Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

Gálla Edit

“Red Scar in the Sky”: Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Revolt

Doctoral School of Literary Studies
Head of the Doctoral School: Dr Lukács István PhD habil. DSc, professor
Modern English and American Literature Doctoral Programme
Head of the Doctoral Programme: Dr Ferencz Győző PhD habil, professor

Committee members:
Head of the Committee: Dr Ferencz Győző PhD habil, professor
Internal referee: Dr Ruttkay Veronika PhD, senior lecturer
External referee: Dr Dolmányos Péter PhD, college professor
Members: Dr Friedrich Judit CSc, associate professor
Dr Dósa Attila PhD, associate professor
Secretary: Dr Remport Eglantina PhD, senior lecturer

Supervisor: Dr Timár Andrea PhD habil, senior lecturer

Budapest, 2018
1. Aims

The present dissertation sets itself the task of demonstrating that Sylvia Plath's late poetry engages with historical, political and social themes with considerable depth of insight into the workings of social structures and mechanisms. These wider issues with which her late poems are preoccupied are contrasted with the specific plight of the individual who is enmeshed in the web of social relations. These communal structures, in turn, are governed by historically entrenched laws and necessities. Situated within this complex and predetermined structure, the individual is significantly impacted and constrained in his or her autonomy and scope of action by these larger, communal forces. So much so that, in the poet's last analysis, society is seen to determine, to a great degree, the individual's destiny. The recognition of the decisive impact of social forces on individuals and the ensuing constraints on their freedom impelled Plath to revolt against historical, political and social forms of oppression in the name of individual dignity. While recent criticism has pointed out Plath's achievement of linking the private and the political, acknowledging that her poetry is informed by certain random pieces of political or environmental anxieties, her late poetry has not been interpreted previously as a body of work that conveys a consistent critique of, and literary revolt against, late modern society. Moreover, as the present dissertation contends, Plath's literary revolt is not only targeted at men who oppress women or even patriarchal culture at large – although this assuredly forms an important part of her poetic “revolution” - but also at historical processes, political power structures and social norms of which patriarchy is only a relatively superficial layer.

2. Scope

The focus of the present study is Plath's late poetry, which is defined, for the purposes of this dissertation, as the poems composed from July 1962 until the poet's death in February 1963. This period largely coincides with the creative period that produced the *Ariel* poems – both the original volume as collated by Plath and the revised collection that was published by Hughes in 1965. Because of the existence of two *Ariel* collections which have many discrepancies, and because the version edited by Hughes appeared first and has been acknowledged and assumed to be the definitive *Ariel* for decades, the late poems cannot be unequivocally referred to as the *Ariel* poems. There are, however, some exceptions, as the dissertation discusses some poems composed somewhat earlier than the period identified above. Some poems written as early as 1961 already began to engage with issues or present images or ideas that later received special emphasis in the so-called late poems: “Three Women” with its stark contrast between the two separate spheres characterised
by maternity, on the one hand, and warfare, on the other – a dichotomy used by the late poems to launch a critique against late modern warfare – is a case in point. Further exceptions include “Berck-Plage,” “Last Words,” “An Appearance” and “The Stones” - poems that adumbrate the Plathian technique of deploying the surreal images of detached body parts and animated objects.

3. Method

The main method of the present dissertation to further its line of argument is close reading: by focusing on the texts of the poems, evidence can be provided for the hypothesis that revolt against institutionalised social oppression is the most important thematic element in the late poetry. The in-depth and detailed textual analysis of the poems are conducted with the aid of both recent and early critical writings on Plath, maintaining constant dialogue with diverse critical voices. It is a fundamental assumption of this study that biographical or psychoanalytic criticism of the oeuvre – markedly prevalent in Plath criticism – defeats the objective of gaining a deeper understanding of the poems and is, therefore, to be avoided. Consequently, autobiographic materials – such as Plath's letters and journals, or the full-length Plath biographies – are but sparingly used. Similarly, the prose writings and the early poetry are only fleetingly mentioned in order to keep the focus firmly on the late poetry where Plath's literary revolt is most pronounced.

