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Sylvia Plath Through the Looking-Glass:¹ Too Beautiful to be Dead

NICOLAS PIERRE BOILEAU

Abstract: Mostly ignored during her lifetime, Sylvia Plath as an author came to life when she committed suicide. It is no wonder she should immediately come to mind when dealing with the question of authorship and its commodification: labeled as a feminist, a post-modern, a victim, a poet, a second-rate author, she has been alienated by all the images that have flourished since her death. In comparison with the relatively limited number of texts she actually wrote in such a short life, the images and pictures of Plath have proliferated indeed. These images filled in a void left by the enigma of her suicide. It is true that Sylvia Plath is “the Marilyn Monroe of the literati”: a beautiful, blonde American girl of the ‘50s who sits in all kinds of dress and who coyly, joyfully or flirtingly looks at the camera like a supermodel. Whether it be on the covers of her books, in the biopic, or elsewhere, Sylvia Plath is associated with an ideal image. All this has undeniably helped glamorize the American author and has contributed to reinforce the myth surrounding her. This paper will focus on how the editorial practice influences our reading to such an extent that it makes us forget that Sylvia Plath’s own relationship with images calls for caution. Most pictures have emphasized some aspects of Plath’s writing (gender roles and femininity), but they have covered up other important issues related with self-representation.

Contributor: Nicolas Pierre Boileau is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Aix-Marseille Université, France, where he teaches English and British Literature. He specializes in the study of auto/biography and psychoanalysis. He has published several articles on Woolf, Plath and Frame. His current projects concern contemporary fiction, the edition of the first collection of academic papers on Rachel Cusk’s works, and the representation of madness in autobiographies. He has also translated into French academic works related to the performance arts, the most recent being Aleks Sierz’s *In-yer-Face Theatre*.

Since Roland Barthes announced the death of the Author, critics have refrained from looking at the author as anything more than a “function” (Foucault, 798), a theoretical conception that deprived the author of a body.² By reducing the author to a function in the economy of the text, critics have often constructed the author as a presence in the text without a body. Yet Plath critics can hardly make do without the body of Sylvia, who is “the only writer we enter in the swimsuit competition” (Bryant,

¹ My title refers to Taïna Tuhkunen-Couzic’s analysis of the beginning of *The Bell Jar*, in which she points out the intertextual reference to Carroll.

² The recent exhibition on the images of Arthur Rimbaud in Paris is a sign that change is underway. See “Rimbaudmania: l’Éternité d’une icône”, 7 may to 1 August 2010, Galerie des bibliothèques, Paris.

243). I think Bryant here refers to the Marilyn-Monroe-like³ picture of Sylvia Plath in her bikini, a picture which has recently been re-colored for the front cover to Faber and Faber's edition of *The Bell Jar*. This very famous photograph is part and parcel of an ever-growing number of photographs that have circulated ever since the author died and have shaped the "imaginary" Sylvia Plath.⁴ Two elements need stressing before we start analyzing the role of these photographs in the reception of Plath's works: first, most are private pictures, unlike the photographs which are often used by editors to promote the publication of books.⁵ This alone raises the questions of the boundary between the public and the private, and of the voyeuristic leanings that this choice is meant to titillate. Moreover, most pictures paradoxically show a person who was not yet an "author", in the professional sense of the term,⁶ since they were taken a long time before Plath published her first collection of poems (which itself was not successful enough for her to be considered as a writer). Secondly, the author's oeuvre was published after her body had disappeared, a fact which must be taken into account when one analyses these photographs. As Plath committed suicide on February 11th, 1963, her most important works were thus published posthumously, and her life was shrouded in mystery. The pictures that began circulating soon after her death served the function of compensating for the absence of the author's body, real and symbolical. Sylvia Plath became a "cottage industry",⁷ partly because of the discrepancy between the glamourized image created by these photographs and her tragic life-story, which was to turn her into a feminist icon. Because so little was known about what her life had been like, critics excavated pictures that could substantiate her existence, but this has also led the public to approach Plath through her image rather than through her text, thereby commodifying the author.

According to Rita Felski, the commodification of female authors is much more common than that of their male counterparts because women's literary production continues to be regarded as autobiographical (Felski, 83): the female author herself is part of the literary economy as her work and her self are supposed to be inseparable. Few twentieth-century writers can be said to have had a greater impact on mainstream culture than Sylvia Plath (I. Lindahl-Raittila, 16): in 2003 alone, a biopic starring Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow and soon-to-be James Bond, Daniel Craig, as well as an off-Broadway production, revived the interest in the American author and sparked a media controversy.⁸ These cultural objects were produced in the wake of several

³ "Sylvia Plath has become the Marilyn Monroe of the literati" (Rose, 11).

