

SYLVIA PLATH - A WOMAN BETWEEN EROS AND THANATOS

Barbara Galle

Abstract

The opposition between the Hughes family and the radical feminists led to the emergence of two diametrically opposite Plath myths: a mentally disturbed, manipulative woman, unstoppably driven towards suicide, or an innocent victim of a treacherous husband? Both sides interpret Plath's life and works in view of her untimely death, neglecting the underlying life force that pervades her poetry and prose. Relying on the psychoanalytical theory of instincts, the author shows how Eros complements and even makes use of Thanatos on different levels of Plath's writing: on the level of language as a meaningful structure, on the level of meaning, and in the function of language as therapy. The duality of instincts is particularly evident in Slovenian criticism, where the physical and temporal distance from political scandal enabled the development of two distinct critical currents: one following Hughes's morbid determinism, the other concentrating on Plath's intelligence and joyful observation of nature.

I. The Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath, a renowned poetess and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, has gained worldwide fame due to her untimely death in 1963. Her tempestuous marriage to the late Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, and his allegedly repeated infidelity have been viewed as main reasons for her suicide at the age of thirty. Radical feminists have turned her into a martyr, condemning Hughes and repeatedly wiping his name off her tombstone. Hughes's family, however, responded by creating a diametrically opposite myth of Plath as a mentally disturbed woman with suicidal tendencies, whose unbearable behavior invariably pushed Hughes into the arms of another woman. Most critics have felt obliged to take sides and, labeling her as either mentally unstable or victimized to the point of suicide, interpreted her life and work in view of her unfortunate death. "The writer, like the murderer, needs a motive" (Malcolm 1995: 176) stated Janet Malcolm, a renown literary critic and one of Plath's biographers, who after an extensive research decided to take Hughes's side.

Fatalistically interpreting Plath's life and works as death-driven, Ted Hughes and his followers disregarded the creative life force that is not only naturally present, but actually pervades most of Plath's poetry – its meaning, structure, and its function in Plath's life. By furiously attacking Hughes, radical feminists attempted to reduce

the extent of Thanatos attributed to Plath; however, they concentrated on the outside events instead on what was already present in Plath's own biography and works. For decades the scandal surrounding Plath's death prevented most British and American critics from being able to interpret her poetry as such. Contemporary critics, especially those relying on structural psychoanalysis, have described such Plath criticism as "psychotic" (Rose 1996: 158), and have attempted to avoid the trap of guilt attribution by viewing her texts as fantasies, where every interpretation is possible. However, even they have been attacked by the Hughes family if their interpretations did not match the expectations.

The purpose of this essay is to compensate for the lack of opposition to Hughes's fatalism without attributing guilt. By using psychoanalytical knowledge of instincts and their characteristics, we will expose the life force in Plath's biography and works. This requires a very clear notion of what instincts are and how they work. There are two opposing, yet complementary forces in the human psyche: Eros and Thanatos. The concept of a life-instinct was first introduced by Sigmund Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in 1920. He assumed that there are two basic psychological drives. The life-instinct, metaphorically named Eros, is a drive towards unity, complexity and self-preservation. Already in the womb it ensures the multiplication of cells and a development of a complex organism, while later it often comes to expression as a wish for perfection, love, and structure. Since every human being has a (more or less unconscious) memory of the perfect unity of the fetus with the mother, we attempt to reestablish that experience of perfection through platonic or erotic love, religion, sometimes even through drugs.

Such attempts are, of course, bound to be futile. In its striving for an illusory unity, Eros is inevitably blocked by Thanatos, which is at the same time its extension and its barricade (Rutar 1996: 51). The absolute, "oceanic" pleasure is only possible in the absence of all structures and boundaries, including a person's identity. On nearing the final aim of Eros, an individual is invariably faced with the horror of self-annihilation, stemming from his disintegrating identity. In its extreme, Eros therefore leads to (symbolic) death, and at that stage we can no longer refer to it as a life-instinct. It has turned into its opposite: Thanatos, the death-instinct, under the influence of which a person becomes a living automaton without any desire, sense of identity, or a reasonable thought. The two instincts are strongly interrelated and they are only rarely encountered in their pure form. Usually they are merged into a whole, where one of them prevails while the other serves it.

To detect these two currents in Sylvia Plath, we need to take a close look at her biography. We will notice that the erotic drive for perfection and unity continually outwitted her suicidal tendencies and even made use of them to make Plath into an even more successful writer.

Born on 27 October 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, Sylvia Plath was an extremely talented child. At the age of ten she read forty books for her own pleasure, wrote verse all the time and decorated it with her own illustrations. In high school she continued getting nothing but the best grades, each year receiving numerous awards for creative writing and drawing. Her poems and short stories were by this time regularly published in newspapers and magazines, such as *Seventeen*, *The Christian Sci-*

ence Monitor and *The Boston Globe*. In 1950 she entered Smith College, where she managed to keep her grades, but the continual striving to keep her scholarship, combined with a part-time job to cover the other expenses, began to take a toll on her health. When she won the first prize for her short story "Sunday at the Mintons" in 1952 and was invited to spend the holidays in New York as a guest editor of the *Mademoiselle*, her exhaustion gradually led to depression. Faced with her insecure future, disappointment with the opposite sex, and doubt in her own artistic abilities, she attempted suicide not long after returning home. However, Eros was still very much at work. Her body first refused to drown, popping out like a cork, then her wrists seemed too white and innocent to be cut with a razor. Even when Plath finally stuffed herself with sleeping pills and crawled into a hiding place, she moaned until she was found and rescued. Having spent six months in McLean psychiatric hospital, she returned to Smith and continued her career as a model student.

