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“And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself”¹ Sylvia Plath’s Autothanatography or Death Writing

Nicolas BOILEAU

- 1 All of Plath’s production is pervaded with the recurring, if not obsessive, theme of death, that of the personae (*The Bell Jar*, “Tulips,” “A Birthday Present,” “Lady Lazarus,” for instance) as well as that of other characters (“Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,” “Daddy,” “The Edge,” “Three Women,” amongst other examples). As has been pointed out by many, Sylvia Plath’s suicide in 1963, only four months after she wrote “Daddy,” has led to two main critical trends: on the one hand, some have sought to downplay the peritextual effect of Plath’s suicide so as to concentrate on the function of death in the economy of Plathian poetry², thereby erasing the autobiographical aspect of her work:

Sylvia Plath’s poetry, full as it is of reference to death, is by no means focused on her own death. In the poems collected in the volume *Ariel* and some of the later ones, there are references to two different kinds of death, in particular to the concentration camps. Far from becoming more self-absorbed in the past years and months of her life, Sylvia Plath seems to have developed a political consciousness. (Bassnett 21)

- 2 Others have chosen to rely on the autobiographical material, and run the risk of reducing Plath’s writing to a form of solipsism, confirmed as this interpretation seemed to be by her being labelled as a “confessional poet” (Alvarez)³. Plath’s interest in Freud’s essay on melancholia, “Mourning and Melancholia,” could suggest that it is not so much death itself but one’s response to death, or the possibility of having a death of one’s own after that of her father, which matters for her. Reading the theme of death in Plath’s work from the perspective of “autothanatography” as a genre is useful in order to divert the attention away from moralistic concerns related to whether her representation of death was always informed by her own death wish, and to renew the appraisal of Plath’s literary achievements. As the word designating the genre suggests, it is not only death that is

dealt with, but "Thanatos," its representation and the way it is perceived; the kind of death that is addressed in this paper, and in Plath's work at large, is not the biological death of the body, nor is it the agony of the diseased body (and the related questions of suffering and pathos), but the obsessing desire for a self-inflicted death. Suicide, which in Lacanian psychoanalysis is considered as an act of the subject when s/he experiences himself or herself as waste (*Le sinthome* 2005), as a wish to take a step off stage (Britzolakis), needs to be at the centre of, rather than shunned from, the reading of Plath's work. The current interest in suicide as an area that is coherent enough to offer consistent studies confirms that death itself is not specific enough as a concept to analyse Plath's texts. The genre of autothanatography could be a way of addressing the performative representation of the very act of committing suicide⁴. In this respect, it is significant to note that E. Laurent's analysis of the category of melancholia in Lacan's work shows that the latter addresses the question of suicide, or the temptation for suicide, rather than the emotion of "sadness" that is often looked at (Laurent 11). Autothanatography seems to be the ideal framework from which to raise the question of the difference between the accuracy of a fact – death in this case – and the real presence of this fact at the symbolic level of language – here, the writing of death, and the representation it constructs.

- 3 In recent years, the word "autothanatography" has been used by various critics. It emerged, according to N. K. Miller, as a type of writing against death, that is for authors that somehow could feel the time of their deaths or that of their relatives' and friends' approaching; and in later years, the term has started being applied mostly to autobiography that deals with an experience of disease – and especially AIDS (Smith and Watson 188). All life writing can be said to be a form of auto-obituary, because life writing seems to be prompted by a desire to leave a trace of something now gone and soon to be forgotten, namely the author's life⁵. The writing is not only *against* death but *about* death, as a question posed to its looming presence. After looking at how radical Plath's death imagery is, which suggests something beyond the ontological fear that is sometimes expressed in autobiographies, especially in the ones written in later life, the language of melancholia thus revealed will be discussed: some experience remains asymbolic, that is beyond language, creating a hole in language itself. I want to suggest that Plath's generic choices should be called "death writing", as we are used to referring to "life writing", that is a writing that seeks to account for death and necessarily fails, because the act itself will only happen after the text. Laure de Nervaux's essay on the same topic, concluding as it does on the failure of language and the theatricality of Plath's representation of melancholia, will be the basis for our sidestepping towards the notion of suicide. Discussing the role played by psychoanalysis in Plath's endorsement of the language of melancholia, Nervaux explains,

Psychoanalysis provides the epistemological and rhetorical background of the confessional poets' quest for self... The indebtedness of [Sylvia Plath's] poems to Freudian theory should not be taken for granted however. Plath uses psychoanalysis both as a tool of self-analysis and as a literary device. The result is a highly theatrical psychodrama in which autobiography and fiction are closely intertwined. (Nervaux)

- 4 Psychoanalysis is here construed as the version of Freud's theory, with little interest in current evolutions that will be included in this paper. It reflects however the inescapable nature of the reference to this domain when studying Plath.

