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Reading Myself Elsewhere. A Few Notes on Reading Otherwise

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Abstract • This essay investigates the emotional attachments we bring to a book: we will describe the identification processes that reading may involve, and how these processes affect the reader's experience and identity. When it is authentic, the act of reading cannot be considered as a moment of mirroring, but it includes a more profound identification experience to the extent that reading becomes a sort of event, a gesture that at times may alter the reader's perception of her identity since, through it, she can access the buried spaces of the unconscious. If it is true that every work demands an interpretation, at the same time the fruition of literary texts by readers is inextricably linked to their desire for personal knowledge. This is why reading is neither a cognitive nor a psychobiological experience, insofar as it involves a more complex and personal interpretative and intersubjective activity: reader and text become a sort of innovative enterprise through which connections are not only unmasked, but above all continuously created. For the purposes of the discussion and to illuminate better the point I want to make, I will implicate myself and my own personal experience as reader of Sylvia Plath.

Keywords • Reading; Identification; Intersubjectivity; Emotions; Sylvia Plath

Ledizioni 

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I. You Can't Fight the Feeling

Everything starts with a *feeling* that I experience again and again whenever I read certain novels or certain collections of poems. I am referring to the ability that some selected books have to transform the listening of someone else's story into the listening of my own self. Of course, this does not happen every time, and definitely not with every text. Very often I scroll the pages quickly before realizing that I cannot recognize those words as my words. They simply do not fit me. But it also happens sometimes that I find myself embroiled in the text I am reading, as if it were an invitation to find in those pages something like myself. Evidently, these are special texts that call for different strategies, not easily explicable, also because most of the times the strategies they suggest are subjective. No feeling can be the same as another, or can arise as another. The reading experience is never the same as itself, and at the same time it is not easy to describe with a critical eye, insofar as it is accompanied by a sort of ineffability. This reminds me of what Virginia Woolf writes about reading in a 1925 essay:

If to read a book as it should be read calls for the rarest qualities of imagination, insight, and judgment, you may perhaps conclude that literature is a very complex art and that it is unlikely that we shall be able, even after a lifetime of reading, to make any valuable contribution to its criticism. We must remain readers; we shall not put on the further glory that belongs to those rare beings who are also critics. (581)

This is why, for the purposes of my discussion, I want to implicate myself and my own personal experience as reader, being aware that this is probably the only way to untangle the issue I want to investigate.

Why do I feel that a text is right for me? And how do I know, as a reader, that the same text is telling me no lies? These are the questions I will try to answer throughout this essay. More precisely, I will discuss from a wider perspective the peculiar nature of the emotional attachments we bring to a book. I will describe in particular the *identification processes* that reading eventually involves, and how these processes may affect the reader's experience, for better and for worse.

2. What Does It Mean to Read a Text?

To illuminate better the point I want to make, it is worth rephrasing the preceding questions as follows: when I read, what do I look for in my readings? What do I expect from books? What kind of experience do I look for?

Since the 1960s literary theory has been marked by a significant change of perspective, which finds its fulcrum in the investigation of the coalescence of text and reader. As is known, there is a conspicuous number of theories about how reading works, and though

most of them are in contradiction with each other, all agree on one point: they all recognize the act of reading as crucial.¹

Quite recently, neuroscience research has demonstrated that, when we read about another person or look at another person in a picture, we are involved in what that person is feeling or simply doing thanks to the activation of specific neural systems. Those who love to read demonstrate a certain degree of “participatory response”:² they take part in the life and events of the characters in the books “as if”—and this the key formula—they were entrapped in a sort of mutual reflectivity, a kinetic participation in the fictional scene. The neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese, to whom we owe the study of the so-called *mirror neurons* first discovered in the ventral premotor cortex of a macaque monkey and then also in the humans (Gallese et al., “Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex”; Gallese, “The Manifold Nature of Interpersonal Relations”), has written extensively on the empathic and embodied experience in art viewing, concluding that this type of response plays a crucial role in our understanding of the work of art itself.³ In the specific case of reading, Gallese writes:

