

EMILY BRÖNTE AND SYLVIA PLATH: WOMEN POETS.

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UFPEL/FAPERGS

Emily Brontë and Sylvia Plath are women writers whose literary trajectory bear some coincidences. They both wrote prose and poetry; they both earned their long-lasting fame to a single novel. They both wrote in discomformity with their times, not only in their themes and tones, but also because they privileged the genre that was not commendable by their times. During the early Victorian Age, poetry was far more prestigious than the raising novel, which didn't find, by that time, the favour of the critic. And in contemporary times, poetry had been dislodged from its once prestigious place by a triumphant new genre, the novel. Nevertheless, Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*, is seen by the critic as well as by herself, as a divertissement, at most as a key to her serious writing, her poetry. So, to speak about a deep emotional experience, women might use a non prestigious genre? We can argue that both prose and verse, in the two writers, are filled with a deep emotional meaning. But, again, isn't this, precisely, the mark of feminine writing, the impossibility of speaking anything besides the emotional experience?

Another coincidence between the two writers is the curiosity their personal lives aroused since the beginning. I intend to avoid the biographical traits on purpose, because the aim of this essay is having a look on the socially sanctioned forms a feminine voice can find to cope with emotional experiences such as loss. From Romanticism to Contemporary times, we will certainly find differences, but also, the maybe less visible similarities.

The poems chosen here, *Daddy*, by Sylvia Plath and *Remembrance*, by Emily Brontë, are largely antologized and thus, presumably, highly representative of the poetics of their authors.

This is the reason they were chosen, along with the fact that both deal with the loss of a beloved one.

At first sight, Brontë's tidy verse contrasts with Plath seemingly unorganized metre and blank verse. Besides, there is a difference in tone: Remembrance is a melancholic poem, while Daddy is enraged, as women are not supposed to be. But Remembrance is defiant enough for its time: not only we find a feminine poetic persona that would wish retrieve from the "empty world", surrendering her common sense to a "romantic" (not sensible, wild, unsociable) passion, but also the final concordance with the (presumably enforced) common sense renders her a faulty, unfulfilling existence. So, we can conclude, the common sense is wrong.

The more remarkable difference is the Other that fills the poems with his absence. In Remembrance it is the beloved, the first (hence true) love of the poetic persona. (and again I don't want to pursue the biographical data that points as the person to whom this poem is dedicated, Emily's brother, Branwell, died in early youth) In Daddy, he is the father, also a central figure in the emotional path of a girl. So the difference, no doubt existing, bears also some coincidence.

In both poems, the poetic persona, speaking in a female voice, is relational. The dead person, beloved or father, has the greatest importance in their lives. This is why the loss is so devastating.

Both poems are inhabited by the same cry: is happiness possible in a world where beloved ones die? This unresponded question is their common trait, and the less conventional way they state the question can, maybe, point to an answer.

This very brief reading of both poems can lead us to some conclusions: they are both formally well written, sophisticated, and somehow unconventional. Is this the reason why Plath and Brontë's poetry is less read than their novels?

Ellen Moers says that writing poetry is socially out of the range of feminine authorship, because it demands a measure of freedom such to allow a number of emotional and intellectual experiences which is out of women's possibilities. But women poets such as Emily Dickinson, Christina Rosseti or Elizabeth Bishop have been recognized by the canonizing instances since Romanticism. Their poetic voice is as sophisticated as Brontë or Plath's. We can even consider that their acceptance by the critic and subsequent canonization are due just to this sophistication.

Another possibility is that the canonizing instances, namely the academy, is bearing the pressure of another element of the literary system, the reading public. Novels are far more widely read than poetry nowadays. So, the novels granted their authors fame, because they were able to transcend the academy reading. Even the reading of these widely anthologized poems takes place in a scholar context of reading, while the reading of the novels, in spite of happening also in the academic context, is not circumscribed to it. This can explain us why are Emily and Sylvia more famous as novelists than as poets, but does not explain why the critic considers their novels as mere entertainment.

Wuthering Heights had a poor reception by the critic of its times. It was considered a wild novel, lacking verisimilitude and, last but not least, a bad example for young readers: its explosion of not commendable emotions was considered harming. There was a moral judgment on this reception. But, in spite of the critics opinion, the novel was read, bought, and survived. Nowadays, this first reception is not considered to be accurate, and the novel is read in another key. The problem contemporaries found, the disjunction between the accepted poet and the rejected novelist, is not important anymore, even because the novel is still widely read, and the poetry is read only in the scholarly context. So, Emily Brontë's novel can be accepted. It survived long enough to transcend its first reception, and the idea of a feminine acceptable experience, hence writing, can bear, nowadays, her once disruptive book.

