

## THE MUTILATION OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN

Daniela MOLDOVEANU, PhD, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

*Abstract: Sylvia Plath's style, rich in metaphor, symbols and myth, stands out for the art of rendering the impression of sincerity or authenticity, in spite of the fact that she makes use of the most refined literary techniques and conventions, thus revealing the strong interrelation between fiction and biography. While the "real" world undergoes an ample process of fictionalization in her poetry, the personae - whose voice is often on the verge of hysteria - becomes more and more real, therefore the elements which get to influence her dynamic visions build their own strategies of sabotage confirming, once more, that "the blood-jet is poetry". Sylvia Plath - one of the most important as well as controversial poets of her generation - successfully managed to illustrate in her "flesh and blood"-like verse the close-to-the-skin resonance and self-induced tension of the confessional paradigm.*

*Keywords: Sylvia Plath, confessional poetry, impression of sincerity, self-induced tension, "flesh and blood"-like verse*

Born on October 27, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, the American poet Sylvia Plath, who was adopted, during her University years in Cambridge, by the English literary circles, became one of the most appreciated, but also controversial representatives of the confessional poetry. Together with Anne Sexton and John Berryman, if we refer strictly to the circumstances of her death, Sylvia Plath guides the poetical fiction to the point on which it blends with reality, thus writing her volumes (especially the last one – **Ariel and Other Poems** – issued posthumously in 1965) from the perspective of a long before announced death which was also performed in 1963.

Seen in retrospection, from this point of view, the shadow of a morbid existentialism floats, ever since, over the literary destiny of our poet, and this fact generated a lot of speculations and legends regarding Sylvia's life and death. But no matter how things were or might have been, her literary work is important for and through itself, independently of the aura of obscurity that surrounds man in social, psychological, emotional or spiritual circumstances and which extended, inevitably, over Sylvia Plath's paper identity.

And because the paradigm preferred by Sylvia praises personal life data, biography and confession as starting point in literary fiction unwinding, some information about the events that are supposed to have influenced the writing of numerous poems, now, famous for the acuity of the poet's feelings and lucidity of their description, are necessary.

Remarkably precocious inside and outside the artistic sphere, Sylvia Plath had one of her poems published for the first time in children's section of *Boston Herald*, when she was eight. This fact leads us to the conclusion that for her, poetry is more than a simple artistic convention; it is the native, basic language the way Eugenio Coșeriu describes it and through which one communicates with the exterior world and reasons about it, at the same time taking distance from the limiting parameters of a ready-made reality.

It's just that, on the road, the child's game will impeccably turn into a surviving strategy in spite of the poet's being – thus reflecting a terrible fight against her own self, on life and death – where from we have the label of *extreme poetry* which A. Alvarez<sup>1</sup> has attached to her verses. Because Sylvia Plath's feelings will reach a border from where the poet cannot go back pretending that the demon exorcism process had cathartic effects in real life compared with the terrible entangling on paper.

The real world becomes the hypertext made pretty much of intertexts and poetical metatexts, therefore, the tight relation between art and biography announces a tragic end thanks to, from now on, the incapacity of identifying a definite border between them. While the lyrical ego de-fictionalizes itself, the real world undergoes a vast process of fictionalization. Thus, identity as guiding mark of psychological, emotional and spiritual equilibrium has, many times, its integrity threatened.

That first literary essay, as our poet herself relates, was a short poem about what *she can see and hear in warm summer nights*; nature representing the favorite inspiration source for Sylvia Plath all over her poetry. The *Pan-ism* of her poems illustrates the trajectory of the inner states (from the greediness with which the representations of the lyrical ego swallow the surrounding world in all its out bursting passion and extremism till they culminate with the representation of border feelings like the *Stasis: Stasis in darkness (Ariel)*, ...*great Stasis (Years)* as the ultimate state of mind, of crystal-clear vision on oneself and the universe) by embracing the phases Pan the God<sup>2</sup> himself embodies, from Eros to Thanatos and back.