When we read we not only entirely focus our attention on the literary work, but at the same time our stillness enables us to deploy fully our embodied simulation resources at the service of our immersive relationship with the narrated characters. This is why the FoB [Feeling of Body] generated by fiction is often more powerful than that triggered by our daily interactions with the world. Our pleasure in novel reading is thus likely also driven by this sense of safe intimacy with a world we not only imagine, but also literally embody. (Wojciehowski and Gallese)

Very briefly, to understand or to attribute a specific meaning to what we read, it is necessary to draw upon our cognitive, emotional and bodily involvement. And it is precisely this *embodied simulation* that gives an empirical base to the role of empathy within the aesthetic experience. The empathic element in a text depends, on the one hand, on the “what” of the experience (that is, our response to the supposed explicit content of the work), and on the other hand on the “how” (that is, our response to the very traces the artist leaves behind). Gallese points out: “Thanks to the embodied simulation I have the ability to recognize in what I see something within which I ‘resonate’. . . . The meaning of others’ experiences is understood not by virtue of an explanation, but thanks to a direct understanding, so to speak, an understanding coming from within” (“Dai neuroni a specchio alla consonanza intenzionale” 201; my trans.).

Even though I agree that the meaning of a text (be it literary or visual) lies within every level of our experience, at the same time there is something that proceeds beyond the necessity to find out whether the reading experience reveals a neurobiological correlation. I find it is safer to consider reading in terms of an *event* that at times may alter the readers’ perception of their identity since, through it, they can access the buried spaces of their

¹ I limit myself to remembering how, even though the most well-known speculations on the relation between text and reader can be dated back to the classical age—for example, to the Aristotelian concept of *catharsis*—it is only during the 1960s that, thanks to some schools of literary theory such as Structuralism and New Criticism, we arrive at the systematic formulation of various *reader-oriented* approaches, which consider the reader as an active participant in making sense of the text. For a more accurate introduction on this issue, see Bertoni.

More recently, Neurosciences and Cognitivism are both trying to offer new insights on the same issue, for instance, by privileging experiments conducted through the support of *neuroimaging*. See Ballerio.

² This is the precise expression adopted by Richard Gerrig.

³ See Freedberg and Gallese.

unconscious. These spaces might hold something about themselves that until then they had ignored or, it would be better to say, they had preferred to ignore.

In one important passage of his *Recherche (Le Temps retrouvé)*, Marcel Proust offers some very fascinating insights on the act of reading, by comparing literature to an optical lens facilitating the disclosure of some hidden aspects of one identity. He asserts that “[i]n reality every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself” (948).

So, the act of reading, when it is authentic, is not a banal moment of mirroring—understood in its more superficial sense, in terms of a psychobiological feeling—, but, I would argue, a more profound *identification* experience—to borrow the language of psychoanalysis, via the quotation from Freud.⁴ This is the thesis, whose rightness this contribution will try to defend and clarify.

Reading seems to trigger a very particular reaction, so that the reader tends to search in the text something that indirectly refers to herself, a clue saying something about her very ignored aspects, hoping that they may become conscious. All these hidden aspects are potentially there, in the very sentences we read, transforming simultaneously the text into the reader’s unknown face. This reminds me of George Steiner, and of what he wrote about reading in terms of *risk*:

To read well is to take great risks. It is to make vulnerable our identity, our self-possession. . . . It may come to possess us so completely that we go, for a spell, in fear of ourselves and in imperfect recognition. He who has read Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and can look into his mirror unflinching may technically be able to read print, but is illiterate in the only sense that matters. (10-11)

In light of these remarks, it seems to me that cognitive sciences focus their attention only on the relationship between one general reader and text, a temporary relation that is immediately interrupted as soon as the same general reader closes the book. As a result, cognitive sciences neglect the role of reading in terms of a more profound *singular experience*, a moment when I can question all the things appearing attractive or disturbing to me through the protection of an aesthetic screen, to the extent that the text itself can turn its form and eventually become another text. It can become a thing soaked with something like myself, a sort of casket containing something that sounds true to me, or the answer to a question that I have never asked. Herein lies the function of reading and literature.

