

THE AUTOFICTIONAL AILING SELF: DEPRESSION IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR* AND CELLA SERGHI'S *THE SPIDER'S WEB* – A COMPARISON¹

Hristo Boev

Department of English Studies, Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, Shumen, Bulgaria

Abstract: *During the COVID-19 pandemic and emerging from it many people went through depressive states, sometimes with a lethal outcome. Depression, however, can be caused by numerous factors not expressly necessitating a global cataclysm, invariably remaining a particular personal response to a perceived strong sensation of discomfort and loss of meaning in one's life. This paper will examine the major novels by two writers – the American Sylvia Plath and the Romanian Cella Serghi with the purpose of comparing the autofictional representations of depression in both, paying attention to its causes, courses, and outcomes. The comparative analysis will also establish the power of autofiction as a phenomenon and its capacity of producing texts with interdisciplinary dimensions containing a universal appeal. By examining two autofictional responses to an identical issue – the modern disease occasioned by similar causes, the paper aims to provide potential solutions that might have worked to a healing effect in the other text with the potential to transcend the texts in question and be applied to real-life situations since the described incidents have already happened not once and not only as part of the lived experience of the two writers. Last but not least, by effectuating the comparison the article seeks to help promote an author from a smaller national literature to the realms of World Literature.*

Keywords: *autofiction, World Literature, phenomenology, depression, lived experience*

About the author: *Hristo Boev, Ph.D. is an associate professor of English and American Literature at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Shumen, Bulgaria. He is the author of the published monographs: Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities, The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars (original title in Bulgarian) and Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction. He is also a translator of English, Romanian and Bulgarian with numerous literary translations to his credit. His main interests lie in the fields of Comparative Literature, Modernism, Literary Urbanism, Geocriticism and the Art of translation.*

e-mail: *h.boev@shu.bg*

ORCID ID: *<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6933-3167>*

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1. Based on the author's monograph *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction* (2021). – a. n.

According to WHO, more than 700 000 people take their own lives every year with approximately 280 million people in the world suffering from depression. Unsurprisingly, depression has been a source of numerous autofictional explorations many of them rife with ethical issues. A major American classic from the early 1960s, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and a less known Romanian novel from the late 1930s, Cella Serghi's *The Spider's Web* (*Pânza de păianjen*) (1938) provide different answers to dealing with the disease as part of the writers' lived experience. These works are comparable by 21-century standards since such an analysis employs a combination of approaches: *historical and geographical – different locations and times; thematic – comparing occurrences of a particular topic in different literary periods; cultures in minor languages (Romanian) become the subject of inherently acceptable comparisons in a major language such as English; canon vs countercanon*² (Hutchinson, 2018, pp. 19-34). It is interesting to note that both authors were going through a very difficult phase in their lives, being abandoned by their husbands, at the time of writing the novels, with Plath portraying an earlier episode when depression had struck harder – the summer of 1953 and with Serghi describing a much more recent event in her life. Far from glorifying or victimizing themselves, they produced accounts with poignant insights into the suffering feminine self, showcasing the potential immense capabilities of women writing in distress. In the Forward to a recent study, *Autofiction in English*, Isabelle Grell (2018) confirms these writing possibilities: “it [autofiction] can only be developed from persons, conscious of themselves and of the fact of living in a group that sustains them, denigrates them or simply ignores them, in a world where it is necessary to tell, just to tell, and tell justly, raising their own voice to divulge the flip side of life” (p. vi). Apart from claiming that autofiction tells the untellable, this also asks the question if writing as an omniscient narrator could make a case of autofiction. In the same study, Lorna Martens answers it positively and gives numerous examples of the advantages of this approach – one of which would be that the story told could be truer to life since the author would not feel the need for self-censorship (Martens, 2018, p. 49). One could even argue for writing in the second person as a sort of a dialogue with oneself or an imaginary someone else to be yet another fascinating possibility, but this is indeed rare. Both Plath and Serghi are autofictive in their novels offering the perspective of a young female first-person narrator in their 20s: *The Bell Jar* is told from

2. Cella Serghi's novel was not included in George Călinescu's monumental anthology of Romanian writers *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (1941) containing 948 pages due to Serghi's alleged failure to send him her manuscript but has remained in print to this day through multiple reeditions where she kept modifying her text. Călinescu's work canonized some of Serghi's contemporaries together with earlier writers who have been considered canonical ever since. – a. n.

the perspective of a girl called Esther Greenwood³, *The Spider's Web* features Diana Slavu as its principal narrator; in both the fictional element – non-lived experience is minimal and intricately incorporated in the story to the point of being unrecognizable to a reader unfamiliar with the life facts.

In their fictional forms of life writing both Plath and Serghi join other autofictive writers who have been through a personal trauma and who would like to keep it for the world through the recorded memory of the experience. Grell also has the following to say: “What makes a person an author is that this person speaks to others of a life experience, reflects on it and transforms it in style into a book” (p. vii). To this we could also add the evidence of intent – as Jon Phelan (2020) claims simply: “fiction tends to be written by an author who intended the work to be read as fiction” (Phelan, 2020, p. 9), and that undoubtedly includes autofiction. An umbrella term, life writing⁴ seems to be useful and can be said to have two general modes encompassing both fiction and non-fiction: describing one’s own experiences and describing someone else’s accounts of lived experience – the biographical form. Academic publications nowadays insist on an interdisciplinary approach with contributors from the complete spectrum of the Humanities. The interdisciplinarity thus associated with analyzing autofictive writing is then but a reflection of its intrinsically complex nature. Writing from personal experience with emphasis on veracity invariably encounters a seemingly insurmountable problem. If we consider, for a moment, the rendition of the experience itself in a journal, for example, we will inevitably bump head-on into what has been deemed a major issue of the term *lived experience*, and namely, the capacity of language to render into text what the author has been through – Tzvetan Todorov argues that the end result could only be fiction, literature being but an imitation through language (Todorov, 1973, pp. 5-16). When we read literature, we automatically assume that the language in which we read can do so to a high degree of semblance of the real

3. Possibly after Ethel Greengrass, the latter being the family maiden name of Ethel Rosenberg who was to be electrocuted with her husband in the summer of 1953, an event that shocked Plath profoundly and in her later works (prose and poetry) she kept identifying with Jewish women, recreating imaginary holocausts for her feminine selves in prose and verse. – a. n.

