Sylvia Plath's War Metaphors or How Female Confessional Poetry Changed Public Perception of Women's Personal Identity

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1. Premises

By using war metaphors in communication in general, and in confessional poetry in particular, a distinctive frame of mind is set to acquaint the addressee and the reader, respectively, with the unsettling psychological background of the message, before anything else, so that the tensional context be included in the reception and interpretation process. Thus, a set of beliefs sedimented through the extensive use of structural metaphors related to war (Lakoff, Johnson: 2003) is accessed whenever particular metaphorical clusters meant to shape emotional meaning are used.

There are some keywords and expressions like: conflict, clash of arms, threat, hostility, attack, defense, opposing forces, violence, confusion and change, usually associated with the broad term "war" that tend to come to one's mind when exposed to messages on the subject. They automatically set the reading and decoding vibe and fashion the unconscious emotional response to texts on such topics, mainly due to the past experiences and various definitions of war[1] that have along the history of humankind established a trend of thought on the matter, tightly linked to the definition of human nature as well as underpinned by anxiety, apprehension, moral crisis and a desire for change. And if the texts in question are confessional poetic works written at the beginning of the 1950s and 1960s, this means that the "now" popular description of the term "war" will bear the distinct traces of the Second World War, fact which adds to the generic definition of the concept the following keywords and expressions: concentration camps, holocaust, gas chambers, annihilation, identity hate, bombs, mass destruction, trauma. These notions are also

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[1] Heraclitus states that, "War is father of all and king of all; and some he manifested as gods, some as men; some he made slaves, some free" (Heraclitus apud Graham 2015). And according to Hobbes (2011) war is embedded in human nature, idea that can also be found in Kant (1983) who sees war as a noble source of inspiration ingrained in human nature.

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not unintentionally recurrent in the works of one of the most combustive representatives of the confessional paradigm, namely Sylvia Plath[2].

For Jakobson, the ascendancy of poetic language over the prosaic one resides in the former's autonomy and independence to its object, in its self-referentiality and governance by inherent rules, thus emphasizing "the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects" that exposes the "palpability of the signs" (Jakobson 1960: 356). In his turn, Genette (1995: 240) views poetry as "art par excellence", and one of the main purposes of art is to create "a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it" (Shklovsky 2012: 18). But what Sylvia Plath intends to realize in utilizing war metaphors ("the roller/ Of wars, wars, wars" – *Daddy*) as poetic technique, is to facilitate better emotional understanding of the object under scrutiny. In order to do that, she makes use of "alternative metaphors" (Schäffner, Wenden 1995) so that their newness, creativity and not seldom shocking analogies ("Radiation turned it white/ And killed it in an hour. // Greasing the bodies of adulterers/ Like Hiroshima ash..." – *Fever 103°)* "defamiliarize" the reader with the classical perspective on the object of focus, thus creating a breach for new perspectives and mentality change.

Be it personal history ("Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" – *Daddy*) or collective history ("It was only in a movie, it was only/ In a war making evil headlines when we/ Were small that they famished and/ Grew so lean and would not round/ […] So weedy a race could not remain in dreams,/ Could not remain outlandish victims/ Battalions. […]/ If the thin people simply stand in the forest,/ Making the world go thin as a wasp's nest// And grayer; not even moving their bones" – *The Thin People*) or an intermingling of both – women's pre-established roles in society (*Housewife*), women's socially triggered self-diminishing perception (*Stings*), women's abuse (*Daddy*, *The Applicant*) and self harm (*Tulips*), post-war trauma (*The Thin People*, *Lady Lazarus*) – the subject tackled in Plath's poems has the grains of war at its core. And this is not necessarily or not only because of the topics Plath dwells on, but especially due to the electric language she employs ("What a million filaments./ The peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see/ Them unwrap me hand and foot –/ The big strip tease" – *Lady Lazarus*) in order to impose a universe where the elements of internal conflict are so intimately linked to those of exteriority that they intermingle in an alchemy of opposites, linguistically highlighted by metaphor and metonymy: "How one we grow,/ Pivot of heels and knees!– The furrow/ Splits and passes, sister to/ The brown arc/ Of the neck […] And I/ Am the arrow, […]/ The dew that flies/ Suicidal, at one with the drive/ Into the red eye […]/ the cauldron of morning" (*Ariel*). Therefore, the cause and the effect of the lyrical ego states – both bow and arrow – tend to have the same epicenter.

