The vase, reconstructed, houses the elusive rose…

Elena Ciobanu, Senior Lecturer, PhD, Vasile Alecsandri University, Bacău, Romania

This is the line that comes to my mind whenever I catch a glimpse of one vase I have at home. It is an earthenware decorative pot with an interesting shape that I once dropped, shattered and almost threw away, but, feeling "loath to junk it," I finally decided to store it somewhere out of the way (Plath, *Collected Poems* 69). I found the broken pieces again after a couple of years and, in a possessed moment, glued them back together. Fragmentation is still visible in the thin irregular fissure line on the pot, whose perpetually cultivated emptiness maintains its place in my world. It has become an object with a certain aura. It is not something destined to harmonize my being with the energy of the world, as promoters of commercial and falsely spiritual discourses would say. Neither is it an artifact meant to represent or show off my professional and/or poetic interest in Sylvia Plath. What has saved it from utter annihilation is its strange combination of self-effacing modesty and imperceptibly menacing radioactivity, its "objective correlative" status. Sylvia Plath has saved it for me, I mean, that poetic world carved for us by a suicidal and terribly gifted woman.

It has been 14 years since I became interested in Plath's work, first of all through translations, and then through professional literary analysis (academic articles, PhD thesis).[1] Yet the very first time I had ever heard of Sylvia Plath was during a poetry lecture I was attending as a student, in 1997. Back then, the computer and the internet had not yet become omnipresent and easily accessible, and the poems and texts presented to us during lectures and seminars seemed so much more valuable. I remember looking carefully at those hand-outs the professor had given to each of us, with poems written by various English and American poets of the 20th century, and his sonorous, pleasant voice as he was reading some of the lines to illustrate some ground-breaking idea that marked the development of contemporary poetry.

Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" was among those poems, and it immediately stuck in my mind: it was so elegantly arranged on the page, and so misleadingly clear and so musical and full of an energy that was so delightfully unknown to me. I did not stop then to ponder more

[1] I am currently working on a book of Romanian translations of Plath's poems, which I hope I will be able to publish in the near future.

profoundly on the hidden tensions and shadows and desperate sardonic cries of the poetic persona. I just treasured it as a newly discovered promising door to the realm of contemporary poetry, that "gothic interior" of "endless perspectives between two mirrors" (Plath, *Johnny Panic* 28). I would go back to it in better days – days not marked by the obligation of taking poetry exams, but days that would bring time yet "for a hundred indecisions/And for a hundred visions and revisions," as Eliot's Prufrock so unforgettably put it (Eliot 4).

That time came sooner than I would have guessed, for, after a year or so, having become an English teacher myself, I came upon a call for contributions (articles, essays, poems, prose, translations etc.) for a newly founded, local cultural magazine.[2] There was no indecision on my part: I decided I would try my hand at translation, as "Lady Lazarus" suddenly loomed in my mind, tempting me to wrestle with it. Translating the poem was indeed a demanding adventure, forcing me to push the frustrating limits of my knowledge forward, exploring the cultural vistas that the poem required of me to explore even before I had made any attempt to focus on the text as such.

When I submitted the translation for publication, I was glad to find out that the editors were familiar with the name of Sylvia Plath, whom they admired unreservedly for her poetry. This familiarity with her work had been ensured for the Romanian public by some previously published translations (batches of Romanian translations of Plath's poems were included in American poetry anthologies that appeared in 1978[3] and 1986,[4] respectively; an "Ariel" bilingual volume was also published in Romania in 1980).[5] More recently, in 2003, "The Bell Jar" was published in Romanian[6] and, in 2009, the "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" short-story collection,[7] in which a group of journal entries were also included. At the moment of my decision to make my own translation of "Lady Lazarus," there was only one previously published Romanian translation of the poem (the one from the "Ariel" volume of translations[8] published in Romania in 1980).

It would have been inconceivable to see Plath published in Romania during the '60s and early 70's, when everything in literature had to be submitted to an official censorship by the

[2] The magazine is entitled *13PLUS*, and it is still being published in Bacău.
[3] Leon Levițchi and Tudor Dorin (eds.), *Antologie de poezie americană*, vol. 2, (Bucureşti: Minerva), 1978.
[4] Mircea Ivănescu (ed.), *Poezie americană modernă şi contemporană*, (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia), 1986.
[5] Sylvia Plath, *Ariel şi alte poeme*, transl. by Vasile Nicolescu, (Bucureşti: Univers), 1980.
[6] Sylvia Plath, *Clopotul de sticlă*, transl. by Alexandra Coliban-Petre, (Iaşi: Polirom), 2003.
[7] Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic şi Biblia Viselor*, transl. by Anacaona Mîndrilă Sonetto, (Iaşi: Polirom), 2009.
[8] *See* note 5 above.