Plath's Radical Death Imagery: from Life Writing to Death Writing

- 5 The reader of Plath is plunged into a world full of corpses and cadavers, like in *The Bell Jar* when Buddy Willard shows his girlfriend around the morgue, in what remains one of the most frightful date scenes in the History of literature. This theme can be construed as the engine of Plath's fiction, because it is that by which the plot progresses. The literature published about Plath's fascination with death is multifarious, but not always devoid of moralistic concerns: "If we forget that the novel is a comedy and satire... we are likely to conclude that the author herself had no interest in politics or history, but simply a morbid fascination with death." (Nelson 24) Although often associated with confessional poetry (Nelson 32), Plath's work seems to respond to the recommendations of well-known modernist manifestoes⁶, because the subject disappears: her style is dense, placid, cold and distant, as epitomised by her exclusive use of parataxis. And yet, it is often an "I" that speaks, leading to a paradoxical, autobiographical interpretation. Some passages are akin to a list of advertising slogans, shocking and brutal: the quote serving as a title for this paper is a case-in-point:

And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen." (*Collected Poems* 161)

- 6 The iambic rhythm of the lines contrasts with the unpredictability of the number of feet and the comma splice, giving off an ambiguous signal that is paralleled in the choice of the present perfect. The narrating "I" is out of breath as its oxygen is taken away by the flowers, or rather by the anaesthetist, since the persona is about to undergo surgery. In the same way, "I" is also restored by the spondee "no face", which signals the absence of any image, any figure of speech, despite the perpetuation of a sense of being. Death does not seem to be an image, but the signifier of all the persona's aporetic experiences (De Man). The lack of affect deriving from the juxtaposition of clauses seems to produce the effacement that has been wanted. This is what Tuhkunen-Couzic argues in her study of Plath's writings, an idea summarised in the expression "embryonic writing." She suggests that death and life are intertwined, but also that Plath's writing is in an early stage of development that never comes to life. It is moreover impossible to escape the imagery of death because the poem itself seems to perform the act of self-erasure and offers a radical image of the reduction to passivity triggered off by the surgery: "Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage." (*Collected Poems* 160) The close study of the poem has shown the game of contrasts in colours as a counter current to the speech of despair (Aird). Yet, this cannot be completely detached from an autobiographical reading based on Plath's miscarriage a few months before (in February 1961) and the meaning of the phrase that suggests a wish to die, and to do so *in her own terms*.
- 7 For indeed Plath does not use death as the classic ontological question posed to existence⁷, but as a violent, linguistic act that effaces the subject:
- These are the isolate, slow faults
that kill, that kill, that kill." (*Collected Poems* 193)
- 8 In this poem, "Elm," where "Nature reflects back the subject's hostility, vacuity and aloneness" (Axelrod 80), the repetition of "that kill," grammatically incorrect in as much as it detaches "that" from a referent that is lost, once again performs the disappearance of the subject in a violent way that annihilates its integrity. The yoking together of death

and like can be seen as a form of renaissance, or be interpreted as Plath's gateway towards her survival (Tuhkunen-Couzic 137); and yet it is important to accept the cries for death that are expressed by Plath, and that defy any possible explanation in their recurrence, their brutality and their lack of interpretative associations, and its overwhelming presence over that of life. All of this suggests a desire that is stronger than the repeated failures to achieve its aim.

I die. I make a death.
I too create corpses" ("Three Women", *Collected Poems* 181-82).

9 Death does not seem to be conducive to any meaning: the parataxis echoes an absence of interpretation that leaves the subject unequipped to face the presence in language of something that cannot be metaphorised or given meaning.