Plath's lyrical ego is designed to reveal the fight between the real self (what she believes she is) and the ideal self (what she would like to become), hence the extreme concentration of her verse ("Before they came the air was calm enough,/ Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise./ Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river/ Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine./ They

[2] All Sylvia Plath's poems in this article are cited from Plath (1981).

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concentrate my attention" – *Tulips*), sometimes even physically felt by the empathetic reader as an uncontrollable energy release that arrests attention, as well as preconceptions: "Peel off the napkin/ O my enemy./ Do I terrify? [...]// Ash, ash –/ You poke and stir" – *Lady Lazarus*).

The identity splitting mechanism of the metaphor and analogy and the patented tearing apart method that Plath employs in order to force change, prove she is one of Octavio Paz's *Children of the Mire*, casting an analogical vision of the world:

> […] analogy does not imply the unity of the world, but its plurality, no man's sameness, but his perpetual splitting away from himself. Analogy says that everything is the metaphor of something else, but in the sphere of identity there are no metaphors (Paz 1991: 73).

And, still, if they do exist, this comes against identity coagulation in a single reference point, as Sylvia Plath – representative of confessional trend – will further demonstrate.

2. Inside Out

It is important to underline that in order to make sense of the confessional poetry paradigm, the reader needs the proper tools beforehand as he or she is conducted "towards the message as such, [to a] focus on the message for its own sake" (Jakobson 1960: 356). Extrapolating, this refers to the way confessional poetess Sylvia Plath relates to exteriority, and most importantly, to the inner world, since her poetry becomes an "instrument of awakening the consciousness of reality" (Genette 1995: 239), not only for the reader, but especially for herself. And besides awakening the consciousness of reality – "Being born a woman is my awful tragedy [...] to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity" (Plath 1998: 30) – Plath's poetry will manage most of the times to put it into motion through blunt auto irony: "Naked as paper to start/ But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,/ In fifty, gold./ A living doll, everywhere you look./ It can sew, it can cook,/ It can talk, talk, talk. [...] You have a hole, it's a poultice./ You have an eye, it's an image./ My boy, it's your last resort./ Will you marry it, marry it, marry it" (*The Applicant*).

An idea circulated that confessional poetry should be seen as a therapeutic means for the mental problems of some poets (like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton), only that its aesthetic intentionality invalidates from the start such a narrowing of the scope of analysis, far from being exclusively a remedy, it clarifies and rearranges the tensional contents of immanence, thoughts, fears and trauma, without passing the sponge over them, on the contrary, they appear even more claiming and evident. We could compare it, however, with psychodrama, an expressive therapeutic method which, according to Schützenberger (2003: 30–33):

> […] explore la vérité des êtres humains ou la réalité des situations, par des méthodes dramatiques […] opère une catharsis du passé dans le présent ou du futur dans le présent, par la représentation dramatique de conflits, avec intensité émotionnelle.

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This theatrical method of catharsis extrapolated to the territory of confessional poetry places the lyrical ego not on a stage before an audience to whom the subject of psychodrama recites its stanzas of emotional climax, but in an inner space where the drama is performed before each and every reader at a time. In dealing with the insurmountable need to escape from the troubled, mutilated self, confessional poets use all the stylistic devices at hand in order to have collective consciousness fragmented into particular receivers (readers) that will eventually give (another) reality or coherence to their trances.

Now the reflexive ego is extracted and exposed from the sphere of those feelings and acts defined as innermost or taboo. The lyrical ego seemingly abandons formal strategies, revealing the fabric of fresh, vivid nerves so that the reader may have the impression that if he or she "touches" these nerves they will resonate directly in the poet's body, soul, mind or psyche. The new writing strategies include implosive language ("Bit my pretty red heart in two./ I was ten when they buried you./ At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you" – *Daddy*) that describes precisely the disclosure process like an act of self-terrorism, thus changing the basis which one builds on. By displaying vulnerabilities, confessional poetry has greater power over the poet's environment, unlike modern poetry whose reins were exclusively in the hands of the artist.