Literature, as every artefact made of language, deals with an invention, a fictional and unreal world, yet it is the real world that literature is trying to invoke, in order to go beyond its opacity, to probe those hidden, radical, and frequently uncomfortable aspects of the human condition. It is only in this way that the world and human feelings can be plumbed. In the 1985 draft Harvard lecture *Cominciare e finire*, Calvino explains how “studying the liminal areas of the literary work means observing the ways in which the literary operation involves reflections that go beyond literature, but that only literature can express” (735; my trans.).⁵ If this is true, reading appears to me as a form of interrogation, the most effective way to dig into my soul, by revealing how one specific text can burn my consciousness every time I read it, and every time in a different way.

Let me say this. Despite the neuroscientific effort to break the experience down into comprehensible segments, I prefer to consider reading in terms of a virtual mute dialogue, a sort of ambiguous and complex zone of experience where something very particular

⁴ For a broader treatment, see Bottioli.

⁵ “Studiare le zone di confine dell’opera letteraria è osservare i modi in cui l’operazione letteraria comporta riflessioni che vanno al di là della letteratura, ma che solo la letteratura può esprimere.”

happens, a zone that Donald Winnicott also refers to in terms of “potential space” (53). When I come to a literary text, I am not only the virtual recipient of another person’s creative story; I do not read merely the results of another person’s intentional writing gesture, the experience of someone else with whom I try to share the same emotion, hoping that this allows me to understand the author or the character with a more vivid participation. When I read, I am above all free to think and question myself; what happens in that moment concerns only me as reader and the text.

Wolfgang Iser too has insisted on this point, claiming that “if the reader and the literary text are partners in a process of communication, and if what is communicated is to be of any value, our prime concern will no longer be the meaning of the text [...] but its *effect*” (54). This precise effect which Iser deals with cannot concern merely the aesthetic approval of the text by the reader, be it very enthusiastic or repulsive. In this effect, I think, it is enclosed the distinction between *comprehension* and *interpretation*. These are two very different mental activities. Comprehension lies in the understanding of the literal meaning and in sharing a given emotional reaction with other readers. Interpretation, conversely, requires an extra effort, a non-literal understanding, as well as the use of more sophisticated and complex mental skills. Emotions are certainly important, but only when they intertwine at an heuristic level, that is, only when they are analyzed closely, and when their sense finds a proper elaboration in the reader’s mind.

Reading means interpreting; and interpreting is understood here as a form of constant interrogation, a moment that at times allows me to face an authentic unveiling of truth, which in turn must be ultimately the deciding factor guiding my will to read a text.

2. Inter-Subjective Reading. The Inner Fabric of the Text

Before proceeding with my argument, let me try to summarize what has been said so far.

Some readers, still today, approach literary texts with the presumption to extrapolate from those same pages the writer’s soul, or the message the author would have entrusted his or her novel and deposited in the words chosen for its composition. They ignore that reading might contribute to bringing out other questions, which are ultimately those same questions that most disturb us and persecute us. This does not mean that there is no context, history or sociology in the work we are looking at, but rather that we should try to find and follow a new trajectory, to let the work itself to be analyzed from always different and unpredictable angles.

First of all, as Roland Barthes suggested (49-55), it is necessary to rethink the traditional categories that regulate the literary communication.⁶ In this way, it will be possible to effect a shift from an idea of text understood in terms of a concrete and tangible product made by one writer, to an idea of text as an “object-of-language” or a “labyrinth of linkages” characterized by an irreducible plurality of meanings. In other words, a text is not the repository of the writer’s ideas that must then be decoded by the reader. This misconception is actually dangerous, and can make us totally blind.

From a wider prospective, it bears mentioning that what we have learnt from some literary theories formulated in the second half of the twentieth century, from Structuralism to

⁶ I would like to remark that the most widespread linguistic *model* of interpersonal *communication* is the one outlined in 1960 by Roman Jakobson. He distinguishes six factors that are necessary for communication to occur: (1) context, (2) addresser (or sender), (3) addressee (or receiver), (4) contact, (5) common code and (6) message. According to Jakobson, an effective communication is the one which guarantees the addressee an optimal and correct reception of the message and its meaning. It is a very elementary exchange, so that the sender codifies a message that the addressee can easily decode. See Jakobson 350-377.