⁴ J.-L. Diaz distinguishes three dimensions of the author, which he calls social, textual and imaginary. I use his definition of the imaginary as the reader's mental construction of the author's body based on photographs, portraits and interviews.

⁵ It may be worth noting that these photographs are rarely used as front covers, or else only on the dust jacket, and almost exclusively when the text is autobiography.

⁶ P. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art : Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996.

⁷ K. A. Baldwin, "The Radical Imaginary of *The Bell Jar*", *A Forum on Fiction*, Fall 2004, vol. 38, n°1, 21-40.

⁸ See Frieda Hughes's reaction to the film for example in her poem "My mother", <http://ru-sylvia-plath.livejournal.com/2127.html>, consulted on Feb. 15th, 2011. This is not to mention mainstream films in

publications, including multiple biographies, such as Kate Moses's *Wintering* (2000) and Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband* (2003), Ryan Adams's "Sylvia Plath" song (2001), and, perhaps more importantly, the publication of the unabridged journals.⁹ Interestingly enough, none of these biographies spare us the photograph section, in which more often than not we come across the same pictures. Sylvia Plath as a cultural object is thus reproduced endlessly, as if critics and readers sought to get as much evidence as possible that she had existed. These pictures depict a perfection of a woman, providing all the ingredients necessary to counter the gloomy, tragic character of her life: the impeccable hairdo (with various hues depending on the moment of her life), the perfect smile, the happy couple when she poses with Hughes. As J. Rose says: "Often [...] it is technically impossible to separate Plath's voice from those who speak for her (a large part of her writing was published and, more importantly, edited after her death)" (Rose, 2). Many critics have already studied salient aspects of the way these pictures were strategically used.¹⁰ Interestingly however, the image of Plath that is often discussed is the textual image created by critical discourses, and the glamourization of the author, which the choice of Gwyneth Paltrow can only expose blatantly. These previous critical works enable me to state that Plath is indeed an IMAX figure (Bryant, 243), that she has been commodified into a marketable product in order to ensure both the circulation and purchase of her works, and that other writers have seized the opportunity to combine scholarly work with popular readership (See Lindahl- Raittila). However, I would like to start analyzing this as an effect of Plath's writing as well: what was Plath's own vision of her pictures and how has the commodification of Plath affected our reception of this? Within the extent of this article, I have decided to look at her prose, which remains slightly undervalued.

Entry 157 (J, 155), written on January 10th, 1953, is the only example of Sylvia Plath's sticking a picture of herself in her diary. It is a picture of her face, which might have been cut out of a passport picture or of a photograph that used to show her body as well (the neck looks awry). Clearly she's not at her best and doesn't smile. Her face is indeed expressionless, as if the picture had been taken by surprise. The picture in that entry, however, is not only stuck there, it is commented upon by the author: "Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it". (J, 155) This insertion reminds contemporary readers of Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, in which the author places photographs of his relatives and the places that he loved in order to spare him the trouble of descriptions. The imperative "look" opposite the photograph is redundant as the image instantly attracts the readers' attention, if only because it is unusual in Plath's journal to find anything but text – except for a few drawings in the

which Plath is quoted. See for example *Ten Things I Hate about you*, in which *The Bell Jar* is read; the book and film version of *Girl, Interrupted*; and in *the Gilmore Girls*, in which the heroine reads Plath's journals.

⁹ Note that a similar thing occurred in France with P. Godi, *Sylvia Plath, Mourir pour vivre*, Croissy-Beaubourg, Éditions Aden, « Le cercle des poètes disparus », 2007, and S. Doizelet, *La Terre des morts est lointaine, Sylvia Plath, « L'une miroir de l'autre »*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

¹⁰ See T. Brain. Funnily enough, despite the title of her otherwise interesting monograph, I. Lindhal scarcely mentions the way pictures have participated in the creation of the author's image.

section from June 1957 to June 1960. Moreover, it is surprising that the author should fear she might forget to look at herself, for in choosing to write a diary, she may be said to indulge in an act of self-contemplation. The inclusion of a photograph therefore undermines the assumption that the text may be a reflection of the person. It might be argued that the written portrait is of a different kind, being concerned with the inner being rather than with the physical aspect. However, Sylvia Plath's comments check this assumption once again:

It is a chalk mask with dead cry poison behind it, like the death of an angler. It is what I was this fall, and what I never want to be again. The pouting disconsolate mouth, the flat, bored, numb, expressionless eyes: symptoms of the foul decay within. (J, 155)

The reference to the mask is a *double entendre*: the literal meaning is that Plath's face looks blank on the picture and looks like an artificial mask which is used to conceal one's face. Its more complex meaning draws on relations with the persona of the artist (Plath as writer), the role played by the actor – both meaning a form of willing pretence – and the fact that a mask is a stereotypical image that is imposed on somebody and that can hardly be taken off – this time a form of imposed pretence. The polysemy of the word “mask” is therefore confusing rather than clarifying and the reality of what she sees in the picture becomes somewhat blurred. “The autobiographical trope is a “specular” one, which posits the fantasy of a recognizable face mirrored and authenticated by the text.” (Britzolakis, 11) The author seeks to look beyond those appearances: words such as “behind” and “within”, as well as the comparison and the description of the salient details as “symptoms” show that the features are meant to be significant of something deeper, something concerning the soul. The vagueness of the self-referent pronoun “what” adds to the confusion. The author does not imply that the picture shows what she looked like but that it is revelatory of her subjectivity. However, the fact that she is able to stick a picture on a page in order to drop the mask reveals that there is no sense of an identity, no sense of sameness; therefore, the same face – for Sylvia's face has had no physical alteration – can represent two different selves.

Several conclusions may thus be drawn. First, if her own image is definitely haunting Sylvia Plath, it is not out of self-love: she wants to think about it in order to avoid making the same mistakes, in order to avoid being again the one she abhors. Secondly, it is clearly commented on as separated from the “I” of the time being. The binary rhythm of the second sentence is based on the alternation between the past and the future and the avoidance of the present “I”. The subject is defined negatively. None of the body parts which are used as symptoms are linked to the author: “the” is used instead of the possessive “my”, as if no resemblance could be found, as if a fracture had separated that image of hers from the one she intends to project now for good. Most of all, it enables us to understand how separate the image is from the person in real life. “That ugly dead mask” is not recognized by Sylvia Plath as being Sylvia, while the reader

definitely knows whom the picture represents. Our feeling is reinforced by the insertion of pictures by the editor, which enables us to identify the face. Plath's image triggers off a feeling of abjection: all the adjectives are meant to distort the face in such a way that the caption to the picture certainly appears as an exaggeration meant to create a grotesque character. Sylvia Plath does not recognize her face as belonging to her. The feeling of division between the person and her image is thus Narcissus-like, in the sense that it is first experienced as other. Reasons for this division could be imagined or guessed but I am more interested in pointing out the ways in which it is expressed. Nothing in the picture can explain the violence of Plath's comments. Part of the reason is that the context of its being taken, or the memories that she associates it with are not clearly stated. The picture becomes a significant way for Plath to materialise/ to fix that which she isn't, as opposed to the written portrait that she keeps writing.

Critics often remind us that Plath's honors thesis was entitled "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels" and recent contributions have valuably emphasized the role played by her work as a painter (something which she is perhaps less remembered for) in helping us understand the function of images in her writing (Britzolakis). The pictures of Plath which have appeared in the press and in biographies, I argue, call attention to their mask-like nature, to rephrase Barthes (Barthes: 1953, 53).

These pictures of Sylvia Plath are unlike the one that appears in the diary because in them Plath poses. The body position, the smile, the eyes indicate that she knows she is being photographed, and she acts like a supermodel, only too aware of the result her alluring smile will produce. She was used to sitting for the satisfaction of others throughout her life (Godi, 41). Plath was obsessed with her image, constantly commenting on the discrepancy between her own sense that she had no identity whatsoever to cling to and the necessity to appear as a perfect girl. Just like the letters she sent to her mother, Plath's pictures are polished images, façades, that bear but the faintest resemblance to the person she was, predetermined by the codes of imagery that hide the gulf separating the subject from her reflection¹¹. The photograph that was chosen as the front cover to *Letters Home* shows Sylvia in a virginal white dress similar to another picture from 1940: on the latter, Plath is the perfect girl, sweet and quiet, with plaits or a simple hairdo. As can be seen in some press clippings of Plath modeling, the smile never leaves her face, that smile which she will later enhance in *The Bell Jar* by comparing it to that of the Cheshire cat (TBJ, 224). The quality of the pictures or of their reproduction is often rather poor but this doesn't seem to matter as the intention behind their insertion is to assert Plath's joy and therefore the disjunction between her writings and her life. As her mother asserts: "Practically every character in *The Bell Jar* represents someone, often in caricature, whom Sylvia loved. As the book stands for itself, it represents the basest ingratitude. This was not the basis of Sylvia's personality." (Britzolakis, 12) Editing practices, ever since *The Bell Jar* in particular was published,