4. Theoretical background

While the dissertation operates predominantly on the methodological principle of close reading, it does not refrain from availing itself of certain theoretical concepts that prove useful in the interpretation of the poetry. Accordingly, the key concept of revolt is examined with the help of Camus's *The Rebel*, in which an ethical approach to suicide is closely linked to the moral necessity of revolt: the conjunction of these two phenomena as proposed by Camus is particularly relevant to the reading of the late poetry. The concept of freedom as intrinsically connected to the public sphere crops up in Arendt's *On Revolution*, and discussed extensively in Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*: since it is one of the contentions of the dissertation that Plath's late poetry was preoccupied with the idea that a separate public and private sphere is maintained for men and women, these works can provide theoretical support for this aspect of the investigation. In addition, Arendt's thoughts in the same book regarding the French Revolution and its persecution of hypocrisy are relied on when emphasising Plath's quest for absolute authenticity and truth in her late poems. As an antithesis to freedom, the notion of oppression ineluctably demands analysis in the context of revolt; this concept gains greater clarity through Weil's historical explanation of its origins in *Oppression and Liberty*, while Tocqueville’s concept of the tyranny of the majority is applied to interpret motifs of...
communal oppression in the poems. To a lesser extent, Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses* and Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* are also drawn upon in order to highlight the related dichotomy of the two basic types of individuals in terms of their attitudes to the majority and social influences.

Pursuing the motif of crime in the poems as a symbol of individuals’ internalised compulsion to adjust to social norms, and concomitantly, their in-built psychological punishment in case of transgression, the dissertation cites Althusser’s *Ideological State Apparatuses* as well as Kristeva’s *Black Sun*. Both are used to introduce the idea that selfhood is inextricably bound up with a sense of guilt – a notion that explains why Plath opted for the discourse of crime and penalty in a group of her late poems that staked out the territory of her poetic revolt in the name of individual autonomy. The increasingly psychological nature of punishment that characterises modern penality according to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* finds an echo in this particular group of Plath poems where images of crime and retribution abound and where the specific physical tortures are unquestionably metaphors for psychological abuse. In order to interpret the gender-specific allocation of the roles of torturer and victim in these poems as well as to place the male torturer’s attitudes toward the female victim-speaker in the context of criminology, Lombroso’s seminal work is quoted on the symbolic figure of the female criminal.

As Plath’s speakers strive to remove themselves from the purview of authoritative punishments, they try to establish the boundaries of potential personal privacy. Theoretical works on privacy by Etzioni, Inness, Petronio and Schneider are invoked to clarify this and related concepts such as isolation, intimacy and exposure. Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of female transcendence as explained in *The Second Sex* is referred to in an attempt to find theoretical forerunners to Plath’s image of the emerging transcendent female self that rises above all worldly constraints imposed on woman’s autonomy. The theriomorph symbols of female transcendence in the poems, such as the lioness or the queen bee, have strong affinities also with the Jungian archetype of the Selbst. While Jung’s archetypes prove relevant concepts to the Plathian revolution aiming at female transcendence, the dissertation refrains from applying Freudian psychoanalysis to the readings since it agrees with Millett’s contention in *Sexual Politics* that Freud’s theories confirm oppressive patriarchal structures rather than allow for any kind of liberation to take place.

Concerns about the individual right to privacy converge on the question of a private sphere, free from intrusion, and a separate public sphere that involves exposure but also possible public acknowledgment. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf construes society as a huge public space where men pursue their political and other activities freely, while women are effectively secluded from participation in these activities by their enclosure within the private house and concomitant economic dependence on men. The idea that a separate public and private sphere still exist in late
modern societies, as this study asserts, is the organising principle of a group of late poems, which are called war poems, for the purposes of the present dissertation. To support the notion that pregnancy and childbirth – themes and images often recurring in the late poetry – can be logically posited as emblematic of women's exclusion from the public sphere, the gendered political contract theory of Pateman serves as reference. In the reading of “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” - perhaps the two most controversial of the war poems – the speaker's seemingly disproportionate comparison between her individual situation and that of Holocaust victims becomes more plausible or acceptable, the dissertation suggests, if both the exploited speaker and her Nazi antagonist are seen as symbolic figures representing typical – though poetically exaggerated – female and male attitudes in patriarchal culture. The deliberately crude stereotypes of the hero-worshipping or grieving female characters are given theoretical explanation by Anna Freud's concept of “identification with the aggressor” and Kristeva's account of depression in *Black Sun*, while the deceptive appearance of nondescript respectability that conceals the wrongdoings of the speaker's enemies as well as many of the details of Nazi atrocities are redolent of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil*.

