

The Metaphoric and the Patriarchal in Women's Writing

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This paper aims to explore some uses of metaphors in women's writing. Its theoretical starting point is the postmodern contention that each text is not an original and creative production of new meanings but rather an authorial re-arrangement of current discursive practices, in which traces of social signification are inscribed. In this process, metaphoric has an important role, since a metaphor functions as a metonymy of a value system, which does not have to be identical with the one inscribed in the discursive level of the text. By looking into some texts written by modern writers, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, as well as the turn of the century American writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, we shall examine the relation between the metaphoric and the discursive in their texts. Our main concern will be the question whether the metaphoric in those texts subverts the discourse, pointing to subconscious desires or, on the other hand, to the author's inability to overcome the cultural stereotypes of her or his time.

I

Doves opposed to eagles, valleys to mountain peaks, boxes to swords¹ – these are but a few of the many metaphors pointing to the binary opposition between the male and the female. These stereotypes are part both of traditional Western culture, and of our subconscious and collective memory. Thus, before we even attempt to discuss the usage of some of these metaphors in women's writing, we must address broader theoretical issues. Namely, does the female subconscious function as the

¹ For an excellent example of such a study see Ellen Moers: *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, Anchor Books, 1977

male does, or do they differ? Do women's fears or desires reveal themselves by the same or by different metaphors? And finally, how are the binary opposition of the male and the female stereotypes determined – biologically or culturally?

Doctors and psychiatrists have claimed that there are specific female ailments and mental disorders such as hormonal imbalance or hysteria. Thus, they have paved the way for theories about a specific female sensibility which support the concept of patriarchy perhaps more than any other school of thought. Even modern feminist critics who rely on psychoanalysis are unable to get completely away from such theories. The traces of them can be found even in the most subtle gynocritical theory of women's writing, developed by H  l  ne Cixous. In her writing, Cixous disapproves of binary opposition between male and female because she claims that a) in what defines *  criture feminine*, it is not the empirical sex of the author that matters, but the kind of writing at stake, b) there is no male and female binary opposition but only the other bisexuality. Nonetheless, when describing »woman's libido« she falls into the patriarchal pattern of binary opposition between cultural and natural. For her, »woman's libido« is to be seen as »cosmic, just as her unconscious is world wide. Her writing can only keep going... she alone dares and wishes to know from within, where she, the outcast, has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language.« (*Medusa 1975/1980*: 259–60) The difference between this »fore-language« belonging to woman's experience, and the binary opposition between women as natural and men as cultural is perhaps lesser than Cixous' followers tend to believe.

Writing, however, is to be viewed primarily as a cultural, not a biological act. We do not write from the womb, or by listening to the roaring of Nature within us (as an American feminist author, Susan Griffin seems to believe). In the practice of writing, we enter into certain discursive practices, which prevail within our culture. By doing so – and there is no way to avoid it, because becoming literate is mastering the modes of cultural representation – we re-affirm the already existing cultural stereotypes. Thus, we enter into the network of social signification inscribed in our culture which is unfavourable to women. Consequently, consciously or subconsciously, women, like many other marginalized groups, will attempt to subvert and reverse these stereotypes.

The subversion of such discourse is possible in different ways. But the most efficient one is that which gets to the symbolic level of discourse – to the metaphors as »full words« that reveal the subconscious. Since those metaphors do not necessarily belong to the same value system as the discourse in which they appear, they have the power to subvert the discourse, pointing sometimes to subconscious desires and still unarticulated longings. On the other hand, metaphors may point to the traces of patriarchal tradition which is so deeply rooted, that it is almost impossible to uproot it completely. The inability of the author to overcome the cultural stereo-

types of the time, will manifest itself as a subconscious obsession with traditional metaphors. Consequently, metaphors may perform different roles in the text. They may carry the main impact of cultural reevaluation (as will be the case in Gilman's story *The Yellow Wall Paper*) or express subconscious desires more subversive than the discourse itself (as in Virginia Woolf's writing). On the other hand they can undermine the intended subversiveness of the poetic discourse, preserving the cultural stereotypes (as it happens in some of Sylvia Plath's poetry).