4. A. Effe and H. Lawlor (2022) in the Introduction to *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, discuss the view that life writing may be a better term since autofiction apparently poses too many challenges as to having an uncontested definition (p. 1). For the purposes of this article, autofiction will be understood to be any piece of text whose author intends it to read as fiction and which contains substantial parts directly related to the lived experience of its author, prominently featuring places, events, times, persons that can be recognized by others regardless of their fictional names (real names are occasionally preserved). Texts that have been recognized to be autofictional are *A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) by Herve Guibert, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and others. – a. n.

thing. That is what makes us avid readers, but there is still the intentionality of the matter, which is what exactly the author intends to consign to paper from what has happened. Further issues could relate to Husserl's *retention* (Husserl, 1991, p. 169) – what has been consciously retained from what has happened, or simply the mood that the autofictive writer is in after the event, as Leonard Woolf succinctly comments on aspects of his wife's approach to her diaries (Woolf, 1982, p. vii). Sylvia Plath herself admits to the uncertainty of diary-keeping in her *Journals*, referring to the post-evaluation of the event which determines the importance of the incident often after the account of it has been consigned to paper (Plath, 2007, p. 24). Irresolvable as this problem appears, it would suffice to admit to certain limitations. We should not forget that the act of writing the self is inevitably linked to “reinventing the self” as Serge Doubrovsky is often quoted as having said or as Grell concludes, “in inscribing the subject in the world, it does not seek to, cannot, categorically refuses to flout the exteriority by which the ‘I’ is systematically unmade” (Grell, 2018, p. vii), that is, the writer refrains from pointing out where certain embellishments have been applied to the actual lived experience; therefore, there is no glorification of the autobiographical self (the writer). And by way of an indirect response to accusations of self-display that both writers' works incited⁵, Grell's conclusion is that “we are very far from the narcissism which the genre has been reproached with, from the mirage of a salutary catharsis on the part of the writer” (p. vii). Even if used as treatment, as it was suggested to Anne Sexton by her therapist (Orne, 1992, p. xiii), writing could be much more useful and cathartic only for the reader – let us not forget that, whether in the confessional mode or not, writers from both sides of the Atlantic such as Plath, Sexton, London, Woolf, Hemingway, Dubarova and D. F. Wallace did commit suicide, so they were not saved or cured by their own writing. In analyzing the reasons for Plath's suicide, Al Alvarez, a Plath's contemporary and close acquaintance, also says it: “for the artist himself art is not necessarily therapeutic; he is not automatically relieved of his fantasies by expressing them. [...] The result of handling it in his work may well be that he finds himself living it out” (Alvarez, 1976, p. 38). Alvarez proceeds by agreeing with Oscar Wilde: “For the artist, in short, nature often imitates art. [...] when an artist holds a mirror up to nature, he finds out who and what he is; but the knowledge may change him irredeemably so that he becomes that image” (p. 39). In terms of Plath's oeuvres, her *Journals* and *Letters* certainly fall into the category of life writing while biographers have examined all the little details of hers and that of a fellow confessionalist from Boston, Anne Sexton, producing indispensable documents with an expressed author's opinion. It was a small, but very important step to be made towards her other prose – the short stories, novel, and poems – especially the very early

5. See *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction* (Boev, 2021, pp. 14, 64, 242). – a. n.

and late poems where Plath by choosing the confessional mode, created genuine autofictions⁶. Her only novel has as its setting New York but was written and published for the first time in London, just some weeks before her suicide in the fiercely cold winter of 1963 so its author did not live to see its subsequent high critical acclaim or readers' warm reception sadly marred by the negative reactions of her husband Ted Hughes and her mother Aurelia, the latter having felt she had been done injustice in the autofictional representation.

In 1937 the magazine *Revista Fundațiilor* featured the first fragment of the novel *The Spider's Web* initially entitled *First Misunderstandings (Cele dintâi nedumeriri)* to be published in 1938. The debut was impressive, and the novel received the high appreciation of the writer Camil Petrescu who had become the man of her adoration. The debut novel was praised by the already well-established Liviu Rebreanu and Mihail Sebastian who contributed to the novel's gaining popularity by supplying a banderol which recommended it to the readers. A year after its publication Serghi won the high praise of the most acclaimed Romanian woman writer of urban literature at the time, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu followed by one of the founders of the new Romanian criticism – Eugen Lovinescu. The novel was highly autobiographical and was a raving success. Despite private protests by Petrescu and Rebreanu who disapproved of the perceived sincerity in her writing, Serghi refused to make the requested modifications (Serghi, 2018, p. 239) and continued with her autobiographical approach in *Mirona* (1975) set in Paris⁷. Another novel followed in 1983 – *The Youth, This Sweet Burden (Această dulce povară, tinerețea)*. Her first novel, on which the author worked for 5 years, is very important to both Romanian and Bulgarian literature not only because of its memorable characters, but because it contains descriptions of several Bulgarian cities and towns, part of the description of the movements of the family as refugees during WWI. It is set mainly in Bucharest and like Plath's novel features clinical descriptions of depression as experienced by the protagonist-narrator.