Deconstructionism, is that every reading attempt focusing only on the recollection of elements from the scenario of contemporary culture—an approach which bends the text in search for sexual, political or ideological issues—is condemned to fail, and above all relegates the selected texts to oblivion. The primary goal of textual analysis should be constantly to re-examine the sense of an art work against any attempt of definite and rigid articulation. As Martin Heidegger suggested, the work of art, when authentic, is the site of a struggle from which a vortex originates, a sort of very dynamic and conflicting movement that simultaneously offers itself to and resists being fully brought into a stable and univocal meaning, and permanently circumscribed into it (15-88). This is the ground on which art lives. It is an essential instability, a *strife*—as Heidegger calls it—that makes precarious every attempt at immutable articulation and drags the art work into a space of ever new and different meanings.

This helps us to understand why our attention must be focused not only on the originary process of the art work, but above all on the role of the interpreter. In order to assign the status of art work to one object, we need to assign simultaneously an active role to the interpreters, that is, in our specific case, to the readers, to the way the readers approach the text and how (and if) the text is able to modify their perception, their gaze and ultimately their identity. I believe this is another crucial aspect to investigate.

Reading does not mean respecting the text; reading cannot be an immediate process of paraphrasing. Conversely, reading always presupposes the coalescence of text and reader, who is in the end the guardian of the text's life, the one who has to animate and give new life to that text so that it can resist over the course of the time. Every work, so to speak, is a desperate cry for understanding and, at the same time, the fruition of literary texts by readers is inextricably linked to their desire for personal knowledge. This is why I claimed that reading is neither a cognitive nor a psychobiological experience, insofar as it involves a more complex and personal interpretative activity, to the extent that reader and text become a sort of innovative enterprise through which connections are not only unmasked, but above all continuously created.

“The constitution of meaning,” writes Iser, “gains its full significance when something happens to the reader. The constituting of meaning and the constituting of the reading subject are therefore interacting operations that are both structured by aspects of the text” (152). Once again, we find here the idea of reading in terms of an event marked by unpredictable effects. And this appears quite clearly not when we read a text for the first time, but when we reread a text. I will offer my personal experience to better explicate this point.

I read a lot, but more for duty than for pleasure. There are only few books that I like to read, and for some reason I continuously go back to them. I read always the same two or three books, and I could swear that I remember their plots by heart. But yet, every time I go back to a book I think I know, my re-reading of it appears as a metaphorical travel along a road that is familiar but that, at the same time, presents ever new and unexpected junctions in the form of paragraphs and phrases that I had ignored in my previous readings, and that are now able to fully grab my attention. This confirms that no two or three readings are identical: the text understood as a collection of sentences is identical of course, but readers change over time and they bring all these changes with them to the very books they read.

As such, reading returns me to the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or “deferred action”—as the English translation renders it—a concept which Jacques Lacan also refers to as *après coup*: it alludes to the ability that certain traumas from the past have to release new effects in the present, when they are placed in contact with ever new and different scenarios. In other words, this concept introduces the idea that there is a retrospective transcribing of an original experience at a later date in the subject's history. This conception seems particularly deserving to be included among the literary reception theories. The idea of deferred action is suitable to explain the multiple effects of meaning that a text is able

to convey according to not only epochs and cultures, but also to the singular experience of the reader. In this sense, Freud helps us in understanding how texts, like traumas, are events constantly in progress, events that are never unequivocally and permanently given.

Therefore, learning to read presupposes a form of imaginative introspection, the premonition of an event that contains in itself the announcement that something about me will be uncovered during the reading process, even though I am not exactly aware about what it is. Siri Hustvedt has coined the expression—which I find fascinating—*between-zone* to indicate this close relationship that can occur while we are reading a book. She writes: “Together, reader and book form a collaboration of meanings, which have no objective reality but create yet another between-zone, an intersubjective exchange, which sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails” (“Why One Story and Not Another?” 392).

I do not know *a-priori* how the text will shape me and, as I already argued, I also think that I will never be able to consciously articulate what exactly it is in that story that moves me. As Hustvedt pointed out, the between-zone does not necessarily occur: sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it fails. Books that say something to me do not have the same result on you. However, when something occurs, I can begin not only to feel the same sense of pain or pleasure, discomfort or enjoyment, that animates the story I am reading; this might be a quite obvious response. Instead, when something succeeds, I can begin to glimpse in the text the answers that I was looking for, the pattern of an authentic experience of knowledge that only through an aesthetic screen can be illuminated.

