



## **MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities**

### **“Had She Plotted It All?": Mimetic Representation and Fictionalisation of Sylvia Plath in Her Work and in David Aceituno's *Sylvia & Ted*"**

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What happened that night? Your final night.  
Double, treble exposure  
Over everything. Late afternoon, Friday,  
My last sight of you alive.  
*Burning your letter to me*, in the ashtray,  
With that strange smile. Had I bungled your plan?  
Had it surprised me sooner than you purposed?  
Had I rushed it back to you too promptly?  
One hour later—you would have been gone  
Where I could not have traced you.  
I would have turned from your locked *red* door  
That nobody would open  
Still holding your letter,  
A thunderbolt that could not earth itself.  
That would have been *electric shock treatment*  
For me.  
Repeated over and over, all weekend,  
As often as I read it, or thought of it.  
That would have remade my brains, and my life.  
The treatment that you planned needed some time.  
I cannot imagine  
How I would have got through that weekend.  
I cannot imagine. **Had you plotted it all?**<sup>1</sup>

*Last Letter*

Ted Hughes,

Found in the British Library  
and published for the first time in October 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> My italics.

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First of all, I would like to thank Vanesa Díaz for bringing me her own copy of *Sylvia & Ted* in the first instance, and then for introducing me its author, David Aceituno. I must also thank him for giving me his words and his time; the first ones were the most valuable gift. I also want to mention Sara Morante, in this case for letting me borrow her own *Sylvia*. For what they are concerned, I must thank the publishing house Olifante for the convenient reproductions.

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Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank; all we have to do is to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the little figures — for they are rather under life size — will begin to move and to speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant, for they thought when they were alive that they could go where they liked; and as they speak we shall read into their sayings all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different.

“I am Christina Rossetti”, *The Common Reader, Second Series* by Virginia Woolf (1932).

### **III. Abstract**

Sylvia Plath's poetry, after her suicide in 1963, has become as significantly notorious as her life and her failed marriage to the Poet Laureate Ted Hughes. Concerning her compositions, Plath had always been aware of the use she made of her life in her search for inspiration. In this sense, not only her poems but also full writings compilations –journals, letters and short stories– have been considered by biographers and critics as reliable information suppliers. In this regard, this MA thesis aims to state Plath's consciousness in the creation of her role as a character in her own fiction, with a focus on her inclination to take to the limits her own daily and vital experiences in order to creatively benefit from them. By the same token, this study intends to explore Plath's reasons to commit suicide by considering it a logical consequence of her work: it argues Plath's creation of her own character and its development in her artistic world, up to the point of being the reason of her last sufferings and ultimate death. Thus, it provides with significant examples of Plath's literary legacy in order to demonstrate this thesis through the analysis of her life and words. In addition to this, this work also traces how the author herself is not entirely the owner of her image as a character, but a potential character in other author's work –novelists, biographers, etc. This study goes further by claiming that the words and actions, in this particular case, do not belong to Plath any longer, but to fiction, where her legacy is as notorious as it was with the intention of reaching posterity in the constitution of her character. Lastly, these biofictions inspired by Plath's life and work are situated at the same level of reliability as biographies about the authoress are, concluding how the biographic genre has in this particular case the same component of fiction as biofictions do.

## Introduction

This year, we commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sylvia Plath's death in that cold morning on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February, when she opened the oven where she laid down her head. Since then, the poeticised picture of the circumstances surrounding her death is well-known: how the winter of 1963 was the coldest that London had lived in years and how Plath –lonely, depressed and having been abandoned by her husband for another woman– could not cope anymore with the care of her two infants in a frozen flat, without heat or a telephone. This setting was not only the environment that led her, sadly, to commit suicide, but also the fuel and inspiration for the poems that have made her immortal.

As a matter of fact, the situation above described had not only been styled in Plath's book of poems *Ariel*, but it has also proven to be the perfect setting for those who wanted to recreate it and embellish the retelling of Plath's life, whether in the biographies or in the subsequent number of works of fiction that draw her in their pages as their main character. And in all that has been described so far, broadly speaking, is also the foundation on which I have built of this MA thesis: the processes of fictionalisation followed by the author herself in the conversion of her life episodes into poems, and how these same processes take place in the construction of numerous kinds of fictions revolving around her figure. Consequently, the main reason for undertaking this study is my interest in the evolution that the role of Plath has taken from her own conception of herself, through the idea of Plath that biographers have wanted to express, to the very last of the fictions about her so far, the book of poems *Sylvia & Ted*, written by David Aceituno.

Taking all these ideas into account, the main aim of this dissertation is to analyse the processes of fictionalisation of Sylvia Plath taking the theoretical approaches concerning the subject of fictionalisation into account to help us think about this topic. In order to do this, I will take into consideration the following topics:

As a starting point, my purpose is to contend that Sylvia Plath was highly conscious of the creation of her own persona as a character that would end up invading her reality. Plath took to the limit her own daily experiences in order to artistically benefit from them; that project developed until it enveloped her and drove her to commit suicide, which is the next argument of my thesis. I will explore whether the creation of the poems in Plath's book *Ariel* could be understood as her motive to kill herself. Her verses will be explored in search of evidence of her purpose. In *Ariel*, Plath describes what it is like to be dead, and to be consequent with her work and her personal project, she has to die. In order to proof the hypothesis that her suicide should be interpreted as an inevitable happening in the construction of her identity as a serious poetess, the main core of this study will expose Plath's own processes of fictionalisation.

In addition to this, her status as a character that is shaping herself for posterity will also be analysed. The fact that Plath had turned herself into a character opened the door for other writers to use her within their works. Thus, I trace the process by which, after her death, Sylvia Plath has become the main character of a great amount of biographical fictions. That leads inevitably to the perusal of her posthumous biographic (second) life to be found in the biographies written about her. In the analysis of these I try to demonstrate that they can be considered, together with the previously mentioned biofictions, as works of fiction. The main aim of this section of my work is to observe the reconstruction of her figure achieved by these works, taking into consideration that these biographies base their statements on Plath's autobiographical works, whether these are fiction, letters or journals, all of them used by the author herself with the intention of outlining her character. In this particular case, I chose a book of poems by the author David Aceituno to illustrate and analyse the previously mentioned concepts.

As far as its structure is concerned, this MA thesis will be developed in three differentiated parts which are thematically categorised:

Firstly, in part one, entitled “Mimesis and Fictive Worlds”, a brief theoretical framework will be provided in which I attempt to establish a basic map of concepts related to the interplay between fact and fiction according to possible world semantics. In order to summarise these concepts, central writings by the critics Thomas Pavel, Lubomír Doležel, Félix Martínez Bonati and Nelson Goodman will be taken into account. The topics raised in this section –as is the case of the concepts of truth and possibility as they relate to the creation of fictional worlds, the nature and viability of the mimetic school of literary analysis and the role played by the figures of the narrator and the author in the creation of possible worlds– are crucial to my analysis of Plath the writer /character that follows.

Secondly, in “Sylvia Plath: from Biographical Object to Character in Fiction”, which could be considered the main core of the dissertation, I will draw a map of Plath’s evolution as the object of biographical works until she finally becomes a character in all kinds of fiction. For this purpose, my intention is to go through the episodes of her personal life — assembling events that range from her youth to her relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes, whose role, additionally, will be highlighted as the other main character depicted in Sylvia Plath’s work— and the way both Plath and, later, her biographers used them in their fictions. To do so, I will make reference to Plath’s most renowned works and to her most widely read biographies and biofictions with the intention of clarifying the creation of what we can call Plath’s myth.

Thirdly and lastly, in part three, “Imagining Sylvia: Plath, the Character in the Fiction of Others”, my aim is to go from biofiction as a genre in general –examining the concept and its intentions–, to the specific existing examples of biofictions about Plath, paying attention to the wide range of their fictive possibilities. Besides, my intention will be to generate a debate

concerning the possible dilemmas that emerge from the ethics involved in the creation of a biofiction about her. Taking into account all these aspects, my final objective is to put forward the hypothesis that the intention of biofiction authors is, ultimately, to talk about themselves.

The last part of my work applies the aforementioned themes and reflections to the book of poems *Sylvia & Ted*, by the Catalan author David Aceituno. As regards my analysis of the book, it is necessary to stress that I will provide unpublished and original sources, given that I had the privilege of having direct access to the author. In this sense, he will confirm his avowed authorial intention of the use of biofiction as a way to talk about one's own life

Additionally, I was able to bring together two appendixes that provide some original information. On the one hand, Appendix A contains, at length, the interview that I conducted with David Aceituno. On the other hand, Appendix B is an original work of pictorial analysis that translates to other artistic fields the portrayals of Plath: an illustration of Sylvia Plath is carefully evaluated in order to understand the processes of representation of its author, the Cantabrian illustrator Sara Morante –which I considered highly interesting to add to this study since it contributes to extrapolate the same processes to other arts.

## 1. Mimesis and Fictive Worlds

*[...] the relationship between the reader-critic and the text is transformed from a one-way interrogation of the historical text by an altogether alien mind at much later time, into a sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures who are able to communicate with each other as friendly, respectful spirits trying to understand each other.*

(Said 2003: xiv)

*The “representation” of reality [...] mean[s] an active dramatic presentation of how each author actually realizes, brings characters to life, and clarifies his or her own world.*

(Said 2003: xx)

The creation of fictive worlds, however deviant and fanciful, is understood as a process of fictionalisation of the real world. The infinite possibilities of creation available when managing the notions of fictional discourses tend to be evaluated in relation to their truth-value, that is to say, in relation to the elucidation of what is false, imaginary or feigned and what is true in the fictive world. This discussion leads us to the consideration of the frontiers of fiction and their contact—and sometimes even friction—with reality. Thus, it is necessary to address certain topics, as is the case of the nature of truth in fiction, the role of the narrative voice in the creation of fictional worlds, and the role of the reader in deciphering said possible worlds, in order to comprehend these creations and the mimetic exercise that seems to lie behind them when translating the real world to a possible fictional world. As a particular example, we can contemplate the case of biography and biographical fiction, two genres that sustain a complex relationship between fact and fiction. In these cases, the theories of fiction based on possible worlds semantics are the most appropriate ones to find a way to think of the relationship between the narration that is conceived as truthful, despite the fact that it is an exercise of fictionalisation—namely biography—, and the one that is defined as fictive narrative—as it is the case of the biographical fiction— although it bases its thematic core on reality.

## 1.1 Fictive Worlds: An Approach

When speaking of the possibilities of creation that fiction has, we can point out how one of the aims of the creation of fictive worlds can be to “...dejar al descubierto las propiedades de la ficción y explorar sus potenciales”, being the latter, all at once, a way of “[p]otenciar nuestra percepción de las posibilidades de la ficción” (Pavel 1983: 178)<sup>2</sup>. Thomas Pavel, a literary critic who has developed theories of fiction based on the logic of possible worlds<sup>3</sup>, pays attention to the distance between reality and fiction in the act of fictionalisation. He considers that, in this act, “[se] p[er]de[...] [el] estatus de descripción verdadera” (1983: 175). Thus, he ends up perceiving the translation of reality into a fictive construction as an act of dissociation between the two. Although this critic also states, at some point in his theories, the importance of the significance of the real facts that have been manipulated in fiction, Pavel stresses the aforementioned distance between reality and fiction and claims that, as a result of its existence, we should obtain “...una actitud más flexible sobre los límites de la ficcionalidad” (179), implying that not every single aspect in the fictional world should be thought of as directly related to reality.

In order to comprehend what is implied in the creation of fiction, Lubomír Doležel, –a prominent figure of the possible world semantics–, analyses and defines fictive worlds as “...conjuntos de estados de cosas posibles” (1988: 79) and contends that these are unlimited and varied. In this sense, the reason why the fictive possibilities of creation are limitless is because, if we interpret fictive worlds as possible worlds, then, “...la literatura no queda restringida a las limitaciones del mundo real” (1988: 80). Although it is true that literature offers the medium and the possibility of constructing what could seem as impossible worlds,

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<sup>2</sup> Although the original source is in English, I was not able to locate it, therefore the quotes will be taken from the Spanish translation. This is also the case of the authors who are listed below and that will be cited later in the text: Lubomír Doležel and Nelson Goodman.

<sup>3</sup> *Fictional Worlds*, 1986. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

that is to say, worlds that contain logical contradictions, those worlds are transformed into fictional possible worlds by the performative power of the fictional text. As a consequence, one could say that the kind of worlds created in realistic literature are no less fictional than the ones represented in genres such as science-fiction or traditional fairytales, which are the more plausible to be considered as impossible worlds. Nevertheless, these created worlds are not real, and, consequently, their meaning cannot be established by comparison with reality. Although the entity described in them could be a person, this being cannot be considered real according to Dolezel, since he stresses the idea that “...los personajes ficticios no pueden encontrarse, interaccionar, comunicarse con la gente real” (1988: 79). He goes further in this statement when he affirms that “...la semántica de los mundos posibles es correcta al insistir en que los individuos ficcionales no pueden ser identificados con individuos reales” (79).

Nelson Goodman, the American philosopher –well-known for his work in the fields of counterfactuals and aesthetics– focuses his work on the wide variety of versions and conceptions of the world. Regarding these notions, he states how the construction of new worlds always departs from “...mundos preexistentes de manera que hacer es, así, rehacer” (1990: 24). Basing part of his discourse on the concept of rebuilding, Goodman analyses the “[...] amplios procesos de eliminación y de contemplación, de extirpación efectiva [...] y de aportación de nuevo material” (33) in the creation of possible worlds. These processes of composition and decomposition –which are consolidated by the use of “[...] nombres, predicados, gestos, imágenes, etc.” (25)– stem from what is already pre-existing in our minds and the way in which we perceive the world. Therefore, there is an interesting starting point when creating fictive worlds: the possession of a certain authority to “[...] dividir y combinar, de acentuar, de ordenar, de suprimir, de completar y de eliminar, e incluso de distorsionar...” (37) which allows us to delimit our created world. Although we find ourselves “[...] confinados a las formas de descripción que empleamos cuando nos referimos a aquello que

describimos” (19), as is the case of the world that we already know, nonetheless, one could state that each one of our own versions, whatever its form be, “...es correcta dado un sistema determinado, según una ciencia, un artista, según una cierta persona que las percibe o dada una circunstancia determinada” (20).

Theorist Félix Martínez Bonati, on the other hand, states that the novelistic discourse could be read “...no como novela, sino como si fuera un relato de hechos reales”; although if we approach the text in that manner, we should not “[...] tomarlo en serio, no podemos darle crédito” (1978: 159). In this sense, according to Martínez Bonati, the novelistic narration is composed by claims that are –strictly speaking– semi-affirmations; he asserts that these are “[...] frases de un tipo lógico especial, propio de la ficción, diversas de las afirmaciones de los discursos no ficcionales” (161). Considering that these are neither true, nor false, when the author writes them he “[...] sólo ‘finge’ hacerlas” (162); in this respect, because he is the writer, his claims “...sería[n] [...] absolutamente verdader[os]” (1992: 93). In accordance to the narrator of the novelistic discourse, he must be differentiated from the above-mentioned author; given that his claims are not only “[...] dichas por el novelista, sino por un hablante meramente imaginario” (1978: 162), it must be recalled, thus, that his “[...] frases novelísticas [...] no son frases reales, sino tan ficticias como los hechos que describen o narran” (162). As these are fictive, they can also be imaginative. As a final point, Bonati emphasises the difference between the images created by the fictive discourse and the ones taken from the real world, considering “lo ficticio como opuesto a [...] lo real” (167). Moreover, Bonati accepts the fact that when we enter the fictional world, we are aware of its fictive nature, although, once we are “[...] dentro de este mundo, lo vivimos como si fuese parte del mundo real y poseyese todas sus propiedades básicas” (1992: 109).

## 1.2 The Frontier between Reality and Fiction

We should stress the difference between reality and fiction in order to distinguish what belongs to the fictive and what to the real world. Dolezel illustrates this difference with an example by pointing out how an animal of flesh and blood does not exist in the fictive world; what exist is its image and its description with words (1980: 100). In order to comprehend this theory of fictionalisation, we should bear in mind that, according to it, “[...] sólo existe un universo legítimo del discurso” and that is “[...] el mundo real” (1999: 14-15). Although it is true that Dolezel, once again, points out that “[l]os mundos ficcionales son accesibles desde el mundo real” (1988: 82), certainly, these can also be constructed, which allows them to “[...] subsistir fuera de los límites de la realidad” (Pavel 1983: 177). It cannot be denied that the world “[...] participa en la formación de los mundos ficcionales proporcionando los modelos de su estructura [...] transmitiendo 'hechos en bruto’” (Dolezel 1988: 82-3). In other words, reality not only serves as a mirror and inspiration to the fictive world, but, in a sense, the latter uses it with the intention of “[...] contrasta[r] e interacciona[r]” with it (Pavel 1983: 178-9). In the same line of discussion, and focusing on the participation of reality in the genesis of fiction, we should be conscious that this existent material “[...] debe sufrir una transformación sustancial” (Dolezel 1988: 83) in its translation from reality to fiction. To do so, the transformation of the components of the real world into elements that are constitutive of alternative, fictional ones is made possible by the human capacity to imagine. Notwithstanding this, these multiple fictive options can be created with the purpose of generating plausible solutions for the problems that exist in reality; they should be formulated “[...] de manera diferente al problema de la existencia del mundo real” (Dolezel 1980: 100). As a result, these multiple worlds become not only possible alternatives to the real world, but also “[...] múltiples mundos reales” (Goodman 1990: 19), and their existence raises the

subsequent question of how to interpret “[...] términos tales como ‘real’, ‘irreal’, ‘ficticio’ o ‘posible’” (19).

