

ON BEING TORMENTED BY DAISY FRIED

As I was walking among the fires of Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius; which to Angels look like torment and insanity...

— William Blake

Daisy Fried's "Torment" is at once a grippingly intimate and anxious-making narrative poem. Just as the speaker suffers in the company of those to whom she can only partially relate, so the reader is forced into an uneasy proximity with the speaker's own troubling and troubled self. T.S. Eliot once called poetry a "superior amusement," but then vacillated, practically recanting, submitting that "if we think of the nature of amusement, then poetry is not amusing."¹ "Torment" fits inside this contradiction. What's gratifying about the poem is precisely what makes this titular noun/verb apt. Only when we come to partake of the speaker's stinging unhappiness, perhaps even recognizing its uncannily familiarity, does it become, in a sense, pleasurable.

On my first perusal of the poem, I admit, I disliked it. Or, more accurately, I felt a mild but persistent uneasiness, discomfited by the poem's characters as if they were each a string on a musical instrument, each slightly out of tune. The seven-paged prosy yet tightly lineated and subtly interlaced narrative takes place in a car of the Dinky, the commuter train that runs from Princeton to the New York line. The speaker has just spent her "pregnant lopsided day" interviewing for adjunct teaching jobs—which she confesses she doesn't really want—and "trying to look not-quite-40." As bad luck would have it she finds herself sharing her car with "fifteen responsible children," two of whom are her very own college senior poetry students, Brianna and Justin. The poem opens with the speaker listening in just at the moment when elephant-print-tie-sporting, money-shark wannabe Justin declares that he "fucked up bad" on one of his Wall Street interviews. So begins the torment.

As Fried's speaker sizes up her young male student her presumptions reveal a mix of contempt and pity: "I see his future, the weight he'll gain / first in his face, then gut and ass, the look / of bad luck he'll haunt his bad jobs with." This is the first of many discordant strains in the poem. The speaker's tone is cynical, almost mocking, yet her disdain for her student is commensurate with her inability to look away or condemn him outright for his naiveté or the general rottenness of his materialist worldview. So train and poem move along, the atmosphere simmering with not-so-latent frustrations and resentments as the speaker (and the reader, concomitantly) voyeuristically drinks in more details of her undergrads' affluence: their "tailored black suits and skirts, silk ties" and "soft chino shorts," which Fried's narrator will "never / be able to afford." Worse, the snippets of the students' conversation require a degree of masochism to be endured, as when Brianna, worried about her future

counts on her fingers, performing
the sitcom of her tragedy, "Tribeca loft,
expense account, designer clothes so haute

¹ Eliot, Preface to the 1928 Edition, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen, viii.

they don't look it, my very own Tesla, summer
home in the Hamptons I'm too busy to use."

When Justin challenges her, saying "You wanted money," Brianna extends the "sitcom of her tragedy," replying morbidly, "it went down with the towers." We can't help but flinch along with Fried's persona. It is tough to sympathize with one who laments 9/11 along with the loss of a Tribeca loft.

Yet the speaker's point of view is also schizoid: divided and divisive. Her lack of internal coherence is hypostatized in her physical condition, which the disembodied voice of her midwife, cacophonously interposed throughout the narrative, describes: "Gumbleeds! nosebleeds! [...] weird hairs, stretch marks,/frequent catnaps, hip joints so loose you must/take care walking." Just as Fried's narrator would appear to inhabit a world far removed from her outlandishly endowed students, so she finds herself at odds with her own gravid figure. Furthermore, her body is metonymic of her general predicament. "I spent my lopsided day lifting my belly/back towards center," she says, as if commenting on the precarious and constantly shifting balance of her life in general. Unable to find her own 'center,' self-estranged in an estranging world, somewhere between Princeton and New York, between jobs, between youth and old age, between writing and teaching, between becoming a mother and being asked to be a "literary mama" to her students, the poet's persona, like some unmoored figure of postmodern uncertainty, is vulnerable to the pressures of external forces.

Even her creative life is at risk. In a meta-theatrical moment, Fried's figurative 'self' confesses that her poetry is governed by, among other things, market forces:

Favorite Teachers writes poems about students!
Reading them is like listening to whores
talk about clients; however contemptuous they sound,
everybody knows who's selling, who's buying.

It's hard to miss this kernel of poem-as-social-commentary, which would like to remind us that there's no escaping the degradations of the marketplace or of sexist exploitation. Thus train car comes into focus as a microcosm of social struggle where patriarchal and financial forces ultimately prevail and "everybody knows who's selling, who's buying." But what's perhaps more significant is how Fried archly writes herself into her own poem—"Favorite Teachers write poems about students!"—even as she immediately equivocates about such poems: "I'd like to be able to like them." What else can this be but a roundabout challenge to Fried's audience? We are caught off guard by such self-doubting self-reflexivity, perhaps wondering what kind of exchange this is and whether we should 'buy' what Fried's poem is 'selling'—if such terms even apply. We might ask whether we ourselves can we 'like' this poem called "Torment." Or would we at least like to "be able" to 'like' it? The poem has become a strangely indeterminate thing with questionable values, and the speaker, a locus of instability.