She graduated *summa cum laude* and went to Cambridge on Fullbright scholarship. There she met Ted Hughes, a talented young poet whose work fascinated her. Ignoring his reputation regarding women, she married him only four months after their first meeting. After the honeymoon in Spain they returned to Cambridge, where she finished her studies, and then took off to the States where Sylvia taught at Smith and Ted at the Massachusetts University. A year later Ted convinced Sylvia to give up teaching and live entirely on their writing. To get fresh ideas, Plath worked part-time as a secretary in Boston psychiatric hospital and attended the lectures of Robert Lowell at the Boston University, where she got acquainted with the new "confessional poetry" and made friends with Anne Sexton.

In 1959 Plath and Hughes traveled all round America, spent two months in the Yaddo writer's colony, and then permanently moved to England. In 1960 their first child, Frieda Rebecca, was born. The same year Plath published her first collection of poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, which was praised for the show of technical skill, but did not make her name. Hughes, on the other hand, was by that time a celebrated poet, consorting with such great names as T. S. Eliot and Stephen Spender. Plath remained in his shadow, working on her first novel and increasingly doubting the power of her imagination. In 1962, soon after the birth of their second child, the marriage, already troubled by her jealousy and mood changes, suffered the final stroke. Sylvia became painfully aware of Ted's affair with Assia Wevill, a common friend, and her rage produced some of her best poems. Ted moved to London, leaving her with two small children.

In December 1962 she moved to W. B. Yeats's house in London, maintaining contact with Ted. In January she published *The Bell Jar*, a novel describing her suicide attempt in 1952. The first critiques were not very enthusiastic, and her latest poems, now believed to be her best, were rejected as being too morbid. Alone with two ill children in a bitterly cold house, rejected by critics as a writer and by Al Alvarez as a woman, she committed suicide on 11 February 1963 by putting her head in a gas stove. Some doubt remains as to whether she actually intended to die, for she left the phone number of her doctor clearly displayed and she was expecting a visitor at that time. There has been speculation that she planned another rebirth, similar to the one in 1952.

Since Plath and Hughes were not yet divorced at the time of her death, her literary legacy came under Hughes's control. For several decades he duly edited and

published her work. In 1965 he published her second collection of poetry, *Ariel*, which comprises her last, most intense poems. However, he omitted the poems which for personal reasons he did not find acceptable, and he also changed the intended optimistic order of poems, implying a far gloomier and deterministic mood. In 1971 he published her transitional poems in *Crossing the Water*, and the previously unpublished late poems in *Winter Trees*. In 1975, Plath's mother Aurelia published a collection of Sylvia's *Letters Home*, in order to neutralize the negative presentation of the mother-daughter relationship in *The Bell Jar* before its publication in America. In 1977 Hughes edited the selection of Plath's short stories *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, and four years later *The Collected Poems*, for which she was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer prize.

Sylvia Plath had a habit of keeping a journal throughout her life. In 1982, a highly censored edition of her journals was published, enraging the readers with innumerable omissions. Before his death in 1998, Hughes sanctioned the publication of unabridged journals, which finally became accessible to the general public in 2000. The journals do not include the notes on the last three years of her life, originally contained in two notebooks. The first one has disappeared (Hughes suspected Sylvia's mother of having secretly taken them), while Hughes admitted having destroyed the second one in order to prevent their children from ever reading it, and also because at the time he viewed forgetfulness as the only means of survival (Plath 1998: xiii). Two of Plath's novels have been similarly lost. Plath herself is said to have destroyed one when she discovered Hughes's infidelity, while the other, *Double Exposure*, which was probably about finished at the time of her death and recounted the tragic story of Plath's failed marriage, has also disappeared. The Plath Archive is now in the hands of her grown-up children, so the possibility of new publications is not excluded.

The main reason for the censorship of Plath's work is its obviously autobiographic nature. Hughes was convinced that it was more important to protect her acquaintances from the "vivid, cruel words she could use" (Plath 2000b: 9) than to reveal certain facts about the famous writer. However, Plath's works also include fabrications, so skillfully interwoven with facts that truth and imagination become indistinguishable. *The Bell Jar*, for example, contains such obvious parallels with Plath's breakdown in 1952 that the reader is quickly deluded into believing that this is a purely autobiographic novel. In 1987 such misconceptions led to a lawsuit against the filmed version of the novel. Plath's former acquaintance and rival Jane Anderson recognized herself in one of the characters, Joan Gilling, who is in the novel presented as a lesbian who eventually commits suicide (Rose 1991: 106-107). Anderson, by that time a successful psychotherapist, claimed that she had never had any homosexual feelings, and was worried about the effect of such rumors on her female patients. Since she obviously had not committed suicide either, the lawsuit triggered widespread speculation about the share of fiction in Plath's work.