### **1.2.1 Truth and Possibility**

Following the same line of discussion, we must develop the notion of truth as far as fictive worlds are concerned. A basic distinction that can be established is that the real world is subject to truth validation —things we say about it are likely to be either true or false—, while fictive worlds are not. Furthermore, comparing these two worlds, we observe how “[...] lo posible es más amplio que lo real” (Russell in Dolezel 1988: 80), since it is limitless. Nevertheless, the problematic lies on the frontiers, “[...] poco reconocibles”, which divide these two worlds, and the middle ground amid both in which exists “[...] la indeterminación [...] entre lo que es real y lo que no lo es” (Pavel 1983: 177). Up to a point, we could assort fictive worlds according to their level of realism, since one could claim that realist novels seem to aim at reproducing the “real world” mimetically; be that as it may, these “[...] mundos ficcionales realistas no difieren de otros mundos ficcionales” (Dolezel 1988: 86). As a matter of fact, the structuralist school of literary analysis does not find any utility to the concept of truth in literary theory, and it defends that “[...] [l]as frases literarias no son ‘ni verdaderas ni falsas’”. (1980: 97). All the same, a definition for the concept of truth in fictive discourses is pursued in order to categorise these under the prism of veracity understood as a condition inherent to the possible world created by the text, and never in relation to its possible counterpart in the real world. Thus, “una frase [...] ficcional es verdadera si expresa (describe) un estado de cosas existente en el mundo ficcional del texto; es falsa si tal estado de cosas no existe en el mundo ficticio del texto” (99). In the same way, generally speaking “[...] la verdad sólo pertenece a lo que se dice, y la verdad literal sólo a lo que se dice literalmente” (Goodman 1990: 38-39). All things considered, the narrator's statements are

taken for real “[...] porque son [...] verosímiles los hechos que [él] establece con sus afirmaciones narrativo-descriptivas” (Bonati 1978: 165), and we can conclude that a fictive version of the real world is “[...] verdadera cuando no viola ninguna creencia [...] ni tampoco quebranta ninguno de los preceptos o de las pautas normativas que le van asociadas” (Goodman 1990: 37) and that constitute said possible world.

### **1.2.2 Mimesis**

In reference to the aforementioned fictional objects that are derivations of reality but have their own truth validation rules, we have already stated how these fictions can be “[...] imitaciones/representaciones de entidades realmente existentes” (Dolezel 1988: 69). This imitative representation of a real prototype –most commonly known as mimesis– in which the fictional entities directly derive from reality, are “[...] entidades que existen realmente” (1999: 21) on their own right. Dolezel criticises the belief that lies behind the theories which convert “[...] a las personas ficticias en gente viva, a los escenarios imaginarios en sitios reales, a las historias inventadas en acontecimientos de la vida real” (10). In addition, Dolezel stresses the role that critics have in promoting this misunderstanding when they apply the same methods to the interpretation of fictional objects as chroniclers do when interpreting the real world (1988: 71). He also condemns the kind of mimetic critique, which, when it becomes impossible to elucidate the real elements that lie beneath fictional entities, forces itself to “[c]onsidera[r] los particulares ficcionales como representaciones de universales reales” (1999: 22), being the latter the plurality of material subjects. Dolezel blames the failure of the mimetic exercise to its being framed in a one-world model, that is, to its dependence on the existence of a real world with which the fictive one established a mimetic relationship to elucidate the meaning of fiction. He also defines it as “[...] una de las operaciones más reduccionistas de las que la mente humana es capaz”, in view of how “[...] el vasto, abierto y tentador universo ficcional queda reducido al modelo de mundo único, el

de la experiencia humana real” (10). Although Dolezel insists in the theoretical failure of the mimetic exercise<sup>4</sup>, “[l]a negación del carácter mimético de la creación de ficciones no significa cortar los fuertes vínculos entre la ficción y la realidad” (11). Mainly, the imagination extracts the basic material from reality in the exercise of constructing fictive worlds but, once created, the meaning of those worlds depends on themselves and on the nature of the rules that constitute them. Likewise, the representation and comprehension of reality is greatly influenced by the construction of alternative possible fictional worlds.

### **1.3 Fictitious Individuals and the Figures of the Author and Narrator**

As a final point, we should not forget to examine the roles concerning the creation of a character as a key figure within the fictive world, and the figures that put him together: the author/creator of that possible world through its narrator. Fictitious individuals are supposedly created by translating from the real to the fictive level. In this sense, we assume that a certain relationship exists between the real figure or prototype and all of its fictive possibilities, although the existence of these “[...] individuos ficcionales no depende de los prototipos reales” (Dolezel 1988: 79), as fictional individuals do not possess the qualities of real beings, given that “[...] según su autor y todas las convenciones literarias, está concebido para permanecer ficticio” (Pavel 1983: 172). While it is true that the “[p]ersonaje” se refiere a la imagen literaria del objeto designado como ‘persona’” (Bonati 1992: 94), this individual is only an object of a certain resemblance with the real equivalent. As Martínez Bonati asserts, “[l]a idea de que los individuos ficticios *no tienen más propiedades que las explícita o inequívocamente establecidas en el texto* de la obra, es obviamente, plausible, pero conlleva la misma mezcla de verdad y error que encontramos en la tesis de que la ficción es representación sin objeto” (108). Taking Bonati’s words into account, we should not ignore,

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<sup>4</sup> Dolezel’s notion is reinforced by Leibniz’s law, which states that “el mundo real no puede ser el domicilio de los particulares ficcionales” (in Dolezel 1999: 25).

then, the close relationship that is established between some fictive images and their real-world counterparts, particularly when they are directly inspired by specific real figures. These, in any case, “[n]o serán historias de su vida, sino descripciones y análisis de su ser imaginario” (107). At this point, the figure to bear in mind in such cases is that of the author of these fictive constructions, since he is “[la] fuente real de todo acto de habla en la narrativa” (Dolezel 1988: 90).

In most cases, a fiction author seems to be a writer of fictional realms; s/he describes, studies and presents the fictive character as a historian would do a historical personality. The author that constructs them knows the domains and persons in his fiction better than anyone does, even the characters themselves. This writer/creator controls the thoughts and emotions of his characters and he “[los] [p]ercib[e] directa e inmediatamente, de un modo mucho más preciso que lo que le sería posible al propio sujeto” (Bonati 1978: 160). According to philosopher John Searle, the author *pretends* when he writes novels, because he has to “[...] sostener la existencia de ciertos hechos” (in Bonati 1978: 162). While Searle suggests that what is accomplished by the novelist by faking is to “[...] crear, para sí mismo y para el lector, un mundo ficticio” (163), Bonati argues that the author does, indeed, imagine his narration, but still, he does not pretend (167). He develops further this idea by stating that the author’s chore is to imagine “[...] un discurso ajeno y ficticio, y anotando el texto correspondiente a ese discurso puramente imaginario, para que un lector pueda reimaginarlo” (169). As a result, the novelist accomplishes the creation of a fictional world which inserts itself in the real world when it reaches the reader; consequently, “[e]l discurso ficticio imaginado por [é]l [...] es *suyo*, pues lo ha imaginado [...] por primera vez, lo ha *creado*” (169). The reader, then, as a recipient of the fictive world that is given to him, has the task of understanding it, and for this task, he “[...] must try to do so as if [he] is the author of that

text, living the author's reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to his or her life" (Said 2003: xiii).

Besides the author and the reader, another relevant figure of fictive domains claims his/her place: the narrator. S/He is located in a transition zone between the text/language which establishes the components and rules that exist in and conform the fictional world and the world concerning the characters' beliefs –in other words, the subjectivities within that world–, which is contemplated by the critique as “[...] absolutamente no-auténtico[...].” (Dolezel 1980: 109). There is, thus, a substantial difference between “[...] el acto de habla del narrador [...] y los actos de habla de los agentes narrativos personalizados (personajes)” (102), inasmuch as the narrator is the one that possesses the authenticating authority of his/her story. That is to say, the information provided by him/her is considered authentic, as it establishes the constituents, limits and laws of the fictional world, whereas the one introduced by the characters is not. As we have already discussed, in narrative theory, the principle by which the narrator cannot be identified with the author is generally accepted; it is necessary to differentiate the affirmations stated in the narrator's sentences from the ones stated by the author, if they find their way into text. The fact of the matter is that the narrator of a novel is “[...] un ente puramente imaginario, un ente radicalmente diverso del autor, aunque a veces se le parezca” (Bonati 1978: 167), and for this reason he does not have access, as we have mentioned before, to the mental states of the rest of the characters –as the author does.

## 2. Sylvia Plath: from Biographical Object to Character in Fiction.

*[...] the journals: a lot of what's in them is practice, shaping up for some possible novel, little chapters for novels. She was constantly sketching something that happened and working it into something she thought might fit into a novel. She thought of her journals as working notes for some ultimate novel [...]. She changed certain things to make them work, to make some kind of symbolic statement of a feeling. She wasn't writing an account of this or that event; she was trying to get to some other kind of [...] material.*

Ted Hughes.

Excerpt taken from an interview published in the *Paris Review*, 1995.<sup>5</sup>

Marianne Egeland, in her acknowledgements in *Claiming Sylvia Plath* –the next-to-last published book about Plath by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, owing to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her suicide– curiously states that her interest in writing about Plath was triggered by a BBC commentator in 1993, who asserted that “Sylvia Plath was suffering from a biography overload syndrome” (2013). As a student investigating what has been written and said about Plath by critics, biographers, journalist, reviewers, writers and even her casual readers, I cannot help but observe the detail that caught Egeland’s attention, and try to find an explanation to the excessive volume of documents written about Plath and published every year. In this sense each author that writes about her has something to add to the previously published papers, having every single one of them a different perception of Sylvia Plath. Hence, they project their own Sylvia Plath. Surely, these “Plath authors” do not serve the same purpose; we need only to pay attention to what Plath’s biographers have been writing in order to figure out the different approaches and intentions they hold. While some of them have claimed to ‘know’ and portrayed objectively the ‘real’ Sylvia Plath, others have subjectively positioned themselves despite being an official source. But, in order to talk about any kind of posterior representation, we need to start by considering what type of portrayal

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<sup>5</sup> Drue Heinz, *The Art of Poetry* n°71.

was chosen by the author herself, although it could be conceived as a rather difficult mission to accomplish, since she left less than a record of her “[...] many camouflages, the stylistic personalities she tried on, the identities [...] she assumed” (Moses 2000).

## **2.1 Life as an Inspiration: An Artist Writes about Him/Herself**

*For art, too, is about power. Who wields the pen, who tells the story, is everything.*  
Lesley McDowell (2010: 25)

It is true that if we try to find the very reason why an author writes, or the formula to discover why s/he writes about something specifically, we will end up with our hands full of answers, as many as readers of said author. Although there are several writers that would flatly deny using (their own) life as an inspiration for their work, resorting to the use of other literary or poetic materials, it cannot be denied that there is another great number who openly consider themselves writers who use the ‘real’ world and the one that is ‘in’ them as their inspiration. Among the reasons that lead those authors to choose themselves as a starting point, we could find, for example, the natural necessity of dealing with what is bothering them internally, writing as a cathartic discharge. It is not rare to trace writers who publically hand in to readers their own lives disguised as fiction, as a technique to free themselves from fixations and preoccupations. “Obsession...”, indeed, “...is [a] crucial term, because it is in his obsessions that the poet finds his heart truth, his raw material” (Butscher 1977: XIII). And this is how they wish to do it, by “identifying and exploring new parts of [themselves], accept[ing] responsibility for them” in the process (Hughes in Heinz 1995). However, this so-called technique does not always end up having the wished effect, sometimes producing the opposite result, so that the presumed therapeutic effect eventually aggravates rather than alleviates the motive and inspiration of their writing. And since “literary works [...] are seen as diagnostic reflections [...] of the author’s life and death” (Egeland 2013: 3), a writer’s work could be used not only to get to know him/her in a deeper level, but also to analyse him/her through it.

This kind of proceeding leaves figuratively naked any author who deliberately decides to devote him/herself in a 'confessional' way. The recounting is a process of self-examination, sometimes a narration that comes out of the demons and inner fights, secrets and dark places to which the author cannot access otherwise. Writers who will to produce a work of art that has the ambition and purpose of “revealing [...] something that [s/he] doesn't actually want to say but desperately needs to communicate” (Hughes in Heinz 1995). These authors are not content with creating for and about themselves, they need to share, and that could be the reason why they begin to mould reality in order to fit in their fiction, freely adjusting with brush and artifice the slightest or liveliest episode. After all, they are the ones who hold the pen, we should “grant the artist [the] imaginative freedom to invent, misremember, substitute and play” (Van Dyne 2006: 18).

## **2.2 Plath's Life as a Source for Her Fiction**

*The only way in which she felt she could become real was through writing.*  
Elena Ciobanu (2008: 127)

When talking about these 'confessional' authors, the name of Sylvia Plath comes inevitably to the fore, although, as several scholars would argue, she is not considered purely a confessional poet in the line of Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell, both personally close to Plath. In which cases would Plath be using writing as a way of confessing herself, of emptying her soul? How did this practice begin in her 'writing' life? Did she have further aims to pursuit other than writing about what happened to her? As a matter of fact, Sylvia Plath began her writing career by trying to become the perfect scholar. She tried to conquer the academic world only to cast it aside once she knew it was not meant for her: she had to become a fiction writer, jump to the other side of the fence. In this sense, under the romantic notion of living life as art, one has the impression that Plath is considered by general public as a martyr, a soul punished by her own gift that ended up becoming a victim of a horrible separation, and sank

in her own nightmares. A few theories, nevertheless, dispute and undo this conception of Plath's writing journey.

In my opinion, that journey was more likely to be the one of a child that suddenly saw herself trapped between two worlds; the real one that surrounded her and the fantasy world of her mind, where she turned life into fiction up to the point of, many years later, taking it to the ultimate consequences: the real Sylvia Plath had become Sylvia Plath the character. Mostly all of her biographers have pointed out her necessity of sharing and dealing with her inner life in one way or another. Edward Butscher, for example, observes how, in her early stages, "though uncomfortable to contemplate, the idea of poetry itself as a defence mechanism cannot be avoided" (1977: 13), since Plath's poetry appeared with her father's death, and, consequently, can be understood as a response to her suffering. Others, as in the case of Linda Wagner-Martin, conceive her need to write about herself as a way to achieve a major goal: "Sylvia knew [...] that [...] the only immortality would exist through her writing" (1987: 5) This biographer in particular stresses how Plath had to deal, in her earlier stages, with art and life from the educational angle, since, as we mentioned before, Plath started her career as a brilliant student. In this sense, she had been able to connect the fictive with the academic world; "she was committed to becoming a better writer and approached her studies from the perspective of what she could learn that would relate to her own writing" (142-3). Since life experiences are crucial in order to write about one's feelings, the first image of Plath we perceive, in her teens and early twenties, is that of a girl who based her stories upon both life and literature. In fact, a turning point in her work is when she realised she had to *live* (with all the implications that this fact entails) to have something to talk about. Paul Alexander, who is considered to be one of her most controversial biographers, tells the story of how Plath's benefactor, Olive Higgins Prouty, encouraged her:

Sylvia wanted to write [...] on grand topics, traveling [...], scaling [...] But she hadn't done any of these things. [...] Prouty said "Is there any time in your life you've had a problem, a real conflict which seemed terribly to you at that moment? [...] Seems to me there's a story there. [...] An interesting one too. Take life! Think of the material you have! (1991: 75-6)

However, at the beginning, the results were not as good as she expected: "Her early attempts at hammering the episodes of her life into fictional or poetic shape [were] hilariously sophomoric. During her college years, Plath often recorded her life in scenes addressing herself as "you" or in a frequently self-congratulatory third person" (Moses 2000). Sylvia<sup>6</sup>, in order to accomplish the task entrusted by Prouty, to *live* and put it into words, began to write a Journal, transmitting and transcribing to it her feelings and thoughts, considering it a step between her life events and the ones in her stories. Perhaps, this was the moment when she started dramatising her experiences in life, re-shaping them later in prose. Many are the accounts of friends and relatives who declared this tendency in her behaviour. Without going any further, the line that separated reality from fiction started to become thinner at that time, as Eddie Cohen –a mail-friend of Plath's who, for years, was witness to her performances– would appreciate. About their letters, Cohen stated how she used to write "with an element of self-dramatisation that might, given the right circumstances, topple over into fiction" (in Wagner-Martin 1987: 58). For an author who would become, some decades later, the object of controversies about the different circulating accounts of her life, it is curious to discover how she was the first one to alter the versions of her life episodes with no other intention than colouring them. As Alfred Kazin, Plath's teacher at Smith College, said: "the world for Sylvia Plath existed only for her to write about" (in Stevenson 1989: 187).

Hyperbolically and consciously, Plath started to fuse life and art together, fiction and reality, to the point of mastering the art of distorting emotions. She openly stated this

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<sup>6</sup> In spite of being aware of the academic convention that requires the use of the author's surname instead of her name, this fact has not been followed by Plath's scholars, who use indistinctly either Sylvia or Plath. Henceforth, for this reason, I will use alternately both.

procedure, for in a few interviews for the BBC in 1963 she did not hesitate to declare that she “believe[d] that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences” (Alexander 1991: 306) or that what she did was to “throw together events from my own life, fictionalising to add colour” (in Egeland 2013: 18). Her belief in this practise reached the point where she thought that “my life, I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time” (in Wagner-Martin 1987: 247), turning Plath into a person highly conscious of what she was doing; living life under the prism of fiction. One of her most contentious biographers, Ronald Hayman, aligns himself to this idea by stating, in the introduction to his biography about Plath, that “her poetry, her fiction and her life would form a triangle” (1991: XV). And he is not the only one in appreciating Plath’s *modus operandi*, there are many scholars and fiction writers who point out how she created fictions in all her potential narratives, prose or poetry, in her letters, or even in interviews and the previously mentioned journals, where she recorded more than soon-to-be stories; no mattered the format, all her pages were witnesses to this creative process<sup>7</sup>. At this point, it is necessary to expose an important issue in her creative process, namely how this sort of adaptation of life into fiction would affect the precision and exactitude in which she would tell her stories. Manipulation, then, began as “a process that inevitably caused magnification, distortion or shrinkage” (Brain and Bayley 2011: 5) and turned into a way for herself to distance from her experiences in order to be able to manage them. Reinventing an experience for a novel by modifying it gave her “a sense of gaining control over [the experience]” (Hayman 1991: 154). However, up to what point is it legitimate to gain that control over an experience if it is no longer the same lived? Maybe, what she achieved by doing so was the reconstruction of a life

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<sup>7</sup> To name a few of these authors, Janet Malcolm does state this fact in *The Silent Woman* (1994: 151) as well as Susan Van Dyne in her essay “The Problem of Biography”, the first chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (2006: 6). Al Álvarez, in *El Dios Salvaje* (2003: 42), and Marianne Egeland (2013: 22), both mention how she adapted experiences to her necessities.

she did not want to live. Consequently, she began to pull it to pieces, reshaping it at her will to be able to live with it.