II

The best and most praised of Sylvia Plath's collections of poems is *Ariel*. First recognized and almost mythologized by male critics like A. Alvarez, this collection has been rightly praised in feminist criticism as one of the milestones of women's writing. Already in the title poem, we note a shift away from the stereotypical female metaphors. Instead of a dove or a rose the poetic subject of the title poem "Ariel" is Lady Godiva, a historic figure of a brave and rebellious woman who dared to ride naked in order to free her people from paying taxes. The bravery and daring of the poetic subject is complemented by the symbolic name of the horse she rides – Ariel. This symbolic airy spirit which we remember from Shakespeare's *Tempest* as a metaphor of his own artistic creation, becomes in this poem a symbol of the fullness and danger of artistic life. Thus, in the last lines of the poem the symbolic ride of Lady Godiva is shown as a process of turing into »the arrow/ the dew that flies/ suicidal, at one with the drive/ into the red/ eye, the cauldron of morning.«

The poem is not to be read as a celebration of the artistic freedom of creation since to this freedom, frustration of womanhood is juxtaposed. (»I unpeel dead hands, dead stringencies the child's cry melts in the wall.«) The tragic dichotomy between being an artist and being a mother is the structuring axis of the poem. On its narrative level, the poem seems to be a statement about the liberating power of art. (»I am an arrow, a dew that flies«). In the context of this act of liberation the final images in the poem (»the red eye, the cauldron of morning«), can be read as positive images, being a symbol of purification. In this context even suicidal can be read as loving the speed, the danger, the challenge of exciting movement.

But there is another possible reading of this poem, which indicates a different meaning. »*Child's cry* which melts into a *wall*« suggests a feminist approach to motherhood, which dares to show its other side – that of frustration and loneliness. The opposition between the ideal (the freedom of artistic spiritual growth) and the pettiness of everyday life which blocks it, also opens up the possibility of a different

interpretation of the final image. The images of »a red eye« (which might be an eye of a devil) and of »a cauldron of morning« suggest that the outer world is a hell which one is forced to face.

Moreover, Ariel is not only an airy spirit. In Jewish mythology, this name is a symbol both of a hero and of a sacrificial altar denoting Jerusalem,² which suggests a further metaphorical ambiguity. The Jewish origin of the image is in line with the symbolic role of Jewish metaphors in Sylvia Plath's poetry. Denoting victimization, they suggest the metaphoric identification of the subject with Jewish destiny, either because of her parental roots or of Cold War politics. The poem thus also suggests that becoming lady Godiva, challenging the existing social order, is an act of victimization of oneself and of a suicide. A woman who refuses to be a cricket by the housefire has to pay for this with her own life. To put it bluntly, the metaphoric stratum of this poem shows that challenging the social order is a dangerous business.

The sense of danger and of the uselessness of an alternative choice (the one which resists patriarchal values) becomes even more obvious in Plath's poem »The Munich Mannequins«. In this almost unambiguous poem about models (or live mannequins) the perfection of their bodies is metaphorically linked to whiteness (though this whiteness, in an oxymoronic image of snow, »drops its pieces of darkness«), to bareness (»perfection is terrible, it cannot have children«), and to loneliness (»Munich is a morgue between Paris and Rome, whereas telephones remain silent and voiceless«, since snow – the symbol of whiteness and perfection which cannot bear children – »has no voice«). To this bareness (»The tree of life / Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose«), the images of motherhood are unambiguously juxtaposed as a better choice (»The blood flood is a flood of love, The absolute sacrifice. It means: no more idol than me, me and you.«)

It is true that all of Sylvia Plath's poetry does not so unambiguously celebrate the traditional values of femininity. In the poem »Tulips«, for example, the tulips are compared to an awful baby, and the poet claims that the tulips as a symbol of love, blood and life are »too excitable, it is winter there«. But the poetic persona of this poem is obviously a sick woman, who wishes to withdraw from life. Thus, her preference of white over red is a sick, and so a negative choice. Consequently, the fact that white and all it stands for (post-natal depression, hospitalization, sickness, loneliness, bareness, withdrawal from life) is the choice of an (by patriarchal standards) abnormal woman, reaffirms rather than challenges the healthy, traditional values of motherhood and of caring for the family.