As to Sylvia Plath, the first reception of *The Bell Jar* was not demeaning as Brontë's novel was. The moral values were not considered anymore (after Miller, Hemmingway, Tennessee Williams, to point out just a few modern writers, they could hardly survive as a measure of good writing) a necessity in literature. The adventures of Esther Greenwood could not be accused of harming the youth. But the novel could be patronized, considered a minor book, able to engage the interest of a small part of the reading public (and a less important too, the young women), in spite of its luxurious style. Writing about the process of development of a young man is something interesting, but the process of development of a young woman is not so. It was not possible to deny the formal qualities of the novel, but it could be judged as less important due to its theme. It is curious to remember that, for a while, when there was the necessity of marking a female character on TV shows as feminist, which is always a little ludicrous, it appeared reading *The Bell Jar*. Irony, as we well know, is a form of demeaning. Just one critic points to the importance of *The Bell Jar* as a book which stands for its own merits, and not only as a key to the reading of Plath's poetry

Finally, we can conclude that a feminine voice can be disruptive, but not that much. Probably, the acceptance of Plath and Brontë's poetry was easier because poetry had been the reading of the elected ones. Even during Romanticism, poetry was not seen as a reading for fun, but as a means of gathering knowledge about the world – this was the basis of its prestige. After Flaubert, Zola and some late Victorian novelists, this function was appropriated by the novel. Poetry had its range of influence diminished. Probably, this is why Plath's disruptive poetic voice is acceptable, while her disruptive novel is not. Brontë's disruptive voice in poetry was made acceptable by many factors. First of all, she published under a pen name that was ambiguous and hence assumed as masculine – what was rather usual by that time. Then, we have to consider that

her poetry is far less disruptive than her only novel. So, women poets can be accepted even if they are defiant – within parameters.

As an afterthought: Whitout her, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem on the death of his wife Lily is a descriptive poem that has not the sound of this personal cry of despair, in spite of describing, as well, a world made empty by the death of the beloved person. Its highly elaborated construction suggests a less "rapturous pain" and a more cerebral approach to the theme of loss. Which, again, brings about the problem of the "emotional" feminine writing versus the "intellectual" masculine writing. It is remarkable, also, the fact that a poem written by a contemporary who is a man is even more different from Brontë's poem than a poem written by a woman in other country and almost three centuries before.

Appendix:

Remembrance

Emily Jane Brontë.

Cold in the earth – and the deep snow piled above thee,

Far, far, removed, cold in the dreary grave!

Have I forgot, my only Love, to love thee,

Severed at last by Time's all-wearing wave?

Now, when alone, do my thoughts no longer hover

Over the mountains, on Angora's shore,

Resting their wings where heath and fern-leaves cover

That noble heart for ever, ever more?

Cold in the earth – and fifteen wild Decembers,
From those brown hills, have melted into spring:
Faithful, indeed, is the spirit that remembers
After such years of change and suffering!

Sweet Love of youth, forgive, if I forgot thee,
While the world's tide is bearing me along;
Stern desires and darker hopes beset me,
Hopes which obscure, but cannot do thee wrong!

No later light has lighten up my heaven,
No other star has ever shone for me;
All my life's bliss from thy dear life was given,
All my life's bliss is the grave with thee.

But, when the days of golden dreams had perished,
And even Despair was powerless to destroy;
Then did I learn how existence could be cherished,
Strengthened, and fed without the aid of joy.

Then did I check the tears of useless passion –
Weaned by my young soul from yearning after thine;

Sternly denied its burning wish to hasten
Down to that tomb already more than mine.

And, ever yet, i dare not let it languish,
Dare not to indulge in memory's rapturous pain;
Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,
How could I seek the empty world again?

Daddy

Sylvia Plath

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For tirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you
You died before I had time –
Marble-heavy, a bag full od God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic

Where it pours bean green over blue

In the waters off beautiful Nauset.

I used to pray to recover you.

Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town

Scaped flat by the roller

Of wars, wars, wars.

But the name of the town is common.

My Polack friend

Says there is a dozen or two.

So I never could tell where you

Put your foot, your root,

I never could talk to you.

My tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich, ich, ich, ich,

I could hardly speak.

I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna

Are not very pure or true.

With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck

And my Taroc pac and my Taroc pack

I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

And your neat mustache

And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer-man, Panzer man, O You –

Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.

Every woman adores a Fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,

In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But not less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

When they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in blank with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two –

The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

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