In Plath's war poems, warfare is concomitant with widespread mechanisation and the devaluation and objectification of human lives on an increasing scale. Both war and the apparently peaceful phenomenon of late modern consumerism, however, have these in common: the alienation and objectification of the human body and the rising significance of objects and machinery. In order to outline the attitudes characteristic of the consumer subject – another emblematic figure in Plath's late poems – Hayward's and Dunn's thoughts on consumer culture are relied on. The dissertation presents gendered models of the consumer subject, and while theories on consumption explain the standard – that is, male – version of the consumer subject, the female model of consumptions finds explanation partly in Baudrillard's in-depth analysis of the phenomenon in *The Consumer Society*, including his notion of vicarious consumption that characterises women, partly in Kristeva's notion of the abject as discussed in *Desire in Language* and *Powers of Horror*. Abjection in Kristeva's terminology equals the rejection of the Other from the company of the Same, thus it may not only be applied to the situation of women, but also to the disabled and the ill. Disability, as the present dissertation claims, is an intrinsic, though concealed, undercurrent in consumerism: according to the ethos of consumerism, subjects are motivated to increase their production in order to be able to consume more. However, consumption does not only serve the purpose of gratification but also of establishing and maintaining an identity within an increasingly homogenising culture, as both Baudrillard and Hayward demonstrate. The efficiency of its productive abilities, on the other hand, increases the productive body's resemblance to machinery and, therefore, to the objects the
individuals consume, thereby implying the risk of disability. Total objectification of the body, nevertheless, does not take place in the case of the productive consumer subject – such as the male speaker in “Gigolo” – but in that of the disabled or dead body – as can be seen in “Paralytic” or “Berck-Plage.” Since illness, disability and death are rejected from consumer culture, they become the abject “Other” which nevertheless threaten all productive bodies with engulfment. Consumer culture's implicit denial of the corruptible and mortal body is discussed by several disability theorists: Pafunda, Wendell and Siebers are cited to emphasise Plath's literary transgression into the taboos territory of the connection between consumerism and disability. The abjection of self becomes manifest in the symbolic figures of the organisation man and the suburban housewife in poems including “The Applicant” - a phenomenon described by Kristeva's two monographs mentioned above. The proliferation of objects and alienated body parts in this group of late poems finds justification in Baudrillard's account of consumerism.

5. Structure and Key Ideas

In the Introduction, the dissertation gives a survey of the main trends in critical literature from the perspective of the proposed hypothesis of the present study, which is the wider historical, political and social relevance of Plath's poetry of revolt. The introductory chapter enumerates prevalent types of Plath criticism, which include biography-centred and psychoanalytic readings, both of which tended to focus on the poet's person instead of her texts. In addition, the critical tendency to categorise Plath's poetry as Confessional also resulted in the reduction of the scope and significance of her achievements since it relegated the issues and concerns conveyed by the poems into the realm of private suffering. In contrast, the aims of the present study are stated: to read the late poems as a thoroughgoing critique of, and revolt against late modern society. Finally, the Introduction summarises the contents of each of the chapters, thereby also foreshadowing the intellectual-emotional process which led Plath to explore several aspects of contemporary social oppression and the potential for a liberated, autonomous selfhood.