Emotional tension, darkest secrets, psychologically significant gestures, trauma and neurosis, revolt and death, all these are themes of inspiration for poets like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Their revolt transfers its centre of gravity from the outside inward – see the Romantics versus the world and society, on the one hand, and on the other, confessional poets facing their own self, above all the rest. Each of them has an unmistakable style of mirroring inner and outer reality, style which considerably reduces, even to the confusion, the distance between "to seem" and "to be". None of them ignores reality; the latter becomes most often a pretext for self-analysis and introspection while it is endowed with warfare attributes.

Sylvia Plath places herself at the core of the poem as a generative and osmotic ego ("I am a center of an atrocity/ What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?" – *Three Women*), virtually swallowing all external elements only to bring them into poetry already digested, transfigured so that her "paper" personality overcomes the "real" one in terms of credibility and importance. Therefore, the fictional "second degree game" becomes a game of life and death.

So it's no wonder that Sylvia Plath dissects every corner of her mind in the attempt to turn it into a new "body" on paper – a signifier intended to outline an innovative semic coherence of the new feminine self ("A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle […]/ And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg" – *A Life*). In her verse, Plath proves to be a militant for the deep urgency of artistic (hence social) reactions to border events in the recent history of women's self-perception (I/ Have a self to recover, a queen" – *Stings*) and women's limitations ("I watched the men walk about me in the office./ They were so flat!/ There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,/ That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,/ Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of

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shrieks proceed,/ Endlessly proceed – and the cold angels, the abstractions" –*Three Women*).

As noted in Sylvia Plath's diary,

> Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars – to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording – all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yet, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night […] (Plath 1998: 30),

the American woman of the sixties, despite the won battle for emancipation in the time of the Second World War when she worked and made decisions for men, being forced to support her family alone, still appears subject to manly society that does not give credit in blank to her ability to surpass herself – endeavor which is the more difficult, the more she must first overcome her own prejudices about the secondary role cast to her in the world: "Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful" (*Stings*). We see how woman lets herself be drained of her special aura and leverage like mystery, sensuality, tenderness. Sylvia Plath's technique aims at desacralizing and then reconfiguring the symbol of femininity to gain power over antagonistic self and ingrained prejudices. Through the metaphors of dissolution she creates a revolution in the post-war perception of women: "A sort of walking miracle, my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade […]/ Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air" (*Lady Lazarus*).

Plath emphasizes how female strength often resides in their fragility ("See, the darkness is leaking from the cracks./ I cannot contain it. I cannot contain my life"), as well as anxiety ("I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses" – *Three Women*), which is best conveyed by war metaphors ("The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent/ It is a heart/ This holocaust I walk in/ O, golden child the world will kill and eat" – *Mary's Song*) as primary language that proposes a reality to match the intensity of inner experiences.

Loneliness ("With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle"), physical and psychological distress, and anger ("She has one too many dimensions to enter./ Grief and anger, exorcised,/ Leave her alone now" – *A Life*) build an implosive discourse abounding in first-person references ("I am not ready for anything to happen/ I should have murdered this, that murders me" – *Three Women*) that are, paradoxically, alienating. The autophagy ("And I a smiling woman / I am only thirty / And like the cat I have nine times to die" – *Lady Lazarus*) and the thanatophoric vibe of Plath's confessional poetry come not only to cast a particular vision inoculated with the germs of decomposition, but the secret bet is also to destroy social prejudices through the symbolic conversion of personal ordeal: "I stand in a column […]/ Of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers./ I am no drudge/ Though for years I have eaten dust/ And dried plates with my dense hair. […]/ And seen my strangeness evaporate,/ Blue dew from dangerous skin" (*Stings*).

Plath's war metaphors related to identity loss approach the postmodern rhetoric as they make reference to an oneiric, hence not at all meaningless, world,

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irretrievably decentered by the loss of ascendancy over pain ("I had a dream of an island, red with cries./ It was a dream, and did not mean a thing" – *Three Women*). And even if the great metaphysical themes are also found in her poetry, they are inevitably recalibrated to accentuate the transcendence of immanence: "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free" (*The Arrival of the Bee Box*).