The purpose of this analysis is not to deny the importance of Sylvia Plath's contribution to women's writing. Her poetry introduced new themes, and posed

² See: *Enciklopedija leksikografskog zavoda, Zagreb, 1966 p. 181* and *Webster Dictionary*

questions nobody had dared to address until then. The analysis of her metaphors has had a different purpose. It has intended to show how deeply our discourse, and thus our way of thinking, are rooted within traditional value system, best expressed and perpetuated by metaphors. Furthermore, it has attempted to account for the fact that general criticism and general audience have accepted the poetry of Sylvia Plath readily, without marginalizing her poetry as the writing of the Other. Namely, the fact that there is enough ambiguity in the metaphoric stratum of Sylvia Plath's poetry to allow for its reading by traditional parameters, explains why her poetry was celebrated by critics who would not approve of radical feminist gestures. For those readers and interpreters, Sylvia was a poet who, by challenging traditional values, became a tragic heroine, sacrificing her life through this challenge, but reaffirming the traditional, patriarchal order of things.

III

Virginia Woolf is definitely one of the pioneers of feminist thought. Her essay »A Room of One's Own« makes new claims and opens up new vistas. So do the novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. However, the main protagonists of those two novels – Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay – are, from the feminist point of view, rather ambiguous characters. On the one hand, the portrayal of woman's consciousness, with the sensuous immediacy typical of Virginia Woolf, undoubtedly brings something new to the presentation of women in the literatures of the Western Canon. On the other hand, being the epitome of femininity, these characters still belong to the traditional, patriarchal concept of womanhood as portrayed by many male artists. For that reason, it seem that towards those characters, which are only partly based on personal experience, even Virginia Woolf herself has ambiguous feelings. Somewhere in the middle of the novel we get this description (from the point of view of Peter Walsh) of Clarissa Dalloway. »But it was Clarissa one remembered. Not that she was striking; not beautiful at all; there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything specially clever; there she was, however; there she was.« (p. 85) And then at the very end of the novel it is Peter Walsh's point of view again: »What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was.« (p. 215) Clarissa is thus not only the central consciousness of the novel. She is also its central presence, making a party happen, and making people feel at ease (her servants like her, her guests think her kind and charming). She is a good hostess to the Prime Minister, not to mention that she is also the wife of an important man and that there is another man still in love with her. Compared to other women in the novel – her

daughter, her daughter's governess, even the distinguished Lady Bruton, she seems to be – by traditional standards – a more fulfilled person. In all this, her portrayal is by no way ironic. Therefore we feel empathy for her. But in doing so, we admire her role of house angel – for this is what Clarissa Dalloway really is. It is not only the way other people perceive her – her kindness, her femininity. Her own thoughts belong to someone who is utterly, traditionally feminine, aware of her constant need for support, and of her feminine weakness. Thus, during her party, after hearing about a young man who has committed suicide, Clarissa thinks: 'Even now, quite often if Richard had not been there reading the »Times«, so that she could crouch like a bird and gradually revive, send roaring up the immeasurable delight, rubbing stick to stick, one thing with another, she must have perished. She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself.' (p. 204) It is thus her role of the angel in the house, or of a little woman (the metaphor of a bird, and the metaphor of compulsive cleaning and washing up – rubbing stick to stick, one thing with another) that preserves her sanity, her life. Such a Clarissa triumphs in the end, for her party has been a success, and the sense of harmony and good will is felt. We see pleased guests leave, Clarissa's beautiful daughter going up to her father, the picture suggesting family harmony and happiness, while Clarissa's best friend is saying: »What does brain matter, compared to the heart?«.