Of course, reconstructing her life in poems was not that easy for her at the beginning. The first poems of an adult Plath were composed using the dictionary as a basis. While the creations were already ‘confessional’, stylistically she started by adjusting them to the formal rules, only to discover later that the authentic life of the poem was far from the formal technique. Nonetheless, at the time of the composition of *The Colossus and Other Poems*, Plath started to warn “...herself not to write by formula, but to use her writing as a voyage of discovery, to find by writing what was important about her experiences” (Wagner-Martin 1987: 165). Her husband, who prolifically shared with her the aim of becoming a poet, tried to help her, and against what she warned herself, his counsels were more in the line of creating patterns, since he believed that, unconsciously, “the pattern would be projected from somewhere deep inside” (Hughes in Heinz 1995). However, despite his advises, she started to misperceive the thin line between public and private. For example, and returning to her journals once again, she entitled the days of the entries, an unmistakable sign of the level of conscience of her writings –even the ones that she did not intend to fictionalise, at first. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, whether these pages were meant to be for her fiction or not, she wrote about “...the people she knew as if they were characters in a novel” (Malcolm 1994: 96).

She used the tiniest episode as raw material for her fiction; therefore, Sylvia Plath took advantage, so to say, of the people she knew. They became material for good stories, so that, in this manner, she started to conceive people as ‘inspiration suppliers’ and even as extensions of herself: “the portrayal of others in her work would only then reflect what they truly represented artistically to her: projections and reflections of her own powerful subjectivity” (Stevenson 1989: 167). We could say the very nature of this interest could also be based on

the quest of sensations rather than stories. More than the experiences lived by her or by the ones that surrounded her, she could take advantage of the feelings they provided once they shared things –events, deeds, experiences– with her. Jillian Becker, one of her closest acquaintances in her last days, is one of these witnesses who doubtlessly noticed this tendency on her: “Decía que le gustaban las personas que le podían enseñar algo... la cría de abejas, por ejemplo. Pero yo tuve y sigo teniendo la impresión de que lo que le interesaba sobre todo era el vocabulario y las imágenes que suscitaba la cría de abejas más que las abejas en sí”<sup>8</sup> (2002: 33). In this sense, she started to get closer to her deepest emotions, as if talking about mere sensations of the outside world and how she reacted in front of them was not enough. And to do so, she had to draw her relatives in her work, modelling them in order to fit her scenarios. “Previously, she had chosen topics that presented her with little challenge. Now, she hoped to tackle difficult subjects: her husband, her mother, her dead father” (Alexander 1991: 229). The moment Plath decided to convert her family and closest relatives into characters at her fancy, she exposed more than her emotions and thoughts. She uncovered what she was not determined to admit aloud, the Sylvia Plath they did not know, with opinions and attitudes completely alien to them. As a consequence, “it is probably no confusion [...] to say that she was unfair to her mother, as she was unfair to her father, who after all did not die just to make his daughter miserable” (Stade in Steiner 1974: 27). Could this be a first glimpse, an early signal of her illness? In her instability, she tried to discern madness from brilliance as the source of her talent. Was it writing her gift or her illness? As she probably started to write with curiosity about the limits of her psyche, after her first breakdown in 1953, Plath began to dissociate two Plaths in her. The outer one worried about clarifying to people how she did not see a “[...] connection between writing and madness, and made clear that as far as she was concerned, there was no such connection. Her writing [...]

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<sup>8</sup> Although the original source is in English, I was not able to locate it; therefore the quotes will be taken from the Spanish translation.

came from her sanest self” (Wagner-Martin 1987: 111-2). Meanwhile, the inner Plath started to realise she could resort to her sufferings, and, in this manner, reconstruct the real Sylvia at her content. Her own husband wrote how he “never saw her show her real self to anybody – except, perhaps, in the last three months of her life” (Hughes in Malcolm 1994: 3). In this sense, we have a clue now of who she truly thought she was: “her real self had showed itself in her writing” (Malcolm 1994: 3). And without them, without her pain and sorrow, Plath could not put herself into words, up to the point of depending on them. The problem was that once she started to create her own ‘character’ in a fictive world, there was no turning back.

### **2.3 Sylvia as Her Own Character**

*I have ceased to be, as I once was, a real person... and have become instead [...] material for one of your future books, and a byproduct of your life.*  
Eddie Cohen (in Alexander 1991: 98)

The bright side of creating oneself as one pleases is the fact that everything is likely to be undone and reconstructed again. When Plath started to rebuild herself after her first suicide attempt, she decided that, by the fact of being miraculously alive, she was different. “She worried most of all about the nature of being –chiefly, of being a Sylvia absolutely different from everything else in the world and at the same time absolutely undifferentiated from it” (Stevenson 1989: 21). She tore her “self” apart, and in repairing it piece by piece, it was worth considering the effort of constructing a new one from scratch. As she started to create Sylvia Plath –the character– on paper, she also managed to produce another Sylvia, the one that people knew. And by then, in 1955, “...she had learned to manipulate the tidal swings of mood grooming herself to suit whichever personality seemed appropriate to the task in hand” (1989: 59). Many acquaintances mentioned one detail about Plath in general: she never seemed to act naturally (Crockett in Wagner-Martin 1987: 53). In one way or another, she overacted in everything she did. Perhaps Plath thought that people would not notice the extra intensity; nonetheless, they did. What they did not know was that, in spite of perceiving that

she never relaxed or enjoyed, she was willing to transform this oddness into some kind of art. In this sense, the fact that there were two existing Plaths affected her relationship with others. For instance, Olwyn Hughes, her sister-in-law, who indicated, more than once, how Plath's incongruity altered their behaviour towards each other: Plath "...was acting out of some bizarre conception of a role rather than relating naturally to us" (Olwyn Hughes in Stevenson 1989: 178). It can be thought that Plath did not know how to manage her inner selves in these face to face meetings. However, she seemed to encounter several problems in her correspondence as well. Eddie Cohen, after months of corresponding with Plath, was the first one to notice, when he got the chance to meet her in person, how she had constructed herself using the freedom of the paper. Cohen saw through her instantly, and so he let her know: "You can't plan your life out on paper and expect it to behave that way. I suspect that this tendency of yours contributed to your trouble. You didn't know what to do when something happened that wasn't in the blueprint" (in Alexander 1991: 141). In this case, Cohen made reference to her illness as a consequence of her dissociated behaviour. However, in other letters, he drew attention to her lack of contact with reality: "When a person cannot adjust to reality, it is because they are already too fiercely committed to some other reality" (in Stevenson 1989: 52). Finally, Cohen decided to bring up the fact that her behaviour would end up affecting her in an irreversible manner: "Unless you come into sharper contact with reality and resolve these problems, it will become more and more difficult for you to reconcile the life you lead and the life you want to lead" (in Alexander 1991: 84). As a matter of fact, he was right in this last statement; the crucial problem in Plath's life –especially in her final moments– was the impossibility of reconciling her real self with the one she had created for herself in her fictions.

But then again, Plath cherished the way she was constructing her identity; she liked the feeling of knowing herself as a different Sylvia from the one that family and friends

perceived. Hence, she performed a role in front of everyone, as the girl who people thought they knew. “Sylvia [feared people would find] out she was really a whore, a vampire, a nymphomaniac, –all the things, in fact, she loved to imagine she was, while acting the part of a nice, bright, neat, gushy American student” (Stevenson 1989: 79). Anne Stevenson –the biographer chosen by the Plath Estate– laid bare what Plath sometimes thought of herself, by saying that “...Sylvia –violent, subversive, moonstruck, terribly angry– fought for her existence against a nice, bright, gifted American girl” (163). In the alternation between one with the other, what people perceived was how she “...was making blueprints for life, trying on different lives like dresses” (Macedo in Stevenson 1989: 274), and, in fact, this affected her writing, since, gradually, she started to misperceive the separation between the character and the author. When she was disgusted with one, she fled to the other, to a more suitable space in which she could be anyone else. The resultant predicament of escaping thusly was the contradictions she held. Starting with Cohen’s perception when he met her, “she was not at all like she was in her letters” (Alexander 1991: 90), and extending to her own writings: journals, letters or poems that contradict each other when one reads them together. As Linda Wagner-Martin has asserted: “Her tranquil tone in her letters [...] is contradicted by her anguished journals entries” (1987: 152). The differences between these two stem from how she seemed to be in command of her emotions when she wrote home, performing the role of the perfect, confident daughter, compared with her most intimate declarations in journals, where chaos relatively reigned. In the latter, she visualises herself as “...the heroine of a great drama” (Malcolm 1994: 100), an image in accordance to her inner suffering and struggle. The former, she uses as a new blank page for her to novelise real life events, given that “Aurelia [her mother] was far away and so she would never know the truth of Sylvia’s stories” (Wagner-Martin 1987: 174). “[F]or at least seventeen years Sylvia had lived deviously, revealing only one side of herself when [...] writing to Aurelia, and feeling guilty about the

dissimulation” (Hayman 1991: 123); until, eventually, she decided to share her true self in a shady manner, through her fiction. Among all her textual production, the poems were the only medium in which she showed what she considered her emotional reality. Her poetry positioned Plath as the main character of, not only her life, but of everyone else’s.

### **2.3.1 Ted: Sylvia’s Character**

It should be kept in mind, having examined in the previous pages Plath’s self-characterisation, that once she settled on the plan of becoming a character for her own work’s benefit, she was willing to do the same with her husband, Ted Hughes. “She’d always tended to mythicize her relationships, but none had penetrated so intimately into her writing” (Hayman 1991: 79), until she first met Hughes. Unsurprisingly, she started to idealise him, as a part of her behaviour pattern. In fact, we could say that she had already romanticised him even before she met him, since Plath wrote about the kind of love she was willing to experience the day earlier in her journals:

I deserve that, don’t I, some sort of blazing love that I can live with. My god, I’d love to cook and make a house, and surge force into a man’s dreams, and write, if he could talk and walk and work and passionately want to do his career. I can’t bear to think of this potential for loving and giving going brown and sere in me. Yet the choice is so important, it frightens me a little. A lot (2000: 209).

Nonetheless, in order to achieve in her mind this grade of mythification about a man, there was first a need for raw material. And Hughes provided it; he already had made an impression so strong on her that she was finally ready to let her imagination go. She had been eagerly waiting for the subject of her dreams to arrive, so that she could live the greatest love, the experience that would make her a better writer. The episode of their first encounter, at the Saint Botolph Review launch party the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, 1956, is particularly well known for itself. Plath’s particular account made it even more famous, since, “[a]s might be expected, she made the most of its dramatic potential” (Stevenson 1989: 74) in retelling and remembering the story of how Ted and her danced, drank and shouted at each other, just

before they started to violently kiss until Plath bit him on the cheek, moment in which Hughes, his face covered in blood, left her to go back to his girlfriend. Although Hughes has stated several times that this account was exaggerated (Stevenson 1989: 76), we should give the scene –reconstructed as it is– the credit of being dramatically perfect for Plath’s tale; it could not have been otherwise: theatrical and intense. And so, “with the instincts of the novelist she was trying to become, Plath drew Hughes’s character” (Malcolm 1994: 36), writing home to tell her mother about *her* Ted, the one she was beginning to know. And they become a couple that suddenly was so “...committed to each other and to each other’s writing” (Hughes in Heinz 1995) that, for at least a few years, they worked perfectly together in the pursuit of their art –being it poetry, fiction or any kind of writing. It is true that Plath’s case is not the only one in which an authoress looks for her perfect match with the intention of finding a companion for a creative journey, “so many of them [women] believed they needed a writing partner [...] in order to achieve their literary goals” (McDowell 2010: 11). And, although it could be true that, in general, “women artists of a certain era attached themselves to artistic men as a way of validating themselves and their art” (15), this is not the case of Plath and Hughes. Conversely, theirs could be considered a couple in which this theory worked the other way around, since Sylvia Plath, as a literate, had a lot to offer to Ted Hughes: “When I met Sylvia I also met her library, and the whole wave hit me” (Hughes in Heinz 1995).

Notwithstanding this, a few differences started to appear in, for instance, the conception of the final objective of their art: “They were quite determined to put into words the best that was in them, but, I thought, in somewhat different ways. Sylvia was determined that it should be read. Ted was determined that it should exist” (Myers in Stevenson 1989: 314). In her willingness to get published and be successful, Plath started to get anxious to the point of needing creative help from Hughes. This role as helper was pointed out, decades

later, by Emma Tennant, when she affirmed that Ted was “the poet who love[d] to help [...] women, especially women– to ‘find their story’” (2000: 223). Plath adored the figure that she had created of Hughes as the perfect, loving husband, and she started to live through his success until the time came for her to triumph. She seemed to love her housewife role too and she typed Ted’s poems and became his indispensable support in the shadows. In this manner, her diverse Sylvias were in constant inner struggle, since Plath had to be all of them at once: “To be a fertile, producing wife among other wives gave her reassurance, confirming her role in the schematic structure of her life. To be a poet among other poets fulfilled another role” (Stevenson 1989: 187). In fact, as Linda Wagner-Martin defined it: “Sylvia’s almost obsessive need [was] to live the perfect life, love the perfect man, create the perfect household with two very young children, as a means of proving that she was a success in all the areas women were supposed to excel in” (1987: 206). Surely, as a way of fusing together all these facets, she took them to the fictive world, although the only problem was that, among them, was Ted Hughes as well. Then again, Plath, as she had casted Ted in the role of the perfect lover, started to see him as she wanted to, as a character far from the perfect one in the letters she sent home at the beginning of the relationship. Hence, he began to serve her purposes according her composition requests, as anyone else did. Different acquaintances and friends, as spectators of the marriage plot, saw how this fact, among other aspects, affected them: “After six or seven years that had been marvellously creative [...], the marriage had somehow become destructive” Richard Murphy said years later to Plath’s biographer, Anne Stevenson (1989: 350). However, this vision of the matrimony’s failure could be seen as an outcome of Sylvia’s plotting of the perfect marriage, and the impossibility in Ted’s hands of dealing with his wife’s ideals. Besides, “quizá fuera por eso que se había[n] separado [...]: no era cuestión de diferencias sino de intolerables similitudes. Es probable que cuando dos poetas originales, ambiciosos, plenamente dedicados se unen en matrimonio, y los dos son productivos, cada

poema que escribe uno le dé al otro la sensación de que lo ha extraído de su cráneo”<sup>9</sup> (Álvarez 2003: 31). Despite these opinions and theories on Plath and Hughes failure as a couple, the separation clearly triggered something in Plath, inspiring her greatest poems. Unhappiness had given her the material and “her anger at Ted was the fuel [...] for many of her [...] October poems” (Wagner-Martin 1987: 219). Plath’s Ted was a character capable of the worst atrocities, of abusing and betraying her, a perfect role for him, since she needed Hughes to be the villain behind her leitmotif of reviving, a concept that would transform her into the Phoenix and made her arise from the flames to survive and take revenge. In spite of everything, “Hughes actually might have been good for Plath, that in Hughes Plath found exactly what she wanted and needed, whatever it cost her in the end” (McDowell 2010: 24). Significantly, years later, Assia Wevill, the woman for whom Hughes had left Sylvia, told her sister-in-law that “she doubted whether the attraction between Ted and herself could ever have developed into an affair, as it later did, had Sylvia behaved differently” (Hayman 1991: 209). Perhaps, Plath made things happen to her fictional self, though, in order to do that, these things had to happen to her real self as well. Another way to look at this is that, if Sylvia was aware of the character forcing the outer Sylvia to live experiences to write about them, she, conscious and responsible for what was happening, though unable to stop it, could also be using her fiction as a cry for help.

As regards Ted Hughes –the character–, he remained as Plath had described him, petrified, a fixture in his wife’s fiction. She could not know the devastating consequences of her words, which had lived with Hughes as long as he did. Over the years, “Hughes discovered that not only had she from the beginning been composing her own Poetic Self, but the literary character she had constructed for him was comprised of elements taken from other persons” (Egeland 2013: 172). Since Plath’s suicide, he had done everything he could to live

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<sup>9</sup> Although the original source is in English, I was not able to locate it; therefore the quotes of this author will be taken from the Spanish version.

and demonstrate that there were a few chances that the character described by her was him<sup>10</sup>. Whatever it was, “no matter what, Hughes could not escape the consequences of his life with Plath, or her death” (Alexander 1991: 363).

## 2.4 Episodes in a Life

*Imagine the wealth of material the experience of Europe would give me for  
stories and poems.  
Plath, before going to Cambridge<sup>11</sup>*

Sylvia Plath learned how to eat in the British manner, knife in right hand and fork in left; forming and performing a character was about being thorough with the details. As a matter of fact, Plath’s construction of her life was, above all, the combination of little pieces of people, sounds and places. For Plath, to move overseas was the experience she was yearning to have in order to leave her father’s figure behind, although it did not appear as a likely task. Additionally, her mother’s figure was still present across the world, in America. Aurelia Plath was the reader of Sylvia’s *Letters Home*, being naively unaware of their fictive nature. These epistles were an essential part in Plath’s creative process, since it appeared that “...nothing could be real to Sylvia until she had shared it with Mrs Plath” (Stevenson 1989: 104-105). Whether this seemed odd to Hughes or not, Sylvia and Ted’s life events turned into episodes in Plath’s letters, and, as a result, they were modified to appropriately fit her stories.

Although it is not my intention to pursue and to analyse the many examples of life events contained in Plath’s fictions, I am going to mention a few, for I think it is necessary to have in mind some specific accounts that illustrate Plath’s usage of life events in her work. Some of them are self-explanatory, such as the way the name of the cemetery’s path by which Plath’s father was buried is used in her poem “Electra on Azalea Path”; or the way the elm

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<sup>10</sup> To see more about this fact, view point n° 2.7 The Myth and The Controversy of the Plath Estate.