3. Life on the battlefield: hypostases of the nihilistic self

History, personal or universal, has always played a significant role in Sylvia Plath's poetry. Philosophy and quite implacable vision of history are the guiding marks for the destiny of most of the themes addressed, including the Eros-Chronos-Thanatos triad. Here's what she writes in her diary (July 1950):

> 8. – With me, the present is forever, and forever is always shifting, flowing, melting. This second is life. And when it is gone it is dead. But you can't start over with each new second. You have to judge by what is dead. It's like quicksand ... hopeless from the start. A story, a picture, can renew sensation a little, but not enough, not enough. Nothing is real except the present, and already, I feel the weight of centuries smothering me (Plath 1998: 4).

We cannot fail to notice that the attitude of the poetess toward time ("O God, I am not like you […]/ Eternity bores me [...]/ What I love is/ The piston in motion –/ My soul dies before it./ And the hooves of the horses,/ Their merciless churn. – *Years*)" resonates perfectly with Octavio Paz's insight into the same subject:

> The present has become the central value of the temporal triad. The relation between the three times has changed, but this does not imply the disappearance of the past, or of the future. On the contrary, they gain more reality: they become dimensions of the present [...]. The time has come to build an Ethics and a Politics upon the Poetics of the now (Paz 1991: 171).

At this point, we must emphasize that Plath is one of the "children of the mire" for whom poetry represents, besides knowledge, action: "Daddy, I have had to kill you,/ […] Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" – *Daddy*). The two views above remind us of a third: Mircea Eliade's "myth of the eternal return" (Eliade 1999). Confinement, recurrence and fragmentation of self into archetypes frighten Sylvia Plath to the utmost, but she still extensively uses mythological motifs to objectify and deepen considerations on her own existence: "The woman is perfected/ Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment,/ The illusion of Greek necessity/ Her bare/ Feet seem to be saying:/ We have come so far, it is over" (*Edge*).

Having as source of inspiration African stories and fairy tales, "African myth is so geocentric that «the gods of native Africa […] must lose their earthly constituent, their earthly adhesions, before they can become properly divine»" (Radin apud Mazzaro 1980: 150), Plath starts to believe she can achieve perfection and redemption through a continuous loss of human features: "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well,/ I do it so it feels like hell /[…] I guess you could say I've a call" (*Lady Lazarus*).

The artistry of self-negation is supposed to dynamite sufferings and trauma by emphasizing in confessional verse precisely their influence on most levels. That is

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why Sylvia's prayer obsessively reiterates that after she dies God may do whatever He wants of her, except force her become her old self again, since winning the war with oneself actually means to surrender the "rotten" self to poetry. Plath skillfully explores this belief issued from general guilt after the Second World War that DNA must have suffered serious alterations so that the new perverted genes, common to all people, shelter terrible nightmares along with the ferocity of soldiers now denouncing the general sin in bloodshed: "Straight from the heart […]/ Out of the gap/ A million soldiers run,/ Redcoats, everyone […]/ Whose side are they on? […]/ The pulp of your heart/ Confronts its small/ Mill of silence [...]" (*Cut*). Sylvia Plath borrows the "dreaming back" technique from Yeats to follow the thread of time backwards and overpopulate the present with the hunting remains of those who had been massacred and cremated: "Ash, ash/ You poke and stir/ Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –/ A cake of soap,/ A wedding ring/ A gold filling" (*Lady Lazarus*).

The "dreaming back" technique reveals Sylvia Plath's lyrical ego as Electra's descendant ("Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg/ Under the coronal of sugar roses/ The queen bee marries the winter of your life" – *The Beekeeper's Daughter*) and the bearer of a contradictory family legacy. Born to a German father ("I have always been scared of you / With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook./And your neat mustache /And your Aryan eye, bright blue/ Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You" – *Daddy*) and to a, to some extent, Hebrew mother ("An engine, an engine/ Chuffing me off like a Jew./ A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen […]/ I think I may well be a Jew" – *Daddy*), Plath casts the two oxymoronic poles against the background of world history[3] as proof of internal disorder which might as well have been caused by circumstances related to the legend of the Second World War. Paradoxically, while she perceives herself as a permanent outsider, she assumes the elements of history and universal guilt as belonging to her nature[4], becoming actively involved in the realities of her times. She thus manages to proudly transcend, but also painfully expand her mythical persona ("Irrefutable, beautifully smug/ As Venus, pedestaled on a half-shell/ Shawled in blond hair […]/ […] the women/ Settle in their belling dresses […]/ They step among the archetypes" – *Heavy Women*), feeding these universal wounds retroactively with her own story. A story crippled nearly from the start: Sylvia Plath never had the opportunity to define exactly her affection toward her prematurely dead father, feeling somehow cancelled and barren in her love without a recipient: "Small as a doll in my dress of innocence/ I lay dreaming your epic, image by image […]/ Everything took place in a durable whiteness" (*Electra on Azalea Path*).