10 Death also seems to be the aporia of Plath's writing, upon which most poetic voices stumble, stuck in the rut of a death that cannot be shaken off nor embraced wholly:

I saw death in the bare trees, a deprivation
I could not believe it.
... I am dying as I sit.
This is a disease I carry home, this is a death.
Again, this is a death.
... Is this my lover then? This death, this death?
... this old dead love of death." ("Three Women", *Collected Poems* 177)

11 Although the three consecutive stanzas from which this quote is extracted are condensed here, the least we can say is that the voice stutters on the word "death," mentioned nine times in twenty-one lines! All these occurrences prove that death is reduced to a signifier whose signified is not played with, extracted or developed. It is the sign pointing towards the dead-end of life on the symbolic level of language. Plath's critical literature finds it difficult to make sense of the Holocaust imagery that Plath uses time and again in her writing (Nelson, 26), but a recognition of the absence of a signified associated to the concept of death may account for Plath's use of such radical imagery to try and fix its meaning by using a symbol that is already-made for her. The American society of the 50s, patriarchy, the fight against communism, and various social readings have been put at play to account for such a radical choice (Kappes), but this negates the repetition of a signifier without a signified attached to it. The autothanatographical perspective to approach this aspect of Plath's work remains underdeveloped in current studies, so as to rework it for an understanding of Plath's melancholy language.

The language of melancholia: Beyond Freud's Influence

12 Some Plath critics have laid the stress on Plath's admission that she had read Freud, and analysed her texts as explorations, if not illustrations, of Freud's study, "Mourning and Melancholia." More often than not, this was in turn reinterpreted as a feature of the time, when Freud was popular, and his theories well known and read (Tuhkunen-Couzic 162-3; Godi):

Read Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" this morning after Ted left for the library. An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the "vampire" metaphor Freud uses, "draining the ego": that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: mother's clutch. (*Journals* 447)

- 13 It is interesting to note that Plath refers to her suicide as if it had been completed, and not as a failed attempt. This has led to some work on the question of whether the diagnosis was apt, with different trends in criticism fighting over whether melancholia was a better word than depression (Alexander), depression being discarded in the field of psychoanalysis because it is not precise enough to distinguish psychosis from neurosis. Laure de Nervaux's work sees this as the basis for Plath's fictionalisation of her life, which is a way of showing that Freud is not so much a theoretical reference, but an intertext helping the production of Plath's version of her story. There are indeed signs of fictionalisation that contribute to establishing a link between psychoanalysis and Plath: Kristeva calls her study of melancholia "the dark sun" and Plath talks of "a love of death that sickens everything/ A dead sun stains the newsprint." ("Three Women" 181) The oxymora are close enough to see either Plath as an illustrator of the theory or as a perfect example of it.
- 14 The very notion of melancholia needs defining further: Freud, Abraham, Klein, Kristeva, Burton and Lacan have all written about it, whether by describing its symptoms and affects, or by trying to show its structure. Freud's essay is well known beyond psychoanalytic circles. Freud equates the melancholy mood to that of a pathological mourning that leads to painful dejection, an incapacity to love, and inhibition. Like all the others, Freud points to the radical feeling of sadness that is a sign of melancholia: "an abyss of sadness, incommunicable pain that absorbs us sometimes, and often durably, until we have lost the desire to speak" (Kristeva 13)⁸. This in itself enables us to draw a parallel between the radical aspect of the death imagery identified above and the description of the melancholy state. Jacques-Alain Miller in *Variétés de l'humeur* suggests that there is a difference between the melancholy position and the melancholy state, the latter being characterised by temporary mood swings; the other by the subject's systematic relation to *jouissance* that leaves the subject with a feeling of destitution, and precipitates his/ her wish to put an end to it by performing a real act of severing (Miller 74). This prolongs Kristeva's own distinction: "Melancholia is the asylum symptomatology of inhibition and asymbolia that settles for moments or chronically in an individual, alternating, most often, with a phase said to be 'maniac' of exaltation" (Kristeva 18-19). Current research enables critics to go beyond the description of the mood, which is so radical that it is likely to be a screen diverting the listener away from the facts that are uncovered in the process. Sophie Marret-Maleval for example insists on the fact that the melancholy subject is likely to identify strongly with a social norm and social expectations, because of a failure of the subject's self to be constituted as an ideal (Marret-Maleval)⁹. Social norms in this case function as the ideal version of the subject and because the self is fully identified with them, there is no room for a welcome deviation from the norm. The effect of the lack of this ideal is the identification of the subject with object *a* as defined by Lacan – something which signifies that the subject perceives him/herself as waste that can be disposed of in the suicidal act. All current work on melancholia has effaced the link to narcissism that could be found in Rank for example (Freud). All however point to the link with suicide (Freud 252-3), prompting to a different understanding of the root "auto" in "autothanatography," i.e. no longer the writing of one's own death but the writing of the death one causes to oneself.
- 15 Seen from the perspective of the language of melancholia, Plath's reliance on stereotypes and fixed meanings suggests indeed she may have wanted to explore the absence of a constituted self that forces the subject to be in constant need for images and pre-