"What I've done," Sylvia once mentioned to her mother, "is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color" (Plath 1999: 262). The characters are mostly caricatures of the people she once knew, their traits are often exaggerated and sometimes two or more people are merged into one. Actual events are frequently partly changed in order to make a point or to add a touch of mystery. The

early short story "Sunday at the Mintons" is a typical example of transformation in Plath's writing. In this story she presents her relationship with the revoltingly conceited Yale student Dick Norton through two elderly siblings, Elizabeth and Henry. Elizabeth, used to her brother's endless patronizing and criticism, accidentally drops her mother's brooch during a walk on the beach. Henry, who bravely attempts to retrieve it, is washed into the ocean by an unexpected wave, and Elizabeth drifts into the air, giggling uncontrollably. What turns out to be Elizabeth's fantasy is, of course, an expression of Plath's own frustration. However, she was well aware of the possible reaction the story might produce, so she took the necessary steps to veil the true identity of the protagonists, making them old and related.

Still, not all transformations of reality seem to be intentional. In the essay "Ocean 1212-W", which describes her idyllic childhood at the seaside, she remembers her first contact with the sea, when she crawled right into the water and was saved at the last moment by her mother. According to Aurelia Plath this did not happen to Sylvia, but to her little brother Warren. Plath's favorite childhood memory, swimming with her father, who died when she was eight years old, also turns out to be false, for Otto Plath never took time to go swimming with his children. It was Sylvia's grandfather who did that. Anne Stevenson, the author of *Bitter Fame*, one of the most hostile Plath biographies, claims that there is nothing unintentional in such changes: "Sylvia's memory ... served the purposes of her art-myth; she revised her life constantly to suit her art" (Stevenson 1998: 14).

However true this may be, we should not neglect the basic findings on the way memory works. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Sigmund Freud claims that early childhood memories are all but reliable: "Some of the mnemonic images are certainly falsified, incomplete or displaced in time and place" (Freud 1991: 87). Such mistakes are brought about by unconscious desires, and therefore memories should be analyzed in the same way as dreams and fantasies. Swimming with the father, who in reality never spent much time with the children, is an obvious example of wish-fulfillment, and it is very likely that the transformation of the grandfather into the father took place even before the literary depiction, in the memory itself.

Since Plath's works contain a lot of - intentional or unintentional - fictitious elements, we should not make rash conclusions about her life solely on the basis of her writing. This is also true of her poetry, often carelessly labeled as "confessional". Her poems have been roughly divided into three phases: her "early" poems, collected in *The Colossus and Other Poems*, are technically impeccable, but they show a certain want of originality and inspiration: "How excited we would be about Miss Plath if we - and she - never read Mr Ransom and Miss Moore. Or if she were 23 and not 28" (Wagner-Martin 1988: 35). The poems are well-controlled and intelligent, but Plath herself confessed during a later interview with Peter Orr that they "privately bored her" (Bronfen 1998: 65). The complex linguistic structures and imaginative metaphors win the reader's intellectual admiration, but they fail to involve his emotions.

The "transitional" poems (written between 1959 and 1962) reveal a search for Plath's own style. The syntax loosens and the poems become more readable, gradually nearing spoken language that marks her late poetry. There is yet no trace of the intense emotions and wild fury which made her name. The poems reflect the peace-

fulness of a happy family life and are either dedicated to her newborn babies (“Morning Song”) or describe the stay in hospital after a miscarriage and appendectomy (“In Plaster”, “Tulips”).

“The Rabbit Catcher” and “Event”, written in May 1962, mark the beginning of the late period. The marriage of two great poets begins to disintegrate and her poems are suddenly pervaded by rage and jealousy at the discovery of Ted’s infidelity. Written without much contemplation at four a clock in the morning, before the children woke up, these poems seem to lack conscious control both on the level of structure and contents. The spoken language with an exquisite sound quality at times nears the ramble of a small child, the lines are noticeably shorter, but the metaphors manage to retain their ingenuity. The poet’s worries ruthlessly intrude into the verse, denigrating Ted (“Bastard / Masturbating a glitter, / He wants to be loved.”) or his new flame (“Toad-stone! Sister-bitch! Sweet neighbor!”). The children, though still a source of joy and freshness, come to be viewed as a heavy burden on the single mother: “With a goddam baby screaming off somewhere. / There’s always a bloody baby in the air.” The thought of death constantly reappears, but she still fights it: “His beak / Claps sidewise: I am not his yet.”

Due to the highly personal themes that mark her late poetry, Plath has been repeatedly classified as a confessional poet. Confessionalism was an American poetic movement whose members concentrated on their psychological problems, nervous breakdowns and suicide attempts. The founder of the poetry that used psychoanalysis to transform personal experience into art was Robert Lowell, Plath’s former professor, who was soon followed by authors like Hart Crane, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton. By the end of the 1970s confessionalism carried a negative connotation: “It signaled the end of control, the opposite of craft” (Wagner-Martin 1988: 12). The women-dominated poetry was seen as egotistic, prosaic dealing with one’s own problems, which had no artistic or wider cultural meaning.