Chapter 1 discusses the pivotal concepts of oppression and revolt in the context of a group of late poems, each of which foreground a particular aspect of communal constraint on the individual. “Burning the Letters” introduces the individual's conflict with the community through an enraged female speaker who is both a deceived wife and an unrecognised artist. While the primary source of betrayal and disparagement is the adulterous poet husband, the local community, who bows before the prestige of the male authority figure and condones his deceitfulness, is equally blameworthy. The image of the fox hunted down and torn apart by a pack of dogs, becomes the symbol of Plath's poetic immortality. The dog pack, symbolic of the unthinking and irresponsible behaviour of the
throng comes to represent the Napoleonic army in a later poem, “The Swarm.” Napoleon’s empire-building ambitions, nurtured by an ethos of glory, represented by the swarming bees, is contrasted with the pragmatic, business-like attitudes of contemporary society in the dehumanised figure of the beekeeper. Contemporary attitudes to greatness are characterised by brutish indifference even more so in “Totem,” in which every activity reduces its participants to either predator or prey, all according to a predetermined order that rules the universe. It is not only wisdom, beauty and innocence that are annihilated: the image of the self as an old suit stuffed in a suitcase which will never arrive at its destination, conveys the futility of all individual aspirations in an indifferent, death-infested world. Lastly, the chapter discusses “Kindness,” which confirms the speaker’s refusal to conform to the social strictures of feminine immanence. The personified Dame Kindness stands for patriarchal ideology, positing domesticity as the only possible sphere for woman, and also condoning violence against the vulnerable. The ideology of domesticity threatens the speaker, who is both an artist and a mother, with silencing, and implicitly, with death; nevertheless, the speaker refuses to accept the terms on which life is granted to her by a hypocritical society.

Chapter 2 moves on to investigate how the transgressive – because resisting – individual is stigmatised as a criminal guilty of subverting the status quo. This sense of unnamed guilt the majority generates in the subject is best captured by the discourse of criminality in an era characterised by Cold War anxieties. In “A Birthday Present,” the female speaker feels secretly monitored and also gradually contaminated by an atmosphere of imminent punishment to be dealt by the former male partner. The dissolution of the relationship is conveyed through images fraught with criminality, and the tortured female speaker wants to forego the prolongation of suspense by quietly acquiescing in her execution. While this persona does not consider whether she deserves to be punished, “The Jailer” focuses on the attribution and source of criminality. As the speaker’s sense of reality is increasingly warped by the paraphernalia of deceit the jailer applies, she experiences systematic abuse as retribution for her unnamed crime, which she eventually recognises as the voluntary forfeiture of her own selfhood. The surrender and gradual annihilation of female selfhood constitutes the main theme of “The Detective.” In this poem, the Sherlock Holmes-like speaker investigates the gradual disappearance of the lady of the house, whose nurturing, female body parts are subsequently absorbed by the murderous home and the surrounding garden due to the deceits of the male partner.

The discourse of criminality operates on the principle of reporting and investigation – in other words, the surveillance of individuals. In order to escape unwanted trespassing on private life, Plath’s speakers begin to explore the boundaries of privacy and where it can be located in late modern society. Accordingly, Chapter 3 provides readings of late poems where the issue of privacy
and the related concepts of isolation and exposure come to the foreground. “Letter in November” conveys the conflicted relationship of the lonely female speaker to property ownership: as her autumnal garden turns into a psychic landscape of historical wars motivated by acquisitiveness, she is compelled to redefine her pride ownership in terms of silent complicity in the violence and injustices of the past. Rejecting landed property ownership since it is connected to masculine warfare, Plath’s persona moves into the domain of feminised domesticity, which excludes men in “Lesbos.” However, as the speaker realises, there is no appropriate common language for meaningful interpersonal relationships between women who are constrained to exist solely as housewives in a fundamentally misogynistic culture. The enmity between women is further accentuated in “Eavesdropper;” where women, in order to confirm their precarious belonging in the community, are forced to spy on each other. Dismissing the home as the appropriate sphere for female privacy, Plath proceeded to attempt to locate woman’s autonomy in the body in poems like “Purdah,” in which the persona is completely reduced to her own, objectified and appropriated body and, therefore, has to seek liberation from the unbearable constraints of objectified existence by taking murderous revenge on the male usurper. Ultimately, Plath’s speakers come to realise that only by stepping out of this world of material constraints can they achieve autonomous selfhood. In “Stings,” the speaker revolts against her entrapment in a subservient role which confines her to the workaday world of immanence. By identifying with the symbol of the integrated self, the queen bee, she is finally able to reach the desired freedom in transcendence. Lastly, “Ariel” celebrates the liberated female speaker’s metamorphosis into pure movement and a passionate drive towards the infinite.