<sup>11</sup> Dated 7<sup>th</sup> December of 1954. *Letters Home* (1992: 148)

that Sylvia and Ted had in their land in Court Green, becomes fictional material in the poem “Elm”. Even “Cut”<sup>12</sup> is one of the most recognisable examples, since it does not only describe an actual cut in her finger, but is also used as a metaphor for the way she was feeling severed from her husband. As in the previous case, the most interesting examples are the ones based on her experiences with Ted, inasmuch as the facts were especially useful for her composition purposes. “Words Heard, By Accident, Over the Phone” is a title that seems almost a transcription of the real incident. It is not necessary to add much more information to understand the plot of the poem and to recreate the event that inspired it: Sylvia picked up the phone, and by Ted’s urgency to answer the call, she guessed it was Ted’s lover, Assia, who did not say a word. Subsequently, she ripped the phone from the wall jack: “Sylvia did not even try to control her anger, for in her mind it was justified” (Alexander 1991: 285). “Burning the letters” has a similar origin than the previous event/poem, and it is mentioned in Hayman’s and Alexander’s (1991: 286) biographies. Once more, the title describes the plot and the incident, although, as Hayman has pointed out, “in an unnervingly precise way, the poem documents what she did, but this doesn’t mean it offers a precise record of what happened. Whether the papers had been in the attic or whether she was actually wearing a ‘housedress’ matter no more [...] It’s the emotional truth that counts” (1991: 174). In “Burning the Letters” as in all of her poetic production, Plath inscribed in her poems the “emotional truth” of her with Ted –or any other person. The poems served many purposes, since her aim was not only to put these emotions into words, but to achieve something else in doing so: “Several of the February poems appear to have been triggered, on some level, by Olwyn’s attack on Sylvia at Christmas. If Plath could not adequately defend herself in person, then she would get revenge in print” (Alexander 1991: 256). The list of life-inspired narrations is boundless; however, in my opinion, the poems that added something to the “real

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<sup>12</sup> “Cut” is the eleventh poem intended to be in Ariel. “What a thrill- / My thumb instead of an onion. / The top quite gone / Except for a sort of a hinge / of skin” (2003: 44, vv.1-5).

event” are the most interesting ones, given that they allow for richer interpretations, as the source of their meaning is not constrained by the sole exercise of determining their fidelity to reality. What she changed and why she did so tell us more, sometimes, than the narration of the poem itself. A case in point is the incident that provoked the short story “The fifty-ninth Bear”, which happened at Yellowstone Park when Sylvia and Ted were travelling around the United States in 1959 and they faced a bear ravaging their car; “Between the real-life incident and the imagined incident, however, there is one drastic difference: in the story, the bear mauls the husband –and kills him” (Alexander 1991: 235).

Some of these events demanded a transcription in a poem, while others just needed to be narrated in the diary, as is the case of the notorious episode in the parking lot, in which Sylvia, while waiting for Ted to pick her up after her last day of class as a teacher in Smith College, sees him talking and smiling to a young girl. When they saw Plath, the girl ran away without saying a word. All writers and critics that work about Plath narrate this episode in Sylvia’s life, some of them using it, as Egeland claims, to sneak in their own interpretation of Ted and Sylvia’s roles within the marriage: “All biographers except Anne Stevenson, [...] include [the episode] in their portrait of Hughes as a philanderer and wife-cheater” (2013: 159). In contrast to Egeland’s observation, there is Lesley McDowell’s, who points out the conflict that is created due to the varied interpretations of this scene, since “it is hard to reconcile these [...] versions of the same evening, and such polarity in representation” (2010: 304), concluding the impossibility of discerning whether or not Hughes representation in it is correct. As Janet Malcolm has astutely observed, this incident in Plath’s diaries appears as a “...shaped, premeditated work of a writerly narrator, rather than the innocent blurtings of a diarist” (1994: 151), annotating that, perhaps, Plath’s account of it –the only one we count on– is, probably, not to be literally trusted.

As far as Plath's writing dynamics is concerned, she would constantly resort to a whole life made up of places, acquaintances, encounters, etc. Court Green –the house Sylvia and Ted owned in Devon– became a character in her poetry and also a vivid presence in her life. The village's church provided Sylvia with new images and references for her work, to the extent that she considered converting to Catholicism only to write about it. Even the village and its neighbours supplied Plath, as she observed them, with pages and pages of notes which could become ingredients for her future novels: “[i]n such passages the writing [...] says more about Sylvia than about the people she seeks to portray” (Stevenson 1989: 232). No one, neither her friends nor the villagers, ever noticed that she was recollecting information. In fact, “when Sylvia asked questions and expressed interest [...] it seemed perfectly natural. Nor did it ever occur to [them] that she wouldn't –let alone shouldn't– make use of her findings” (Mervin in Stevenson 1989: 330). Waking up early, cooking, collecting fruits from the yard, even becoming pregnant was instantly material that she could use to fill in the blank paper. It seemed as if “[...] everything became material for poems” (Stevenson 1989: 168).

Plath and Hughes had a very similar conception of art. Both “[...] believed that to be in possession of a story meant to be in possession of your life. [...] Telling a story is interpreting your life; it also makes that life possible” (Van Dyne 2006: 17). Sylvia made her stories possible by interpreting her life, although many times she seemed to go to the extreme of looking for those experiences in her life. Having creative writing as her sole aim, her predisposition to acquire experiences to be then narrativised –as it could be to force herself to have experiences in order to have first-hand material instead of just letting them happen– often derived in forced situations. For example, in the aforementioned poem “Burning the letters”, it is plausible to think that the idea pre-existed and, so, she burned the letters to then have the life material to model into her writing: “[i]nstead of being a by-product of the experience, the poem, though it existed only as a vague idea, may have guided her actions”

(Hayman 1991: 174). In this manner, Plath started a "...tendency to engineer crises in her life for the sake of the creative stimulation they gave her. Many writers have done this" (191). In this regard, it must be said that Ted Hughes was not an exception. He himself admitted that "...being experimental isn't enough. The plunge has to be for real. The new thing has to be not you or has to seem so till it turns out to be the new you or the other you" (in Heinz 1995). As a way of displaying this procedure, we should regard the episode in Hughes' writing life concerning the affair he had with the author Emma Tennant during his second marriage. Hughes, having met Tennant and declared being openly attracted to her, addressed her with a proposition: "'I want you for no more than a year', so declares the man. 'We could... I could... [...] 'write' [...] 'Without a story there is no poem. Not even a writer'" (Tennant 2000: 111). In this "absurd request", Hughes was looking for experiences outside his marriage and found in Tennant a writer –as Sylvia was– to share these. Tennant herself thought that "without another writer, I believe he means, there can be never a story" (2000: 111-112). At this stage in the creative process, writers like Hughes or Plath start to conceive objects and people not only as a part of the real world, but also as tools that belong to them: "Plath's habits of self-representation suggest that she regarded her life as if it were a text she could invent and rewrite" (Van Dyne 2006: 5). In fact, the most famous episodes in Plath's life have ended up being her most famous publications.

#### **2.4.1 *The Bell Jar***

Plath was willing to put on paper the most significant experience in her life: the one concerning her breakdown in 1953. To have gone through such torment and to have survived was, in her eyes, a signal of its significance; she had to write about it, for it had happened for that purpose. While it is true that *The Bell Jar* has been for decades an icon –especially in the US market, where it has sold nearly three million copies to this day–, critics argued for years,

bearing in mind that Plath published it under pseudonym, that the novel probably "...would soon have sunk into oblivion if it hadn't been revealed that Victoria Lucas was the poet Sylvia Plath" (Hayman 1991: 197). It took Plath a few years to put what had happened to her into words in order to convey some universal "emotional truth". She wanted to share how she had felt inside that bell jar that had isolated her and distorted her view of the world: "Plath wanted [...] her novel to speak for the lives of countless women she had known, [...] depict[ing] the female dilemma of the 1950s. No woman can have it all, but choosing is also difficult" (Wagner-Martin 1987: 185). As her own husband said, *The Bell Jar* "...had to work as both the ranking of the mythic event and the liturgy, so to speak, of her own salvation" (Hughes 1994: 3). Plath used prose in order to fictionalise her life, although, this time, "each episode of the plot is a close-to-documentary account of something that did happen in the author's life" (1994: 2). Thus, it could be said that she started to write the novel in order to be self-analytic about her past. In fact, as more than one biographer has stated, "it is hard to disassociate her from Esther Greenwood [...] One finds oneself thinking 'but this is how it happened'" (Alexander 1991: 321). In this regard, it has been interpreted as completely autobiographical for years, without taking into account the likely adaptations of certain events or characters, as is the case of Plath's family. Her mother and brother were aware of this possibility, as being evidenced by Plath's decision to publish the novel under her name, frightened of their reactions. In this sense, we should take into account that the book "...is a fiction, and in fiction real people are transformed" (Wagner-Martin 1987: 190). Even the main character of the book, at a certain point of the narration, affirms this natural tendency in her by saying that "I never told anybody my life story, though, or if I did, I made up a whopper" (in Bayley and Brain 2011: 1). According to Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, this is a warning coming from Plath herself, something "...that readers of all kinds of supposed representations of Plath would do well to heed" (1). Keeping these observations in mind, one could assert that this

novel can still be considered a largely literary, fictionalised work. Given that Plath tended to dramatize even her own journals, it is plausible to consider *The Bell Jar* as another of her fictionalising projects as well. Moreover, “since there is no way of knowing just how Plath has reimagined episodes [...] in order to make them serve within the framework of the text, it would be a mistake to approach the novel as a mere chronicle of a personal trauma” (Hagström 2009: 45).

### **2.4.2 *Ariel***

Following the same line of discussion, another episode in her life that affected her writing was happening to her at that moment. Her marriage was breaking down, and, as could be expected from Plath, “when the dream crashed, she made art out of the night sweats that grease her breakfast plate” (Fitzherbert 2013). She had already begun to talk about her life as wife and mother; hence, she would also explain, in her fiction, how that kind of life started to fall apart. In the creation of *Ariel*, Sylvia was aware of the relentless force that her pen was carrying and could not, or would not, control it. The contradictory feelings she was living were delivering a disquieting work, and Sylvia, consciously enjoying it, knew that “...the writing that had come from the pain of those months was almost worth the suffering” (Wagner-Martin 1987: 221). As a matter of fact, she was conscious of the creative stream that was surrounding her and she used it as her leitmotif. Through *Ariel*, she would be reborn, as she considered the poems “...self-projections [...], the central figure of her mythic world” (Stevenson 1989: 269). Anne Stevenson herself, points out Plath’s “dangerously altered and alienated state of mind” at those depressive stages (1989: 288). Nevertheless, Sylvia took advantage of her depressions and low moments, being able to record them with artistry. It seemed as if once “Hughes had moved out, [...] the muse had moved in” (Hayman 1991: 181). In this period, she would make use of everything within her reach: wounds, illnesses, the weather or her children. The poems were disturbing to the point of not being Plath able to distinguish which came first: the

event or the poem. For many years, she had acquired the talent of describing herself as an object not belonging to the real world, so that when the time came for her to write the poems that would *make her name*<sup>13</sup>, she got too close to the line dividing reality from fiction falling inevitably into the latter. Certainly, Plath was not aware of this difference: “[s]ospecho que de un modo extraño se consideraba realista: las muertes y resurrecciones de “Lady Lazarus”, las pesadillas de “Daddy”, las había vivido en carne propia” (Álvarez 2003: 35). This could be a reason to believe that the contents of her latest poems could reveal her real intentions of killing herself. As an example, we could delve into two of the poems in *Ariel* in particular: “Edge” and “Death and Co.”, both faintly insinuating her determination of killing her children, Frieda and Nicholas. Since Sylvia anticipated her death in these same compositions and then killed herself, critics are inclined to deduce that she intended to do the same with her kids. On the other hand, Álvarez pays attention to the cadence of Plath’s poetry, stating that “Sylvia sigue [...] absorta en la tarea práctica de permitir que cada imagen desarrolle vida propia plena y quieta. El hecho de que esté escribiendo sobre su muerte es casi irrelevante” (2003: 51). Nevertheless, the content is still terrifying, since it suggests that she is considering the possibility of her own children’s sacrifice “...a fin de vengarse de su marido a la manera de Medea” (Becker 2004: 39). Her last verses are crude and with them Plath did not intend to get the reader’s empathy. As a matter of fact, Janet Malcolm asserts in accordance to Plath’s rudeness that this detail “...is what sets her apart from other so-called confessional poets of the fifties and sixties” (1994: 32). Many specialists in Plath’s work<sup>14</sup> have discussed how the creation of the *Ariel* poems enabled the poet to feel triumphant over the suffering she was going through, although, at the same time, these poems were the ones dragging her to suicide: “In the first week of February the dead Sylvia Plath was still a fiction in the poetry that Sylvia

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<sup>13</sup> Plath wrote to her mother in October 1962: "I am a writer . . . I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name", *Letters Home* (1992: 468).

<sup>14</sup> To mention a few of these opinions: Myers in Stevenson (1989: 321); Al Álvarez (2003: 53).

Plath was writing, but by the end of the second week the poet was dead” (Hayman 1991: 191). Notwithstanding this, there is another theoretical current against the idea of Plath’s suicide attempt. In this case, her *leitmotif* of rebirth is used as the key notion in order to state her intention of using these poems as a fresh start: after the cold winter, spring would come: “[*Ariel*] is considered to have a different narrative, and suicide is not its thematic centre” (Hagström 2009: 50).

Plath’s intended order for the *Ariel* poems was different from the one published after her death. If we compare it with the one sorted by Hughes in editing the book, Plath’s *Ariel* would begin with the word “love” and end with “life”, interpreting the meaning of its poems as if “[s]he was putting them in an order that would tell her the story of her own survival [...] [S]he willed herself, as she had done countless times before, toward the spring of her inner life” (Moses 2000). Had this been Sylvia’s aim, it did not work in the end. Nonetheless, it could be considered that, in one way or another, she accomplished her rebirth: Thus, “*Ariel* [...] poems are proof that she finally achieved the birth of a new real self in the death of an old one” (Egeland 2013: 17). Plath may be dead but she has gained a new posthumous life. In conclusion, “[w]ithout wanting a halo, she may have wanted to create a legend centred on poems which had, as she knew, the stuff of greatness in them [...] Sylvia Plath wouldn’t survive the suicide, but ‘Sylvia Plath’ would” (Hayman 1991: 196).

## 2.5 Towards the End: “Dying is an Art, Like Everything Else”<sup>15</sup>

*Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –*  
“Lady Lazarus” (2003: 3, v.75).

As readers, we know, though Plath does not as she is typing, that she is going to be dead after writing the *Ariel* poems. It becomes inevitable, then, to consider the ways in which Plath’s

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<sup>15</sup> “Lady Lazarus” (Plath 2003: 34, vv. 43-44).

death shapes our processes of adscription of meaning to her work. In this sense, “[t]oday we view all this poetry of death in the perspective of her suicide, but until she killed herself, it had a different meaning” (Hayman 1991: 188). At this stage, we may assume that when Plath started to write *Ariel*, she was not capable of stopping to “...describe in writing what it was like to go under” (11). As “Lady Lazarus”<sup>16</sup>, Sylvia thought that by wiping her old self out, she would be able to remain alive as a new person. Nonetheless, in order to do this, “tenía que pagar con su vida [ya que] la muerte era para ella una deuda que cada década debía saldarse” (Álvarez 2003: 35). Accordingly, Plath started the aforementioned poem with the verse “I have done it again”,<sup>17</sup> in which she refers, surprisingly in a preterit tense, to her third attempt of suicide, an act yet to come. Nevertheless, in spite of talking about something that will happen in a short-term future, she was not capable of stopping her own movements or intercepting them, for they were a necessity in her compositions.

Following the same line of discussion, some critics have looked for support to their theories –namely, either the evitability or the inevitability of her suicide– in her so-called literary testament: the last poem she wrote. As a matter of fact, two poems are dated –on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, 1963– as her last: the aforementioned “Edge” and “Balloons”. Due to the different nature and tone of the poems, the choice of considering one or the other as her last predetermines the outcome of the analysis of *Ariel*. On the one hand, “Edge” is clearly anticipating the events: “The woman is perfected/ Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment” (2003: 174, vv.1-3). Thus, those who choose this poem as her last composition tend to support the idea of her “Greek necessity” (174, v.4) of death. On the other hand, in “Balloons”, as gloomy as any *Ariel* poem, she describes her son playing with a balloon: “His balloon squeak like a cat./ Seeming to see/ A funny pink world he might eat on

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<sup>16</sup> “I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die. / This is Number Three. / What a trash /To annihilate each decade” (32 vv. 20-24).

<sup>17</sup> (32, v.1)

the other side of it” (166, vv.22-24). Considering that in “Edge”, “[e]ach dead child coiled, a white serpent” (174, v.8), the image that Plath displays in the former poem is comparatively positive. Therefore, the reader who chooses this as her last poem sees in Plath an optimistic and confident person with a future ahead of her. All in all, “[t]he fact is that there is no way of knowing which of the poems she wrote last” (Hagström 2009: 49). Nonetheless, since her suicide is inextricable from her poems, those choosing “Balloons” can only suspect that something could have gone wrong, while those opting for “Edge” find in Plath’s final act the logical consequence of her writing. Those critics who think that her death was inevitable, tend to interpret “Balloons” as the inscription of how, since she could not escape from death, “...somehow she must have imagined living on after [it]” (Stevenson 1989: 297). All things considered, “[...] it’s impossible to be sure whether writing the poems helped her towards the decision” (Hayman 1991: 190).

Everything that has been or will be said concerning the circumstances of Plath’s death may fail to be completely accurate. It is true that there are several theories about the event and that people from all fields have not stopped discussing them. In this Master’s Thesis, I am particularly interested in the approaches which state that Sylvia sacrificed herself to her own art: “[t]he image of Plath’s poetry eating her up is an interesting version of the myth [...] the poet becomes a victim of her work, which is larger than herself” (Hagström 2009: 43). Sylvia Plath had begun her writing life getting inspiration from real experiences, until she realised that, in putting them to paper, she was modifying them. Her creative process reached a point in which she preferred to force situations to happen in order to write them, and that eventually lead her to the *Ariel* poems quandary in which she was textualising events about her life she had not yet made happen, in what could be called an act of anticipation. In order to make her creations honest, she believed she had to be truthful and consequent to her art. Somehow, Plath needed her writing in order to live, and when this art demanded her to die, she saw

herself resurrecting by committing suicide. The real problem was that “life [...] does not reliably offer –as art does– a second [...] chance to tinker with a problem” (Malcolm 1994: 7). She had evoked death in the greatest compositions that she would have ever imagined herself creating, and as victim of these, she realised that “...nothing is more important than literature, and no sacrifice in its service is too great” (156). Given that she had been waiting her whole life for a creative torrent of this magnitude, she had to make the most of it, regardless of the consequences. Perhaps that was the reason she believed in the regenerating nature of her poems; it could be said that because surviving had worked for her in the past, she could carry it further this time. In this regard, Ted Hughes pointed out that “[y]ou can’t overestimate her compulsion to write like that. She had to write those things –even against her most vital interests” (in Heinz 1995). In a meeting with Janet Malcolm, Anne Stevenson confessed how she felt about Sylvia’s ending: “To me, no art, no ‘great poem’ is worth that much human suffering. After all, there is suffering enough in the world without creating it for the purpose of an interior psychodrama” (1994: 79). Whether the *Ariel* poems caused her death or she intended to leave them as her last confession, we could claim that, in a way, “... her suicide authenticates the truth of her poems. [...] Further, [...] her suicide is proof that the violent unresolved materials of her unconscious, once courted or confronted as subjects for poetry, couldn’t finally be transmuted, ordered and contained by words” (Van Dyne 2006: 5). She paid a high price with an act that would validate her seriousness as a writer; she had proved her poems’ truth. It is impossible to know if her action was conceived as a way to achieve posterity. However, “the image of the poet offering herself up for her art is a highly romanticised one (to say the least), but it has been reverberating in writings about Plath ever since” (Hagström 2009: 42). The creation of her own character, which enabled her fiction, was for Sylvia, ultimately, the most important thing, or in any case, it started to be until it reached a point of no return. Ted Hughes had said that, by trying to kill herself and writing

*The Bell Jar*, she was trying to “escape from her past and [...] conquest [...] the future” (1994: 23). Equally, this can be applied as the patron that she tried to accomplish in *Ariel*.