In such a discourse of depression albeit mainly in fiction, a medical definition would certainly be in order. The editors of the highly detailed *Manic-Depressive*

6. A masculine counterpart to Plath's novel, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) could be called mock autofiction since it pretends to be telling a true story, but the story is completely invented. – a. n.

7. The goal was authenticity in fiction, without turning it into autofiction or writing from experience in such a manner that it would be unrecognizable – autofiction in disguise. In his essay "Originality and Authenticity" (*Originalitate și autenticitate*) (1934, pp. 174-8) Mircea Eliade examines the two principles: if originality presupposes individuality, authenticity is guaranteed by universality, so he says: "Telling a personal experience does not mean using a certain formula. It means expressing and thinking in facts. The more authentic you are, more yourself, the less personal you are, the more you express a universal experience or knowledge" (Eliade, 1934, p. 177). – a. n.

Illness: Bipolar Disorder and Recurrent Depression, Frederick Goodwin and Key Jamison (2007) with their opening lines remind us of the very old general perception that “melancholia is the beginning and a part of mania”, the latter being nothing but the worsening of the disease (melancholia) (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007, p. xix). The editors of the eleventh edition of *Kaplan and Sadock’s Synopsis of Psychiatry* (2015) indicate that “although the DSM-5⁸ distinguishes major depressive disorder from generalized anxiety disorder, most clinicians are aware that these are often overlapping symptoms and conditions in clinical practice” (Sadock et al., 2015, p. 2). The latter discuss *major depression* and *bipolar disorder* as two distinct psychiatric conditions (p. 347). They also provide the following succinct description of a major depressive episode; many elements of which certainly can be found in Plath’s well documented depressive episodes, also present in *The Bell Jar*:

A major depressive disorder occurs without a history of a manic, mixed, or hypomanic episode. A major depressive episode must last at least 2 weeks, and typically a person with a diagnosis of a major depressive episode also experiences at least four symptoms from a list that includes changes in appetite and weight, changes in sleep and activity, lack of energy, feelings of guilt, problems thinking and making decisions, and recurring thoughts of death or suicide (Sadock et al., 2015, p. 347).

Goodwin and Jamison in their discussion of famous patients refer to both Plath’s *Journals* and her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, where they cite that Plath was aware she had a depression, but they also suggest that she might have been bipolar based on the description of the symptoms of the depression that Plath experienced and that she makes in her novel, concluding that “Sylvia Plath, probably bipolar, [was] certainly hospitalized and treated for severe depression” (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007, p. 70). If they are right, Plath could have benefited from the lithium treatment her fellow confessional from Boston, Robert Lowell received, but instead she was subjected to the cruel ECT shocks without anesthesia (also described in her novel) which were supposed to resolve her depressive episode, but which she viewed as pure torture and which did not help her stabilize her well documented moods which greatly oscillated between euphoria and dysphoria. Cella Serghi has never been so fully researched and the depression she experienced (reflected in her first novel) could be considered to have been occasioned by multiple factors involving trauma, excluding the possibility of a bipolar disorder.

In her influential *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag (2001) points out to the presence of certain metaphors associated with

8. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Diseases. It is the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the USA, the number 5 representing the 5th revision from the year 2013. – a. n.

the respective diseases. Nation-specific and period-dependent, *depression* is presented as clearly unromantic. Unsurprisingly, it “has supplanted the romantic notion of melancholy” (Sontag, 2001, p. 43). So, she defines it as “melancholy minus its charms – the animation, the fits” (p. 43). Again, from the 19th century, we have numerous fictional representations of melancholy related to depression as in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” where the main protagonist is pale, apathetic, sedentary, and suffering from an unknown undiagnosed disease. Both depression and melancholy may be the result of a totally different condition, state, or in the case of the latter – a temperament: for instance, melancholy in Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and Dimcho Debelyanov’s “I Want to Remember You Like That” (*Искам да те помня все така*) where we have the beautiful melancholic aesthetics of represented sadness arising from terminal tuberculosis. Clinical depression could be the byproduct of a different disease, as Sontag also indicates, including tuberculosis, cancer, or AIDS (p. 100). We should also be aware of the enormous potential of depression to serve as a global metaphor for totalitarian oppression as demonstrated in numerous dystopian novels where the characters tend to appear apathetic, subdued, emotionless, often experiencing an early demise.

Plath’s portrayal of New York in *The Bell Jar* can be termed *dystopian* (Boev, 2022, p. 356) and is of a city overwhelmingly dark, run by some hidden Gestapo-like government where the protagonist’s every step is accompanied by a life-threat by known and unknown individuals. Although imbued with anxiety stemming from the surrealist description of a *sultry* New York and grimly prophetic, opening with the Rosenbergs’ execution (Plath, 1966, p.1) which was to be transformed into Plath’s own potential electrocution by ECT, there is not much that would suggest the inception of depression. Plath’s portrayal of her depressive episode in *The Bell Jar* comes as a thunderbolt from partially overcast skies and is as clinically precise as possible with descriptions of the onset of the condition, her inability to read and concentrate, her heavy migraines and insomnia, her incapacity to articulate meaningfully how she feels; this points in the direction of a depressive episode within the bipolar experience as proposed by Goodwin and Jamison, which can also explain its extreme severity. In that Plath does not see anything romantic or melancholic and she tries to remain lucid and capture as much as possible from this lived experience so she can render it to paper. Her approach is scientific, without the slightest trace of lament or regret. Her post-depressive ironies in retrospect reflect how she felt then – August 1953, her passing into what Sontag terms “kingdom of the sick” (Sontag, 2001, p. 8.) and her perceived degradation in the eyes of the residents of the better kingdom. For example, in the pity that a nurse takes on her when she temporarily loses her eyesight in the wake of her suicide attempt: “A cheery voice spoke out of the dark. ‘There are lots of blind people in the world. You’ll marry a nice blind man some day’” (Plath, 1966, p. 181).