¹¹ "The reifying power of the eyes is highlighted: [...] the protagonists are nothing more than mere surfaces devoid of any depth." (Nervaux, 147)

have repeatedly tried to erase the difference between the literary persona and the person Plath really was, taking the pictures as evidence of the distortion that her fiction produces (Brain, 6). Plath's pictures were in turn used by everyone to comment on Plath herself and to justify either the reading of her texts or the interpretation of her life. This "reproduction" of the author, as Nathalie Lavalie argues, creates another *oeuvre* that competes with the author's original writings:

The author ceased to be an original and became a reproduction. His being is no longer located in his utterance, in his physical appearance, in the unique nature of his life but in the multiple recordings, testimonies and narratives that are endlessly repeated. His life has become one of the volumes of his complete works, or even better, one of the versions of his works. (Lavalie, 12)

Because of the numerous problems of exegesis that were posed by Plath's case, the pictures meant an easier access to a certain form of knowledge on the author that the text seemed reluctant to give away. Yet this negated what was conveyed in Plath's works on the image of the body, therefore seemingly unifying the dismembered parts of Sylvia's written and pictured bodies.

Bearing in mind how the author herself judges the person who can be seen in the pictures, this complex relation seems to be negated by the above-mentioned editorial practices. Plath has been turned into a glossy magazine pinup. Plath was haunted by the clichéd representation of women that is passed on by women's magazines. The fact that she participated in their writing contests (just like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, Plath entered different magazine competitions) and their publications, as well as the fact that she could not resist reading these very magazines, does not mean that she was deluded by them (Tuhkunen, 128). I would like to argue that the metaphor of a *corps morcelé* (Rose, 72) is indeed an apt metaphor for Plath, for her writings convey the idea that the image of a unified body is deceiving, and that it is a mere façade that conceal the fact that the individual first experiences his/ her body as made of disconnected parts. Jacques Lacan has shown how the mirror(ed) image of the self is the stage that enables the subject to construct the identification with a unified image of his/her own body, thereby negating the primary experience of a body made of bits and pieces (Lacan: 1966).

Time and again in her works, the author asserts the escaping nature of her body (Boileau: 2008), the impossibility for her to recognize herself in the mirror, and the absence of a correspondence between the image and her sense of being: "And I sit here without identity: faceless. My head aches... I'm lost." (J, 26); "Why can't I try on different lives, like dresses, to see which fits best and is most becoming?" (J, 101) The journal and the artistic works give a spitting image, as it were, of the same absence of reflection in the mirror. *The Bell Jar* is filled with episodes in which Esther does not recognize her own face or body. In that sense, the novel is based on a paradox similar to that underlined in Sylvia's own life: the main character is intrigued by the image of herself

while this never fits her expectations. Esther is narcissistic in the original sense of the myth, i.e. a character who is conscious of the rupture between the self and its image, or rather who forecloses the delusion that most people experience for their image. As Pierre Hadot argues, "Narcissus' folly precisely lies in the fact that he doesn't recognise himself." (Hadot, 92) Yet Esther's tragedy is that the reflection is always devalued, and therefore she cannot ever fall in love with herself.¹² The monstrous nature of the reflected image evokes this absence of recognition: "I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked." (TBJ, 17) The choice of an Asian, a person whose physical features are different from the WASP type, enhances the fact that the reflection is an encounter with the figure of the other. It is only because Esther seeks to restore meaning that she is led to establish the link between the image and who she is: "it was only me of course". But her first experience was one of othering. This comparison recurs in the novel: "The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian." (TBJ, 108) Above all, images seem to pre-exist the subject and have a life of their own: "The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colours. It was a face that needed soap and water and Christian tolerance." (TBJ, 98) Of course, this is an example of Plath's sarcastic humour, but in conjunction with all the references to images, this certainly also helps construct or confirm the lack of recognition which can be veiled by the rest of the text. Just like Narcissus, Esther almost kills herself because the mirror is an experience of otherness that makes the suicidal act possible:

I moved in front of the medicine cabinet. If I looked in the mirror while I did it, it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play. But the person in the mirror was paralysed and too stupid to do a thing. (TBJ, 142)