Despite the clearness of her act, there are certain opinions which pose doubts as to Plath’s intentions. Al Álvarez leads this front since Plath’s suicide: “Estoy convencido de que por ese entonces no pensaba en suicidarse. Al contrario: podía escribir sobre el hecho con tanta libertad porque ya lo había dejado atrás” (Álvarez 2003: 34). He reiterates this idea throughout his book *El Dios Salvaje*, as Kate Moses does too in most of her writings:

If one accepts the possibility that Plath’s true demon was not something of her own making but a force, or forces, she was quite powerless against, her attempts to juggle the details of her daily life, to care for herself and her small children alone and furthermore to programmatically write “dawn poems in blood” to save her sanity seem nothing less than courageous (2000).

In these opinions that go against the theories about Plath’s intentions of killing herself as part of her art, her illness is frequently identified as the main motivation for her death drive: “[i]t does not come as a surprise that sacrificing oneself for one’s art would be compatible with being mentally ill” (Hagström 2009: 37). Since there is no reliable way to uncover from a medical perspective which mental illness it was that led Plath to suicide, her own work is often used as evidence. Numerous studies use her fiction to diagnose her. That is the case of Catherine Thompson’s “Dawn Poems in Blood: Sylvia Plath and PMS,” an article which sustains that Plath’s work was significantly influenced by PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome). As Kate Moses states: “Thompson pointed out that Plath unwittingly recorded experiencing on a cyclical basis all of the major symptoms of PMS” (2000), a syndrome that shares similitudes with the depressive phase of bipolar II that could also be applied to Plath’s case. In the same manner, in “The Origins of Creativity and Destructiveness in the Life and Work of Sylvia Plath”, Nick Owen wants to prove “...through analysis of chosen poetry and through looking closely at the facts of her life [...] that she lost a twin before birth, and that this loss affected her so [...] negatively that her poetic exploration of it led her to self-

destruction rather than healing” (2008: 103). On the whole, although the plausibility of these kinds of studies, it must be said that they have been mostly ignored by Plath scholars.

## 2.6 Biography or Fiction?

*Art is theft, art is armed robbery, art is not pleasing your mother.*  
(Malcolm 1994: 158)

The posthumous image that Plath left to the world in the *Ariel* poems does not reveal a positive perception of herself. Additionally, the person about whom she wrote and herself, the writer, started to be the same indivisible being, which led many to consider her writings as if they were her last will, “...a full record of her ambivalences –which is why the study of her life is both so alluring and so disturbing” (Malcolm 1994: 88). Consequently, several critics and writers would say that we hold a great quantity of information about Plath, since “what we know is what we have of her own words, in her many voices, in front of us” (McDowell 2010: 327). However, as we will see, there is an unaddressed problem at the heart of such belief.

The biographical readings of her work, most assuredly emphasised by Sylvia’s end and the way she almost seemed to foresee her own demise in *Ariel*, started to become a central notion in Plath studies and, what is more, in her transformation into a mass author. Since all her work has traditionally been understood literally, “blurbs [...] and photos on book covers encourage[d] readers to conflate art with life and fictional characters with biographical persons” (Egeland 2013: 11). Given that her poems have this atmosphere of doom due to Plath’s fatal fate, the story that the readers are longing to find is the explanation for the end that they already know about. Those readers who want to solve the enigma start their enquiries with the reading of Plath’s work, conceiving it as a source of first-hand information. As Robert Lowell has stated, “the line of distinction between [the] poet’s life and her art is so blurred as to become non-existent” (in Alexander 1991: 342). In this sense, by accessing her

work, readers believe they will obtain an account of her life narrated by the author herself. However, “the meanings of Plath’s poems [...] are not fixed but change depending on our tools and the contexts in which we have learnt [...] to read them” (Van Dyne 2006: 18). Given that these meanings depend on the perception that each one of her readers has, once s/he has gone through Plath’s work, and having harboured more questions than answers, s/he finds him/herself with the doubt of where to look for more. Eventually, Plath’s biography seems the most logical text to turn to.

If we believe that “...biography is a non-fiction genre with objectivity and distance as its founding principles” (Brain 2011: 191), that kind of text could elucidate the ambiguities of Plath’s artistic creation. However, we should also take into account that, in biography, “la fidelidad a lo sucedido [...] se convierte en un propósito tan imperativo como moralmente insoslayable e *imposible de cumplir*”<sup>18</sup> (Lynch 2004). In the case at hand, the Plath’s portrayal became a demand which would be repeatedly satisfied, since “no suicidal act has been better documented than hers” (Hayman 1991: XIII). In fact, as Marianne Egeland has stated, “the biography of Plath has been repeated so many times now that it easily looks like old news” (2013: 170). While it is true that the narration of Plath’s life in all those biographies has her letters and journals as their main source, it was an imperative to produce new material that would interpret her stories’ whole background. One could say that the problem when composing a biography about Plath is the multiplicity of voices<sup>19</sup> present in the aforementioned letters and journals, and in her fictions: short stories, juvenilia and the published materials *The Colossus*, *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*. In this sense, while attempting to create the unabridged biographical portrayal of Plath, one needs to face the quandary of prioritising among those different voices included in the sources mentioned above. In this

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<sup>18</sup> My italics.

<sup>19</sup> Janet Malcolm defines this problematic, affirming that “[t]he many voices in which the dead girl spoke [...] mocked the whole idea of biographical narrative” (1994: 17).

sense, “[t]here is a temptation to privilege one text over another” (McDowell 2010: 328), considering the journal’s descriptions and the verses in the *Ariel* poems more trustworthy and consistent than the emotions narrated in her letters or previous works. Consequently, we find conflicting visions of Plath in the different biographies written so far, depending on the reliability the author gives to Plath’s sources and his/her dependency on them. In fact, “if there is a *Plathian model*, it is remarkable for its flexibility and its capacity to support contradictory views” (Egeland 2013: 41).

Other voices that must be kept in mind are the ones belonging to the characters peopling Plath’s stories and their equivalents in real life. It seems as if these characters could exist as fictive ones only in our imagination. Nevertheless, in the creation of the biographical Plath, Ted Hughes’ presence is necessarily associated, not only to Plath’s fictionalised version, but also to “...his real-life counterpart [which] is so prominent” (97) a presence in her life; a detail that, it must be said, added to Plath’s biography’s impact on the market. “Controversy sells biography” (Egeland 2013: 164), and so does Plath, to the extent that “[t]he Plath-Hughes relationship has become an industry in itself” (McDowell 2010: 300). Plath’s marriage, as a fundamental part of her biography, became a juicy material destined to fill pages and sell books. And then, again, if we take into account that Sylvia, as we have already argued, was writing about her own character, contemplating it as she wanted to see herself, the biographies that take her fiction as a source of reliable truth when reconstructing Plath’s life, are, forcibly, partly fictive. This theory –which could be applied to biography in general but that acquires a special significance in this case– is repeatedly referred to by critics. While some of them differ in the diverse functions and approaches that the “creation” of a biography entails, many of them agree that Plath’s biographies do not succeed in their final intention: “[they] fail[...] as fiction [...]; [they] fail[...] as information” (Brain 2011: 188). After all, what the biographer is seeking and the reader hopes to find is the ultimate

clarification of what is not said by Plath herself. And, in this sense, “if we hope to piece together the definitive, documented facts that provide a causal link between Plath’s experience and her art, we are bound to be disappointed” (Van Dyne 2006: 16).

When evaluating the biographer’s task, a few ideas related to the trustworthiness of their narration are to be taken into consideration. To name two of the most relevant for the present work, the desirable neutrality that seems hardly achievable or the middle ground positioning between Plath and Hughes that they all, theoretically, aspire to attain. What is clear, however, is that, in all these considerations, to be mistaken when issuing a judgment is not contemplated; even though the facts that we could learn from biographers are not necessarily true, these are equally legitimate, since they are based on their own perception. “There is never an end to what the biographer cannot know” (Van Dyne 2006: 3), in the sense that to collect the whole amount of information and to piece it together in order to give it to the reader is not the biographer’s only aim. Somehow, s/he ends up being another character within his/her book; sometimes s/he even becomes the main character above the subject s/he is supposedly dealing with. Nevertheless, this practise is highly understandable; “[s]i ya es difícil hacer que los demás comprendan la índole de una experiencia personal, ¿qué no será conseguir dar de una experiencia *ajena* una versión fiel de los hechos?” (Lynch 2004). In order to relate with the experience lived by his/her subject of study, the narrator, somehow, seeks a connection which will make the reader believe in his/her personal implication in the story as a source of credibility. And if, at some point, we believe that “biography isn’t a poem, it isn’t a novel, it’s a document” –as Olwyn Hughes detailed to Janet Malcolm in a letter in 1991 when the latter was writing her book about Plath’s expositions (1994: 45)–, then, we may start to call into question the integrity of a document based on that kind of personal implication. The truth is that we are almost always free to doubt the biographer; s/he takes Plath’s words and steals them, her words do not belong to her anymore once she is dead.

Neither does the story of her life: “[a]fter we die, our story passes into the hands of strangers. The biographer feels [her/]himself to be not a borrower but a new owner” (184), s/he comes to be “...part of the story, not simply the teller [...] of it” (McDowell 2010: 299). It becomes possible, thus, to establish an analogy between the way a fiction writer inscribes his/her own world vision in his/her work, and the way biographers do that in their texts in ways similar to those used in the writing of fiction. The use of fictionalising methods in biographies can be identified thanks to “...novelistic techniques of imagining a scene that could not have been documented, of claiming to know what Plath thought and felt” (Brain 2011: 192). The relationship between the real fact and its fictive version in the biographer’s work is barely reliable if we compare it to the same relation found in the original material intended by Plath. It is for this reason that biographers of Sylvia Plath seem to “[...] compete for the authority to determine legitimate interpretations of their subject” (Egeland 2013: 6), which results in a competition to be perceived as the best detective among them. In this sense, there will be no winner, for, “what if the anecdotal evidence that biographers rely so heavily upon to persuade their readers is fabricated and/or based on far-fetched interpretations of people and incidents?” (134). Marianne Egeland, once more, raises a few arguments about writers of Plath’s biographies, such as “the insistence that a biographer has discovered new, myth-shattering materials and is doing something ‘for the first time’” (164), or the idea that “some of the ‘mysteries’ might have been created retrospectively by people who [...] wish to contribute but [...] are mistaken or mixed up about order of events” (169). In all cases, what we are facing is unreliability itself; the moment someone tries to put on paper the truth of Plath’s life by taking as their main source her own works, s/he is condemned to Plath’s own plight, that of being unable to distinguish between fiction and reality.

There will always be new biographies to come, since each one of them tells his/her own story, preventing readers from identifying with or feeling absolutely certain about the

reliability of one single version of the facts. Actually, “[...] lo que justifica la proliferación de versiones sobre esta pareja de intelectuales mal avenidos, [es] la capacidad generadora de mitos que poseen las reconstrucciones biográficas” (Lynch 2004). There are a substantial number of biographies with Plath’s name on the cover, and, although it would be interesting to analyse each one of them in depth, this kind of task has already been undertaken by many critics. Nonetheless, it is precise to mention the most relevant, which are, in chronological order, the ones written by Edward Butscher in 1977, Linda Wager-Martin in 1988, Anne Stevenson in 1989, Ronald Hayman and Paul Alexander, both in 1991. The work of some of them has been easily forgotten, as is the case of Butscher’s *Method and Madness*. Others have not been exempt from controversy, such as Stevenson’s and Wagner-Martin’s, whose biographies have been attacked by both Hughes’s and Plath’s defenders. Stevenson has been criticised for being chosen by the Plath Estate to compose *Bitter Fame* –the first authorised biography counting on the permission and approval of Ted Hughes–; Hayman and Paul, each one from their own perspective, reacted and contested Stevenson’s version with their books – *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* and *Rough Magic* respectively–, conceived as the opposition to the “official” and “approved” text.

The differences between these five authors are self-evident. While it is true that the majority narrates the same episodes in order to achieve their goals, they do it from different angles, concluding with what they consider opportune. Even style is a tool used for the benefit of their goals. Certainly, these five cases were not produced under the same conditions. First of all, Butscher did not work on the reconstruction of the facts having all the materials at hand, given that when he wrote his book, *The Collected Poems* (1981) had not been published yet. Secondly, Anne Stevenson has publicly declared that she was not able to write the book that she wanted to (Malcolm 1994: 78), as she felt she was under Olwyn Hughes’s control. Specific proofs of Olwyn’s immovable posture can be found in the different appendixes of the

biography. Written by Hughes's friends and defenders, they narrate their own experiences and interpretations of Plath's behaviour from the prism which makes Plath look guilty for everything that happened in the marriage, while exempting Hughes from any responsibility. Stevenson's biography is so evidently one-sided that it quickly had to confront the reactions of readers, critics and scholars, who, probably having not been positioned yet about the marriage rupture, hurried to adopt the opposite stance. What is more, she saw herself constricted to the creation of a text that refuted the image of Plath as a victim: "[s]he projected the image of a martyr" (274); or "[h]er poems caused pain to the victims of her pen" (266) are only two of an endless list of examples<sup>20</sup>.

On the other hand, Hayman's biography maintains a diametrically opposed version of the events. In this case, the biographer decided to openly place himself against Ted Hughes's figure, adopting the role of his opponent before the public opinion. While Plath's death originated a vast amount of unclear information, Hayman, moreover, "trie[d] to create a series of 'unsolved mysteries'" (Egeland 2013: 168) based on that, which, certainly, did not help to consider his biography as a reliable source of information. His war against Hughes starts the moment Hayman states, without contrasting the information, that "sometimes he was suspicious of food [Sylvia] gave him, complaining she was trying to kill him [...] Sometimes he'd sink into black moods [...]" (1991: 98). Although such annotations could find their source in a common perception of the Hughes-Plath marriage, Hayman also assaults Hughes, after the suicides of the two mothers of his children, when he affirms that in *Birthday Letters* and *Capriccio* –both collections of poems dedicated to Plath and Wevill respectively– "[...] he was making out a case for [his] defence" (228), adding that "it was strategically advantageous to plead his case in verse, [since many] of his arguments would fail to stand up in prose" (229). One of the main features that Hayman shares with Paul Alexander is the

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<sup>20</sup> See *Bitter Fame* on their marriage (245); on their divorce (253/257/281); on her victimisation (276).

ability to imagine Plath's thoughts or words when describing Sylvia's life. This fact, far from providing the reader with a new reliable perspective, attains the opposite reaction: the reader starts to wonder how they could possibly possess such information. Additionally, there is no textual indication of when the biographer's own voice comes in, when he adds something of his own creation to the existing source. Once more, this happens in *Rough Magic* as well: "[...] [it] is Alexander, not Plath, who describes" (Egeland 2013: 160). Hayman tries to excuse himself arguing that authors have the right to make use of Plath's life since she used herself as a source to write. He goes further by maintaining that in order to understand her poems, it is necessary to know her life.

Following the same line of discussion, if Ronald Hayman had declared himself the opponent of Ted Hughes, Paul Alexander did likewise. He had held the expectation of becoming the first biographer to be able to rely on Hughes statements about Plath, and, given that Ted Hughes had always refused to talk to any biographer or writer, delegating this task to his sister Olwyn, Alexander's prospects turned into a battle against Hughes<sup>21</sup>. In relation to Plath's account, "Alexander's inclinations for poetic licence, for rendering a person's thoughts, feelings, and reactions without a basis in facts, [are] evident from the very first chapter" (Egeland 2013: 160). As a matter of fact, the fictionalisation exercise present in his biography is noticeably evident, since his description "...gives the impression of [his] having been present or having read eyewitness accounts, which he has not" (160). Alexander's narration of events previously unmentioned –even by Plath– and supported by unverifiable sources and anonymous witnesses, make his biography a fictionalised life account that would be perfectly suitable for a fabricated fiction. Nonetheless, for a text that is branded as a real-fact biography, the reader is facing an exceedingly subjective vision.

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<sup>21</sup> I will provide several examples of this later in the text, in the point n° 2.7.1: "Taking Sides".

Besides having contributed with new facts and points of view –shedding light on Plath’s myth and mysteries from their own perspective– all these biographers have narrated Plath’s storyline from beginning to end, without skipping any fundamental event: the girl that promised she would never speak to god again when her father died, and that, in that same moment, made her mother promise not to marry ever again; the same young lady that, years later, would have thrown all her clothes out of the window of a New York hotel, just before returning home and attempting to kill herself by taking too many pills. The same woman that would have permission from her psychiatrist to hate her mother and that would marry a fervent, talented man, only to separate from him years later because of his infidelity, occasion that she used to write the poems that made her name; her last days spent in a cold flat in an even colder London town, asking for stamps to the neighbour downstairs, and leaving the world with the incognita of whom she met the night before the day she killed herself; the same woman about whom her husband said at her funeral that “Everybody hated her” and the one who wrote the lines that passed on to posterity: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through”.