Although Plath attended Lowell’s classes and consorted with Anne Sexton, her poetry could hardly be described as confessional. Her aim was to transcend the self-centeredness by giving personal experience a universal validity in a certain social context: “I think that personal experience shouldn’t be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau” (198). Her poems are indeed personal, but at the same time general enough to allow a wide specter of readers to identify with them. Sylvia Plath could not have become an icon of the developing feminism if women had not seen her work as an expression of rebellion against the patriarchal society of the early 1960s. The lines “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” from “Lady Lazarus” were a source of inspiration to female intellectuals even before the beginning of an organized feminist movement.

The use of personal experience in her writing was for Plath not a choice, but a means of survival. Having learnt at a young age that writing and academic success were the only ways of obtaining the love of her parents, she came to see her literary achievements as a proof of her own worth: “I felt if I didn’t write nobody would accept me as a human being” (Plath 2000a: 448). Continual writing, technique development, market research, and a wish for success became an obsession that gradually

took over her life. Periods of compulsive writing were usually followed by writer's blocks, accompanied by severe panic attacks and depressions. These confirm that writing for Plath became a form of obsession, a "private religion", where the absence of the ritual produces intense feelings of guilt.

In "Obsessions and Religion" Sigmund Freud draws parallels between obsessive and religious rituals, pointing out that both are protective measures that help to sustain a repressed instinctual impulse. The repressed instinct presents a temptation, for which punishment is expected. Due to the constant expectation of punishment, the person suffers from "a lurking sense of expectant anxiety, an expectation of misfortune, which is linked, through the idea of punishment, with the internal perception of the temptation" (Freud 1991: 37). The obsessive ceremony serves both the repressed instinct and the forces which are repressing it, functioning as a "compromise between the warring forces of the mind" (39): on the one hand it helps to sustain repression, while on the other the form of the ritual reproduces some of the very pleasure it is designed to prevent.

In the case of Sylvia Plath, writing served above all to help her deal with her ambivalent feelings towards her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath. Throughout Plath's childhood, her mother concentrated on taking care of her husband Otto, who eventually died of diabetes, and of Sylvia's younger brother Warren, a rather sickly child. Sylvia was often sent to spend long periods of time with her grandparents, whom she loved; but who could not replace maternal love. In her letters to Sylvia, Aurelia mostly praised her academic and artistic achievements, thus encouraging Sylvia's development into a perfectionist over-achiever, dependent on external success. The wish to buy her mother's love and the love of the whole world gradually drove Sylvia onto the verge of death. The psychoanalytic sessions with Dr Ruth Beuscher after the first suicide attempt revealed an underlying hatred towards the apparently loving and self-sacrificial Aurelia: "Like a shot of brandy went home, a sniff of cocaine, hit me where I live and I am alive and so-there. Better than shock-treatment: 'I give you permission to hate your mother'" (Plath 2000a: 184). She expressed her wish for her mother's death in *The Bell Jar*, but outwardly she remained little "Sivvy", who in every letter to her mother expressed endless gratitude and the hope she could "continue to lay more laurels at [Aurelia's] feet" (Plath 1999: 94).

Letters Home have been viewed by critics as a proof of Plath's hypocrisy, of giving her mother what she wanted to hear. However, had Plath fully embraced the newly-discovered aggression, the ritual of writing (as a means of sustaining the repression of aggressive feelings towards Aurelia) would have become unnecessary and the depressions would have disappeared. The genuine feelings of love, gratitude and filial duty towards Aurelia could not simply be erased: "I may hate her, but that's not all. I pity and love her too. After all, as the story goes, she is my mother" (Plath 2000a: 445). The ambivalence of her emotions caught her into a vicious circle. She continued writing in an attempt to win her mother's love and to suppress the socially unacceptable murderous desires. On the other hand, she used writing to express the very feelings she was trying to deny, and so reduced the dangerous pressure of unconscious impulses. Writing as an obsession therefore paradoxically turned into a form of therapy.

The dual function of writing in Plath's life illustrates the continual struggle between Eros and Thanatos, two mutually exclusive, yet complementary instincts. The therapeutic value of an obsession in Plath is a typical example of Eros taking over and making use of Thanatos. Although senseless repetition is in the domain of Thanatos, Eros managed to turn it into a means of self-preservation, reducing the pressure of unconscious murderous desires, which could, if they burst into the consciousness, produce deadly feelings of guilt. The fact that it was writing that became her obsession can hardly be coincidental, for language itself is in the service of Eros, since it sustains the structure of the symbolic reality that makes us human.

Julia Kristeva distinguishes between two orders within language: the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic, associated with sound and rhythm, is a remainder of the pre-Oedipal, maternal world. Whenever the sound quality of the signifier prevails over the signified, we are dealing with an attempt to reestablish the primeval unity. This expression of Eros is particularly obvious in Plath's late poetry, which is to be read aloud. In "Daddy", the rhythm and the repetition of the infantile "u" sound produce a strong association with a toddler's speech: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe ...". While reading this poem on BBC, Plath actually imitated a small child. It can hardly be a coincidence that the semiotic prevails in the very poem in which Plath expresses her anger and frustration at both her father's and Hughes's departure. The disappointment with both substitute love objects triggers a wish to reestablish the once-lost symbiosis with the mother. In accordance with the natural progress of such a desire, a characteristic wish for death appears at the end of the poem.

