

# Words of stone and words of shadow in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Ioannis Kanellos

IMT Atlantique, Brest, France

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**Abstract:** This paper is a review of Elena Ciobanu's monograph "Sylvia Plath's Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self", published in 2009 (Iasi: Demiurg). The review focuses on some phenomenological aspects that E. Ciobanu analyses in her study, by combining literary hermeneutics, linguistics and philosophy. The value of this work resides, among others, in the way in which the author interprets Plath's most famous semantic ambiguities. In Ciobanu's view, the shadow and the stone, two of Plath's most frequently used images, can be seen as the fundamental tropes of suffering that structure the work of the American poet.

**Keywords:** semantic ambiguity, tropes of suffering, phenomenology, poetic self, body and language.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

For decades now, scholars have been baffled by Sylvia Plath's imaginative reconfiguring of the world. Elena Ciobanu's 2009 monograph on Plath's poetry (*Sylvia Plath's Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self*, Iași: Demiurg) focuses on the singularity of the Plathian poetic experience, by using methods that cannot simply be subordinated to traditional literary hermeneutics. Her analysis is grounded in a voluntary deviation of the typical literary method for the sake of recuperating a phenomenological added value. Plath's poetic creation is consistently approached through her linguistic idiom which is seen as a corpus containing the traces of a life and, at the same time, maintaining the life of a body. The author concentrates on the efforts of the Plathian "I" to apprehend and express her experience and thus to constitute herself as a subject. This subject gradually fails to connect to the other, estranges herself from the social sphere and finally loses any connection to normativity whatsoever.

In her short existence, Sylvia Plath seems to have directed her efforts in two main directions: 1. the struggle against the loss of meaning that threatened the construction of her textual subject and that often rendered her unable to arrive at her own signifieds; and 2. the desperate attempt to encode, in poetry or in prose, the fragments of a personal history that is sometimes elliptic, and, more often than not, phantasmically constructed. This is a world that remains incomplete and unstable, despite the desire of the subject to conquer and contain a reality that could eventually become meaningful: when separated both from her body and from the social body, the life of this self becomes unsustainable.

Elena Ciobanu shows that this double effort on the part of Sylvia Plath's textual self is assimilated to a project of self-restoration or to a quest for otherness. This project will not be successfully fulfilled, primarily because the Plathian self is alienated from her own words, a fact that she will eventually and definitively become fully aware of. In fact, she will turn herself into a prisoner of her own words through a lexical 'mummification' that doesn't solve her semantic contradictions but turns them into essentialized realities. The language in which she chooses to enact this process is always related to, and depends on, the presence of the body. The trajectory of Plath's poems, Ciobanu argues, is based on an endlessly redefined relation between body and language. This body is fundamentally perturbed, even before it is inscribed as a feminine body. It strives to transcend biology and to subdue the social order by compromising any coherent correspondence between signs and reality, language and life.

In the second chapter of her book, the author shows how the first serious attempt to definitively undo significance is rooted in the consciousness of a loss of meaning, of the separateness of everything, and of the separateness of the subject from other subjects: “As from a star, I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over.” (*Ocean 1212-W*)

The utter separateness of everything leads to a frightening corollary: day after day, it becomes a separation between form and content and thus the poetic function of her discourse seems to proliferate autonomously and even to acquire exaggerated dimensions. At first, it tries to compensate for the referential loss, but eventually it will subsume the other five functions of language. This can be clearly seen in one of her last poems, where the “I” sadly declares: “Years later I/Encounter them on the road —/Words dry and riderless,/The indefatigable hoof-taps” (*Words*). Elena Ciobanu chooses inspired subtitles that clearly send to the steps of her analytical process: “The impenetrable wall of meaning”, “Empty signifiers and obscure signifieds”, “The splitting of meanings”, “The subordination of the empirical subject to the poetic self”, etc. The critical discourse is grounded in numerous illustrations, both in verse and in prose, appropriately chosen from the Plathian corpus.