## **2.7 The Myth and the Controversy of the Plath Estate**

*Their tragedy became public, and everybody wanted a piece.*  
(Egeland 2013: 26)

For more than thirty years, the Plath Estate has been accused of censorship and manipulation as regards what has been published about Plath, as they made the authors interested in writing about her ask for permission to quote. The authorisation often came under certain requirements, frequently related to the image of Ted Hughes in the book. Needless to say, a dilemma emerged because of this fact. While some of these authors, only to have the right to express their own uncensored opinions, opposed the Plath Estate, which rendered it

impossible for them to use certain quotations –and, hence, they lost depth in their enquiries–, others surrendered to the request and changed the contents of their books, as is the case of Linda Wagner-Martin, who “[...] made many modifications in order to secure permission to quote at length from Plath’s work” (Egeland 2013: 144), or the notorious case of Anne Stevenson, who was vastly criticised for having collaborated with Olwyn Hughes. This is a fact that Stevenson tried to refute over the years by denouncing the pressure she was under due to Olwyn’s authoritarian character. According to Stevenson, Olwyn fiercely imposed a touched-up account of Hughes’s involvement in Plath’s death –without having, actually, considered the possibility that this imposition could eventually play against her family’s interests.

As a result of Olwyn’s attitude, a question was raised about the management of the Plath’s Estate, concerning Plath’s literary possessions. Words that belonged to the authoress had been transferred, by marriage, to Ted Hughes and, by assignment, to his sister Olwyn, who understood the possession of Sylvia’s work as an opportunity to defend her brother from external attacks and, also, as a source of income. The fact of the matter was, as Marianne Egeland has claimed, that Olwyn seemed to find it difficult to recognise “[...] the line between free speech and the right to information on the one hand and the right to privacy on the other” (2013: 25). Undoubtedly, the Hughes family started their tight control of the estate having –theoretically– discretion as their final aim. Nonetheless, they only managed to generate controversy and confrontation with those who wanted to use the estate. Complaints concerning their administration have been heard for decades: “[n]o doubt the time will come when biographers and critics will no longer have to submit their work to the Estate for approval” (Hayman 1991: XVII). Despite their futile efforts to regulate the estate with objectivity, they managed to antagonise almost everybody who wanted to work on Plath:

“[...] it appear[ed] that for [them] there [was] only one version of reality, one version –their version– of the truth” (Rose 1991: XIV).

Ted Hughes himself remained a distant observer, allowing his sister to manage his dead wife’s estate while he tried to carry on with his own life. The contributions he made came in the form of letters addressed to writers with a manuscript that asked for permission to quote; in his missives he answered with rectifications, estimations and limited statements. Furthermore, in all of them, Hughes tried to distance himself from the image that was gradually being formed of him. In a letter to Stevenson about her manuscript of *Bitter Fame*, he made clear that he had only corrected the “[...] limited numbers of facts about which I feel I can be reasonably certain. That leaves the main bulk of the book to other people’s reports, opinions, and interpretations, for which I take no responsibility” (1989: xv-xvi). Hughes, pretending to maintain as much privacy as possible, felt reluctant to supply the mass opinion with trivia about his past, as can be seen in his letters to Paul Alexander: “[a]nd I hope it doesn’t sound too strange if I say that my home is the one place that I can keep reasonably clear of the agitations and foolishness of public Plath debates, and that I wish to keep it so” (1991: 3). Naturally, Hughes reaction against the public exposure of his own life transformed him into a distant figure to the reading public. His refusal to give his own account of the story was due to his “[...] realization that, however tactfully handled, this was public-domain stuff” (Malcolm 1994: 130) and, as I have already mentioned, Hughes was willingly retreating from the public arena, even if that meant sacrificing his own version of the truth. In this sense, Hughes had always ensconced himself behind his sister Olwyn, letting her be the public face of the Estate. In that way Hughes managed to “[...] protect [...] his secrets better than his sister [did]: no one can use his words against him” because it was always Olwyn who did the talking “[b]ut everyone can –and does– speculate about his motives” (50). While it seems obvious that one of the subjects he would never talk about was Sylvia, it could also be alleged

that, through certain publications, as is the case of *Bitter Fame*, he was also speaking about his marriage, since Stevenson's biography was the one controlled by the Estate, and, therefore, approved by him. Whatever Hughes commented was valuable information, to the extent that, even from his silences, people could infer what they wanted to deduce all along: "[he] professes to have understood from day one that he was the only person who could not give an account of Sylvia Plath. All those who needed to find him guilty would simply not believe him" (Egeland 2013: 150). Whether Ted wanted to become a part of Sylvia's posthumous fame or not, he had no choice and, for that reason, at a particular point in his life he started to manage and edit Plath's publications carefully. Nevertheless, the economic element behind this fact –Hughes was, at the end of the day, the beneficiary of the earnings generated by Plath's production– made his opponents accuse him of exploitation, while his defenders alleged that "[e]ven though he by necessity had to accept the existence of a veritable Sylvia Plath industry and that easy money was to be made on her name, he did not welcome it with open arms" (150).

Apart from the economic reason mentioned above, Ted Hughes's figure has been legendarily involved in two other polemics concerning Plath's compositions: the intended and final order of the *Ariel* poems –aforementioned in the text–, and the possibility that Hughes had destroyed her latest journals, alleging their children's mental well-being as the main reason to make them disappear. As regards *Ariel*, he had always stated that publishing houses believed it impossible to respect Plath's intended order. As Hughes himself indicated, being aware that having altered the order of presentation and even deleted certain poems had turned him into a target for accusations: "[...] nobody in the U.S. wanted to publish the collection as she left it". Once more, as in every decision taken by Hughes, his supporters believed in the need for those changes; they defended, as Hughes stated, that all criticism was "[...] based on simple ignorance of how it all happened" (in Heinz 1995). On the other hand, his opponents

argued that Sylvia's original order "[...] would let readers into secrets about the break-up of their marriage" (Hayman 1991: 199), implying that Hughes's intentions were to disguise his culpability. In respect to the missing journals, these are also subject of controversy to the present day and one can foresee they will keep readers and critics debating about their actual situation for decades. Even though there are writers who criticise Hughes' actions, and prefer to focus on the loss of such source of information, since "[b]y destroying them Hughes forever silenced the record [of what] he considered so essential to Plath's poetic achievement" (Moses 2000), others take this criticism further and firmly believe in the possibility that "[...] the two notebooks existed intact [and] [t]hey still do" (Alexander 1991: 355).

What seems clear, concerning Hughes's life-time after Plath's death, is that he failed to move on and survive her<sup>22</sup>, as some writers believe when they state that "Hughes has only been barely alive [...] as a hostage to her fame" (Bundtzen 2011: 177). In fact, we have no way of knowing about his suffering after having gone through the experience of seeing his two wives killing themselves in similar ways; the Hughes that has survived in the shared imaginary of Plath and Hughes' readers tends to play the role of the psychologically abusive husband responsible for her demise. It is as if "[s]omeone or something has to be responsible for those aspects of negativity and violence that Plath articulated with such stunning clarity in her work" (Rose 1991: 6) and Ted fitted this role perfectly and, in part, he was conscious of this<sup>23</sup>. Although Hughes stated several times his repulse to the representation of his persona – "[i]t is infuriating for me to see my private experiences and feelings re-invented [...] and interpreted and published as official history" (in Malcolm 1994: 125)–, it could also be questioned how he played the role that was given to him, questioning if he did "[...] enjoy

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it seemed as if he did not want to: "I shall never get over the shock and I don't particularly want to. [...] ...if there is an eternity, I am damned in it" he wrote in a letter to Aurelia Plath, dated 15<sup>th</sup> March 1963, a week after Sylvia's death. (In *Letters of Ted Hughes*, 2007: 215)

<sup>23</sup> "I don't want ever to be forgiven. I don't mean that I shall become a public shrine of mourning and remorse, I would sooner become the opposite." (In *Letters of Ted Hughes*, 2007: 215).

presenting himself as an ogre[...]" (Tennant 2000: 135). For Hughes, in spite of having been treated sometimes "[...] as if he were dead [already]" (Malcolm 1994: 51), and abused by the media up to the point of having to change his phone number frequently, "[knew] the power of the card that is the myth built around his life and love for Sylvia, his betrayal and desertion. He play[ed] it" (219).

The myth generated over the years by the figure of Sylvia Plath tends to repeat the same storyline again and again. Its characters, Sylvia and Ted, have been subjected to diverse interpretations that have continued to appear in the last fifty years, in which Plath has been conceived either as a martyr or as an insane, insufferable woman, and Hughes either as an abuser and womaniser or as the lovely caring husband who could not cope with his wife's madness anymore<sup>24</sup>. Meanwhile, family members –as is the case of their daughter Frieda– had to live contemplating "[...] the persistent reinvention of her mother and vilification of her father" (Egeland 2013: 30). Nonetheless, Hughes and Plath are not the only ones who form part of this love-drama as doomed characters. Assia Wevill is often forgotten instead of being taken into account as a plausible key factor. It could be considered that Assia "killed" Sylvia the moment she took Hughes away from her and started a romance with him. Equally, one could also argue that Sylvia, later, "killed" Assia with her omnipresence, and understand "...Wevill's tragedy as a loss of identity to Plath" (Bundtzen 2011: 176). While Assia's role and importance in this story has been –however irrelevantly– discussed<sup>25</sup>, her figure had, as a matter of fact, a posthumous role beyond her involvement with Hughes: she was used afterwards by Ted with the secret intention of apologising to Plath. By dismissing her and undervaluing their relationship, Hughes avoided placing Assia in a similar status to Sylvia.

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<sup>24</sup> In the '60s and '70s specially, the feminist movement stressed and polarised their roles in the media, generating a climate "[...] in which [...] Sylvia stand[s] for the martyred female and Hughes for the murderous male" (Tennant 2000: 48).

<sup>25</sup> "[W]hy is Wevill's life public property, or of public interest? She wasn't a poet herself, and her sad story is many women's': does knowing about her life really provide any clues to understanding Hughes's poetry, with its focus on the natural world and mythology?" (McRobie 2008).

Besides this, the incorporation of Assia to the Plath myth can also be understood as the necessity of dramatising the story by using the standard narrative structure of a love triangle. Even Olwyn Hughes, whose relationship with Plath throughout their life could be summarised in a few unsympathetic encounters, started to play, as we have seen before, her own role in this story when the myth about Plath was created; in this sense, it is interesting to see how it affected Olwyn herself given that her “[...] ‘real’ relationship with Plath began only after Plath’s death” (Malcolm 1994: 47).

On the subject of Plath’s writing legacy –her letters and journals–, Janet Malcolm stresses how, once we are dead, “we want to be remembered on our own terms” (1994: 110) and attributes this desire to Plath, too. Marianne Egeland agrees and asserts, in accordance to the compilations above-mentioned, how “Sylvia [...] belong[s] in the picture she aims to draw” (2013: 173). In writing them, unconsciously and subsequently, Plath “[...] ha[s] mythologized both poets and made it difficult for Hughes to live the anonymous life he has sought” (Heinz 1995), turning him into a part of the myth. Surely, Plath had created something over which she could not have complete control. The continuous theories about her last creations and the full compendium of her letters and journals in addition to her fatal end have, over the years, increasingly mythologised her figure. The vastness of Sylvia’s endless myth grows out of the multiplicity of opposite interpretations regarding the reasons behind her suicide: “[t]o imagine anyone’s taking h[er] life as a way of completing, fulfilling, explaining the highest work of that life may appear impudent [...]. And yet is it more thoughtful to believe that love, debts, ill health, revenge are greater values to the human soul than creative, artistic powers” (Hardwick in Hagström 2009: 42-43).

### 2.7.1 Taking Sides

If there is a factor that characterises the legacy of the relationship between Plath and Hughes, is the one concerning the positioning of critics' and writers', who openly defend one side or the other of the story. Although it is true that it is possible to "[...] contar con la ventaja de jugar con la camiseta de ambos bandos, [...] tarde o temprano hay que decantarse por una o por la otra" (Lynch 2004). Depending on whose side this critic or writer is, Plath and Hughes's roles are either blurred or emphasised, and every element in their biographies is used to take up a stance, such as Sylvia's mental status, which "[...] has largely been advanced by Hughes's defenders and has thus not been given much attention by those who see her as a feminist martyr" (Hagström 2009: 48). If we may speak of confronted positionings, Hughes supporters have focused on underlining the shadowy details about Plath's life. Among them, whether she wanted to be considered Hughes's supporter or not, Anne Stevenson managed to signal how "[Sylvia's] concept of marriage was absolute and all-demanding. It was perfect or it was nothing" (1989: 245), with the intention of dismantling her image of the impeccable housewife, adding this information to the common belief that her character was difficult to get along with. In this sense, Stevenson was one of the first writers to defend the theory maintained by Hughes according to which "[...] they had agreed to some kind of trial separation for six months or so, during which Ted would go to Spain" (253), and which is an argument often received by Hughes's opponents as a simple excuse to his affair with Wevill. In this sense, Stevenson also tried to emphasise Plath's tendency to exaggerate about her fragile situation by highlighting Sylvia's fantasy of extreme deprivation (276), and, above all, by introducing the notion that she was already looking for a new relationship with another man to restore her pride (281). Dido Merwin, a close friend of Ted Hughes, took this defence further to the point of signalling Plath's blame in the marriage break. In this sense, she maintained how Sylvia was convinced of Hughes' non-proved infidelities, a behaviour

that, according to Merwin, was ultimately the cause of Ted's adultery: "a[l]most anyone could be brainwashed into becoming an adulterer and a liar if you went on long enough implying that that was what they were" (in Stevenson 1989: 342). Notwithstanding her partiality, her account was published alongside Plath's official supervised biography. Marianne Egeland's positioning in her book *Claiming Sylvia Plath* can also be considered a defence of Hughes. Although she does not attack Plath directly, she does not support Hughes's opponents either, as she could have done if she had defended the aforementioned case of the Paul Alexander's biography *Rough Magic*<sup>26</sup>. However, what Egeland does defend is the indisputable role of Hughes as a father by raising the following question: "[i]f the disturbing images of Hughes were true, how could [Plath] leave her children in his care?" (2013: 156).

It could be thought that to be a defender of Plath's side of the story would mean "[p]ortraying Plath as a strong, independent woman who dies because she is forced to cope alone under extreme circumstances" (Hagström 2009: 39). Nevertheless, it appears that to defend her side is not only to praise her but, as in Hughes's case, to be against her husband as well. In this case, Plath's defence seemed to have begun with Hayman's and Alexander's corresponding biographies –aforementioned in point n°2.6 of this MA Thesis–, and continued in 1998 with the several reactions that emerged in the wake of the publication of Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, a book that was considered "[t]he Ted Hughes rehabilitation project" (Rahim 2013). Hayman's efforts focused on pointing Assia Wevill as the main reason to make Hughes responsible for Plath's death. Alexander's case is the most notorious one, since his "[...] chief aim seems to be to see how outrageously it can slander Hughes" (Malcolm 1994: 167). Alexander's disdain towards Hughes is displayed throughout his book<sup>27</sup> and,

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<sup>26</sup> To see Egeland's dismantling: 2013: 155, 156.

<sup>27</sup> Among the endless examples, Alexander, uninformed, accuses Ted Hughes of: raping Sylvia (147/ 289), breaking things furiously (187), influencing Sylvia's thinking (189-190), choking her (194-196), forcing her to abort (197), being unhealthily dirty (223), humiliating her and being homophobic (225-227), not letting her talk in front of people (237), making her pack up all their things while she was pregnant (240), not loving his son and

although it intends to become a defence of Sylvia Plath's memory, it seems, rather, a personal attack on Hughes and, thus, not completely trustworthy. On the other hand, Kate Moses has thoroughly analysed Hughes' behaviour in the assumption that Plath's defenders are right in their attacks. While she discusses Ted's procedure when editing Plath's journals, Moses focuses her attention on the comparison between the edited with the unabridged version of these, in which she signals how Hughes censored details about himself concerning his basic privacy. Nonetheless, the parts that have been hidden to the public's reading "[...] injected all sorts of strange and dark and terrible fantasies, possibly stranger and darker than the truth" (2000). Once they saw the light, Moses proved that "[n]othing about Hughes that is new to the unabridged journals reveals him as any worse than he already had allowed himself to be seen in earlier books" (2000), stating in this manner that it is not necessary to carry out an inconsiderate attack, as in Alexander's case, given that Hughes' attitudes were revelatory enough on themselves.

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not wanting to have him (269-270), spending her money with other women (295), wanting her to commit suicide to the point of forcing her to do it (298), and even hypnotising her with this purpose (328).

### 3. Imagining Sylvia: Plath, the Character in the Fiction of Others

*Las páginas que vienen a continuación tampoco cuentan la historia, sólo recrean en forma de drama un mito reciente. La parcialidad, así como el uso de nombres de personas reales, obedecen a la intención privada del autor.*

David Aceituno (2010a: 17)

“Stasis in Darkness”, an article written by Anikka Hagström about Plath as a fictive character in other authors’ fictions, begins with a paragraph from the novel *The Well of Lost Plots* by Jasper Fforde, in which the author represents Plath as the nominee for an award to the most troubled romantic lead (female) who, in the end, is “disqualified for being real” (2009: 34). When reading that paragraph, we may not realise until the last words that she was, indeed, a real person. For a few seconds, Fforde tricks the reader, leading us to think how this is not, probably, the first time that we mistake her for a character. Sylvia Plath’s is one of the most notorious cases in which a real person is often considered as or mistaken for a fictive character. In part two of this Master’s thesis, we have discussed how Plath ended up becoming her own character. However, the question of how she becomes a character in other authors’ texts and even in the reader’s subconscious remains yet to be addressed open. Sometimes, these authors may use Plath herself as the main character of their compositions, reconciling real facts with the evocative notions that her figure produces in them. In other cases, they may search for inspiration in Plath’s own writings, transforming their work into a continuation of hers. Either as homage or as pure sensationalism, the truth is that these tendencies constitute a movement within literary mythography. As a matter of fact, as we will see later, these kinds of fictions based on someone else’s life can approach reality from almost any perspective for the purpose of reinvention.

### 3.1 Biographic Fictions about Plath

*En este libro se habla de la vida íntima como sólo puede rozarla el arte, pensándola con la imaginación.*

Gonzalo Torné in the introduction to *Sylvia & Ted*<sup>28</sup>

Biographical fiction –henceforth, biofiction<sup>29</sup>– could be conceived, in the case of Sylvia Plath, as a way of keeping her story alive. Given that what remains to be told cannot come from the authoress any longer, these new fictions, built upon her figure, allow her voice –to a certain extent– to be heard again. In this sense, biofictions can be understood as a fresh approach to her story, providing, for instance, a different ending –not necessarily a better one or a happy one– and taking a little bit further, with imagination, what biography does not have the possibility of extending: “[t]he discipline of biographical fiction surely requires that the novelist first acquire all the facts a biographer would, and *then* use them in a way that produces an aesthetic effect unavailable from biography” (Ferretter 2009: 288). Thus, there is neither one single formula to create biofictions about Plath nor a limited way of approaching her as a new character. Among these manifold representations –that could be considered not only new approaches but also “[...] nuanced responses to her work” (Brain 2011: 184)–, I would like to highlight the following varieties:

Firstly, we may assume that Plath’s figure affected other people’s lives. Consequently, a novel concerning Plath may deal with the effect she had and may still have on the existence of another person foreign to her. Illustrating this case we have Robert Anderson’s *Little Fugue*, an example that “[...] alternates the author's own story with the stories of Plath [and Hughes] [...] The alternation is not distinct; Mr. Anderson infiltrates their story, and they infiltrate his” (Eder 2004). Secondly, an author can also (re)imagine Plath’s life –commonly

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<sup>28</sup> Aceituno 2010a: 12.