Yet, in spite of this narrative strategy which makes Clarissa so central to the story and thus so emphatic, it is difficult to believe (when taking into account other Woolf's texts) that her attitude toward an angel-in-the-house character could have been so positive. And really, there are signals in the texts which however subtle, nonetheless point in the different direction. The guests, who admire Clarissa, do so in a slightly ironical way. Sir Harry, for example, thinks of her 'perfect of her type' (p. 194) and »Hutton (a very bad poet) has always felt that Mrs Dalloway was far the best of the great ladies who took an interest in art« (p.195). The most interesting, however, is the relationship between Lady Bruton and Clarissa. In the novel Lady Bruton's angularity is stressed so as to become a metonymy for her lack of femininity. And yet, she is an accomplished woman who talks to men on their own terms, meets them for lunch (to which Clarissa is not invited) and discusses things with the Prime Minister. In this, she is different from Clarissa who finds »roses more real than the Armenians (or was it the Albanians – she could never tell« (Cf. p. 133) Like everyone else, lady Bruton likes Clarissa, but thinks of her thus: »'And there's Peter Walsh«, said Lady Bruton (for she could never think of anything to say to Clarissa, though she liked her. She had lots of fine qualities; but they had nothing in common – she and Clarissa. It might have been better if Richard had married a woman with less charm, who would have helped him more in his work. He had lost his chance of the Cabinet).' (p. 198) In Lady Bruton's judgement Clarissa thus fails even as an angel in the house, because she has not done enough for her husband's

career. Thus, the main point of view of the novel is undermined and relativized. Clarissa's triumph is a triumph only within the limitations of Clarissa's world. And, as Lady Bruton testifies, there are other worlds beyond this one – worlds Clarissa knows nothing about.

However, the evaluation of those two worlds is not clearly defined in this novel. Thus, although Virginia Woolf, consciously or subconsciously, by her narrative strategies undermines the celebration of the feminine principle as the value the novel puts forward, her affirmation of alternative choices is not strongly stated.

This is also the case in her novel *To the Lighthouse*, which on the metaphoric level can be read unambiguously – only after the death of Mrs. Ramsay can her daughter go to the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe complete her painting, adding the vertical line – the lighthouse – to it. Thus it seems that only after the death of the angel in the house can the alternative choices of female life styles – that of the active and adventurous Cam and of unfeminine, artistic Lily – come to the fore. And yet again, this metaphoric layer of the novel is so unobtrusive, that a different reading, celebrating the femininity principle embodied in Mrs. Ramsay, is also quite legitimate.

IV

This is why the unpleasant bluntness of »The Yellow Wall Paper« is so enjoyable. Written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman at the turn of the century, it is a typical decadent story with a Gothic plot. Its protagonist is a woman suffering from a post-natal nervous condition. She has been brought to a country house by her husband, a famous doctor, in order to recover. However, the doctor is unsympathetic to his wife's need, and brushes them off as childish whims. He refuses to leave the house before the three months' lease is over, and refuses to move downstairs from the bedroom with the yellow wallpaper. Instead, he brings his sister to look after his wife. One of their main concerns is to prevent her from tiring herself, especially by writing. Thus, the wife spends most of her time in the bedroom, doing nothing. This leisure which is forced upon her, makes her more and more obsessed with the only thing she sees all the day long – the yellow wallpaper. After a while she starts hallucinating, and in her imagination the wall paper becomes a living creature. When she first notices that the wall paper is moving, as if there was a living creature behind it, what she feels is terror. But soon the terror turns into fascination, and finally identification. At the end of the story the woman herself has become the creature behind the wall paper.

The end of the story unveils the meaning behind the Gothic plot: 'I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. »I've got out at last,« I said, »in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!« Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!'(Perkins – Gilman 1995: 26 – 27) Written before Kafka's »The Metamorphosis«, this story stops where Kafka's story starts – with the metaphor of a human being turning into a creeping creature. But differently from Kafka's story, in which a similar metamorphosis seems unpleasant and undesired by the subject, in this story the change is definitely welcome. Oppressed by her husband's concern for her health which has become his excuse to limit all her activities, even her writing, and thus acquire a total control over her life, frustrated even more by the fact that he has brought his sister to look after her and the household, thus limiting her freedom even further, the woman has to use cunning in order to outwit him. Becoming a crawling creature is not a nice choice, but it is a liberating one. Thus, in spite of the unpleasantness of the metaphor, we have to read the end of the story as a happy ending. While, until then, her husband *walked* over her, she is now able to *creep* over him. She is able to do this only by becoming a monster. But if this is the price she has to pay for her liberation, she is willing to pay it. On the metaphoric level the story is a statement of a liberated woman who refuses to play by the rules of patriarchy. Thus, its sense of monstrosity does not have to be hers.