ordained norms to comply and identify with. She wrote of the main character in *The Bell Jar*: "Make her a statement of her generation. Which is you." (*Journals* 289) This is partly why *The Bell Jar* has often led to sociological readings focusing on the social context and its repercussions in a story that was at times too stereotypical or generational to be true. *The Bell Jar* may even be considered to have been at the origin of accounts for which the stereotypical nature of the representation was not connected to an underlying recognition of a gaping hole in the self's definition. It would seem to confirm that if the story is so stereotypical, it is also because it is the expression of a melancholy vision of the world that the American society of the 50s and 60s certainly helped make collective. La Belle's reading of the mirrors in *The Bell Jar* could thus serve as a stepping-board to reinterpret this phenomenon, moving from the Narcissistic pleasure at stake to the perspective of melancholia. Mirrors could be seen as the subject's problematic attachment to ready-made images that come in lieu of an absence of dialectically-constructed meanings (LaBelle). This is also another subtext to Nervaux's analysis of the phenomenon in the poem "Daddy":

The poem's hyperbolic rhetoric piles image upon image, turning the word "Daddy" into an unstable signifier, a word with a shifting meaning referring to the author's biological father, to a petrified literary tradition, to patriarchal ideology, and to history in its most dehumanizing form. Signifiers lead to more signifiers but no ultimate meaning is revealed.

- 16 Nervaux interestingly finds multiple meanings and concludes to an absence of a dominating one. Another possible way of looking at this would be to note that the signifier produces many meanings that reveal how dysfunctional it is in its operation. In "Three Women," the woman who experiences a loss of integrity is dressed up by the medical staff in order to be ornate with the drags of womanhood, a drag version that gives itself as a semblance that cannot be appropriated by the subject, who can only describe what is happening without making sense of the experience:

I am not ugly. I am even beautiful
 The mirror gives back a woman without deformity
 The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity
 It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.
 It is usual in my life and the lives of others.
 I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.
 I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick...
 I am on the old mouth
 The red mouth I put by with my identity.
 The streets may turn to paper suddenly, but I recover
 From the long fall...
 As for a fall. I am no shadow. (*Collected Poems* 183 *et passim*)

- 17 It is a recurring motif that Plath associates mirrors with a form of death, the image produced being seen as the opposite of the real, and she thereby explores the rift between the real presence of something and the image that strips it bare. The use of the same verb "give back" suggests that indeed images are material for Plath, like objects. In the posthumously published "Courage of Shutting up," Plath writes:

But how about the eyes, the eyes, the eyes?
 Mirrors can kill and talk, they are terrible rooms
 In which a torture goes one can only watch.
 The face that lived in this mirror is the face of a dead man
 Do not worry about the eyes.