Therefore, we identify, on the one hand, the desacralization and demonization of the father's image ("Negro, masked like a white" – *Thalidomide*) – which is meant to neutralize all the suffering inflicted by his absence – on the other hand, the same image carved into the core of her being, from where the face confronting death will emerge as from a carnivore mirror: "Each morning it is her face that replaces

[3] "[…] a genuine confessional poem has to be superbly successful artistically if it is to achieve this fusion of the private and the culturally symbolic, but it must at any rate be far more highly charged than the usual poem" (Rosenthal 1967: 69).

[4] "the poems constitute «an act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred»" (Steiner apud Mazzaro 1980: 158).

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the darkness/ In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish" (*Mirror***)**. Like a severed hand ("Your dark/ Amputations crawl and appall" – *Thalidomide*), the gap left by the absence of the dead father is transformed into a painful abyss with spectra that never cease to hurt and haunt the little girl: "I see your voice/ Black and leafy, as in my childhood [...]/ A yew hedge of orders/ Gothic and barbarous, pure German/ Dead men cry from it/ I am guilty of nothing" (*Little Fugue*).

And the dead come to demand their rights from generation to generation. The German father now becomes the exponent of a group of fierce criminals, and the orphaned daughter takes over by way of testament and destructive feelings the atrocities of war ("O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at/ Your gate, father – your hound-bitch, daughter, friend./ It was my love that did us both to death" – *Electra on Azalea Path*), at the same time posing as a victim of abuse: "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" (*Daddy*). The distrust in breaking with the (personal) past permanently turns the confessional poetess's severe childhood trauma into poignant reality which will expand until it gets out of control; that is why heaven and escape perspectives drastically narrow: "Not God but a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through" (*Daddy*).

Sylvia Plath's inclination for duality was often analyzed[5] and the conclusion is that duplicity will always annihilate to renovate or renovate to annihilate ("If I've killed one man, I've killed two/ The vampire who said he was you […]/ There's a stake in your fat black heart" – *Daddy*). The self-alienation process in Plath's poems gives rise to an inhuman being, a sinful female Lazarus who comes back from the dead only to die again – Mother of Death. This symbol of perpetual war, the revengeful Erinys swallows both the executioner and the victim. Like a Phoenix whose ideal is ashes and the flame hardened in the concentration camp furnaces ("I am your opus,/ I am your valuable,/ The pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek./ I turn and burn" – *Lady Lazarus*), all these hypostases burn in spontaneous combustion, in the end performing the Heraclitean baptism: "Am a pure acetylene/ Virgin [...]/ (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)/ To Paradise" (*Fever 103°*).

Sylvia Plath's poetry employs the metaphor of torture chamber to convey women's submissive condition ("A man in black with a Meinkampf look/ And a love of the rack and the screw" – *Daddy*), and their reign over the realm of suffering. Here, trauma and flaws take various guises to complete the jouissance of the self-decomposition process: death by hanging (*The Hanging Man*), strangulation by barbed wire (*Daddy*), scarves, tentacles (*Medusa*) and umbilical cord; then we have carbon monoxide poisoning (*Poppies in July*; *Poppies in October*) and death by radiation (*Fever 103°; Mary's Song*), bee stings (*Stings*), drowning (*Suicide off Egg Rock*), etc. Camp survivors, alongside Plath's lyrical ego as the sole recognized survivor of her nightmares, become shadows (i.e. decompose) that haunt the

[5] "The honours paper that Plath eventually did on the double – not in Joyce but Dostoevsky – would have lent to these processes of meditation an almost psychoanalytic concept of the double. The concept would be based on opposition rather than congruence. The opposition would add up either to a third figure containing both or to a cancellation of what each half-figure represents" (Mazzaro 1980: 148).