Language also performs the function of the Eros through the symbolic, which maintains its structure and logical connections. Governed by control and order, the symbolic finds its peak in poetic language, therefore we can find nothing surprising in Harold Bloom's belief that "Eros equals figurative meaning" (Ellmann 1994: 25). Sylvia Plath's poetry is marked with a persistent wish to control both the form and the meaning, and the elaborate metaphors testify to its highly symbolic value. Despite the frequent theme of death the poems are tightly interwoven with Eros, the wish for structure. Both semiotic and symbolic aspects of Plath's poetry therefore serve as protective measures against her self-destructive impulses.

Eros, however, does not find expression solely through sound and structure. Plath's poems are often brimming with eroticism. "Pursuit", written after the first meeting with Hughes, combines hypnotically erotic atmosphere with masochistic pleasure in imminent death. Hughes is presented as a blood-thirsty panther, gradually catching up with her:

I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
To quench his thirst I squander blood;
He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice.

The tension and rhythm increase from stanza to stanza, till the fever culminates in the last two lines:

The panther's thread is on the stairs,
Coming up and up the stairs.

The erotic atmosphere and rhythm are enhanced by the threat of death. "Death," Plath wrote in a letter, "includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love" (Plath 1992: 222). Violence and death in Plath's poems carry a strong erotic connotation, partly stemming from her actual relationship with Hughes, who during her first meeting ripped off her earrings and headband, while she took vengeance by biting his cheek and leaving him with a bloody mark. Marital conflicts sometimes ended with twisted fingers and bloody scratches, while in "The Rabbit Catcher" she is being strangled. However, even here the approaching death takes on an orgasmic quality. As shown by Georges Bataille, the area of eroticism is in itself the area of violence, for every act of disrupting discontinuity is severely violent (Bataille 2001: 14). Although people search for continuity that could only be established by death, they paradoxically do so only if their search is not to be completed. Marquis de Sade was one of the few exceptions who were not appalled by the eroticism of torture and death. Plath's "terrible beauty of death" (Plath 1992: 222) was therefore not a product of a disturbed mind, but a deep insight into the true nature of man, who fears most what he most desires.

In consistence with the nature of Eros and Thanatos, Plath sees death as the ultimate goal of love and desire. The longing for the unity with the object of love is frequently combined with elements of incest, which is again perfectly natural, for the desired unity is essentially the lost unity with the mother. Since it cannot be reestablished, people look for substitute love objects, and the first choice for a young girl is usually her father, succeeded by other male lovers. In Plath, however, the death of her father when she was eight years old preserved the little girl's Oedipal fixation and gave death an additional meaning.

Disappointed with mother's attachment to her brother Warren, little Sylvia transferred her affection to her father Otto, a strict patriarch who spent most of his days working on scientific books and articles. Due to his preoccupation with work and his early death, Plath preserved the infantile image of his enormous size and abilities. In "The Colossus" he is presented as the scattered statue of a 34-meter Apollo, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, which was destroyed by an earthquake in 227 B.C.: "O father, all by yourself / You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum". The mourning daughter lives among the enormous ruins that she will never be able to put together again: "I crawl like an ant in mourning / Over the weedy acres of your brow / To mend the immense skull-plates".

Since the Plath family spent the last years of her father's life at the seaside, the image of sea and water in Plath's writing retained the allusion to happy childhood. At the same time water with its murderous qualities becomes the place of unity with her father: "Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water". In *The Bell Jar* Plath describes her first suicide attempt as trying to drown, which she imagined to be the best way to die. However, her attempt to be in this way reunited with her father failed: "... somehow the urge to life, mere physical life, is damn strong" (Plath 1992: 130). She found herself popping out of the water.

Otto's death from diabetes intensified Plath's already conflicting relationship with her mother, which contributed to her suicide attempts in 1952. In her journals Plath connects her wish to die with an unconscious wish to kill her mother: "... a

transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself” (Plath 2000a: 447). In Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” she recognized her own feelings and reasons for suicide. Freud noticed that the symptoms of melancholia match those of mourning a lost object of love, and so he concluded that melancholia must in fact be an unconscious way of mourning. Due to the fixation on the lost object, the Ego refuses to accept the loss and attempts to preserve the object through internalization. Since every relationship is inherently ambivalent, the negative feelings and reproaches towards the object are now also internalized. Criticism towards the lost object therefore becomes self-criticism, and possible murderous impulses come to expression as a strong suicidal urge, which may in some cases lead to actual suicide.

Plath connected her own feelings of depression with her emotional “loss” of the mother, which led to the internalization of mother’s image. Since Aurelia made a great effort to conceal her feelings from the children when her husband died, Sylvia blamed her for not loving her father and even for killing him by marrying him too old. In the process of internalization she directed these reproaches towards herself and suffered from feelings of guilt she could not explain. In combination with Oedipal feelings of rivalry, disappointment with Aurelia’s emotional inadequacy, and filial feelings of guilt of nurturing such hostile emotions towards the woman who gave birth to her and sacrificed her own happiness for her, Plath’s self-reproaches reached a dangerous level.