When Sylvia was eight, her father dies and this moment represents for our poet a drastic and brutal change of intuitions and vision on life. Her father died prematurely of untreated diabetes because doctors had mistaken its symptoms for pulmonary cancer – Otto Platt, who then became Plath, was a teacher of German and Biology, being specialized in bees. We will encounter this kind of details scattered, melted and re-invented in the substance of Sylvia's poems, pointing at their resound and repercussions on her soul and mind.

**The Bees**-cycle of poems or dramatic monologues like **Daddy** and its satellites reflect the nature of the spiritual alchemy, intense and profoundly dramatic, that led to their refinement until they touched the trauma nucleus in pure state. But even more remarkable is the poet's success to convey the poignant impression of authenticity – permanently extracting the core of the poem from the art sphere, of fiction and fictionalization in order to seed it into the ontological sphere – in spite of the fact that she makes use of the most sophisticated poetical techniques and conventions in writing.

The little girl – who throughout all her life will be haunted by the magnetic image of her father – when she is informed of his death, she declares that she would never speak to God again. But, as for Jung, the Ego means, apart from the Ego itself, also God – that spirit that unites the subconscious with the conscious aiming to give coherence to the individual

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Extremist artist sets out deliberately to explore the roots of his emotions, the obscurest springs of his personality, maybe even the sickness he feels himself to be pray to, giving himself over to it, for the sake of the range and intensity of his art.* (A. Alvarez, *Under Pressure*, New York, Penguin, 1965, p. 185)

<sup>2</sup> *...God of pastoral cults...alert, agile, quick and dissembler: expresses the beast's slyness. Panic and terror come from his name, and they let them possess the entire nature and the entire being and also the feeling the troubling presence of this God rises in people's mind and senses. Bare of this untamed sensuality, he will later embody the Great Everything, the completeness of a particular being.* (Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, vol. III, București, Artemis Publishing House, 1993, p. 11, 12)

reflection of the universe – we can infer that Sylvia gives up to a significant part of herself, and she will always feel this gap eating her spirit from inside out.

If we compare Sylvia with Anne Sexton, her colleague of generation and poetic formula, we can observe how the latter is more dedicated to place God at the centre of her questions, anxieties, phantasy (in **The Awful Rowing Towards God**, for example), while Plath prefers the rigidity of myths – the violent force of nature and the obscurity of the deep corners of the mind, consciousness and, above all, of the inner space – to the impenetrable instance represented by divinity in its sterile perfection. A divinity, whose religion – with its labyrinth of secret significations, unknown to the poet's heart – cannot save her because she doesn't accept his authority, but she feels his stare at the back of her head. She will always be on the Son's side, who suffers unconditionally out of too much love and devotion, the image of that... *Christus/ The awful/ God-bit in him,/ Dying to fly and be done with it?* (**Years**) overlaps the profile of the little girl suffocated by the tyrannical presence of her father's absence: *Daddy/You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/ For thirty years, poor and white/ Barely daring to breathe or Achoo// ...Marble-heavy* (**Daddy**).

While His undirected and confused son or daughter agitate themselves regarding philosophical, ethical or social problems (life, death, morality, war, concentration camps, human dignity) – personalizing them so far as he or she can imagine them and project them on the screen of their horizon – God the Father closes His eye, tired, carefree, lost in an amnesia that throws man in history, alone on the white space of the supreme mind, as if it were after Hiroshima: *It never occurred that they had been forgot/ That the big God/ Had lazily closed one eye and let them slip[...]/ Over the English cliff and under so much history!/ They did not see him smile,[...]/ He'd had so many wars!/ The white gape of his mind was the real Tabula Rasa.* (**Lyonnesse**).

Marta Petreu also tackles the same subject in her arghezian psalms. Here, the fury against a transcendental force, blind and deaf to the mortals' troubles, goes hand in hand with irony, sarcasm and a false, lucid and iconoclast detachment from the influence of that, so called, *Domine*, completely void of emotions.