<sup>29</sup> “Biofiction” is a neologism coined by Alain Buisine in 1991 in the academic journal *Revue des sciences humaines* n°224, pp. 7-13.

the last part of it—, with the intention of reinventing it completely or contributing to its memorialisation with his/her own vision of what happened. In this case, the author relies upon facts, placing the information where best suits him/her. Furthermore, and in contrast to a biography –considering that “[...] a literary work may provide an emotional or psychological truth that a biography cannot” (Hagström 2009: 36)—, it also uses in its creative process a great amount of imagination. One of the most praised cases is Kate Moses’ *Wintering*, whose author’s note declares how she is in charge of the “[...] invention of the characters’ thoughts and conversations”, and also of the “[...] fictional particulars attributed to real events otherwise known only in sketchy detail...” (2003: 338). Thirdly, we may refer to the fictions written by people who formed part of Plath’s life. While the tendency among her acquaintances to relate their own experiences with her is well-known<sup>30</sup>, we should also bear in mind how in those works of fiction the authors try to fit in –and in some cases even defend– their own viewpoint. On the one hand, Emma Tennant’s *Burnt Diaries* narrates Tennant’s autobiographical account of her liaison with Ted Hughes. Although she did not know Plath personally, she was affected by her presence given that, secretly, she wanted to become another Sylvia for Ted: “I want and I don’t want to be compared to her” (2000: 156). On the other hand, we should contemplate the works by Anne Sexton<sup>31</sup>, Ted Hughes<sup>32</sup> and Frieda Hughes<sup>33</sup>, since they all composed poems in her friend’s/wife’s/mother’s memory, being these artistic representations in her honour. Finally, even though it is not entirely accurate to put an end to a list of possible rewritings that is proving to have some many spinoffs, we should mention, because of its relevance, the biopic as a form of biofiction; the intention tends to be to produce a film or a play whose aim is to portray, for the general public, the life

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<sup>30</sup> It is the case of *Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* by Jillian Becker, 2004, who is known for hosting Plath at her home the last of week her life.

<sup>31</sup> “Sylvia’s Death”, 1963.

<sup>32</sup> *Birthday Letters*, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> “Readers”, 1997.

and death of the authoress. These representations tend to be narrated from a biased perspective –or at least with a subjective strong opinion. As an example, we might pay attention to the case of *Sylvia*, the film directed by Christine Jeffs in 2003, with Gwyneth Paltrow and Daniel Craig in the leading roles, which has been strongly criticised for its partiality.

Plath's specialists have been very strict concerning the trustworthiness of biofictions, scarcely giving credit to them. While some critics stand for the plausibility of biofiction as a reliable source, stating that "[...] there is still every reason to take biofiction seriously, and to incorporate it in scholarly discussions about Plath and her work in order to find new paths to tread" (Hagström 2009: 35), others do not hesitate to assert that "[t]heir strange ambiguity inadvertently calls into question the truth and accuracy of narrative representation [...] their contents are both true and false" (Brain 2011: 186-187). Regardless of the reliability of biofictions, and of whether the composition of these texts is legitimate or not, and whether they deserved to be published or not, what we should keep in mind is the fact that these succeed in bringing Plath back, reinforcing the image of literary icon that Plath has attained through the years: "[s]he may have been real once, but since the 1970s, she has also appeared as a character in numerous fictive works" (Hagström 2009: 34). The authors of these works have employed her –in the last twenty years in particular– as a fictional device with more or less effectiveness. It is true that some critics have brought to the fore how Plath's case in particular is such a difficult one to reconstruct; Plath's reality was already extremely fictive in itself, and consequently, already in Plath's own fiction, it seemed as if "[...] history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming 'true' history" (Brain 2011: 186).

There is a tendency to classify biofictions regarding their level of accuracy and reliability. We should pay attention, then, to the actual events portrayed in Plath's biofictions

to see if that exercise is of help when calibrating the alleged quality of a work of this kind. To some degree, a biofiction is not only the imaginative material provided by the writer's mind but also the result of a researched and engaged writing. We could assume that the writer has gained a thorough knowledge of Plath's life and s/he uses it as s/he pleases according to his/her purpose. Although it might seem that the "best" biofiction should be the most realistic, perhaps, "[...] the truest novel about Plath [is the one that] makes no assumption that a realistic narrative of her life can be told" (Ferretter 2009: 292). It seems as if to be shaped into arguments, "[e]ngaged in primary archival research and [to] provide[...] a scrupulous account of [the] sources" (Brain 2011: 188), however, may not be enough to create the most acclaimed biofiction about Plath. It would seem to follow that lack of "[...] close fidelity to biographical accounts of the characters [should] not be a problem" (Ferretter 2009: 287), and, still, sometimes, it is. Considering that the characters of these novels, because of their fictional nature, do not exist –strictly– out of their pages, their story should not be measured by its reliability or truthfulness. These characters only exist within the narration, so their counterparts in real life do not exist.

Up to now, the element that seems to matter the most in Plath's biofictions is the one that relates to the subjective perception that the writer has of Sylvia, and his/her understanding of her figure. The fact that there are artistic manifestations that are unfaithful to her life does not mean that these are bad creations. Sylvia had sacrificed herself for her art and in this gesture she had also offered herself up for future writers who might want turn her into a character in their fiction. Having taken all of this into consideration, at this stage, we should be asking ourselves, together with Ferretter: "[b]y what criteria should a novel based on the life of a historical person be judged?" (2009: 281), and furthermore, "[s]hould depictions of Plath by those who knew her be considered more trustworthy –and ethical– than those by writers who did not?" (Brain 2011: 185). It is not my intention to thoroughly analyse the

existing biofictions, since others have recently accomplished this task<sup>34</sup>. However, in regard to these, I think it is useful for some examples to be raised in order to appreciate their *raison d'être*. It is the case, for instance, of Paul Alexander, who first wrote the biography *Rough Magic* –mentioned earlier in this text– only to find what he thought a better way to represent Plath in the creation of a biofiction. Alexander decided to switch from biography to a more suitable form that would accommodate all his thoughts and personal opinions, some of which are considered controversial. In a sense, it seems as if Alexander's resentment against Ted Hughes would fit best in a biofiction, given the freedom offered by this genre, where his words are not understood or sold as an acceptable reality, but rather as his own perception of events. Alexander's aim in *Edge* is for the readers to listen to his theories about Plath's life and death as if those events genuinely happened the way he narrates them: “[h]e even says that Hughes was there when she died” (Egeland 2013: 163). By focusing on the “facts”, and on his effort to bring out *his truth*, he leaves Hughes and Plath's work out of his text.

On the other hand, Emma Tennant's aim in her works appears to be unclear when compared to the previous example. Tennant has written two books concerning the figures of Plath and Hughes; only the second, *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted*, is considered to be purely a biofiction, and she states so herself in the author's note, when she affirms that the “[e]vents described in the book are based on fact and [...] many of the[se] facts were previously concealed or unknown. [The book] is, nevertheless, a work of imagination” (2001: 7). Both, *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* and *Burnt Diaries* –which is autobiographical– “ha[ve] been strongly criticised by Plath scholars [...] as mere sensationalism” (Ferretter 2009: 281), focusing in particular these critics on Tennant's status as Hughes' former mistress. Clearly, the retelling of her account obeys to her necessity of narrating her personal experiences first, and then fictionalise the story with first-hand information. However, her relative closeness to

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. “A Fine White Flying Myth of One's Own: Sylvia Plath in Fiction” by Luke Ferretter in *Plath Profiles*, Summer 2009, Volume 2. pp. 278-298, and “Stasis in Darkness: Sylvia Plath as a Fictive Character” by Annika J. Hagström, in *English Studies* 2009, Volume 90, Issue 1 Pp. 34-56.

the facts lived by the persons who have a leading role in her narration –in the case of *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* in particular– is criticised by scholars, who consider that her exploration of the facts “cross[es] the line from imaginative re-creation into sensationalism” (Ferretter 2009: 294). To summarise, the fact that Tennant knew Hughes does not make her narration more trustworthy than the ones that come from fiction written by strangers. Furthermore, it has also been pondered whether Tennant’s familiarity with the events affects the way in which the novel is read, as readers may consider her involvement as something that could add or rest credibility –not to mention morbid interest– to the final result. This issue leads to another question about the reader’s concerns: “[H]ow is [s/he] ever to know what in Tennant’s novel is fact and what is fiction?” (Hagström 2009: 40). Interestingly enough, this is an enquiry that might be applied to all those biofictions in which the reader asks him/herself about the nature of the facts portrayed. However, it comes up repeatedly when dealing with Tennant’s text precisely because of the author’s name and her relationship to the subjects about whom she is writing.

Last but not least, one of the most acclaimed biofictions about Plath is the aforementioned *Wintering* by Kate Moses, a novelist who is also an up-and-coming Plath scholar. We have already established that the details that lead critics to consider one biofiction better than another are its reliability, its undertone or the basic quality of the writing. We could now add the respect for Plath with which these are produced. As far as this matter is concerned, Moses’ biofiction stands out for her admiration of Plath, which translates in her inclusion of fictive elements within the storyline to evoke real ones, with the sole intention of paying tribute to the late authoress. According to Moses in *Wintering*, Plath’s death “was a tragic blow from without into a life that, although caught in the depths of winter, was always directed towards the coming spring” (in Ferretter 2009: 285). The fact that this novel does not

narrate the episode of her death is probably the reason why it is the most praised biofiction so far since it is not considered opportunistic.

Generally speaking, if the final objective of Plath's biofictions is to proclaim different interpretations of Sylvia's life and work, then, it should be kept in mind that these might, in the end, be "[...] more true to the story of Sylvia Plath than any single biography on its own" (Hagström 2009: 35) or even than the one intended by Plath herself. After all, it seems as if all depictions are reduced to a "[...] search for a final truth that we mistakenly imagine [that] exists" (Van Dyne 2006: 18).

### **3.2 Ethics and Truthfulness**

*Soy consciente del riesgo de escribir sobre una pareja que existió y que se convirtió en mito por la espectacularidad periodística de algunos de sus actos. Es meterse donde a uno no lo llaman y donde uno no puede ver nada y menos aún juzgar.*

David Aceituno (2010b).

In regard to some of the questions raised in the last part of this MA thesis, we should analyse in depth the ones concerning the sensationalism and the ethics of the biofictions about Plath. Resuming the argument about the possible opportunistic nature of certain biofictions, although these attempts could come from a sense of respect and from the author's intention of dignifying the main subject when morals are involved, there is a certain conduct expected, despite not being a requirement. Certainly, there is no rule that states the obligation of literature in general, and biofictions in particular, to be politically correct. Nonetheless, and as far as biofictions are concerned, it almost appears that in order "to consider such representations critically [it] is necessarily to explore the ethical questions involved" (Brain 2011: 183). When transforming the life of a real person into a literary production which will have a place in the literary market, the ethics that should be kept in mind entail more than a problematic of citation and author's royalties, at least in Plath's case. The ethical dilemma

meets again with the portrayed characters' counterparts in real life, given the plausibility of hurting them with these particular narrations. Tracy Brain downplays the liberty of some authors to behave intrusively when they look too closely, as she –and also some of Plath's family members– sees it, “[...] where strangers have no right” (199). It appears to be a matter of legitimacy rather than intimacy, since the importance of the matter seems to rely “[on] who, if anyone, has the right to represent Sylvia Plath at all” (185). In this sense, certain aspects of this criticism –such as the ones concerning the nature of the representation of her death– could be understandable; nevertheless, as a renowned literary figure, the depictions of Plath should be above this controversy. Brain, yet again, uses the word “voyeurism” and its implications to mention the possibility that this has of compromising certain representations (193), and stresses the necessary delicacy in taking up again some events in particular, not only in the case of Sylvia Plath's suicide, but in any alike circumstance. Going back once again to the debate concerning the depictions written by the ones who knew Plath, we should call into question not only the reliability of their account, but also their likeability. These individuals, as Brain puts it afresh, “[...] have a direct line to [the subject's] truth” (186); nonetheless, their cases are feasible to be interpreted as a sensationalist strategy carried out bearing the market in mind.

Keeping this last point in mind, one of my main reservations revolves around the question of how scholars have been critical of authors for not being entirely accurate in their stories. Once these scholars have stated how “[...] the writer owes [him/herself] to accuracy and [to] the feelings of people associated” (Brain 2011: 183), it is also relevant to ask whether this responsibility is susceptible to be kept in mind by the writer or not. It does not seem hard to conceive that “[a]uthors might have agendas other than factual accuracy when portraying a historical person's life and may adapt or appropriate the biographical material for specific purposes” (Hagström 2009: 36). In this sense, for an author, there are many reasons for not

being precise and faithful to real events –especially if his/her desire is to present some facets of Plath’s life differently–; in that case, “[...] reinterpreting [...] may be a political act, or the outcome of a wish to enter into discussion with a canonical work” (36). Anikka Hagström defends the theory that the aim of biofictions could be far from the loyalty to real life and she does so with the help of Linda Hutcheon’s words, who points out that “fictive revisionings of history” are liable to be “new directions in which to think about [them]” (36).

Lastly, to a limited extent, it does not matter anymore if biofictions do not portray the same character than the one we know from Plath’s journals, letters and poems –particularly as these are full of multiple meanings themselves. If we believe, with Malcolm, that “[w]e do not ‘own’ the facts of our lives” (1994: 8), we come to understand that, in this sense, Plath’s life does not belong to her anymore from the moment she, as an author, lost her own text to the hands of readers and writers. Undoubtedly, the voice we are hearing behind these lines is Roland Barthes’ in his essay “The Death of the Author”, where he stated the condition of the author by becoming a product of others’ minds the moment his voice loses its origin. Plath’s case is a suitable one to illustrate Barthes’ theory, given that he also indicated that it is commonly believed that “[...] the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it”, while he himself put forward the idea that “the author is never anything more than the man who writes” and, therefore, “it is [his] language which speaks, not [him]” (1967). These theories can be applied to the reception of Plath’s texts. Precisely, it is when “the author enters his own death, [that the] writing begins”, so biofictions could be interpreted as new beginnings which remodel Plath’s meanings. Once more, Barthes emphasises this last statement by saying that “a text [...] is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing” (1967). Conclusively, we could come back to Hagström’s words to sum up the importance of biofictions in Plath’s conflictive case at the time of interpreting her contradictory images: “Perhaps simply because they are fictive, these works

allow for more freely expressed ideas and fantasies about Plath” (2009: 52), and that explains why there still are scholars, writers, biographers and readers debating, theorising, analysing and creating about her.

### 3.3 “En realidad yo quería hablar de mí”.

*He hecho trampa, los uso a ellos por eso, porque se han convertido casi en un recurso.*

David Aceituno, about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes <sup>35</sup>

As we have already discussed the idea of simply portraying “[...] a different character than the one we know from her journals and letters” (Ferretter 2009: 283), it is now the turn to differentiate these manifestations from each other. While it is true that many of the authors of biofictions follow their personal plans when composing their fictionalised vision of Plath, and surely all of them try to distance their work as much as possible from other creations, it is also appropriate to stress that this is “[a] story that is already [...] overloaded with the thoughts and opinions of those who knew the couple directly or indirectly, or those who didn’t know them at all” (McDowell 2010: 300). In fact, although there are many works written by relatives and acquaintances –as we have already mentioned–, most of them are frequently accounts of their own experiences, and, so, they are not considered biofictions *per se*. In effect, the ones composed by those who did not actually know Plath are mostly based on their personal opinions of Sylvia’s life and death, and, consequently, they describe their own external perceptions. In this sense, there are no longer disagreements –as we have already seen in point nº2.7.1–, given that each author has an agenda and his/her own interpretation to defend. As they stand up for their individual retellings of Plath’s myth, they feel they have a right to abandon allegiance to her figure: in retelling her story they are “perpetuating and

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with the author that can be found in its entirety in Appendix A.

*developing*<sup>36</sup> its status as a contemporary myth” (Ferreter 2009: 281). What is more, for this purpose, biofiction writers feel free to distort and manipulate the information they have “[...] in order to make [the] text fit [their] own [...] interpretation of the Plath story” (Hagström 2009: 36). Luke Ferreter hits the nail right on the head when he points out how Plath’s can also be contemplated “[...] as a story in whose terms contemporary readers and writers make sense of their lives” (2009: 280) and, hence, the proliferation and the relevance of biofictions. As a matter of fact, Ferreter is not the only one who believes in this kind of function of biofictions. His colleague in this field, Anikka Hagström, joins him to state her belief that these fictive depictions not only reveal a partial truth about Plath, but also “[...] tell us something about ourselves –our culture and our time– and about contemporary methods of constructing meaning” (2009: 35).

Furthermore, another important issue that shapes the nature of the biofictions about Plath concerns the moment in life in which their authors are exposed to Plath’s work: the particular moment in which they capture and attain “[their] own reception and consumption of [her] texts...”; that should also be an important part “of what must be examined” (Van Dyne 2006: 18). Besides this, and on general terms, although there are not official studies about it, the tendencies in the creation of biofictions about Plath are worthy of note. In fact, a great number of biofictions have been appearing<sup>37</sup> since 1998, corresponding with Ted Hughes’s death. In the light of recent publications about Sylvia in the last months<sup>38</sup>, there does not seem

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<sup>36</sup> My italics.

<sup>37</sup> To mention a few: the novels *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* in 2001; *Wintering* and *The Well of Lost Plots* in 2003, besides *Sylvia* the film, also in 2003; *Little Fugue* in 2005; the book of poems *Sylvia & Ted* in 2010. If we take other arts into account, there are at least a dozen of songs composed and released between years 2003 and 2009 about Sylvia Plath –most of them contain her name on the title. Among them, we should highlight remarkable names of the industry as Manic Street Preachers or Ryan Adams.