authorities who wanted no capitalist seed to pervert the "healthy" socialist organism that was in fact so profoundly flawed and corrupt. Towards the end of the '70s and during the '80s, the control of cultural products was loosened, and consequently a large number of great Western classics began to be translated and printed.[9] Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was published in Romanian nine years (!) before the Revolution from December 1989 took place in Bucharest. Its subject matter and breath-taking guts were so different and so refreshingly free in the communist Romania of the time. People in the literary world recognized her as one of the greatest poets of the world and took pride in being familiar with her poems. Paradoxically, the lack of detailed information regarding her life (with the exception of a few most conspicuous facts like her suicide and doomed marriage to Ted Hughes), due to the cultural policy of Romanian communist institutions, prevented the infamous Plath/Hughes dispute from diverting, to any considerable degree, the readers' attention from Plath's poetry to her life. Thus, her poetry was approached primarily as only poetry. Romanian readers were certainly aware of Plath as a suicidal poet, but with a stronger accent on the "poet" part, which does not mean at all that the "poet" part elicited in its readers less passionate or biased responses. Plath's poetry is not poetry meant for lukewarm ones, for "the tame flower-nibblers, the ones//Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 269).

As one might expect, in today's Romania, as everywhere around the world, Plath's work continues to be somehow active, exciting and disturbing, particularly for artistic personalities. It has generated a subtle influence, especially among women poets, who find her violent energy and her amazing gift for language inspiring. Every once in a while one can find in cultural magazines translations of Plath's poems or even poems dedicated to Plath or written in tribute to her, mainly by young poets who are trying to find their own voice. The simple mentioning of her name seems to reactivate a sort of possessiveness in those familiar with her life and poetry, a sort of conviction that "others have got it all wrong, while I am the only one who truly grasps her" – a line of thought never expressed openly, but nevertheless present in the mind of some of my acquaintances or even colleagues.

I was prevented from giving in to this sort of idea by my distrust of any such egocentric manifestations of cultural appropriation. What I also think saved me from trivially identifying

[9]A number of Romanian novels, written in the Socialist realistic style of the period, which contained hidden allegorical criticism against the state, together with translations of world literature masterpieces, constituted for the reading public almost the only refuge from the depressing atmosphere of material and spiritual deprivation.

with the Sylvia Plath icon was both the fact that I deeply dislike imitative behaviour, and my hypothesis that someone situated as far from Sylvia Plath and her culture as myself could not by definition claim such an identification. Starting from such premises, my PhD research on Plath's poetry was initially marked by a certain lack of self-confidence, which began to dissipate when I discovered that my intuitions and interpretations corresponded to those from the books of criticism that had already been published. To mention all those books in which I found confirmation of my intuitions would mean to recount the whole process of my academic research on Sylvia Plath, and this is not my purpose here. However, I feel obliged to say that, while I found something valuable, no matter how little, in every book written on Plath, I always preferred those analyses that concentrated primarily on Plath's poetry as art, and not as material for demonstrations of various theories, more or less related to the field of literature.[10] Also, very high in my hierarchy, I would place both the books that explore the artistic relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes,[11] and those books and articles that deal with the Plath archive, by presenting their authors' interesting experiences with Plath's original manuscripts.[12] Last, but not least, I must mention W. K. Buckley's founding and editing of *Plath Profiles*, the first journal in the world on Sylvia Plath, as one of the projects that I have found most inspiring and generous for my professional life.

These confirmations helped me counteract another thing: whenever I mentioned that I was working on Plath's work or translating her poetry into Romanian, some of my acquaintances looked at me cautiously and decided that – since I had no suicidal tendencies whatsoever, no signs of ghastly depression or other mental disorder, no unusual family drama, no poet husband – I was not like "Her" at all, and that my psychology would not allow me to apprehend "Her"

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[10] Among the books I enjoyed most from this point of view I would mention here the following: Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath. A Critical Study*, (London: Faber and Faber), 2001; Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, (London: Virago Press), 1992; Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1999; Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath. The Wound and the Cure of Words*, (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1990.

[11] For instance: Margaret Dickie Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1980; Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – a Marriage*, (New York: Penguin Books), 2003; Lynda Bundtzen, "Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths," in Jo Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2007, pp. 21-36.