The right to privacy, shortly after its emergence, came under attack by the globalised warfare, increased surveillance and constant nuclear threat of the Cold War era. Chapter 4 deals with Plath’s so-called war poems which focus on the implications of warfare on private life. “Three Women” uses the concept of the male public sphere, which is most appropriately characterised by warfare, institutionalised violence and deadly machinery, to underline the vulnerability of women with their impregnable and defenceless bodies in a society that refuses women full participation due to their procreative function. In “Mary’s Song,” “Letter in November” as well as in “Cut,” a history fraught with bloodshed continues to haunt the speaker who recognises that she is complicit in the violence of the distant past. While the historical survey poems ponder the stream of endless military violence leading up to the speaker’s present situation, poems such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” focus only on World War II and use Holocaust imagery. The present dissertation reads “Daddy” as an attempt on the poet’s part to find an egress from women’s psychological entrapment in destructive male-female relationships in which their identification with the male aggressor enables
them to experience their voluntary masochism as mutual affection. This reading emphasises the symbolic qualities of Daddy, representing all male authority figures in women’s lives – a symbolic male figure that must be ritualistically murdered by the female persona in order to gain access to the masculine preserve of language and artistic autonomy. The persona in “Lady Lazarus,” through the agonising process of repeated deaths and resurrections – an allegory for the evolution of the artist – vindicates her right to a final comeback, after which the symbolic male oppressor has no more authority over her now disembodied and immortalised, powerfully vengeful self. Disembodiment becomes the key motif in “Fever 103,” where women’s sinful complicity in warfare, conveyed through images of the hellish smokes in the wake of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, is linked to female sexual desires. The final poem discussed in this chapter, “Getting There,” also applies sexual imagery to emphasise the ineluctable battles for mere existence in the world, which is compared to a battlefield. The persona’s human vulnerability is contrasted with the iron forces of a mechanised, masculine society, intent on destroying the thinking and feeling individual.

The rising importance of machinery and inanimate objects and the concomitant dehumanisation of individuals are foregrounded by many of Plath’s late poems. Chapter 5 focuses on two intertwined aspects of late modern society which conspire to the eradication of both individual autonomy and the spiritual dimension to life: consumerism and attitudes to disability. The male consumer subject in “Gigolo” epitomises the narcissistic behaviour of individuals, whose productive bodies are objectified by themselves no less than others in order to get access to more commodities. In contrast, the typical female consumer appearing in “Morning Song” and “Last Words” tend to replace the array of consumer goods with children. For both the male and female subjects, consumer goods play an essential role in forming and maintaining their identities. However, there is a crucial difference in terms of the formation of selfhood: while male subjects partake of the Same, women are cast out as the Other. To the extent that they are rejected from the world of the Same, women abide in abjection, while men can move on from their incipient abjection by using their female partner as abject alter ego, thus becoming free to enter the symbolic order of the Same. Such a process can be observed in “An Appearance” and “The Applicant,” where the suburban housewife, the female counterpart to the organisation man, is presented as a subhuman woman-as-machine, existing solely for the purpose of providing existential security to the psychologically crippled man by embodying the abject Other. The fragmentation of the human body, which occurs in the poems, conveys the medical discourse of consumerism which claims that bodies are perfectible and is in denial with regards to their disability and death. A surreal imagery of alienated and dispersed body parts is applied to create the sombre world of “Berck-Plage,” in which a seaside
resort for convalescent people is chosen as background: the eroticised body parts of the bathers and the partly concealed prosthetics of the disabled guests correspond. This is due to the objectification of sexuality and the threat of disability latent in all self-objectifying consumerist behaviour: the final scene of the funeral procession, described in terms of sexual gratification and soulless objects, while people seem to be absent, conveys the collapse of the spiritual dimension to life in the consumer society. Both the medical discourse and women’s consumerist attitudes are important to the dramatic situation of “The Other,” in which the despised mistress consumes the objectified marital relationship and enjoys the man’s social status vicariously, while the wife avoids the conflict by malingering. It is the commodity status of women that is represented in the “The Munich Mannequins,” where the slimness and barrenness of the shop-window mannequins constitute a sacrifice in the affluent society which exalts and denies the body at the same time. Since the chronic dissatisfaction of the consumer subject can never cease as long as the body remains productive, the only way to break the cycle of production and consumption is disability, which places the individual outside the society of the Same. The male speaker of “Paralytic,” due to his exclusion, ceases to be alienated and dispersed: he regains his wholeness and returns to the maternal Other. On the other hand, the malingering male persona in “Amnesiac” relies on the medical discourse of consumerism. His willed amnesia is emblematic of the temporal breakdown encouraged by the consumerist society, which allows for irresponsible behaviour, and, ultimately, for the objectification of both people and relationships.