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torturers only to turn, once again, into shadows: "They found their talent to persevere/ In thinness, to come later […]/ Into our bad dreams, their menace/ Not guns, not abuses/ But a thin silence" (*The Thin People*). It is a vortex cycle of physical and mental strain.

The "thin silence" filled with unsettled lives flows out from the purgatory of the confessional troubled conscience, which makes it clear that Paradise cannot be attained otherwise than by the flames from the ovens of death crawling deep inside the most innocent of hearts or themes tackled: "The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent/ It is a heart/ This holocaust I walk in/ O, golden child the world will kill and eat" (*Mary's Song*). There is an alchemical process of universal guilt distillation in Plath's verse aimed at effacing culpability. And since in times of war mass suffering tends to overshadow the individual, Plath makes soul and holocaust become one in order for the symbolic radiation of her anxious mind to devour sin ("Like Hiroshima ash and eating in/ The sin, the sin" – *Fever 103°*) and purify its vessel: "And I, stepping from this skin/ Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces/ Step up to you from the black car of Lethe,/ Pure as a baby" (*Getting There*).

Therefore, the lyrical ego is cast in the role of a witch consumed on the pyre of her own flawed vision of the world: "The horizons ring me like faggots,/ Touched by a match, they might warm me/ And their fine lines singe/ The air to orange [...]/ There is no life higher than the grasstops [...]/ and the wind/ Pours by like destiny, bending/ Everything in one direction" (*Wuthering Heights*). So, if sin means fragmentation and inner contortion, the confessional lyrical ego replenishes itself through death. But not any kind of death, a self-aware death that makes a statement and gives perspective. All facets of confessional personality will fit into a single enlightening puzzle-face which feels at home in the "oneiric space" and is not afraid to face divinity, for: "[…] what makes our finitude less a lack than a capacity is the magnitude of death, that respect in which it refuses to be thought, pondered, weighed according to any system of equivalences" (Dastur 1996: 3).

Thus, Plath reverses planes and hierarchies and subtly uses this stylistic shift to illustrate the consequences of war. Reality is now established by negation ("The moon is *no* door" – *The Moon and the Yew Tree*); the verb "to be" seems, in these circumstances, to have certifying or founding properties only in the oneiric space, on the dark background of night. The world pulsing with life will finally give in and fall asleep hurt by too much vividness, while the oneiric realm has all the characteristics of a universe in which the "hieroglyphics" of inner short circuits are decoded and reinterpreted: "Little poppies, little hell flames/ […] Or your liquors seep to me/ in this glass capsule/ Dulling and stilling" (*Poppies in July*). The powerful need to escape self perception and reality is translated into sleep, opiates and, ultimately, death.

We notice that liveliness in times of (psychological, emotional and spiritual) war equals torture, wounds, flames, extreme pain, excitement – border life, in a nutshell. And in support of the admirably orchestrated chaos, Plath employs an amalgamation of powerful images, metaphors that, all gathered, are sabotaging each other due to the oxymoronic sense, duplicating the antagonistic battle between life and death, good and evil, inner self and outer self, etc. The confessional poetess makes a point that people's identity is shaped by inner as well as external circumstances, and in order to win the war against one's own self or against the alter

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ego, one has to be ready to lose some battles first: "And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself" (*Tulips*).

Another proof of Plath's feminist rebellion is the preference for non-colors: white signifies death, sterility and endless depression, and occurs most often hypostatized. In this respect, the image of the moon stands out as a muse[6] of bad omens and the bearer of the poet's cursed destiny ("But heavy-footed, stood aside […]/ Godmothers […]/ They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,/ Faces blank as the day I was born" – *The Disquieting Muses*). She also distinguishes her father's bones as essence of void ("And get back, back, back to you./ I thought even the bones would do" – *Daddy*), pearls as amulets of death ("And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" – *Lady Lazarus*; "The rest of the body is all washed-out / The color of pearl" – *Contusion*), bandages, linen and hospital sheets as anonymity heralds ("My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen"), and blind, irisless eye as symbol of "locked-in"[7] syndrome (Damasio 2002) as well as morbid obsession ("They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff/ Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut" – *Tulips*).