Like a Christ overcome with doubt, subdued to the will of his Father, the American poet will, eventually, reject her father's magnetic attraction (*Daddy, I have had to kill you// Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through – Daddy*), through a symbolic death from which there is no resurrection other than another death: *I am only thirty/ And like the cat I have nine times to die* (**Lady Lazarus**). The *Supreme sacrifice* thus meaning *no more idols but me* (**The Munich Mannequins**).

At this point, biography takes the place of metaphysics, of transcendence; therefore we get to talk about the *transcendence of immanency*<sup>3</sup>. Marta Petreu also prefers the obsessive self-analysis in order to compensate for her lack of capacity to truly believe in metaphysic scenarios. That's how elements – which influence, or are allowed to influence her poetic

<sup>3</sup> *Confessional poets were radically skeptical in terms of belief. Their writing presumes that depth in poetry is not to be had by recourse to philosophical concepts or religious doctrines, or even by the representation of extraordinary moments of vision. For subject matter, Lowell, Berryman, Roethke, Plath and Snodgrass turned to autobiography, or what was meant to pass for autobiography* (*The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, vol. VIII, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 126)

views and her view on life in general, apart from the literary convention – manage to independently build their own undermining strategies.

Sylvia Plath, like Mariana Marin or Marta Petreu, always appears to be ready to invest the lyrical ego with superior powers and the power to decide on her destiny, therefore she creates her own enemy, this being either the moon (**The Moon and the Yew Tree**), a flower (**Tulips, Poppies in July**), a tree (**Elm**) or the sea (**Suicide off Egg Rock, Man in Black**), a mythical character like the muses (**The Disquieting Muses**) or a cherished being for whom she has contradictory feelings (**Daddy, The Rival, Letter in November**), or her own gloomy state of mind. All these – representing a will beyond herself, but which has its roots in the extremist vision on the world of our poet – open the exchange of speculation on duality, psychic lability and the so called *death infatuation, the protean presence of death*<sup>4</sup>.

The ambition to be perfect and to polish the details to exhaustion, overstress the young poet. Always unsatisfied with herself, Sylvia Plath – an exemplary pupil and the brilliant student with numerous prizes for verse and short stories, guest editor of the *Mademoiselle* magazine of New York, the one who sees her poetry published widely in specialized magazines – passes through a very turbulent period during college, described in her novel, **The Bell Jar**.

Published under the surname Victoria Lucas, the book received good chronicles, being compared, in time, with the renowned **Catching in the Rye** by Salinger. But it couldn't have been different, because the vitality of her writing, the lyric feeling inserted in the key moments of the book, the playful and colorful style, self-irony, the humor impregnated with that English wit – all these overlapping lucidity like the surface of a magnifier – give a new perspective and, above all, profoundness to the problems of a very difficult age, admirable described on this occasion.

The main character – the neurotic teenager who eventually manages to take her destiny into her own hands – follows the course of the poet's life, the style and feeling of the writing being extremely touching and emotional. The novel cannot be read as an authentic page of diary, but it copies it admirably. That's what Sylvia Plath was writing when depression, insomnia and the thought of suicide took over her life, limiting her horizon at an obsessional space and, at the same time, a securing one, from which, she feels, is exiled – the womb:

*To annihilate the world by annihilation of one's self is the deluded height of desperate egoism. The simple way out of all the little brick dead ends we scratch our nails against...I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb.*<sup>5</sup>

The desire to crawl back into the womb – which can be also found in Marta Petreu's poetry – to escape of any kind of responsibility, pain or anxiety, comes from the proud taking-over of a too big responsibility. The slogan, *all or nothing*, no matter how agitating might be, by imposing people to evolve and transcend themselves, is, at the same time dangerous, proving to be, in the end, fatal for our poet.