- 18 The circular nature of the stanza shows the relentless question raised concerning the object of the eyes: the subject becomes conflated with an object, which is the only thing captured in the mirrored image (Lacan "the Mirror Stage"). This notion that the subject cannot be entirely lodged in the image, whether a mirror like here, or a photograph like in *The Bell Jar* – when Esther is asked to choose a symbol to be pictured with in the next edition of the magazine and she cannot accept the prop nor the act of being photographed and is forced out of the studio, crying. In "Death and Co," Plath continues to write about this: "He tells me how badly I photograph" (*Collected Poems* 254). The absence of an image that captures the subject evokes the stepping offstage that is at the heart of the suicidal act. It shows the mortifying function of the objectification of Narcissism, but also the impossibility for Plath as subject to make sense out of it: what "he says" is taken at face value. Like the object that she is, the quality of the image is left alone, discarded and dejected, reduced to a tortured object, a point of horror that she is a witness to, but the last line suggests that there is nothing for us to do but avert the eyes. No meaning will come out of it. This is a feature of melancholia as defined by Kristeva: "For the melancholy subject, primary identification proves fragile and insufficient to insure the other identifications, the symbolic ones, which would enable the *erotic Thing* to be liable to become an *Object of desire*." (Kristeva 23)

Death Writing or Autothanatography: Beyond the Metaphor

- 19 Plath's autothanatographic writings can be placed against the general context of post-war US cultural and social background. It may not be surprising that the functioning of melancholia was then more operative than in other contexts, at a time when the USA had established a system of general surveillance of dissonant or discordant voices, especially non-masculine ones, in the fight against Communism. If some argued that hysteria was the illness of the 19th century (Gubar and Gilbert), schizophrenia that of the early 20th century (Showalter and Laing), melancholia could be seen as the logical symptom of the 50s and 60s, when normativity and consensual thinking were of paramount importance to safeguard the danger within. Poets in particular became associated with the dissonant voices through the two movements of the Beat Generation and confessional poets: all confessional poets were institutionalised in nursing homes or treated by psychiatrists. Social problems therefore were considered by some as a solipsist, introspective exploration that was highly dysfunctional and should be treated:

Rejecting modernism's imperative of impersonality, Robert Lowell, W.S. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath turned poetry into a place of self-exploration, dramatizing unresolved conflicts and drawing upon highly intimate matters in first person poems. (Nervaux)

- 20 The word "autothanatography," or the concept, remains absent from Plath's critical literature, probably because Plath critics are still haunted by the overwhelming presence of the author's suicide in the understanding of her writing, or try to evacuate it as it used to be so central. Axelrod suggests, "Plath's poems thus enact a paradoxical project of staged self-exposure." (Axelrod 73) But I think we need to go further and say it's a staged self-exposure of her own erasure. Axelrod recognises the autography inherent to Plath's *oeuvre* but is made slightly uncomfortable by the staging of it, because it suggests some fictionalisation. What her writing seeks to do is to fight against the feeling of self-erasure

rather than self-exposure, or rather it exaggerates the act of self-exposure precisely because she can only experience her self as already erased, hence her feeling that the description of melancholia fitted her mood exactly: "The melancholy person is foreign to his or her mother tongue. S/he has lost the meaning—the value—of his/her mother tongue, rather than losing his/ her mother. The dead language that is spoken and which prefigures the suicide hides some Thing that was buried alive." (Kristeva 64) This points to another reason why Plath's texts seem to be so emotionless: she exposes in the language that she uses how much language carries death.

- 21 The 1962-3 poems in this respect show great regularity in stylistic choices of short, run-on lines, condensed poems—anything that seems to favour irregularity and fragmentation, and evokes the loss of meaning. The poems never seem to miss an opportunity to assert the disappearance of the subject: "And I, nearly extinct" ("Brasilia," *Collected Poems* 258); "Dead egg, I lie / Whole / On a whole world I cannot touch, / At the white tight..." ("Paralytic," *Collected Poems* 266), "When my engine reaches the end of it." ("Gigolo," *Collected Poems* 267), to quote but a few, not necessarily in the first person. In "Childless Woman," words, images and the presence of death become intertwined in a manner that the form of the poem helps construct:

This body,
This ivory

Ungodly as a child's shriek.
Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,
Loyal to my image,

Uttering nothing but blood –
Taste it, dark red!
And my forest

My funeral,
And this hill and this
Gleaming with the mouths of corpses. ("Childless Woman", *Collected Poems* 259)