Plath furthermore mentions frost and snow as embodiments of aboulia ("Voicelessness. The snow has no voice" – *The Munich Mannequins*), winter as season of suffering and stagnation ("Such coldness, forgetfulness/ Through the black amnesias of heaven/ Falling like blessings, like flakes/ Six sided, white/ On my eyes, my lips, my hair/ Touching and melting/ Nowhere" – *The Night Dances*; "I can taste the tin of the sky […]/ Winter dawn is the color of metal" – *Walking in Winter*), and the nurses as angels of death mysteriously linked to the occult forces, to divinity. They are metaphors of alienation, elements that enter the patient's body to the spirit and make changes over which she has no power: "Each nurse patched her soul to a wound and disappeared" (*Walking in Winter*).

On the same level of signification, black represents another gruesome embodiment of the lyrical ego; the tree with its barren branches bears the white image of the moon as a lineless palm without a destiny. There will find refuge strange spirits like the guilt repressed: "I am terrified by this dark thing/ That sleeps in me/ All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity" – *Elm*). Messenger between earth and sky, the tree expands one branch for the halter, waiting for sufferings to bloom ("And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence" – *The Moon And The Yew Tree*; "The yew my Christ, then/ Death opened, like a black tree, blackly" – *Little Fugue*; "A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree" – *The Hanging Man*). Its roots reach deep into the ground to parents' bones ("I know it with my great tap root" – *Elm*) and the sharp, barren branches attract lightning: "By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me/ I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet" – *The Hanging Man*).

Space, the elements of nature turn out to be an alter ego of the poetess in accord with the symbolism assigned to them. Depicted as a lightning rod ("The sky

[6] "[…] there is a strange muse, bald, white, and wild, in her «hood of bone» floating over a landscape like that of the primitive painters, a burningly luminous vision of a Paradise […] which is at the same time eerily frightening, an unalterably spotlit vision of death" (Hughes 1965: 1).

[7] a feeling of claustrophobia, of inner blocking of the confessional poets immersed into the perfectly lucid awareness of helplessness.

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leans on me, me, the one upright" – *Wuthering Heights*), the tree, that is the symbol of human being, by its dangerous verticality draws fate's attention to it, causing misfortunes, therefore: "I am Vertical / But I would rather be horizontal" (*I Am Vertical*). Plath cherishes Emily Dickinson's vision ("We – who have the Souls – Die oftener/ Not so vitally" – *Nature – Sometimes Sears a Sapling*[8]), and, in this respect, we can sense consanguinity between the two peer women poets.

Nature in Plath's verse is the handy counterpoint to the lyrical ego's extreme states of mind; it's a blotter that absorbs feelings and then displays them in war-ravaged landscapes or in the intense redness of flowers (*Tulips*), in landscapes with ravaged, decaying gardens (*The Manor Garden*), in troubled waters, steel-like sky, etc. In this regard, the confessional poetess was influenced by symbolists and expressionists and quite often likened to Roethke and his metaphysics of nature. But Sylvia's metaphysics is devoid of metaphysics, we could say, because the little string linking souls to the world is now in the hands of the individual, and the backstage transcendental ritual has disappeared: "Guileless and clear/ Oval soul-animals [...]/ Brother is making/ His balloon squeak like a cat […]/ Contemplating a world clear as water/ A red/ Shred in his little fist" – *Balloons*). Plath's convulsive verse depicts an independent as well as troubled woman at war with herself and the world – hence the war metaphors; a woman who, by her intense confessional poetry writes the most impactful declaration of independence from the conservative female identity.

Epiphany – so intensely sought after and cherished by modernists – marks here the crossroads with the postmodern vision. Knowledge and stable sense of the world slide to ambiguity, imbalance and war metaphors. The exoteric props ("[…] meat-and-potato thoughts – assumes the nimbus/ Of ambrosial revelation./ To the cloud-cuckoo land of color wheels/ And pristine alphabets […]" – *The Ghost's Leavetaking*) are thrown into esoteric territory with a naturalness claiming to be naive. The same is the tone in *Daddy* poem, as if taken from a cradle song. The contrast enhances the drama, and being so pronounced, it would most likely be cancelled and turned into lamentation if it weren't for the self-irony employed. This is a risk assumed and, thus, half surmounted by Plath's confessional poetry.