<sup>4</sup> Annette Levers, *The World as Icon. On Sylvia Plath's Themes* in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, Ed. Charles Newman, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1973, p. 135

<sup>5</sup> *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Ed. Ted Hughes, Ballantine Books, 1982 apud. Mircea Mihăieș, *Cruel Books. Personal Diary and Suicide*, Iași, Polirom, 2005, p. 71

After electroshock therapies and alienating receipts (the confessional poet Robert Lowell, as well as Anne Sexton describe their experiences in mental institutions), face to face with the incapacity of writing generated by the emotional stress, on 24 august 1953, Sylvia descends into the basement, takes a handful of sleeping pills and curls up in the narrow place under the porch, not before having left behind a letter in which she explains that she went on a long walk.

Discovered after two days, almost in a coma, she will be institutionalized in a sanatorium, for recovery. The desire to escape from the external world, on which the poet manifests more and more intensely her domination, appears illustrated also by her attraction and preference for narrow spaces, smothering or sterile (configured as symbols: cave, oven, beehive, or as abstract notions: recurrent death, night, inner intentness, hysteria) towards which aim or which the majority of her poems delineate.

In 1956, after a few obscure erotic experiences, she marries the English poet, Ted Hughes. Their marriage was intensely commented because of the hardships the two partners underwent, apart from the moments of intense happiness. It generated infinite speculation which had the ambition to find affirmance from within the poetry area for what was happening in real life and in the poet's biography; because her lyrics are full of symbols, metaphor and allusion to domestic life. And this fact, to the detriment of the artistic value of her poems, suffocates the literary product with interpretations that bring to the front stage the social and personal hardships of the two poets, without being able to filter the literary truth.

From this union, a girl, Frieda, and a boy, Nicholas, were born. They will remain orphans of mother on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1963, when Sylvia Plath – a young divorcee, the author of the poetry volume **The Colossus** (published for the first time in 1960 in England, and in 1962 in America) and of the volume called **Ariel and other poems** (published posthumously in 1965), one of the few Pulitzer prize winners from beyond the grave (for the volume **The Collected Poems**, 1981) – going through a severe depression, isolates with cellotape the door of the children's room, then the kitchen door, she turns on the gas and kneels in front of the open oven. She is found breathless by the nurse that was supposed to visit her that day. We cannot know for sure whether she played with the destiny, hoping to win or not, whether she really intended to commit suicide and end this way or not. These are questions that haven't found an answer yet, maybe only seen in retrospective, from her diary, clinical charts or from her poetry, the readers could try to make sense of her destiny.

The biographical chart of Sylvia Plath's – because of the procedure of mythologizing her own identity, constantly applied on her poems (even more rigorously than Anne Sexton, with whom she is frequently compared, uses to) – has to be taken cum grano salis when her work is being dissected. Because we cannot talk, it isn't even the case, about genuine sincerity – which would probably justify some speculations, otherwise inaccurate – but we should talk about authenticity and the very well transmitted impression of real experience, of spiritual biography.

And these two aspects, as we can infer, are very differently conveyed on paper. Mariana Marin uses the same writing techniques when she constructs or deconstructs the poem, she also transcends that too humanly facet of her personality, Marta Petreu also super exposes herself, like Sylvia Plath does, each one of them managing to virtuously fulfill the

initial goal to talk to the reader's mind and soul at a very deep and emotionally implicated level.

### **Bibliography**

**The Cambridge History of American Literature**, Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, vol. VIII, Cambridge University Press, 2003

**The Journals of Sylvia Plath**, Ed. Ted Hughes, Ballantine Books, 1982

Alvarez, A., **Under Pressure**, New York, Penguin, 1965

Chevalier, Jean; Gheerbrant, Alain, **Dictionary of Symbols**, Bucharest, Artemis Publishing House, 1993

Levers, Annette, **The World as Icon. On Sylvia Plath's Themes** in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, Ed. Charles Newman, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1973

Mihăieș, Mircea, **Cruel Books. Personal Diary and Suicide**, Iași, Polirom, 2005