In other words, reading must create an *expectation* and a *sense of abeyance*. It is not only a matter of emotionality. There is always an emotional response to a work of art, but it is exactly what generates this emotion, and the nature and intensity of it, that calls for careful thinking and demands to be analyzed closely.

Reading is synonymous with questioning the human identity. I feel that the text touches me in many vital points and is able to stir them. It is not only the fact that my past and memories erupt from the text. I read, therefore I feel. I look for something and I interrogate myself. And, by so doing, I also question my own responses.

From this point of view, reading activates a form of intersubjective dialogue. It is an idea that was beautifully expressed by Georges Poulet in his 1969 article *Phenomenology of Reading*, where he discusses the peculiarities of literary experience, an experience which is not comparable to any other. Poulet, in particular, discusses the specific strategies through which the metamorphosis of the reader’s self may occur during the reading process; he writes:

Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an *I*, and yet the *I* which I pronounce is not my self. . . . ‘JE est un autre’ said Rimbaud. Another *I*, who has replaced my own, and who will continue to do so as long as I read. Reading is just that: a way of giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them. . . . Reading, then, is the act in which the subjective principle which I call *I* is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my *I*. I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me. . . . When I am absorbed in reading, a second self takes over, a self which thinks and feels for me. . . . someone else holds the center of the stage, and the question which imposes itself, which I am absolutely obliged to ask myself, is this: “Who is the usurper who occupies the forefront? What is this mind who all alone by himself fills my consciousness and who, when I say *I*, is indeed that *I*?” (57)

So, when I read, I think the thoughts of another as if they were mine, and such thoughts invade my consciousness, to the point of projecting myself within a totally alienated dimension. Yet, as Poulet points out, this alienating effect cannot hide the fact that behind those thoughts there is always the conscience of one other who is not me; reading always

presupposes a conscious or unconscious process of appropriating the thoughts of one other. But who is this other? This is the inevitable problem to be solved.

It would be too obvious to trace in this otherness the personality of the author, his or her contingent self. Indeed, Poulet prefers to exalt the autonomy of the literary text, an autonomy that is structured by precise aspects of the text itself, as well as the idea of literary work understood in terms of inner conscience that invades the reader, by transforming her momentarily in one other self.

It is a very fascinating argument by Poulet, but one cannot help but notice that it is a theory that assigns the reader a completely secondary role: the reader must forget about herself in order to make the work live within herself; there is no space for reader's intentions. This is why I would like to take one step further than what was outlined by Poulet, and suggest that this other self (or second self) is not someone totally alien to the reader; it is the reader herself. It is the part of the reader that until then she has neglected and to which she can finally lend an ear, reassured by the protection of an aesthetic illusion. After all, this is the ultimate goal of every aesthetic experience. It aspires to the highest value of knowledge, namely, the one concerning the investigation of the mysteries of the human condition.

The power of this intersubjective dialogue consists in the fact that reading can turn an anonymous "it" into a more personal and unexpectedly familiar "you". It is a kind of openness that reveals the readers' will to know something about themselves and to be changed by what they read. I believe that, without the excesses of Don Quixote or Emma Bovary, every passionate reader enters his or her favourite readings in the construction of his or her own identity; and this is exactly the privileged way of approaching and discovering our "innermost self."

3. My Sylvia Plath

There would be no reading experience if the words I read did not leave me with a *sense of waiting*, if they did not create an expectation, an illusion that keeps me suspended making me think that, right there, in that fictional place and time, something is happening. It is an event that has to do with me, because it creates a meaning deposited under the surface of my own life. I do believe that reading must have a sort of existential implication. This is exactly what I look for in my readings, otherwise they would be a banal form of escapism, an excuse to evade the reality without understanding that it is exactly the reality that every reading has to plumb. This thought brings me round to Simone Weil, and to her thinking about reading. She too recognized that at the basis of every reading experience there is a will to knowledge. She writes: "There is a mystery in reading, a mystery the contemplation of which can doubtless help not to explain, but to understand other mysteries in men's lives" (297).⁷ Reading is an ethical experience: we read because we want to understand; we read because we may want to change.