There is also her mother's condescension: "My mother took care never to tell me to do anything. She would reason with me sweetly, like one intelligent mature person with another" (p. 127). Once Esther's (Plath's) condition worsens, she can observe her mother's subsequent helplessness, how she starts treating her as a subhuman being in a Kafkaesque iteration of *The Metamorphosis* where Gregor has turned into a gigantic insect and has to watch in consternation how his family of humans are plotting his murder: "I watched my mother grow smaller and smaller until she disappeared into the door of Doctor Gordon's office building. Then I watched her grow larger and larger as she came back to the car. 'Well?' I could tell she had been crying. My mother didn't look at me. She started the car" (Plath, 1966, p. 143). Gradually the elder woman starts treating Esther like a small child: "My mother smiled. 'I knew my baby wasn't like that.' I looked at her. 'Like what?' 'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital.' She paused. 'I knew you'd decide to be all right again'" (p. 154). Esther (Plath) also becomes paranoid, and she starts suspecting that her mother might want to kill her with the ECT therapy. Esther's conversations with a boy on the beach in Boston only confirm her worst suspicions (p. 164). With Esther's affected vision, tormented by severe depression, Boston has completely lost its pure blue magic from Plath's short stories and memories about her childhood. Instead, Esther is blinded by the sun and all the contours are blurry, very much as in Camus's *L'Étranger* where the protagonist kills an Arab on the beach without being able to see him well: "I rolled on my stomach and squinted at the view in the other direction [...]. A glassy haze rippled up from the fires in the grills and the heat on the road, and through the haze, as through a curtain of clear water, I could make out a smudgy skyline of gas tanks and factory stacks and derricks and bridges" (p. 165). The inability to see is also reflected in the perceived weakening of her body and mind: "And when people found out my mind had gone, as they would have to, sooner or later, in spite of my mother's guarded tongue, they would persuade her to put me into an asylum where I could be cured. Only my case was incurable" (p. 168). Esther's suicide attempt brings out the worst in her mother who egocentrically believes it was her fault (p. 215). Esther's (Plath's) depression leads to her complete rupture with everyone she knew or cared about her, including her boyfriend who is himself convalescent from tuberculosis. Plath portrays depression as a direct descent into a black abyss and her depictions of the harrowing experience are honest, her self-analysis – merciless and unrelenting, the suicide appears to be a dignified attempt to preserve the agency of making a choice rather than be offered as a guinea pig to the doctors for their experiments.

However, Plath's description of Esther's most extreme gesture – her attempts to kill herself, which finally results in her using sedatives, is one of the most unnerving and grotesque at the same time. Plath does that with so much absurdist

humor and grim determination that she creates some of the most unforgettable moments of pure absurdism in World Literature:

That morning I had tried to hang myself. I had taken the silk cord of my mother's yellow bathrobe as soon as she left for work, and, in the amber shade of the bedroom, fashioned it into a knot that slipped up and down on itself. It took me a long time to do this, because I was poor at knots and had no idea how to make a proper one. Then I hunted around for a place to attach the rope. The trouble was, our house had the wrong kind of ceilings. The ceilings were low, white and smoothly plastered, without a light fixture or a wood beam in sight. I thought with longing of the house my grandmother had before she sold it to come and live with us, and then with my Aunt Libby [...] After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight. But each time I would get the cord so tight I could feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face, my hands would weaken and let go, and I would be all right again (Plath, 1966, p. 168).

There is nothing romantic or glorifying in Esther's pitiful attempts, the very act becoming a parody of itself. The comic effect is also completely natural, but, of course, one could not even laugh, knowing that Plath did eventually do it only weeks after *The Bell Jar* was published in England. The matter-of-fact details she adds to the passage as is the name of her aunt, as well as the *longing* for a fixture on which to hang herself, with the imminent death of its author, make this description unique.

While Plath utilizes bitter self-ironies as regards her own depression, she is resentful of the depression of others – the girl Joan whom she sees as a rival since she has had a short relationship with Buddy Willard, another scene prophetic of Assia Weevil's copycat suicide after becoming Hughes's common law partner. One has the sensation that at moments Plath would have wished to accumulate all the world's depression like a black hole so she could unleash a deadly gamma ray blast that would pitifully end so much human misery. All that attests to the fact that Plath appropriated depression and made it part of her literary and real-life self which could act up at any moment. As far as other diseases go though, for example, cancer, Plath's attitude is one of scientific curiosity, but is short-lived: "Twenty days after that mole appeared the girl was dead,' the doctor said and everybody went very quiet for a minute and then the bell rang, so I never really found out what the mole was or why the girl had died" (p. 66). When she hears of "sickle cell anaemia", Esther declares it a "depressing disease" (p. 66), but then she is her normal non-depressive self, prior to depression striking, which makes Esther appear the bright sparkling overachiever that Plath was. By contrast, the *Journals* offer human sympathy in the shape of many more words when it is about Plath's grandmother who was slowly dying of cancer in 1956: "my dearest grandmother who took care of me all my life while mother worked

is dying very slowly and bravely of cancer, and she has not even been able to have intravenous feeding for six weeks but is living on her body, which will be all sublimed away” (Plath, 2007, p. 143).