Although Plath thoroughly analyzed her ambivalent feelings towards her mother, she refused to venture into a similar analysis of her relationship with her father. The “bee god” was not to be touched. During therapy with Dr Ruth Beuscher she claimed to see no point in going into her apparent feelings of guilt in relation to her father’s death, and it was only after her marriage disintegrated that she acknowledged any negative feelings towards her father. In “Daddy”, she expressed the first upsurge of hate towards the cruel fascist that was no less Ted than Otto. The two were by this time intertwined to such an extent that even Plath could not tell them apart anymore. Just like Otto’s imagined omnipotence once gave Ted an air of god-like superiority, her husband’s infidelity pulled her father along into the abyss of vindictive wrath.

The inability to cope with the loneliness and with the life of a single mother, whose first novel and the latest poems were bitterly rejected by the critics, finally pushed Plath into untimely death. Consequently, she has been repeatedly described as mentally disturbed, and her poetry has been said to reflect her mental illness: “... these are poems of schizophrenia, or rather, poems by a schizophrenic who had painstakingly, over a period of years, mastered the craft of poetry” (Wagner 1988: 73). Early criticism above all attempted to pathologize Plath through a series of amateur analyses. They attributed to her nearly all existing diagnoses, from schizophrenia to neurosis, psychosis, and hysteria. Still, when Plath was treated in McLean after her first suicide attempt, no signs of schizophrenia or psychosis were discovered, nor did the doctors believe that there was any danger of the present neurosis developing into a serious mental illness (Plath 1992: 126).

Modern feminist currents describe Plath’s mental instability as a normal response of an ambitious, creative woman to the social conditions in the 1950s. Sibylle Duda and Luise F. Pusch did an extensive research into the lives of eleven famous

women, who rebelled against the patriarchal society, only to be first labeled as insane and then subjected to violent psychiatric treatment, which actually caused them to lose their mental balance (Duda 1995: 313). According to Duda, Plath's "madness" reflects the constant oscillation between adaptation and rebellion, which eventually became unbearable. Believing in the social ideal of the mother and housewife, she at the same time strove for recognition as an artist, equal to men. Unwilling to give up either of her ideals, she kept finding herself in conflict with society, her family, and herself.

Radical feminists saw Plath as a typical victim of a patriarchal society. They openly blamed Hughes for murdering her, repeatedly erased his surname from Plath's tombstone in Yorkshire, and fought against the censorship of Plath's diaries and letters. They saw Plath as a predecessor of the feminist movement, although already at that time serious doubts emerged as to whether Plath is to be associated with feminism at all: "With her philosophy of catch your man and be happy, she seems closer to the world of romantic fiction than to that of Germaine Greer" (Rose 1991: 168). Robert A. Piazza believes that the readers, in search of political support, attributed to her writing feminist sentiments that Plath in reality never nurtured (Kinsey-Clinton 1999). On the other hand, critics like David Holbrook have accepted the feminist vision of Plath, and despite all her efforts to find fulfillment in her femininity and motherhood describe her as "sadly pseudo-male, like many of her cultists" (Holbrook, qtd. in Rose 1991: 19).

The journals and other works of Sylvia Plath reflect her eternal dichotomy between social expectations and the wish for freedom and equality: "I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man" (Plath 2000a: 54). Realizing that a woman in the 1950s could only gain recognition through the success of her husband, she concludes that the only free choice a woman can make is that of choosing her partner, in whom she will invest her energy. Although her independent personality is repulsed by this idea, she already begins to accept it: "it is as I feared: I am becoming adjusted and accustomed to this idea" (ibid.).

After marrying Hughes, Plath attempted to act as a model housewife and mother. Her literary attempts could continue, for they posed no threat to her far more successful husband. Although they denied any feelings of artistic envy in their relationship, Plath's short story "The Wishing Box" proves otherwise. Janet Malcolm in *The Silent Woman* emphasizes that the feelings of envy, hatred and self-hatred were at that time a normal part of a female writers' attitude toward their husbands: "Writing got all mixed up with men. It was in some way the man's fault when the writing didn't go well, as it was Harold's fault when Agnes's dreaming didn't go well" (Malcolm 1995: 88).

"The Wishing Box" shows Plath's feelings of inferiority and complete lack of imagination in comparison to Ted. Ted's role of Plath's writing teacher only intensified this feeling. His letter to Aurelia Plath after Sylvia's death shows that he himself believed in her artistic incompetence: "She doesn't seem to have had an idea of her own, beyond plain outrage and indignation". These words could be just an expression of anger and opposition to his mother-in-law; however, if sincere, they give a clue to the source of Plath's low self-esteem. Although Hughes rarely allowed himself such slips after Plath's death, she must have sensed his opinion about her writing. This also explains why she began to hide her work from him a few years after their wedding.

Sylvia was ready to accept a traditional female role, however, she was only willing to subject herself to a colossal, fatherly man, who would be physically and intellectually superior to her. She despised weak men, whom strong women marry to always have it their own way. Young Sylvia dreamt of a man who would drag her by the hair into the cave and wildly rape her (Plath 2000a: 174). Her journals and other works are brimming with the desire for a dominant man, which culminates in the masochistic lines of "Daddy": "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." Radical feminists, of course, found these lines very problematic. Even in the case of identification with the fascist, the female reader cannot feel flattered. One of the feminist interpretations therefore prefers to see the father-fascist as standing for the violence of the patriarchal society. Consequently, the vindictive violence to the father, which follows, comes as a justified and victorious revenge of the woman on the repressive male society (Rose 1991: 235).