Therefore, Sylvia Plath. When I read her poems and diaries, I engage my capacity for internal speech; I feel like I *need* to return to her again. There is something mysterious in her words, something that escapes my full understanding. I think that the reason why I return to her so frequently is because her words are able to elude me; they force me to keep reading, and by so doing, I have gradually reduced the distance in an attempt to respond to her words. It is as if in those phrases and verses there is a content that silently speaks to me, a content that I cannot totally grasp, a sort of displaced gaze thrown on myself.

⁷ This essay was originally published in 1946 with the title "Essai sur la Notion de Lecture," in *Les Études Philosophiques*.

And so, to pick up the question I posed in the premise, why do I feel that Plath's texts are right for me?

In 1985, the poetess Susan Howe published a book untitled *My Emily Dickinson*. More recently, Siri Hustvedt has also resorted to the possessive determiner to address the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois. *My Louise Bourgeois* is the formula she adopted to convey how the art of this sculptor "has become part of [her] cellular makeup, part of our bodies and brains" ("My Louise Bourgeois" 33). I guess I want to pursue this tradition, by claiming another great poetess: *my Sylvia Plath*, the Sylvia Plath who has now become part of myself through her writing, and above all through the reading I made of what she wrote.

There is no question in my mind that Sylvia Plath is my author. I can talk about her biography, her suicide, her presumed illness and how this last shaped her art, but that has nothing to do with the reason why I feel so close to her writing. Since I read Plath's poems for the first time at sixteen, I immediately recognized and shared with her a sense of discomfort and sorrow. But at the same time, reading Plath's pages did not evoke an immediate emotion of pity. Rather, their effect was more acute; they evoked—and still do—a feeling that I inscribed under the sign of the "familiar." Let me say this. *My Sylvia Plath's* power lies not in being confessional,⁸ but in the fact that she is able to stir up all the contents buried into the secret prison of my own unconscious.

I would like to return for a moment to the psychoanalytic word *identification*, to explicate in detail what is at stake in this passage.

The term *identification* might be approached from multiple angles, even the most immediate and common ones, which means, also to indicate those processes that might be better described in terms of emphatic or mirroring phenomena. But it bears remembering that, in the psychoanalytic sense, identification concerns specific, highly complex and pervasive processes, the ones inherent to a profound—but largely unconscious—transformation of one identity. In this perspective, the subject might certainly recognize and name the model, or the object with which she identifies, but she cannot fully control and explain the metamorphosis she is facing. This is precisely the greatest philosophical news Sigmund Freud introduces in his 1921 essay, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.⁹ Identity is defined here in terms of identification; each subject, far from being a trivial collection of properties or parts, is strongly determined by processes of assimilation of otherness. Every identity is never defined in relation only to itself, but within a pervasive relation with another subject. *Idem* is in relation with *alter*; *idem* and *alter* are always intertwined in many different and conflicting ways.

This conception of identity in terms of identification returns us to another question: what am I looking for in the identification with Sylvia Plath? Certainly, I do not want merely to imitate her. I do not want to stick my head in the oven; that would be insane. However, I do identify with Sylvia Plath. But my identification with her does not force my mind to an extreme mimetism. On the contrary, it offers the possibility to interrogate myself by traveling with her for the duration of the reading; for instance, on the relationship between femininity and desire, which is here addressed in terms of *manque à être*, a desire destined to remain forever unfulfilled.

Life is unintelligible for Sylvia Plath. In order to reduce its strangeness, she feels the necessity to write. In her view, life must be fixed in words. This is the precise task Plath

⁸ I'm alluding to the argument articulated in M.L. Rosenthal's essay *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (1967). Rosenthal was the first who used the term *confessional poetry* having in mind in particular Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, but he included Plath too under the same label. This categorization has been long argued; see, for example, Uroff.

⁹ Freud distinguishes different types of identifications: the identification with a model, and the identification with an object. The first modifies the Ego, while the second contributes to installing the so-called Ideal of the Ego.

assigned to her writing. She writes down in a passage of her diaries: “Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reliving of people and the world as they are and as they might be” (*The Unabridged Journals* 436).