Although Plath’s depression was a private thing – it was with her before her marriage and was resumed with a new vehement flare after Hughes left her – in her works it traverses and marks consistently her represented 1950s and so casts a dark shroud over the entire decade in which Eisenhower was president. For us, the readers, Plath’s works present a largely depressive America of the decade of Eisenhower.

In Serghi, life before marriage was difficult as amply attested to by her *The Spider’s Web* and *Memories* (*Pe firul de păianjen al memoriei*⁹), but marriage did not make it any easier, nor did it resolve the Romanian author’s perennial penury; it can be considered the last straw that unlocked the author’s depression since it involved experiencing humiliation and blame¹⁰. The marriage between Cella Serghi and the engineer Alfino Seni was not the love at first sight which brought together Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Despite the demands that society imposed on both men and women, Serghi’s account of the epoch in *Memories* tells us that: “young women fell in love and wanted to be loved with heart and imagination” (Serghi, 2018, p. 49). In her *The Spider’s Web* Serghi, being true to her own life, makes it clear that Michi (Seni) was the only presentable serious choice she could make and who did not require a dowry from her. The many other gentlemen who profess to be in love with Diana (Serghi), the narrator dismisses easily as most of them appear to have done it for the sport of courting a girl and asking her hand in marriage. She loves only one – Alex Dobrescu (Camil Petrescu) but he seems to be as elusive as the sea – always somewhere there, yet out of Serghi’s reach. As the Mangalia and Balchik scenes from the novel prove again and again, Serghi, born in Constanța *pe strada Mării* (on Sea Street), identified with the sea in the same way as the Bulgarian Dubarova¹¹ and the American Plath felt a connection to it that could never be taken away from them. In fact, one can argue that the recession of the sea from their works was detrimental to their lives (both Plath and Dubarova committed suicide with the sea gone from their last texts) since an organic connection to a mighty element of

9. Literally, On the spider’s thread of the memory. – a. n.

10. Poor marriage or job is considered a depressogenic factor in young women (Brown et al, 1995, pp. 7-21). – a. n.

11. Petya Dubarova (1962-1979) was a highly original Bulgarian poet whose life was tragically curbed by suicide; her works are mainly based on personal experiences and explore topics such as school, the sea, the city of Burgas and its people during communism. For more references to this poet in the context of autofiction and the Cold War, see the author’s monograph *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath’s Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction*

identification was cut off. In her *Memories* Serghi evokes her meeting her future husband and it is rendered in *The Spider's Web* almost verbatim. So Serghi feels that a potential marriage to him would be constricting and compares it to constraining the sea in imagery reminiscent of Dubarova's "shackled sea":

I let him speak. He spoke hurriedly, slurring over words. I listened to the sound of the sea. I knew I would always bump into life like the sea smashes into the rocks, that I would carry in me all its nostalgies and an eternal yearning for freedom. If the engineer asks me to be his wife, I will lose my freedom, but will get rid of many worries. Even the sea is not free, I was trying to console myself. It is confined by shores. Perhaps it rages so because it, too, has lost its freedom. It seems to hit its head against walls, bump into rocks and as a result, its mouth is all foam (Serghi, 2018, p. 16)¹².

Marriage as "a totalitarian state" in Plath finds its sea equivalent in Serghi – a sea that has lost its liberty. It is quite remarkable that both writers make this comment about marriage from the prism of the memory and for both it has been a sort of prison. But Serghi's getting married to the engineer is not without a compromise not only on her part: "I'm marrying you, but my family mustn't know about it, for the time being.' 'Why not?' 'Because I'm marrying a girl without a dowry. I'm a construction engineer and a construction engineer without capital cannot construct'" (Serghi, 2018, p. 16). The drama of this insulting situation is given considerable space in *The Spider's Web*. Numerous examples are supplied testifying to the impossibility to bend this unwritten marriage law (Serghi, 1978, pp. 42, 125, 130, 147, 152, 156, 161, 164, 190). In retrospect, Diana summarizes: "I was a burden for my family. My sister had also grown up. She had yet to finish school, to marry, too, without a dowry... Marrying Michi I thought I was going to make things calm down, I was going to take a burden off my mum's shoulders. Michi signified a shelter, peace and quiet, a warm friendship, and for my family, a big relief" (Serghi, 1978, p. 190). Still, the problem with not being loved remains and as it simmers through Serghi's novel, at the end it finally explodes.

Losing Petrescu at the *strand*, Serghi meets him a year later, already married to Seni, and provides the following remarkable portrait of the writer in which he is very different from the towering stature and imposing personality of Ted Hughes: "He was not tall [1.61 m.] and that seemed to annoy him as much as his deafness. He had a limping gait. The shoulders in a permanent shrug, the eyes close to each other, attentive, as if he wanted to hear with them, protesting all the time vehemently against everything that was happening around him, in the country, in the world" (Serghi, 2018, p. 22). Besides being a famous writer loved by a promising woman writer, Petrescu shares another characteristic with Hughes – his first wife committed suicide (Serghi, 2018, p. 50). Serghi quotes

12. All cited translations from Bulgarian and Romanian into English are mine. – a. n.

Eugen Lovinescu almost completely agreeing with the description the literary critic provides: “an exuberant little man, irritable, always in a hurry. Peevish, full of talent, but also of fatuity” (p. 23). The physical peculiarities are smoothed out in *The Spider’s Web* in the figure of Alex Dobrescu, that is, Serghi does not dwell on them, but describes the languid figure of a sea god who is too absentminded to always hear well and who is invariably surrounded by girls in scant beach attire. Petrescu’s ability to swim, just like Plath’s endowing Hughes with highly developed Spanish language skills in a short story of hers reflecting their honeymoon, is transposed into an accomplishment of perfect swimming in Alex.