In the last six months of her life, Plath produced her most influential works, preserved in the minds of the readers and critics as the only true Sylvia Plath: an angry, disillusioned, deserted woman, who does not hesitate to expose her suffering and the ridiculously subjected role of the woman in society. In "The Applicant" the search for a wife is presented as buying an empty-headed, submissive doll: "A living doll, everywhere you look. / It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk." In "Purdah" the doll, facing her husband's betrayal, transforms into the lioness – the self-confident and lethally dangerous woman, who has nothing in common with the meek, loving representatives of conventional femininity. This image, embraced by radical feminists, made Holbrook and similar critics equate her with the hordes of women who, wearing pants, demanded equality and therefore lost their femininity. A woman who is not willing to subject herself and demands her own career is not a real woman, for she exhibits typically male qualities.

Hughes explained Plath's transformation as the liberation of her true self and stressed that what she showed before were only masks. His thesis that Sylvia pretended during the six years of their marriage cannot hold, for even though the traditional role of a woman is primarily a male fantasy, this does not mean that women experience it any less intensely (Rose 1991: 128). Still, in order to please men and show themselves as "feminine", women have to accept certain ways of behaving and thinking, and suppress the traditionally "non-feminine" impulses like aggression, ambition, and independence. These are the very qualities that burst into Plath's poetry after her breakup with Hughes. In "Purdah" the doll unleashes the destructive lioness, indicating the previous repression.

According to Jacques Lacan, the woman who accepts traditional female characteristics puts on a mask and escapes into an illusion of safety, firm identity, and possession of objects (Žižek 1999: 8). This gives her self-confidence and security, and at the same time protects the patriarchal male identity. The "real woman", however, recognizes her *manqué* and presents herself as a hysterical blend of appearances, covering emptiness. She is much more difficult to live with, for she requires the man to desire and in this way admit his imperfection (Miller 1997: 13).

When faced with the loss of perfection and safety in marriage, Plath transformed into a "real woman". The transformation was accompanied by a terrifying loss

of identity, for even the identity of a lioness could not hold. The “real woman” has to face emptiness, the absence of identity, described in “Purdah” as the “cloak of holes”. The “real woman” gives up her role of a mother and is willing, like Medea, to sacrifice her children to cut an indelible emptiness into the man. Accordingly, Plath’s last poem, “Edge”, gives an image of a woman perfected in death, holding two dead children in her arms.

The image of a “real woman” is closely related to the image of death. The mask she refuses to wear is in the service of Eros, for it brings the illusion of firmness and perfection. The disintegration of the illusion leads to Thanatos, the horrifying feeling of losing firm ground, which accompanies the loss of identity and security. After a couple of months of trying out the identities of the bee queen and god’s lioness, which produced her best poetry, Sylvia Plath progressively succumbed to the death instinct. The crisis came after the New Year of 1963, when Plath was painfully rejected by Al Alvarez. His memoir tells us that this was the first time he obtained a look behind her mask, realizing her despair, imperfection, unpleasantly smelling hair (Alvarez 1974: 48). He discovered that she needed help, and ran away. This was a typical escape of a man from a “real woman”, who poses a threat to his identity as well.

Although she explored the question of her identity all her life, Plath only in the last month of her life became aware of the absence of any identity. As a “real woman” she finally “took on her non-existence” (Žižek 1999: 7) and disappeared.

II. Sylvia Plath in Slovenia

With Andrej Blatnik’s translation of *The Bell Jar* (Stekleni zvon) and Miha Avanzo’s translation of a choice of Plath’s poems in 1992, the Slovenians became aware of this unusual poet, whose life and self-destructive tendencies reflect their national stereotype. In the first years of the 21st century the interest boomed and nowadays the Slovenian public is more interested in Plath than ever.

Slovenian literary magazines first mentioned her name already in 1962, while literary criticism only began discussing her work thirty years later. In 1993, Tomaž Toporišič expressed his surprise that her poems had not been translated already at the peak of modernism, for their structure of meaning was extremely close to the poetry of Dane Zajc and Venko Taufer, while their lyricism and poetic self-dissection was much closer to our idea of the nature of poetry than to the poems of her beatnik contemporaries (Toporišič 1993: 45). Toporišič sees the value of her poetry above all in tearing down the boundaries of language and in its combining capacities, which enable her to invent unprecedented, daring, grotesque imagery. He is convinced of a close connection between the mood of her poems and the general atmosphere in Slovenia. According to Toporišič, Slovenian readers could not only recognize themselves in her poetry, but also realize their own self-captivity – the lack of distance to themselves.