Not only is the image unrecognised, but it becomes a fiction with a life of its own, emphasising Esther's lack of self-love, and depriving the subject of her reality. Other girls normally find solace in the image of themselves (*La Belle*): "[Hilda] stared at her reflection in the glossed shop windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist." (TBJ, 96) These experiences keep recurring throughout the novel, giving us the impression that the body is not linked with the subject, that its image is that of a *corps morcelé* (since very often the face is literally detached in the contemplation) and that reality is de-substantiating: "At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture" (TBJ, 168). The most telling example is the one in which Esther is asked to "smile" (TBJ, 96) and bursts into tears. More often than not, this episode is analysed from a feminist perspective as the rebellion of Esther against the clichéd representation of women: she is given a paper rose to evoke poetry,

¹² For a feminist perspective on these passages see *La Belle*, 124-128, 158-9 *et passim*.

and all the girls are given trinkets and forced to smile. Yet, there's a more personal dimension that needs stressing, which is linked with desire and language. The whole passage is based on the heroine's breaking down in front of the inquisitive looks of the other people around: the objective of the camera pointed towards her, together with the eyes of the photographer, of Jay Cee and the other girls, are associated with the relentless question: "What do you want?", which Esther is incapable of answering – and this of course places Esther under scrutiny. Jay Cee's witty remark: "She wants to be everything" would require a paper in itself, but suffice it to say here that it points to the lack of a signifier that is correlated to an image and that could represent Esther as a subject.¹³

What's at stake is not to conclude on the autobiographical dimension of the text, as Axelrod, for example, did in his biography, when he published the photograph which, according to him, corresponds to this episode in *The Bell Jar*. This haunting presence of an image that is divorced from its referent invites carefulness in the handling of pictures in Plath's case, beyond the usual precautions (construction, privacy, etc.). Her texts seem to have been an attempt at voicing that truth about the representation of the body: the cliché – the paper rose, the smile – is only a prop for Plath who can't be photographed because of the absence of an imaginary level connected with language. Her pictures are thus clichés, a projection of the self as stereotypical.¹⁴

Is it Plath as author or Plath as a person that people wish to promote? Critics of authorship have convincingly pointed out that literary authors have to negotiate their situation between space and non-space, what Maingueneau calls "paratopia": the author both belongs to the realm of literature, while at the same time s/he seeks to escape that institutional space by creating another world that is neither completely part of this world, nor completely part of literature (Maingueneau, 27). Perhaps Sylvia's reflection on images was linked with the instability of her identity. This is Laure de Nervaux's main thesis when dealing with the question of mirrors in Plath's poetic oeuvre, together with the notion that women's coming to terms with imposed definitions of femininity often leads them to a different understanding of the concept (Nervaux, 11). If we are to follow Esther's model, not in the dim sense that she is but a persona of Plath, but in the broadest sense that she conveys what Plath meant about the issues of identity and the imaginary identification that usually participates in its construction, the persona of the author seems to be the only thing Plath identified with, a persona that all these photographs have helped de-construct and shatter to pieces. Indeed, time and again Plath returned to writing, as if this were the location that suited her being best. It was for her what put an end to the otherwise ever-lasting series of possible images for the

¹³ When there is a lack in the function of symbolisation, there is no adequate representation of the body (Maleval, 146).

¹⁴ "Two photographs of Plath that were taken by Gordon Lameyer and reproduced in *Letters Home*, obviously inspired by the numerous pictures of Marilyn Monroe that circulated then, show Plath's incapacity to give out an image of herself that hadn't been previously structured by the codes of representation that applied to femininity, and reveal the importance of the cinema as a model for the construction of the image of the self." (Nervaux, 281)

self: "Each day demands we create our whole world over/ disguising the constant horror in a coat/ of many coloured fictions", she wrote in "Tale of Tule". The constant repetition of the same clichés of Plath was meant to fill in the void left by an experience beyond meaning: Plath's suicide. The pictures symbolised Plath's presence and seemed to provide readers with some form of truth. Lacan explains: "Knowledge in lieu of truth, that's the definition of myth" (Lacan: 1998, 12). Perhaps we could explain what everybody calls the myth of Sylvia Plath thus: it is the critics' relentless efforts to replace truth with knowledge that has led to the erasure or ignorance of what Plath's texts expressed. Critics' appropriation of Plath for their own ends has contributed to masking that truth by trying to understand why she had committed suicide, blaming Hughes, herself, her mother, her father, her brother, her schooldays' dates, and others. I hope to have shown that by doing so they have distracted our attention from the most important issue of the author's relation to her own image.

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