

Natural and Necessary Vicissitudes in the Paternal Cycle

Although Dante's *Divine Comedy* is set in an intricate fantasy world based on the existence of a supernatural power, the poem's most poignant and relevant insights derive from the development of ordinary human relationships—the most prominent of which is the paternal relationship of Vergil and Dante/Pilgrim. Similarly, Harry Chapin's song "Tangled Up Puppet" centers on the connection between parent and child, focusing specifically (as does the *Comedy*) on how that bond changes over time. While both works are devoted to the same unifying theme, a preliminary analysis of the substance of each work, particularly of that which pertains to the parent-child relationship, would lead one to believe they are entirely different: in the *Comedy*, parent and child grow closer together, while in "Puppet," parent and child grow farther apart. Initially, Vergil would find this to be the case—that Harry Chapin's song describes circumstances that differ from his own—but his opinion would undoubtedly change after further reflection. He would realize that both works detail different facets of the same universal parent-child bond.

At the outset, the paternal relationships in each work appear blatantly different. Dante/Pilgrim and Vergil's interactions transition from struggle and difficulty (*Inferno* II) to harmony and cohesion (*Purgatorio* XXVII), a progression highlighted by the story of *Purgatorio*, where such development is mirrored by the nature of the mountain itself: "this mountain's of such sort / that climbing it is hardest at the start; / but as we rise, the slope grows less unkind" (IV. 88-90). All efforts Chapin exerts, however, prove futile if not altogether counterproductive: "And the more that I keep dancing / and spinning round in knots / the more I

see what used to be / and the less of you I've got" (Chapin. 16-19). The changes in the Pilgrim's language when he addresses Vergil—from "my master" (*Purgatorio* II. 25) to "gentle father dear" (XVII. 13), for example—reveal a growing intimacy, while Chapin's daughter's language suggests a trend in the opposite direction: "You used to say," "Read me a story and sing me songs of love"... [Now] you just turn away and say, 'please leave me alone'" (8,11).

These differences would lead Vergil to a realization demonstrated by the poem itself. In any relationship, regression and failure always accompany forward progress and success—that, in a sense, relationships "undulate" over time. Indeed, Vergil and the Pilgrim were not always ascending, nor did they traverse a fixed route. First they had to endure the challenges of Hell, with the Pilgrim often an unwilling and unenlightened companion. Early on, he actually asks, "Why should I go there [Heaven]? Who sanctions it? / For I am not Aeneas, am not Paul; / nor I nor others think myself so worthy." (*Inferno* II. 31-33). Even on Mt. Purgatory, where their path leads only upward, Vergil and the Pilgrim's relationship does not fit the trajectory of a straight, rising incline. Their relationship is dynamic, not unlike a pendulum in perpetual oscillation, and as they steer themselves toward heaven, their respective roles are regularly changing. In Ante-Purgatory, the Pilgrim says to Vergil, as if he were the guide and Vergil the student, "Lift up your eyes... if you can find no counsel within yourself" (*Purgatorio* III. 61-63). Additionally, on the terrace of the prideful, after Vergil has guided him to the first two storiatas, the Pilgrim "move[s] past" him (X. 73, 52) to reach the third one, overtaking his mentor.

Harry Chapin's situation, therefore, is not all that different; his relationship with his daughter also "undulates," beginning on high and subsequently descending (while the opposite is true for the Pilgrim and Vergil). At first, his relationship with his daughter was marked by mutual affection: "you curled in my lap like a child, / you'd cling to me smiling, your eyes wide

and wild... for you were *Princess Paradise* like your wings of a dove” (4-5, 9). Currently, however, he and his daughter, farther apart, are at a low point: “now you slip through my arms, wave a passing hello / twist away and toss a kiss, laughing as you go” (6-7). Interestingly, Harry wants to relive ages past while his daughter rushes to experience adulthood—outlooks that are indicative of their changing roles. Harry’s desires are reflected in the style of his piece, which he (an adult) sings in a tone similar to that of a lullaby, a song primarily for children. His daughter, on the other hand, busies herself with things more befitting “mature” adults—“makeup and rinses... earrings and rings” (20-21). The pulsing course and changing roles inherent in all relationships prominently assert themselves in the Pilgrim’s relationship with Vergil as well as in Harry Chapin’s relationship with his daughter.