In this, Gilman performs an important ideological overturn. Instead of accepting already existing cultural binary opposition, like those of a feminine and a masculine (angular) woman, or motherhood and barren beauty, she overturns the existing value system. By turning the metaphor of a creeping creature into something positive, she opens up the possibility for woman's acceptance of herself and her deeds outside patriarchal value judgements. By doing so, she gets away from the fixed system of patriarchal values and opens new possibilities of behaving and judging.

V

The three examples discussed show that the history of literature is not a simple and happy narrative of progression. Texts written earlier, might be more radical, ideologically more contemporary, than those written later.

However, such texts will not draw general attention to themselves until the ideological context becomes ripe for their reception. Consequently, it could be claimed that texts are readerly rather than writerly in so far as we view a text as a network of

sentences through which we have to map our reading. Since we approach it with our reading habits and the ideological presuppositions which form our horizon of expectations, we either find those places in the text which support our expectations, or reject the text completely. When due to ideological shifts, those reading habits change, a different mapping in the reading of the text will take place, and it will gain a new meaning. This, consequently, will bring about new evaluation, and result in a new attitude towards the literary canon. »The Yellow Wallpaper« can be viewed as such a text.

Yet, the reception of texts, and the modes of their reception, are not to be seen as one-way roads. The silenced voices, witnessing what has no witnesses – the alternative truth, the alternative history, when numerous enough become alternative narrative. They become what Lyotard calls »petits recits«, small marginal narratives which nonetheless create a space for writing and thinking away from patriarchal »grand narrative«. ³ In doing so, they consequently suspend the space for grand narrative, making »petits recits« the only possible way of discoursing in postmodern culture. To this, texts like 'The Yellow Wallpaper' have contributed significantly. But ideologically more subtle texts, such as those written by Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, were needed to start off those »petits recits« and thus pave the way for the proper reception of Gilman's text, a century after it had been written.

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³ In *The Postmodern Conditions* (1979), Lyotard argues that our »truth claims« of knowledge, producing »meta-narratives« or »grand recits« have lost their credibility since Auschwitz and the Gulag to nuclear threat and severe ecological crisis. Thus, the Enlightenment narrative of liberation and equality has ground into its opposite. The alternative are »petits recits«. Relying on the activity of »paralogism«, i.e. illogical and contradictory reasoning, as well as witnessing what has no witnesses, such as the Gulag or the gas chambers, they produce a breakthrough into the unknown of new knowledge.

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METAFORIKO I PATRIJARHALNO U ŽENSKOM PISMU

Ovaj članak želi istražiti uporabu metaforičkoga u ženskom pismu. Teorijsko polazište mu je post-moderno stajalište da tekst ne treba promišljati kao izvorno autorsko djelo, već kao autorsko restrukturiranje već postojećih diskurzivnih praksi, u kojima se kriju natruhe društvenih vrednota i smislotvorbe. U okviru takvih diskursa metafore imaju značajnu ulogu, jer one mogu funkcionirati kao metonimije sustava vrijednosti, koji ne mora uvijek biti identian onome na koji narativni sloj teksta upućuje. Analizirajući tekstove Virginije Woolf, Sylvije Plath i Charlotte Perkins Gilman, američke autorice koja se javlja na prijelazu iz devetnaestoga u dvadeseto stoljeće, analizirali smo procjepe koji nastaju između idejnog sloja teksta, koji se ostvaruje na razini diskursa, i onoga koji se ostvaruje na planu metaforičkoga. Naime, metaforičko u tekstovima V. Woolf, i njezine prethodnice, Gilman – Perkins, upućuje na one ideje, koje se autorice u samom tekstu još ne usuduju do kraja artikulirati. S druge strane, oni tekstovi koje doživljavamo kao idejno radikalne, kao na primjer pjesme Sylvije Plath, ponekad će na razini metaforičkoga otkriti podsvijesnu vezanost uz tradicionalne stereotipe.