In both her *Memories* and *The Spider’s Web* Serghi provides the reasons for her marriage break-up and they could be summed up under an incompatibility of characters – the romantic side in Serghi (Diana) and the pragmatic down-to-earth Seni (Michi), but that is not all. Unlike Ted and Sylvia’s marriage based on love in the 1950s, Serghi’s marriage was an affair based on financial dependence which proved to be unsustainable. In the novel Diana asks herself time and again if she can settle for *security* without love in marriage, being fully aware of the harsh alternative of having love (Alex) without the possibility of marriage. In the intense psychological exploration of the reasons for the dissolution of her marriage Diana (Serghi) asks herself again and again if she can put up with the things that irritate her in Michi (Seni) and if she can continue having a double life. When she opts for leaving Michi, Diana has already been unfaithful to him (with Alex¹³), but Michi has also had an affair to Diana’s dismay (Serghi, 1978, p. 303). Even though she does not admit to her own infidelity, Diana’s convictions that a marriage should continue at all cost, if for nothing else, for Michi’s (Seni’s) sacrifice, are shattered. Diana (Serghi), just like Plath or the lyrical ‘I’ in the “Beekeeper’s Daughter”, accepts infidelity on part of her husband, but unlike Plath, who in her 11-July-1962 (Plath, 2018, 2, p. 790) letter to her psychiatrist hopelessly holds on to keeping an imaginary alfa female position, simply considers the marriage profoundly compromised by both parties and, with no real love to keep it together, untenable.

In explaining women’s mystery, Serghi quotes Simone de Beauvoir, saying “all a man does not or will not understand becomes the woman’s mystery” (Serghi, 2018, p. 52), but in *The Spider’s Web*, just like Plath in her works containing the father figure, against the Romanian tradition of male writers of *la femme fatale*, creates *l’homme fatal*. Both Petrescu and Hughes become gods in Serghi’s and Plath’s autofictions while the writers’ literary feminine selves juxtaposed to them are systematically demystified and demythologized, both occasionally trying to preserve something of the goddess aura of the woman which otherwise thrives. As Serghi demonstrates through her writing, it is all in men’s imagination and

13. Never to be consummated with Camil Petrescu. – a. n.

it is within the powers of the woman to keep it aflame. Plath through her *The Bell Jar* and “Lady Lazarus” claims that it can triumph on its own, although her desperate post-Hughes letters to her psychiatrist disprove the fictional claims.

The underlying reason for portraying depression in both Plath’s and Serghi’s works may be the desire to share suffering due to the impossibility to act otherwise and thus effectively end its cause, but also it may be for the aesthetic function that the act contains. For instance, Plath, while quite young at Smith College, said in her *Journals*: “I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness. I never thought, I never wrote, I never suffered. I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb. I do not know who I am, where I am going” (Plath, 2007, p. 273). In “De Profundis” Oscar Wilde writes to Alfred Douglas: “Where there is sorrow there is holy ground. Some day you will realise what that means” (Wilde, 2013, p. 1422). It is easy to understand the very young Plath who wants to connect to life-changing events and go through shattering experiences, and ironically enough she enters Wilde’s paradox of the real tragedy “of getting it” in her life enwrapped in domesticity. Wilde writes from the Reading Gaol in a manner stripped of all pretenses to his signature Dandyism and cynicism and expresses in two sentences the underlying theme of his *Fairy Tales* and novel. With Plath and Wilde, it has been the necessary stimulus, the unextinguishable flame at the core of their major works. Undoubtedly, Cella Serghi also subscribes to this since her *The Spider’s Web* among other things is mainly the story of a woman (herself) who suffers bitterly for being married to a man whom she does not love and loving a man she cannot marry. Their trying to find answers to a question that concerned them directly has resulted in mature works of fiction and autofiction. Going through depression, resulting from her unhappy marriage, Serghi offers a different solution to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and to Plath’s end of life which can be viewed as the autofictional experience of a *Bildungsroman*, all representable poems, letters, journals, and the novel being considered chronologically. The positive resolution of the impasse Serghi finds herself in – divorced and with no chance of becoming Petrescu’s wife is based on several differences to Plath’s situation. In both Plath and Serghi, especially Plath, a psychosocial treatment in combination with the correct medications could have resulted in a better course of the condition with a more favorable outcome (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007, p. 916), but unfortunately both women found themselves very much on their own in the face of adversity, and yet Serghi’s situation contained all the signs for a more successful socially determined substitute as a form of self-therapy.

The *first* difference from Plath (Esther or the lyrical speaker in so many poems) is the fact that Serghi (Diana) does not seem to ever have tried to create an eternal father-figure of her husband or beloved – did not have the Electra complex Plath had. When she married, her father was still among the living.