In 1994, two articles on Plath appeared in Slovenian literary magazines. In *Pesniška tribuna*, Petra Colarič describes Plath’s mind as neither logical nor psychologically convincing (Colarič 1994: 19). In *Vestnik*, Jelena Tomanič compares the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, concluding that Plath manipulates the reader

into taking her side, while Sexton attempts to pass on the message that people should strive for warm interpersonal relationships (Tomanič 1994: 382). Both authors view Plath as a manipulator, in this way reflecting the influence of Anne Stevenson's hostile biography, which was published in 1989 and at that time presented the main source of information on Plath's life. Written under Olwyn Hughes's supervision, the book attempts to protect Ted Hughes by blackening Plath's character and presenting her as a skilful manipulator. Since this biography doubts Plath's every statement and emotion, it should come as no surprise that contemporary critics adopted this view.

In 1998 Plath's name appeared for the first time in the *Delo* newspaper. Lenca Ferenčak's article accompanied her translation of "Three Women", broadcast by Radio Slovenia in February 1997. Refusing to concentrate on Plath's tragic death, Ferenčak includes extracts from interviews with the still happily married Sylvia, in this way creating an image of an intelligent young woman, well aware of the world that surrounds her. Although worried about the terrifying military-industrial complex in America, as well as about the influence of radiation on human genes, she does not let such thoughts influence her poetry, which rather describes the misty moon over the yew tree in the neighboring garden (Ferenčak 1998: 16).

In recent years, two theatrical performances reminded Slovenians of the life and tragic death of Sylvia Plath. In 2001, Damir Zlatar Frey combined acting and dancing capacities of Rosana Hribar in *Sylvia Plath - a Monologue from Beyond* (Sylvia Plath – monolog iz onstranstva), a co-production of Koreodrama Ljubljana and Plesni teater Ljubljana. Accompanied by Preisner's *Requiem for My Friend*, Hribar presented the emotional charge that triggered Plath's suicide. The goal of the performance was not to give a clear image of Plath's complex personality, but to concentrate on her numerous suicide attempts and on the transition between different psychological states. The performance without words was based on emotional expressiveness, on the pleasure of self-destruction, where every word is superfluous. The highly symbolic performance was not well accepted by the audience, either because there was almost no connection with the actual personality of Sylvia Plath, or because the depressed, almost psychotic psychological state repulsed the Slovenians with its very familiarity. Thanatos in its purest form seems terrifying and revolting, the pleasure of suicide grotesque.

In 2003, however, *The Longing and Death of Sylvia Plath* (Hrepenenje in smrt Sylvije Plath), an excellent performance directed by Jernej Lorenci won the hearts of the Slovenian audience. The co-production of Teater SARTR from Sarajevo and Kulturno društvo B-51 from Ljubljana could be seen in Drama as part of the Ex Ponto festival. The role of Sylvia was outstandingly played by Selma Alispahič, who had actually worked with Ted Hughes in Young Vic Theatre in London, and could therefore enrich the performance with her own personal experience. Having intensely worked on Plath's work for several years, Alispahič also contributed the largest share of the extensive biography research. Besides reading all Plath's works, she carried out a study of her character with the help of a psychiatrist and transactional analysis.

The performance effectively reflects the complexity of Plath's life and character. Framed as an analytic session with Dr Ruth Beuscher, it apparently gives the audience an insight into Plath's unconscious. The characters merge and transform into each other on the basis of more or less unconscious connections, while the characters

from *The Bell Jar* intrude into real life. The border between Otto Plath and Ted Hughes is so misty that the same character is greeted as father and then treated as Ted. Ted is presented as cold and dominant, forcing Sylvia to recite Shakespeare and criticizing her for not doing it perfectly, while Otto appears at times of crisis and comforts her. The demonic mother openly expresses pleasure at her husband's death, and forces cake into Sylvia's mouth to make her sound sweeter. Occasionally Sylvia bursts into murderous screams, telling mother to be quiet, but her hatred is eventually introverted and transformed into strong suicidal impulses. In the final scene Sylvia is left completely alone, with no one to look at her new poems, and neither Ted nor father respond to her desperate cries. She breathes in and departs from this world with a smile.

The main difference between Frey's and Lorenci's performance reflects the dichotomy in Slovenian literary criticism in relation to Plath's life and death. Due to the geographical distance, the lack of radical feminism, and the late availability of her work, Slovenian literary criticism did not split into Ted Hughes's advocates and enemies, leaving more space for the inherent dualism between Eros and Thanatos. The critics who, influenced by her life story and Hughes's interpretations, understand her life as an unstoppable drive towards the unavoidable end, either express dissatisfaction with her morbidity or through identification indulge in the pleasure of self-destruction. On the other hand, the critics who are more open and better informed recognize in her works an immense will to life and self-perfection, for Plath's personal symbolism considers death just one more step on the path to freedom, happiness, and rebirth.

Many Slovenians are simply fascinated by Plath, which can be understood in the light of Janek Musek's research of Slovenian national character. Although stereotypically introverted and rather cold, we are supposedly one of the most aggressive, dominant, and ambitious nations in the world (Musek 1994: 74). The combination of aggressiveness and introversion explains the high suicide rate, and also clarifies the affinity with Plath, who preferred to direct her murderous impulses towards herself. The Slovenians are fascinated either by her ambition, similar to our own, or by her unstoppable aggression, which in both cases turns towards the ego and leads to suicidal tendencies. The young American poet represents the fulfillment of our most secret desires, and at the same time gives us a clear warning. In this way, one could consider Sylvia Plath a truly "Slovenian" author.

Ljubljana, Slovenia

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