- 22 Autothanatography is a genre that, unlike autobiography, does not have to account for the accuracy of its story, inasmuch as the text is directed towards the expression of one's own death, which by definition, is yet to happen (Sylvia Plath wrote this poem when she was the mother of two). The deconstruction of syntax and the juxtaposition of words are confusing and allow for multiple, contradictory explanations. What can be said is that the image that is central is once again something that is unstable (spin), while the body is detached in pieces that appear either in mirrors or in orifices, such as the mouths. The mortifying experience of language is here summarised in the expression "gleaming with the mouths of corpses" and the blood coming out of her mouth, in a sort of anti-vampire-like image. The mortifying nature of the signifier is expressed in the blood that is uttered, an image that suggests indeed that words kill. One could say that the text itself produces the death of its author.
- 23 Hélène Jaccomard explains, "The death of the author, once the last word put down, is the only dénouement capable of making the completion of the text and the end of the story to coincide." (Jacomard 216) The image therefore is to be taken at its literal value. It is almost as if the metaphor was not evocative of multiple meanings, but offered, on the contrary, a more limiting view pointing towards the only possible interpretation, namely that the subject must disappear. For it is not so much that the "portrayal of an existing

self" is "an attempt to discard this self and bring another one into being" (Nervaux), it is rather that the exchangeability of selves unveils another fact: the experience of an inconsistent core of being that cannot hold in the face of language. "Lady Lazarus" (*Collected Poems* 244-47), one of Plath's last poems, easily lends itself to an autobiographical reading: it is an example of autothanatography because it recounts the multiple deaths of the author through her life. Statements as overt as the following ones recall well-known elements of Plath's life¹⁰:

The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.
The second time I meant to
Last it out and not come back at all

24 Or,

they had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls

25 In "Lady Lazarus," interestingly, the word "death" has disappeared in the first lines and it is left to the readers to interpret the cataphoric pronoun "it" that Plath uses. "Lady Lazarus" stresses the impossible solution to the problem posed to the subject: the materiality of a body that cannot be disposed of. The body of the poetic subject is indeed only seen through fragmentation (skin, right foot, featureless face, nose, eyes) and never presented as a unit, that is found wanting. Here again, the first line of the poem is in the present perfect, indicating that the poem is the result of the action, an action that is achieved through the poem itself with the anaphora "I do it," in which "it" can be the art-or the act-of-dying, and the last lines:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

26 The perpetual rebirth of the poet never puts an end to the notion that she needs to pass away before she can act again, however life-threatening her actions may be. Language strips her bare ("the big strip tease" or "the theatrical / come back") of her garments, that is of the imaginary level, and she gives herself to everyone's contemplation, hoping to find another image that she could endorse by catching a glimpse of her self in the others: "what a trash"/ "ash, ash." The feeling of herself equating waste, of being the rest of the signifying process as identified by Lacan in melancholia, is performed in the poem where language deteriorates into a mixture of German and English. The stripping of images that she relied upon is also seen in the address to a third party that is not described and will not answer, and the gradual disappearance of the comparison is replaced by a metonymical approach (my right foot, a paperweight), which points to what E. Laurent says:

Melancholia, inasmuch as it is a suicidal sacrifice, can be identified with this death of the subject that names herself at the very moment when she becomes eternal. In so doing, the subject becomes pure subject of the eternity of desire... The narcissistic sacrifice is subordinated to the symbolic sacrifice. (Laurent 10)

27 In relentlessly working on the writing of her death, Plath can be said to have tried to operate that symbolic sacrifice, that is a sacrifice in language resulting from the absence of an image of herself that she could appropriate. Her repeated suicides in the language of poetry could be construed as her attempt at avoiding the real act.