Both fathers—Vergil and Harry—share concerns and experience similar emotions. Consider, for example, the following vital lyric from “Puppet,” which is given heightened significance because Harry chooses to linger on it musically: “But tonight while we played tag for five minutes in the yard, / Well, just for a moment, I caught you off guard” (22-23). The line is important because it speaks to a goal shared by both parents—namely, the aspiration to eliminate the artificial veneers created by their children. In Harry’s case, that veneer is his daughter’s “guard” (23) against familial affection; in Vergil’s case, that veneer comprises the “counterfeits of goodness” (*Purgatorio* XXX. 131) that Dante had wrongfully accepted. Faced with the possibility of painful loss (that of a child), both father figures respond to the circumstances in similar ways. When Vergil stands alongside the Pilgrim to address him for the last time, he delivers his farewell speech with startling dignity and aplomb. His solemn demeanor and hopeful words of advice

testify to his resilient and optimistic faith in his “son.” Similarly, Harry Chapin, though he fears his daughter is slipping away, does not convey with his voice a sense of restlessness or angst, nor do his words carry with them a suggestion of a stern admonishment. Instead, he sings lyrically, his soothing, mellifluous tone intended to guide his daughter in the same way Vergil intended to guide his son/Pilgrim.

Clear, common threads run through both relationships.

“Puppet” would reveal to Vergil that all relationships are cyclic, like waves undulating from crest and trough. Both relationships confirm the truth of this proposition, though each depicts a different point in the process: Vergil and the Pilgrim are at a crest, while Harry and his daughter are at a trough. Harry’s final line, “...you don’t need to grow up all alone” (35) reflects the lofty, but well-founded, faith that he and Vergil have placed in human relationships—a faith that both of them consider essential, that recognizes temporary successes or failures as necessary elements in a greater, more potent conception of human growth.

Harry Chapin, Tangled Up Puppet

- 1) I’m a tangled up puppet,
- 2) Spinning round in knots, and the more I see what I used to be,
- 3) The less of you I’ve got.
- 4) There was a time that you curled up in my lap like a child;
- 5) You’d cling to me smiling, yours eyes wide and wild.
- 6) Now you slip through my arms, wave a passing hello,
- 7) Twist away and toss a kiss, laughing as you go.
- 8) You used to say, “Read me a story and sing me songs of love,”
- 9) For you were *Princess Paradise* like your wings of a dove.
- 10) Now I chase you and tease you trying to remake you my own,
- 11) But you just turn away and say, ‘please leave me alone.’

- 12) And I'm a tangled up puppet,
- 13) All hanging in your strings.
- 14) I'm a butterfly, in a spider's web,
- 15) Fluttering my wings,
- 16) And the more that I keep dancing
- 17) And spinning round in knots,
- 18) The more I see what used to be
- 19) And the less of you I've got.
- 20) You are a drawer full of makeup and rinses and things;
- 21) You keep changing your moods like your earrings and rings,
- 22) But tonight while we played tag for five minutes in the yard,
- 23) Well, just for a moment, I caught you off guard.
- 24) I'm a tangled up puppet,
- 25) Spinning round in knots, and the more I see what I used to be,
- 26) The less of you I've got.
- 27) But now you write your secret poems
- 28) In a room just for your dreams.
- 29) You don't find time to talk to me
- 30) About the things you mean.
- 31) What I mean is—
- 32) I have watched you take shape from a jumble of parts
- 33) And find the grace and form of a fine work of art.
- 34) Hey, you, my brand new woman, newly come into your own:
- 35) Don't you know that you don't need to grow up all alone.

Works Cited

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