[12] Susan Van Dyne, "Fueling the Phoenix Fire: The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus*," in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Views. Sylvia Plath*, (New York & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers), 1989, pp. 133-149; Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, (Edinburgh: Longman), 2011, (Chapters 1 and 5, particularly); Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg, "These Ghostly Archives," in *Plath Profiles*, 2, 2009.

properly. Back then, it made me wonder for a moment whether a poet was better understood by a critic having a similar psychological profile, but I immediately rejected this as a false problem. The fallacy still survives however: I recognize it now as a sign of superficial, but passionate readers, a category most difficult to deal with. Such readers look at you, then they compare you with their own radical idea of Plath, formed by a few poems they have read and much daydreaming, plus a lot of dissatisfaction with their own life, and end by concluding that you are wrong for the job. It is always at this point that I feel most compelled to defend Plath's excellence as a student, her devotion to order, cleanliness and discipline, her serious poetic apprenticeship, her amazing effort to transmute words into beauty. The picture would not be complete without mentioning another group of more knowledgeable people who liked my work and encouraged me, but who couldn't help "generously" projecting on me the image of a fragile, unstable (and, of course, sensual) woman who rhymed more "properly" with the music of the poetry. It does seem impossible to separate life from work when it comes to Plath and to anybody connected to her in any way, doesn't it? Her guardian-readers wouldn't allow it. – Poor dears.

And how would I define my own relation to Plath's work after all? Andrei Codrescu's invention of "ghost-companion" poets for his students[13] might work to some extent, though not at all in any of the extreme, paranoid ways that kind of relation seems to have developed in some of Codrescu's imaginary students. There is no denying that Sylvia Plath's work constituted the pivot of my research in the field of poetry. I also love Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost and many other poets, but it was Plath who made me experience that peculiar feeling I also recognize in the sparkle from my students' eyes when they discover her poems: the powerful sensation that the truth of poetry is the most important truth in the world, because it is the only one that can give a genuine form to the ineffable energy that constitutes our real core of being.

This is ever so much more evident whenever I am translating her poems into Romanian – a most entrancing experience not available to native speakers of English, I think. Negotiating meanings in the no-man's realm between Plath's texts and my own language has taught me that "There are more things in Heaven and Earth […]/Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" and that what one needs is openness (*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 5, 54). It goes without saying that one educates and enlarges one's powers of perception and imagination while striving to transfer Plath's work

[13] *See* Andrei Codrescu, *The Poetry Lesson*, (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press), 2010, pp. 15 - 16.

into another cultural and linguistic universe. Yet this is only the visible part of the mechanism, the initial euphoric phase that captures the translator's mind and tempts him/her to believe vainly that it is in his/her powers to provide Plath (or any other poet or writer, for that matter), with the most appropriate body of foreign words. But the *traduttore* is separated from the *traditore* only when the translator feels truly impelled to assume a sort of ascetic discipline, a selfless surrender to the truths of the text for whose rebirth in a target language many semantic temptations must be fought and many alien voices must be counteracted that urge the translator to change one shade here, one syllable there. Sometimes the translation process mirrors that of the writing. I felt as burdened by the agglomerations of sounds and meanings from the earlier poems as Sylvia Plath confessed to have felt about them, while the translation of the later poems, no less difficult, proved to be a superior experience. The words of Plath's powerful poetic self from her mature poems follow one another in a frenzy whose dynamic coherence offered me the frame within which I could confidently begin to organize the translation. There is a certain translation anxiety that can be figuratively grasped through Plath's own lines in one poem: its "shadows long in the setting sun/That never brightens or goes down" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 76). If you are lucky, you can sometimes be rewarded with rare moments of grace: that inexplicable feeling that you have indeed reached the right word, that the "long wait" for the Plathian artistic self has finally blessed you with "that rare, random descent" (57). Yet the anxiety never leaves. It can only be temporarily suspended.

I understood this during one night, as I was watching the night sky, with its full moon, and I realized that, after Sylvia Plath, I would never be able to look at the moon without observing its "O-gape of complete despair" and trying to hear its blacks "crackle and drag" (273). At such moments, I have often found myself whispering, almost involuntarily, lines from my favorite poem in all of her work, "The Moon and the Yew Tree." My trance is always balanced by the awareness that when I whisper these words, I also do it as myself, bringing into the experience not only the similarities, but also, and more importantly, all the differences that separate me from Plath's persona. This enacting of otherness through remembering and uttering her words offers me both "the message of the yew tree," and the "echoing" of a voice summoning the "other" neither to submissively identify with her, nor to violently crush her. It is a voice asking for "something else": communication. Communication and tenderness (173, 192, 239).

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