So when the name "Daisy" is dropped by Brianna near the end of the poem—a name which just happens to be the author's very own—we might find ourselves asking: is Fried writing about herself? Is she a 'real person' or a 'literary creation'? With whom or what might we identify? How to trust such a mercurial author-speaker-persona, who

seems on the verge of disowning her own poems. But perhaps to try to differentiate between Fried and her literary persona is folly, or beside the point. More intriguing is the possibility that to be lost inside this perplexing problem of identity, to feel ourselves adrift and ill at ease with our (in)capacity to relate or respond with any certainty, is in fact the point.

Thus any meaningful reading of the poem will have little to do with delineating Fried's speaker as a virtuous or perspicacious figure. Rather, we empathize with her only inasmuch as we share her afflictions—inasmuch as we are similarly alienated, conflicted, susceptible—which, paradoxically, makes such empathy difficult. Wonderfully achingly difficult. Perversely, we delight in the poet's crisis as a child might tenderly probe the surface of a darkening bruise. Just as the tiniest hint of Thanatos will consume our attention, pain naturally attracts us. There is of course an element of Eros in suffering, in its capacity to overwhelm and absorb us. So when we learn from the poet that "Brianna wrote about hanging/onto stall walls in her residence hall bathroom,/fucking Princeton boys one by one," we are at once dismayed and captivated not only by this image of Brianna's sexualization but by the speaker's uncomfortable burden of bearing witness. The temptation is to become absorbed in Brianna's misadventure by way of the speaker's own tortured fascination. Like the speaker we are powerlessness to intervene, perhaps even shuddering at this spectacle of damaged self-esteem disguised as hedonistic pleasure, even as we are unable or unwilling to look away.

In Fried's drama of emotional dissonance it's as if all the actors, including the reader, have no choice but to respond with an innate dissonance of their own. The poem's argument reiterates and involutes, fractal-like. Nowhere in the details can we escape the larger neurotic pattern. Such is the case when we discover that, in a seemingly inapposite parallelism, "Torment" is not only the title of Fried's poem but also the title of a workshop draft submitted by the narrator's male student, Justin. Both are "seven pages long."² The intimation is mischievous, yet clear: however apart in age and outlook and social station Justin and his "professor" may be, on some level the two apparently share, or maybe even reflect in one another, a kind of 'torment.' The contents of Justin's poem are never disclosed, though a few of Fried's comments to Justin are: "You may want to find a way to suggest / ironic distance between the poet and speaker." This sounds close to self-censure on the part of Fried herself, as if she anticipates her own self-mortification, but projects her neurosis onto Justin.

We might want to toss this matter back to Fried, giving her a taste of her own medicine, so to speak, and argue that such an "ironic distance" is in fact a necessary prerequisite of most art-making—or at least a deterrent against indulgent confessionality in poetry. But if we are to trust the narrator when she earlier recalls lecturing her students: "Poems should be about life, / part of life is sex," then we must not ignore the fact that sex, beyond its associations with intimate pleasure, also implies a potentially unpleasurable negation of distance, which is to say a loss of privacy, if not an embarrassment of proximity, and perhaps even a sense of powerlessness in the presence

² Fried's "Torment" is seven pages as it appears in her collection *Women's Poetry: Poems and Advice*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013.

of the other. Intimacy is a species of torment, Fried's poet-self might argue, however implicitly. This too might be what "poems should be about."

So why insinuate the notion of "ironic distance" in a poem that so obviously eschews this kind of irony, drawing its readers in as it does with such unflattering close-ups and tempting us to conflate the author with her literary persona? Curiously, Fried's unwillingness or inability to take her own advice is another destabilizing sort of irony. It complicates Fried's relationship with her students, who, with their dysfunctional sense of themselves and lack of boundaries, can be seen as Fried's unlikely counterparts. Both Brianna and Justin become, if only for brief moments, satirical self-portraits of Fried herself. As the august psychoanalysts have argued: those whom we strongly dislike often possess something we despise in ourselves, perhaps some desire or fear which we have repressed or forsaken.

Cramped into a car on the Dinky line Fried's "Torment *collapses* ironic distances. Less interested in broadcasting pathos per se or in impressing readers with its polished lyricism and crafted epiphanies, and more intent on involving us in its strangely familiar world of emotional discord, Fried's poem is what I'd like to call a superior form of anti-entertainment. Ambivalent to the end, Fried's persona—or perhaps it is Fried herself—blurts out: "I don't know how to end this poem," before she admits to another failure in her role as 'favorite teacher': "I couldn't figure out what else, / to responsible children, there was to say." We might say the ending is as painful, wanting, and unceremonious as the narrator's final encounter: "Justin—'Fuck'—floors it, roars past me, away." Little seems resolved, and the speaker goes so far as to admit defeat. Ouch.

Yet we might linger here awhile until we feel, like the speaker at the end, a kind of rarified relief, "to be embarrassed, triumphant, sorry." Like so many worthwhile pleasures, this one is a complex blend of seemingly incongruous elements. And like a good homeopathic remedy, it cures the disease by evoking its symptoms.