Writing, paradoxically, fixes within language that which escapes from language. Yet Plath, through this writing that becomes very soon an existential necessity for her, begins to fight an even more terrible battle. Indeed, with the passing of time, it becomes clear to her that the world she has captured into her writing so far is a world of falsehood. She continuously asks herself: “God, who am I? I sit in the library tonight, the lights glaring overhead, the fan whirring loudly. Girls, girls everywhere, reading books. Intent faces, flesh pink, white, yellow. And I sit here without identity: faceless” (*The Unabridged Journals* 26). And again, in another passage: “who am I, God-whom-I-don't-believe-in? God-who-is-my-alter-ego? Suddenly the turn table switches to a higher speed, and in the whizzing that ensues I lose track of my identity. I act and react, and suddenly I wonder ‘Where is the girl that I was last year? . . . Two years ago? . . . What would she think of me now?’” (*The Unabridged Journals* 91). Her identity is gradually stripped of every element of reassurance; every mask falls and gives way to a very painful emptiness.

We could say that, as far as Plath does not know well who she is, she knows perfectly well who she no longer is. It appears very clear to her that what she yearns for is a more authentic *elsewhere*. Her desire consists in this suffering; it is a pain caused by her attempt to reach and possess something that is unattainable by its nature.

Sylvia was ill, we know this. Even today, many critics continue to examine private letters and unpublished parts of her diaries with the aim of selecting scandalistic details (Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*). But this is not the kind of disease that interests me. What motivates my continuous reading of Sylvia Plath concerns the illness of her desire, the one from which her words and writing derive. What does Sylvia Plath want? Which is to say: what does a woman want? In a way, *my* Sylvia Plath gave me the chance to reopen the famous Freudian question (*Was will das Weib?*) and to radically displace it. What she looks for in life as well as in writing, it seems to me, is something else, which has changed into an absolute otherness over time. It is an alterity that sounds like a promise of transcendence to her. Just her, who since she was a child had wanted to be everything; she who wishes she were the God girl, and that then she will become “the dew that flies suicidal” (*Collected Poems* 239).

This is how Plath (and specifically the reading I did of her diaries) has opened the way to a greater awareness of my own difference. I did not know, at the outset, that such a reading was to become so crucial for me. I have discovered it reading after reading; and more clearly, upon reflecting retrospectively on the personal “between-zone” which was being created in connection with her. Going back to the risks reading hides, I agree with Shoshana Felman when she claims that “every reading is a rather risky business whose outcome and full consequences can never be known in advance” (5). This is exactly the fascinating aspect of every authentic reading experience: the fact that it allows me to find in the text something I do not expect. In my specific case, *my* Sylvia Plath is, among other things, the account of how I made the discovery of my own identity as missing, and why this missing of one identity appears to me characteristic of femininity. Such an identity lies beyond every essentialist assertion: it is nothing but an additional pain, a lack of indulgence toward ourselves.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Mossali. By privileging the original insights regarding the sexual difference offered by Jacques Lacan in the *Seminar XX*, my research aims at rethinking the traditional concepts of universality and singularity – which correspond respectively to the processes of male and female sexuation – in order to analyze then the uniqueness embodied in the writing of Sylvia Plath.

Plath understood the necessity to abandon the false security of one identity in favor of the insecurity of the loss, of a differential movement which cannot be permanently fixed. As already said, only much later I realized that my reading of Plath was speaking to me through an unexpected power of address, and that the same reading was copying—with no initial awareness on my part—the flux of my own life.

“The dialogue between my writing and my life is always in danger of becoming a slithering of responsibility, of evasive rationalizing,” writes Plath (*The Unabridged Journals* 208-209). And this is true also for reading, which is always the work of a reflective self. If someone asked me to explain why I chose Sylvia Plath, I think I would answer by borrowing the words of Michel de Montaigne: “Because it was [she], because it was I” (139).¹¹

In conclusion. People read and react to a book, for better and for worse. We may like that book, or we may not. But at times, another miracle can occur, and we see that one book we have read is able to intensify our lives. And so, we ask more of it; we want more, more knowledge and more answers. Reading is exactly this, a hope that something may finally happen.

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¹¹ “Parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était moi.”

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