Seni was often indifferent to her emotional world while Petrescu was often too busy to really care. A new perception of the world allowed her to see herself as her father's daughter and be proud of it, resuming her father's family name, having finally given up trying to connect to either Petrescu (Alex) or Seni (Michi). The *second* difference is Serghi's dramatic gest to leave Bucharest and everything that oppressed her in a loveless marriage, which the Romanian writer decided to dissolve and so she managed to get to Paris where she had Romanian friends and spent 30 days there in which she saw 34 spectacles, with some morning performances included (Serghi, 2018, p. 110). In *The Spider's Web* Diana shows more timidity than its creator and does not get farther than Cologne, Germany after which she comes back to Bucharest desirous to return to Michi and her marriage, but then she is served the cold shower of learning that he believes she is an easy woman who has had numerous affairs with men (Serghi, 1978, pp. 382-4). Unlike Plath who stayed in London and who needed to overcome certain Catholic prejudices in the people she communicated with, Serghi (Diana) had to fight the profoundly patriarchal attitudes of Bucharest and Romania. The *third* difference from Plath is that Serghi finally managed to find a paying job in Bucharest – becoming a literary chronicler, having previously worked as an assistant for lawyers without being paid as part of her study practice. Plath was an American immigrant in London while Serghi was only an internal immigrant making her way from Constanța to the capital. The fact that Serghi was finally working something she liked and was being paid for it cannot be overstated. Working when one feels depressed is hard, but it is the way to go, if the sufferer can do it. Performing and teaching jobs are excellent for that purpose, but Plath's teaching experience at Smith was not the happiest for her – she had found she had no time for writing. Otherwise, this could have been a solution and something to look forward to, battling depression every day. With the harsh winter conditions and no real possibility of digitized distance learning and real-time online classes, the possibilities were drastically limited. The *fourth* difference was the social involvement. Serghi was unquestionably much more integrated in the culture life of the Romanian capital, mingling with writers and being friends with some of the most promising ones of the epoch – Camil Petrescu and Mihail Sebastian. Plath seems to have been much shier and really pressed for time in the English capital. Although dreaming of becoming integrated in the cultural life of the city, one of the very few people she saw and who was part of this life, was Al Alvarez from *The Observer*. Unfortunately, she could only see him in his position of chief editor and when they met, they talked shop – only about her poems. She did not know that he was a kindred spirit and that he had had his unsuccessful suicide. She really could have received help from him with her depression, but she did not know, and neither did Alvarez. The *fifth* and most important difference was the fact that Plath had a serious medical condition while Serghi (Diana) did not have the symptoms

of severe clinical depression; it was rather a passing phase occasioned by the rejection of her husband and the unwillingness of her beloved to fully commit to a relationship. In her case it was aggravated by the fact that she was returning to an empty room since she was not sharing it with anyone and Serghi's novel features many scenes of unspeakable dejection, accompanied by the unfounded hope that the telephone will ring, and it will be Michi who wants her back. Some of the signs of depression, however, are there – persistent insomnia and a sense of despair. Her sacrifices, convictions, aspirations, and dreams – just illusions so the underlying sense of depression is triggered instantly into visibility, as it happens with Esther in New York, based on an accumulative effect of emotional shocks:

My temples were ringing, I felt cold. I was sobbing hard. The night had crept into the window. The loneliness around me began to weigh heavy on me. I was afraid of it. I made my bed to climb under the blanket, after that I hastily undressed and turned off the lights. But the darkness frightened me. I turned it back on again. Much later I plucked up courage and I turned it off completely. Again, I was in the dark. The wind was wailing lugubriously, hitting the windowpanes, I could feel its coldness on my shoulders. I walked groping my way to the bed. There I knelt, trying to form a prayer, like I would in my childhood, when in Kniajovo¹⁴, in the grass where I had lost my ball, or when I had lost my mum at the Mamaya train station. The wind groaned as groaned the siren at Constanța when I was a child. [...] The wind wailed in desperation as if having brought all the sorrows from all over the world before the house. I remembered I was kneeling so I could pray. And I said: 'My Lord, help me! I don't know how, in what manner, but help me... Help me to get used to loneliness... to find my way, to find a sense of living...' (Serghi, 1978, pp. 383-4).

Although very young, in her early twenties, Diana (Serghi) feels depressed because of her long struggle with poverty, patriarchal prejudice, indifferent husband (living in his own world of exact sciences), constant display of coquetry on her part and all this to no avail, when she cannot even be with her beloved. This is all augmented to gigantic proportions because of the final rejection of her husband and so Serghi finds herself, like Plath, alone but without children. Just like Plath who wanted to be an all-American girl, Serghi wanted to be an all-Romanian girl and her partial Bulgarian identity¹⁵ did not make matters any easier. In view of so many Romanian novels between the wars featuring suicide¹⁶ – it would be hard to find even one classic from the period which does

14. Kniajevo, Sofia is where Serghi's (Diana's) family moved for a short period in her father's endless search for a job. – a. n.

15. Explored in *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (Различната Добруджа в литературата между войните) (p. 207). – a. n.

16. Gabriela Mihalache in her *Suicide in Romanian Literature between the Wars* (Sinuciderea în literatura română interbelică) says with conviction, "In the literature between the

not, apparently reflecting a life trend¹⁷ – Serghi asks rhetorically: “Was suicide then a psychosis?” (Serghi, 2018, p. 257). And she turns the question to Petrescu reformulated: “Is it inconceivable that I did not kill myself for Camil Petrescu?” (p. 260).

While *The Bell Jar* ends upon a note of quiet optimism, it should be noted that Serghi’s radiant depiction of a physically transforming Bucharest neighborhood is quite remarkable and in tone is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s postwar *flâneurist* portrayal of London in *Mrs Dalloway*. In both, the perspective is certainly that of the feminine protagonist with the difference that in Serghi, the character is able to see the changing world from the same window that prior to this change has so often offered bleak views of the same place, but these views have up to this moment been devoid of clarity. We can recall the scene and admire once again its serenity, from the eyes of the new woman looking upon the world, a much brighter winter by comparison to Plath’s:

Look, the houses have become walls at irregular rows. Now and again, a little square is illuminated... then a lantern lit up. The snow on the roofs is whiter now, contrasting violently with the grayness of the coming night. An automobile, like a black animal, grows bigger, coming round the corner, on the curved road, and turns left, then comes a woman, turning right: on the same road there is a little girl running with a headscarf. And again, a light illuminates a window, then another and yet another... (Serghi, 1978, p. 398).