The phenomenological investigation from the third chapter of Ciobanu’s book explores the ways in which the Plathian subject constructs herself in her poetic discourse. The “I” is seen as the effective cause of an eidetic reduction that establishes the world through an intentional correlation with perception. This is an intriguing reduction which is later understood as “the decision to make the world appear as it is”. Yet can one ignore convention and decide meaning unilaterally? If yes, what would be the risks of such an enterprise? “The tissue of being” begins to undulate: “Yet in my wintriest moods, I hold/Absolute power/To boycott colour and forbid any flower/To be.” (*Soliloquy of the Solipsist*)

The section entitled “Poetic being as a phenomenon” develops an interesting answer with phenomenological and psychiatric consequences: in Plath’s case, one may talk about a specific phenomenon inasmuch as, through a dual mechanism, this phenomenon is generated by the very subject that it posits: “Here I am, a bundle of past recollections and future dreams, knotted up in a reasonably attractive bundle of flesh” (*Journals, 30*). This happens through the substitution of the subject by a persona who, while failing to find her place among the others, tries to ascend into a paradise of a liberated meaning, leaving behind her old “petticoats”, i.e., her former interpretations and manifestations. This decentering leads the poetic self to spaces of pleasure and suffering (orality, sexuality and writing) and finishes by subsuming linguistic forms to the fragments of a fractal experience which Plath seems to embrace without too much resistance. The two tropes of suffering seem to be the stone and the shadow. This is a form of experience that no longer allows one to distinguish between transgression, transcendence or “empty ecstasy”. Be that as it may, we can notice the vicissitudes of a reinvented experience through which a troubled mind attempts, no matter what, to discursively reconstruct the body: “O God, I am not like you/In your vacuous black,/Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti./Eternity bores me,/I never wanted it./What I love is/The piston in motion —/My soul dies before it” (*Years*). It is interesting to study, in such discursive fragments, the deviation and even the destruction of cognitive norms. The benefit of a positive madness is obviously measured by the capacity of the subject to return to ‘normal’ cognition. Yet, when the structures of meaning are themselves attacked, what kind of subject can be said to emerge from that process?

Sylvia Plath’s poetic being appears in Ciobanu’s view as marked by a shadow/stone duality that is developed in the fourth chapter. The shadow/stone duality also reflects the opposition between perception and interpretation that operates in “the Unheimlich time-space of the poetic self”. Plath’s poetic discourse is thus structured by the presence of an “I/shadow who knows that existence is an intentional movement of the self through which a specific time/space is generated” and by the equally troubling presence of an “I/stone, aware of her own paralysis, [...] trapped in the past and incapable of initiating a movement that leads to an identity”. We see thus how a permanent disturbance of the self is inevitable. It takes the form of a “permanence of a troubled self”. Plath’s genius feeds on the same source as her drama: at the beginning, this disorder tends to favour an escape into poetic madness, which allows the subject to enjoy the freedom of alternative intelligent, prodigious, often luminous, significances. However, the subject remains entrapped in a cognition that tends to undo itself. The notion of the present dramatically alters and eventually usurps all stringency. The subject is no longer interested in finding those linguistic categories that would reconnect her to a world that is still shared with the others to a certain degree; what she needs is to create disquieting silences, or “ambivalent word-grains”, or metaphors of all kinds, which affirm a present that is threateningly dilated.

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Sylvia Plath's poetic frenzy seems to have been fundamentally related, and even conditioned by, her psychological illness. The astute analysis of her artistic discourse enables us to understand that the solitary mode in which she chose to construct her meanings helped her get access to her creativity and, at the same time, it made her return to the point of departure impossible. Devoid of stable rites of meaning, Plath's poetics appears as a one-way road.

Elena Ciobanu's remarkable monograph discreetly defends the fruitful collaboration between literature, linguistics and philosophy. While taking into consideration the historical, social and personal circumstances of Plath's creation, this book explores the particular semantic processes at work in the American poet's masterpieces, and thereby opens new perspectives on the fascinating relations between experience, symbolic systems and poetry. The author's impressive analytical skills, together with her keen observations and rigorous criticism render this book valuable not only to Plath scholars, but also, and interestingly so, to specialists coming such fields as philosophy, linguistics, psychology, psychiatry or cognitive sciences.

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