4. Conclusions

Sylvia Plath becomes her own subject of mortification to be afterwards proposed to the reader as subject not at all irrelevant to autofictionalization techniques and to permanent coquetry with the realm of alterity. The poetess's impulse to mythicize her figure resides in the utopian side of the subject – the need for linguistic escape into another dimension of self, free from socially constucted and prejudice related boundaries. Maurice Couturier (1995: 213) speaks of the Western man's eagerness to duplicate; thus the "passion d'être un autre" revolutionizes the first-person-language to a new semantics of ipseity which deconstructs the individual by extracting from the unconscious the ideal figure or the most hidden traits and feelings about which not even the one who reveals them

[8] Emily Dickinson's verse is cited from Johnson (1979).

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doesn't necessarily know, at that time, whether they comply or not with the reality of his being. It would therefore not be unusual that an autofictional pact be, in substance, an autobiographical pact, or vice versa.

Lying and fiction or autofiction are not synonymous; in fact, in fiction, as Dorrit Cohn (1999: 31) remarks, there is no "error" or "fabulation" or "lie", especially because reality is not synonymous with truth but rather with the author's point of view, who details on some aspect of reality in his/her spiritual autobiography, for instance, as the "purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Shklovsky 2012: 12). For Plath, in any case, authenticity is undoubtedly the destination of the road from autobiography to autofiction.

At the antipodes, Dorrit Cohn identifies in regard to autofiction the existence of a double pact: "an autobiographical pact within a fictional pact" (Cohn apud Schmitt 2010: 43); therefore nothing remains outside of fiction, autobiography even less or, in our case, confessional poetry. The biographemes thus show the interior route of reality, a complex alchemic route to reach the philosopher's stone, that is, in Plath's verse, the new dimension of female identity achieved by the extensive use of war metaphors as ontological spaces of self-awareness that mirror the sacrifices made to reach this ideal reunification.

As depicted by Simone de Beauvoir (2008) we are dealing with the woman who *becomes* a woman, declaring herself as such and, more importantly, who remains an independent and conscious "Subject", which no longer slides into the masculine area of influence, playing the supporting part of that vague "Autre" which used to define and complete virility rather than to define itself.

At the same time, interiority also presupposes that the lyrical ego becomes one with the voice of the private identity, only in this way can it articulate its tribulations. The writing remains an alternative life, the body of the repressed that heals by throwing itself into the world so that its scars can be "read" and even opened and exsanguinated of the accumulated poison.

Beyond the preservation instinct, Sylvia Plath leads poetry to the limit of prescribed life as an important factor of inner dissidence and normality, after all. Love, disease, death, happiness are subsumed to the same irrepressible need for being true to oneself.

This is not poetry that demonstrates a thesis, but one that seeks its textual identity in conjunction with the needs of immanence and of its conscience constantly tortured by the idea of not having been able to fulfill its vital project, which is actually poetry: a lucid mirror of the mind and soul of the poetess haunted by the constant fear of demystification of the ideal self-image.

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Abstract

This paper is based on Roman Jakobson's premise concerning the superior status of the poetic function which asserts that poetic language and poetry as such can actually change public perception only by the power and strong impression of truthfulness it (Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry) conveys to the reader. This kind of poetry is nonmimetic and thus "deviant" from the prosaic language mainly by the "defamiliarization" it entails in regard to the continuously renewed perception the reader acquires of the object of poetry. And since the object itself is "new", it actually draws attention toward the generating subject (the poet) only to eventually make the reader want to become more familiar with the latter. Therefore, the reality of inner turmoil the confessional poetess Sylvia Plath captures in verses of self-annihilation, stands for the mapping of the disaster inside which transforms the war metaphors she uses into an extensive, mise en abyme metaphor of destructive emotions, chaotic or fearful attachments and life experiences in general as consequences of the postwar American mentality and trauma. Since she believes that being a woman requires survival skills, the metaphors Sylvia Plath "lives by" enable the reader to follow in her footsteps and eagerly descend deep into the realm of the unconscious, witnessing a psychodrama that ultimately manages to change mindset toward some sensitive topics of those times, like gender awareness and suicidal ideation.

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