The very ending is of pure radiance identifying the sensation of living in the big city with an illuminating ecclesiastical experience – another, positive resurrection which does not unleash the terrible energy of Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”, but allows the reborn individual to reconnect to the urban animal world in a sacred communion basked in light: “Several pigeons traversed the street over the houses, white with brown spots. Church bells toll. Could it be Sunday? I find myself smiling without knowing why. A sunbeam materializes obliquely from an opening in a sky of opaque smoke, like in the icons portraying the Resurrection” (Serghi, 1978, p. 400).

Serghi’s resurrection both in life and in her novel was made possible without going through actual suicide and still it feels like a genuine reawakening to life, when, suddenly, life has meaning once again. As demonstrated in the comparative analysis between Serghi’s and Plath’s portrayals of marriage, the two women writers were far from living in a “married bliss” and with Plath ending her own life at the very beginning of the 1960s, it is her literary selves

wars the number of suicidal characters is so significant that the absence of a study of this aspect would be regrettable” (Mihalache, 2017, p. 8). – a. n.

17. Gabriela Mihalache quotes an article from 1931 according to which “only in our capital, we find that of the total number of the deceased, 30-40% arises from those who have had enough of life” (Mihalache, 2017, p. 59). – a. n.

that have transcended the epoch; as for their author, she remains, as Heather Clark has put it, “caught in a limbo between icon and cliché” (Clark, 2019, p. 360), “mythologized and pathologized, in movies, television and biographies as a high priestess of poetry, obsessed with death” (p. 360). Overcoming adversity was not easy for Serghi, either, but she found the strength in herself to go on living to the dawn of post-socialist democracy in Romania, outliving by far her fellow writers from the 1930s. Through this study its author has aimed not only to showcase comparable feminine experiences in different epochs but effectuate an analysis of the possible causes and solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems in life as represented in autofiction. Without downplaying in the least the true devastating power of depression, reading beyond one’s culture can certainly yield usable solutions. Surely, Emil Cioran’s words referring to meaning in life sound challenging: “Couldn’t we live without this world having one?” (Cioran, 1994, p. 152), savoring Keats’s sensuous reproduction of the simple joys of life from “Endymion” expressed in “sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing./[...] spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth/ Of noble natures, of the gloomy days” (Keats, 1900, p. 187). Could we add to it, as Serghi proposes from the closing pages of her novel, also the joy of reading? And read both Serghi and Plath for the pure joy of establishing a connection in our minds between two fascinating worlds?

Spoken from the horse’s mouth, the words of Alvarez sound a dire warning to everyone who believes they have had enough: “I discovered for myself, in my own body and on my own nerves, that death is simply an end, a dead end, no more, no less. And I wonder if that piece of knowledge isn’t in itself a form of death. After all, the youth who swallowed the sleeping pills and the man who survived are so utterly different that someone or something must have died” (Alvarez, 1976, p. 272).

The autofictions in comparison never seem to treat the depression the writer is suffering from lightly. Nor is it a mask. It is always painfully real and always transformative of the female protagonist allowing the readers to see her in a new light as a reminder to everyone that this could happen to us, too. In their portrayals of depression, both autofictive writers have shown striking sincerity as opposed to the mere authenticity usually present in good non-autofictional representations of disease. Also, as Hywel Dix (2023) reminds us about the importance of autofiction in documenting the past, “these [stories]” become embedded in the fabric of society through the workings of cultural memory” (Dix, 2023, p. 1), hence the autofictional, through fictionalizing specific moments of lived experience, turns the latter into collective consciousness through reading.

It would be a terrible understatement and an unforgivable cliché if we said that the two examined writers have shown heroism in the face of imminent

death. Although Plath wrote in such detail about her depression in 1953, she was no less depressive 10 years later. However, the frolicsome winking at the reader and the unquestionable depth of the novel as regards culture, politics, and femininity would have one also argue that Plath is never truly depressive in her novel. There are so many layers of ironies accompanying the darkest moments in it that we can clearly distinguish between Plath as a writer and Plath as a sufferer of depression. Both Plath's and Serghi's heroines try to comply and improve the skills that are demanded of them, with Esther not trying too hard since she is aware that that would mean too much compliance and compromise. With disappointment setting in, both Esther and Diana find themselves in a state of depression, much more serious in Esther. Plath's harsh criticism of the ECT therapy is yet another solid proof that she managed to turn her lived experience into powerful literature, an important personal account of a decade, in certain ways not unlike Serghi's 1920s, that also came short of women's expectations.

By deciding to become the feminine chroniclers of their respective epochs as youths, both writers took an enormous risk, and this did not go without certain injuries. The choice of the first-person narrator even if masked by another name, once the identification with the writer herself has been established, could always be a source of controversy and literary sleuthing, given the notorious unreliability of this writing mode (often used for mock autobiographies). One point that needs to be redressed here is the perceived female victimization arising from these representations. This question again is raised by Clark who says with poignancy that "Since her suicide in 1963, Plath has become a paradoxical symbol of female power and helplessness whose life has been subsumed by her afterlife" (Clark, 2019, p. 360). While the female angst with "Plath" as its badge does injustice to the American poet being reductionist of the live person and writer she was, labeling Serghi a Romanian writer worthy of doctoral dissertations on feminism does the woman of letters equal harm. In both their novels they are never melodramatic, always remaining lucid and self-analytical. In that, both authors are critical of themselves and of others for not doing enough to change a society which only invited woman's victimhood.

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