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NOTES

1. S. Plath, "Tulips", *Collected Poems*, 161.
2. See T. Tuhkunen-Couzig, 2002. Aird suggests that talking of autobiography for Plath infers an absence of metaphor and creativity (Aird 65).
3. His classification is referred to in all biographies.
4. See for example the site of Rochester's Centre for Research on Suicide: <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/psychiatry/csp/research/suicide-studies.aspx>; in Canada, <http://mgss.ca/> or in Oxford <http://cebmh.warne.ox.ac.uk/csr/profile.html>
5. Woolf, like many autobiographers, uses this as an excuse for her decision to write her memoirs: "Two days ago – Sunday 16th April 1939 to be precise – Nessa said that if I did not start writing my memoirs I should soon be too old. I should be eighty-five, and should have forgotten – witness the unhappy case of Lady Stratchey." V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), London, Pimlico Edition, 2002, 78.
6. T.S. Eliot, *Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1921.
7. See introduction to this collection of articles.
8. Unless specified otherwise, all translations of French texts are mine.
9. This is an article expanding the argument of S. Marret-Maleval, "Mélancolie et psychose ordinaire", in "Des artistes et des psychanalystes", *La Cause Freudienne*, nouvelle revue de psychanalyse, n°78, *Notre sujet supposé savoir*, Paris, Diffusion Seuil, 2011, 248-257.
10. See the popular biographies that all recount Plath's failed attempts to commit suicide when she was a child and teenager: P. Alexander, *Rough Magic*, New York, The Da Capo Press, 2003 (1991); J. Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, New York, Knopf, 1993; or L. Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath, A Literary Life*, London, Macmillan Press Ltd, « Literary Lives », 1999.

ABSTRACTS

Plath's work has often been described as an auto/biographical account of her death wish, and for some, her 1963 suicide was the evidence confirming her obsession for the morbid. The overwhelming presence of grief and mourning in her life has also been said to adumbrate the tone of most of her poems. Yet, very little has been done on the question of "autothanatography," even if indeed Plath's works seem to be far more concerned about death than life. Autothanatography suggests that there is a form of autobiographical writing that is less interested in the author's past life than in the future/ upcoming death of the subject. Following in the footsteps of French psychoanalytical theory on Melancholia, this paper seeks to observe one of the blind spots of Plath's critical literature, that is the real presence of death in language, causing subjects to be impossible to grasp and locate. Plath's autobiographical writings were not means to fight off death, but to account for its looming presence in her writing as well as in her life. Thereby, Plath's responsibility regarding her obsessional writing of death will be toned down, and the poems will be shown to bear the stigmas of the linguistic death that Plath reveals.

L'œuvre de Plath a souvent été décrite comme une écriture autobiographique de sa propre pulsion de mort, et pour certains, son suicide en 1963 n'a fait que confirmer l'obsession de l'auteure pour le morbide. On a pu également dire que la présence envahissante du deuil dans la vie de Plath annonçait le ton qu'elle avait choisi pour la plupart de ses poèmes. Pourtant, on n'a peu abordé ses textes sous l'angle de l'"autothanatographie", même si l'œuvre de Plath semble s'intéresser bien plus à la question de la mort, qu'à celle de la vie. L'autothanatographie suppose qu'il existe une forme d'écriture autobiographique qui se concentre moins sur la vie passée que sur la mort annoncée ou future du sujet. Grâce à l'apport de la psychanalyse lacanienne telle qu'elle se développe actuellement sur la question de la mélancolie, cet article cherche à observer l'un des angles morts de la littérature sur Plath, à savoir la présence réelle de la mort dans le langage, ce qui rend absents à eux-mêmes les sujets. Les écrits autobiographiques de Plath n'étaient pas seulement des moyens de repousser la mort, mais plutôt de témoigner de sa présence dangereuse dans ses textes comme dans sa vie. Ainsi, on pourra réduire la responsabilité de l'obsessionnelle Plath, et on pourra voir les poèmes comme porteurs des stigmates de cette mort dans le langage que Plath révèle.

INDEX

Keywords: Plath, poetry, melancholia, death Writing, Lacan

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Nicolas P. Boileau, Maître de conférences à l'Université d'Aix-Marseille, a soutenu une thèse sur l'autobiographie intitulée: *Une expérience de l'impossible, les écrits autobiographiques de Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath et Janet Frame*. Il a publié des articles sur le modernisme, l'autobiographie et sur les liens entre la littérature et la folie à travers l'étude de la psychanalyse lacanienne. Après avoir traduit l'ouvrage d'Alex Sierz et publié une édition annotée et commentée de *Mrs Dalloway*, Nicolas P. Boileau s'intéresse à la littérature contemporaine et travaille à l'écriture d'une monographie sur l'autobiographie et la psychanalyse. Il coordonne le travail d'un groupe de recherche sur les féminismes, Women's Resistance to Feminism, <https://wfw.hypotheses.org/>