The Conclusion of the present dissertation emphasises the importance and originality of Plath’s late poetry, then provides a summary of the five chapters. Next, it proceeds to approach Plath’s poetry of revolt from an ethical perspective, positing the biographical fact of Plath’s suicide as an act of revolt, brought about by the conflicting notions of justice and mercy, while it also casts a look on Plath’s development from a relatively conformist attitude to one of absolute and ethically justified rebellion.

6. Results
1. A text-based approach to Sylvia Plath’s poetry is provided without undue reference to biographical material or psychoanalytic speculation.
2. The wider relevance of Plath’s poetry is demonstrated in terms of several aspects of late modern society which are explored and conveyed through poetic images and dramatic situations in the poetry, thereby refuting earlier criticism that stressed the self-centred, Confessional quality of the late poetry.
3. The perceived aggression and vengefulness of many of the late poems are shown to be directed
not only against patriarchy, which is only part of the larger structures of social oppression, but against the excessive pressure both the closer and the wider community exercise on the individual.

4. The aspects of late modern society against which the late poetry revolts are the following:
   a) The systematic eradication of individual aspirations to greatness or transcendence through the tyranny of majority opinion, and through condoning acts of brutality and violence.
   b) A discourse of criminality applied to individuals, especially women, who fail to completely conform to social expectations and their subsequent penalisation by the male partner, posited as the representative of society; the willed amnesia of male authority figures which facilitates hypocritical behaviour and further wrongdoing.
   c) Intrusion into the private lives of individuals by larger power structures, which, through the dissemination of ideologies posing as science and the cooperation of individuals, filter their system of surveillance down to every level of social existence, including the home and the body.
   d) Failure to come to terms with historical atrocities and military aggression, and the propagation of silence and amnesia regarding past violence; the continuing separation of society into a public and private sphere, relegating women to the latter due to their ability to give birth; women’s deprivation of the authoritative use of language and artistic creation.
   e) The objectification of human bodies through their productive capacities and through encouraging individuals to consume excessively and rely on consumer goods for an identity; the alienation and dissociation of the human body into its objectified parts and the concomitant proliferation of objects which accumulate increasing significance at the expense of human relationships, which also become objectified and commodified.

5. The dissertation underlines that the scope of the late poetry also encompasses recurrent historical processes of oppressing and exploiting the minorities and the weak. Furthermore, the implication of some of the late poetry is that oppression is inherent in the entire natural world and not restricted to human societies.

6. Present study draws attention to the idea of female transcendence that the late poetry explores as the only ethically viable form of utter revolt against the forms of oppression that apply to the female speakers. The Plathian transcendence involves the symbols of the integrated self as well as disembodiment and ascension: as a result, the liberated self becomes pure and immortal.
Publications Related to the Topic of the Dissertation:

**Articles:**


**Translations:**