<sup>38</sup> Without going any further, these three books about Plath’s figure have been released in the first two months of 2013: *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* by Carl Rollyson, *Mad Girl’s Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* by Andrew Wilson and *Pain, Parties, Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953* by Elizabeth Winder

to be any downward tendency. This is a fact that partially provides evidence on how authors still have their own images of Plath to share.

Finally, I would like to revisit the figures of those critics who stressed the relevance of remaining faithful to the facts, and their relationship with these last examples of creative and personal representations. As Janet Malcolm has stated, “[i]n fiction [...] the writer faithfully reports on what is going on in his imagination” (1994: 155), and from this assertion we can infer that s/he only owes fidelity to his/her own fictional truth. Additionally, if we consider that the nature of *truth* is in itself “multiple and contradictory” (80), and we assume, as a consequence, that the approach of biofiction is finally as trustworthy –or at least equally legitimate– as that of biography, we could conclude that the value of these depictions “[...] consists in what they *add*<sup>39</sup> to biographical narratives that claim only and entirely to describe real events” (Ferretter 2009: 281). Taking everything into account, I would like to illustrate the thinking of these biofiction writers with the voice of one of them, David Aceituno, who has clearly stated that in writing his book of poems *Sylvia & Ted* he has exonerated himself “[...] pensando que la poesía es más piadosa, le da plasticidad a esos peligros [de] rendirse a la psicología de salón y resbalar; las biografías, los ensayos, no todos, pero sí la mayoría, avanzan con la temeraria intención de aproximarse a la verdad...” (2010b). Aceituno, as any other writer, absolves himself through the figure of Sylvia Plath, uninterruptedly contributing to shape her outline.

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<sup>39</sup> My italics.

### 3.4 *Sylvia & Ted* by David Aceituno

*Plath y Hughes van, página a página, desprendiéndose de Plath y Hughes  
para convertirse en Sylvia y Ted*  
Gonzalo Torné (in Aceituno 2010a: 12).

What Aceituno conducts in his own version of the events concerning this ill-fated couple is an exercise of creativity and delicacy. His book of poems *Sylvia & Ted* –published in 2010– is not just “la última lectura del drama de Plath”, nor “una biografía en verso de sus años de matrimonio con Hughes” (Amadas 2010). Certainly, this book does address the final stages of the couple’s relationship, as their marriage breaks apart. In this sense, even when Ted Hughes was alive, he was aware of the potential that they –Plath and himself– had when both were teamed up. In a letter written about Linda Wagner-Martin’s biography of Sylvia, Hughes commented on the writers that “[...] fail [...] to realize that the most interesting and dramatic part of S. P.’s life is only ½ S.P. –the other ½ is *me*” (in Malcolm 1994: 201). Evidently, David Aceituno is conscious of the prominence that Plath and Hughes have as a duo and not only individually; as a result, he joins them so as to utilise their relationship as the starting point of his story. As Hughes did, Aceituno also understands that their marriage belongs, at this stage, to the cultural history of the last fifty years, and they can be used as textual identities. As a matter of fact, his account of their story begins with the statement that Sylvia and Ted do not manage to free themselves from the yoke that binds them. Aceituno’s first page is used to introduce these characters to the readership, and, while he could have summarised Plath and Hughes’ lives –both in common and separately–, he simply gives the reader one poetic paragraph with a few facts about the marriage. The author considers that, in order to read this book, the reader does not need more than that: he wants people to conceive them as characters. From the beginning the book seems to have the intention of showing us their most private thoughts at close range. To some extent, it is necessary to remember that *Sylvia & Ted* is not just “la última aportación [...] en torno a la pareja”; in fact, to describe it

as such would be “[...] cercenar el significado del libro [y] su capacidad polisémica” (Amadas 2010). What is more, although the author publicly states his intention of talking about the couple (hence the title of the book), his intuition turns them into “[...] artefactos absolutamente autónomos, independientes, con sentido en sí mismos” (Rico 2011). Since we are about to read the story of, a priori, an indivisible couple that has two separate identities stylistically remarked throughout the book<sup>40</sup>, it is time to pay attention to the processes and intentions of the author, among which we can find his idea of “no posicionarme ni a favor del uno ni del otro” (Aceituno 2013).

“¿Cómo convertir *lo que ya no es* en literatura?” (Aceituno 2010a: 21, v.19), says a narrative voice, “[...] una especie de voz que da [...] la perspectiva, en la que ha[y] un distanciamiento con el lector” (Aceituno 2013), and whose identity varies from poem to poem. This narrative voice provides the hermeneutic tool to analyse the relationship with reality of Aceituno’s biofiction; namely, what is the text’s relationship to veracity, on the one hand, and to imagination, on the other, or, is its alliance in the liminal space between the two? While it is true that “[t]he challenge [...] for anybody who turns Plath and Hughes into characters, is to balance everyday banality with those moments when they would have had interesting conversation” (Brain 2011: 188), and thus, an author must select which moments s/he wants to portray as fictive within his/her own account, Aceituno does not seem to tell a true story to the reader, but rather, “[...] se para a observar esta relación, imaginar qué pudo sentir cada uno, y condensar ese sufrimiento en sus poemas”. In this sense, it is necessary to highlight that he, “[e]n ningún momento[,] cae en el tono melodramático que una historia como ésta podría fácilmente adoptar” (Amadas 2010). To a certain degree, Aceituno manages to steer through the melodrama and the opportunistic propensity of the topic. Although not an easy task, he makes it conceivable to portray Sylvia and Ted in ways that are entirely

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<sup>40</sup> Aceituno does not put together the characters in his poems; he never shares two voices in one poem, allowing each character to have his/her own space to express, as they please, their thoughts.

imaginative but still biographically plausible. In order to do that, an author needs to be convincing when completing this task, given that “[...] few –very few– writers are good enough to imagine Plath’s thoughts or words in [this] manner” (Brain 2011: 193). An example of the plausibility that we are discussing is to be found in poem III, in which the narrator –in this poem seems to be Sylvia– states that “[s]upe que todo se había roto / cuando vi que tu traje favorito te quedaba algo más grande” (23, vv. 1-2). As readers, we cannot know with certainty if the specific act of noticing Hughes’s body shape shrinking was a way for Plath to discover –or at least suspect– that he was having an affair. However, we do not doubt its plausibility; actually, it was something likely to have happened, in which case what matters the most is its plausibility at an emotional level, and not only as a factual truth. Such is the case of many other verses, for example, when Ted declares in poem XV that “Yo quería huír. No deseaba a tu rival” (42, v.6), or when he implores Plath in poem XXI: “sé equanime dobla por la / mitad la culpa que me echas / hace tiempo que en nuestra / querida casa la parte rota / ocupa más que la invisible” (52, vv.2-6). These various examples serve to illustrate how Aceituno deposits in Ted’s mind emotions and words that, whether they were or not for real in his thoughts, contain a partial truth if we take into account what we know about Hughes in those specific chapters of his life<sup>41</sup>. It is true that we will never know with certainty nor will we have evidence for these events to have taken place, though they do in Aceituno’s imaginary since they convey some kind of truth according to the author’s perceptions. Additionally, the author explains how “Ted empezaba a moverse con comodidad en lo que [el autor] estaba escribiendo y se mostraba como un buen rival ideológico y escenográfico de Plath” (2010b), and that accounts for Ted’s own independency as a character within Aceituno’s book. Aceituno believes a character develops his own story in any text by leaving reality aside and so, in his own words, what is narrated in the book “[n]o es del todo

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<sup>41</sup> That is to say, the reliability of Hughes’s rejection of Assia, or Hughes’ intention in sharing the blame with Plath, which are episodes that we could relate to how Hughes looked down on Assia back in 1962, or the fact that Hughes had always defended that he was not the only one to blame for the rupture of the marriage.

fidedigno” (2013). He is aware that while some aspects are “completamente inventad[o]s en el libro”<sup>42</sup>, there are also, for instance, “descripciones que son muy fieles”<sup>43</sup>, as is the case, pointed out by the author, of “el color rojo de Plath”<sup>44</sup> (2013), referring to her obsession with this particular colour and the importance that has been given to it in Plath’s imagery. Beside this, we have also mentioned, earlier in this text, Plath’s drive to suffering up to her own limits in order to write about it. However, she had never affirmed this in such an open manner as Aceituno makes her state: “Para la creación debes encontrar un espacio que no sea éste. El / tono que te gusta es el que te arranca el alma a tiras” (27, vv. 26-27). Masterfully, Aceituno fuses established facts with the figments of his imagination, and the result is a space of poetic possibility to express what Sylvia and Ted might have felt and thought about themselves and about each other. Furthermore, in doing so, Aceituno “[s]e envalentona a distorsionarlos lo suficiente para ensayar un camino propio” (Torné en Aceituno 2010a: 11).

With reference to the reasons that an author has to start writing about him/herself, and the possibility of conceiving his/her work as the product of a cathartic discharge<sup>45</sup>, David Aceituno is not an exception: he also wants to talk about himself when composing *Sylvia & Ted*, and uses Plath and Hughes as “[...] un pretexto, (o se puede leer como mero pretexto) para hablar de pasiones y sentimientos que trascienden los nombres propios de los poetas: la soledad, el miedo, el sufrimiento, los celos” (Amadas 2010) as emotions that he shares with his characters. To some extent, Aceituno is writing about himself and about global concerns,

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<sup>42</sup> To illustrate this with an example, there was no such “señor Hope” who owns a candle store, as narrated in poem XXII (53 v.7-8), or an audience of 247 people listening to Hughes reciting Plath’s favorites poems twelve years after her death, as stated in the introduction to the poem XXVII (58).

<sup>43</sup> Among these we could point out a few examples, as is the case of the infamous London’s cold winter of 1963, mentioned in poems I (21) and XXVII (59), or the fact that Ted, in Sylvia’s funeral, told their friend Jillian Becker that everybody hated Sylvia, collected in the poem II (22, v.4).

<sup>44</sup> “A ver si adivinas el color de mi vestido nuevo antes de que / [lo arrastre por el lodo / ¿Rojo, dices?” (51, vv.5-6/19)

<sup>45</sup> A point previously developed in part nº 2.1 of this Master’s thesis.

adapting these to the story. In fact, when asked about the reason why he chose Plath to hide his own narration, he undoubtedly asserted his intention of using them as a mask:

[...] las novelas utilizan datos reales en función de los intereses narrativos del autor, que es quien finalmente escoge dónde pone el clímax. Mi intención al escribir el libro todavía no la tengo clara, pero creo que ha sido más parecida a esta última: es ambicioso decirlo pero espero que los lectores piensen más en sus propias vidas, en sus problemas y en cómo resolverlos, que en la relación de una pareja de la que apenas podemos saber nada (2010b).

Thereby, with these words, Aceituno is confirming again his intention of verbalising his own problems; by writing this book he would have been trying to “[...] encauzar una duda vital que se me planteó [...] casi de repente a raíz de una relación que se mostró compleja sin que me diera cuenta” (2010b). However, in this particular venture he had to dip into other people’s lives, given that composing these poems without them in mind would have laid bare certain uncomfortable intimacies. Despite the fact that Aceituno wears a mask, he does not hide behind it: “[I]o que es mío es el sentimiento de dolor, la experiencia del dolor” (2013). When asked about the nature of his processes of adaptation of the poems that, inspired by his own experience, he had already in his mind before deciding to adjust them to Sylvia and Ted’s story, the author simply replies that he did not sit on a table “[...] pensando que tenía que cambiar de enfoque el tipo de poesía que me interesaba [,] ni me planteé racionalmente al principio utilizar la historia de Sylvia Plath y Ted Hughes como modelo”. Although he was attracted by Plath’s “[...] desajuste entre el mundo interior y el exterior” (2010b), and, at the first stages of his creation, he was similarly fascinated by the question of how one represents what one might feel when one’s own partner commits suicide, Aceituno finally decided not to use only one of those sources of inspiration but to use them both as he felt he also needed to explain both sides of the story: his (Hughes/Aceituno) and hers (Plath/Aceituno). Even if Aceituno has been praised with portraying equally Sylvia’s and Ted’s position, he himself does not contemplate the possibility of attaining a perfect balance. To tell the truth, he does

not believe that there is “[...] un posicionamiento definitivo, a no ser que arranques ya con unas ganas de posicionarte” (2013). Both sides are equally prone to criticism or support. As a matter of fact, his intention is to use them “[...] como recurso pero no para llegar a ninguna verdad de ningún tipo”. What he aims to do is to “difuminar o emborronar lo que la gente piensa [de ellos]” (2013).

*Sylvia & Ted* is a work of risk that Aceituno decides to take on account of his willing to carry through such a thematic and formal challenge. With reference to its language and form, it could be said that the book accomplishes its author’s notion of depicting “un recorrido, entre lo emotivo, lo psicológico y lo literario” (Rico 2011) that has as its main core “los diálogos entre vivos y muertos” (Aceituno 2010b). His poems are received as if the protagonists were directly talking to the reader; once dead, they have written poetry again. Certainly, some critics have pointed out Aceituno’s capacity to metabolise the poetry of these two writers (Rico 2011), although, as he has stated, his intentions are far from this: “[n]o he pretendido imitarlos, aunque a lo mejor sí que se [me] ha escapado” (2013). Accordingly, the poems in the book manage to preserve a certain equilibrium; the author seemed to have introduced a couple of stylistic guidelines concerning, for instance, how “[...] en los poemas, los vivos podían hablar con los muertos, y los muertos podían escuchar lo que decían los vivos”. In the same way, he intended the text not to follow “[...] el orden cronológico de los hechos tal como fueron, sino que iba a estar a disposición del ritmo que [él mismo] quería imponer.” (2010b). Moreover, Aceituno also conceived the “titles” of the poems –in which he tends to indicate the character talking in each– as verses that also belong to the body of the poem, sometimes longer than the text itself. For him, “[e]sa voz es la que se sitúa [...] como si supiera algo que el lector está a punto de saber” (2010b), and it provides the reader with the precise information that the author wants him/her to have. At the same time, these titles also served the purpose of contextualising the poems; they are also “una especie de voz que da

[...] la perspectiva, en la que ha[y] un distanciamiento con el lector” (2013). For all these aspects, the book stands out “[por el] lenguaje depurado, austero de su poesía, y por la capacidad que demuestra el autor en captar la esencia del drama ajeno” (Amadas 2010).

*Sylvia & Ted* also approaches a few content aspects from a new perspective, providing images of Plath and Hughes that we had never seen before. While each poem can be considered “[...] una nueva visión sobre los hechos” (Amadas 2010) in itself, because it allows us to penetrate in the story from all the angles created by Aceituno’s imagination, we should not forget that they are supposed to contain a certain grade of authenticity. Although it could be true that each one of them “[...] es consecuencia de una anécdota o de un capítulo” (Rico 2011), there are specific examples of how, in getting closer to Plath’s mind, the author allows himself to relate intimate episodes as no one has ever done before. Aceituno’s intention in his daring when inscribing Plath’s eroticism in his poems –as he does in poem V, where Sylvia “[e]mpieza[...] a tocar[s]e” (27, v.33) when she imagines her husband having sex with another woman–, is using poetry to be able to create these risky narrations. Actually, as the situation is “lo suficientemente maleable como para poder poner a Plath masturbándose” (2013), he apologises in advance for this audacity and justifies his decision by reminding us of Plath’s attraction to pain<sup>46</sup>. In this case, nonetheless, the kind of pain described emerges from the fantasy that Plath is having when picturing her husband with another woman. In a sense, Aceituno interprets Plath’s action as a way of both provoking and calming pain; he describes how “[...] los dedos / buscan el centro del dolor, ya húmedo” (27, vv.45-46). The described situation could perfectly have happened, and yet, when asked about its plausibility, Aceituno extrapolates his answer to the rest of the book: “Es una verdad parcial” (2013). The partial truth of this particular episode could be compared to that provided

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<sup>46</sup> This idea is stressed throughout the book, as in poem IV, in which Ted refers to this Pain: “Prefieres al Dolor como marido / Lo conociste antes que a mí / Él sabe cómo tratarte / Tú sabes cuándo va a llegar a casa” (25, vv.14-17), or poem XIII, in which Plath affirms “Lo que hacen los demás con el dolor y lo que hago yo con el dolor. / Ésa podría ser una manera de clasificarlo todo” (40, vv. 32-33).

by biographies, a genre that Aceituno attacks –putting that criticism in Plath’s mouth in poem XVIII<sup>47</sup>. Nonetheless, he ends up contradicting himself on this topic, “porque al final yo estoy haciendo algo así” (2013). Certainly, “[t]he writer of serious biofiction, in fact, has a lot in common with the biographer. Both aim at presenting their stories as plausible, and they both interpret facts and sources” (Hagström 2009: 35). However, one main difference between the task of the biographer and that of the biofiction author lies in their use of the compiled information: Aceituno admits that he made use of “la información un poco en función de lo que le fuera bien a los poemas” (2013), putting it at the service of his art. Likewise, he felt as if “[...] cuanto más [s]e documentaba más se limitaba [su] capacidad de escribir sobre ambos; no [l]e interesaba saber demasiado de ellos” (2010b). In this sense, we could say that the author is as truthful as can be, if we are ready to agree that in biofictions “[w]hat seems important [...] is not any certainty that it happened like this. Rather, it is the plausibility that such moment did occur” (Brain 2011: 189-190). In spite of everything, Aceituno does not try to reveal the “one and only” truth about the couple, or even judge them; he just aims to “[...] comprender los sentimientos y las pasiones y los miedos que tuvieron (o sufrieron) [...] a lo largo de su relación” (Amadas 2010).

In the same way that Aceituno seems to have been the first to portray Plath’s intimacy in such a trespassing way, he is also responsible for saving from oblivion the figure of Assia Wevill and providing her with a voice. Although he has stated that the use of her figure –in accordance to his use of the figures of Aurelia Plath and Nicholas and Frieda Hughes– is rescued as a resource “para darle equilibrio al texto,[...] para bajar la tensión [y] [...] cambiar de tema”, he also admits that bringing her back, not only as the rival but also as the third part of the triangle, is due to morbid fascination: “[l]a escena era jugosa para representarla” (2013). Wevill’s appearance in this story provides Aceituno with “[...] la posibilidad de

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<sup>47</sup>In poem XVIII Sylvia attacks straightaway poem XVII, which is the back cover of Wagner-Martin’s biography, by asking “¿Qué hay de verdad en ella? / ¿”Personaje”? ¿Yo?” (45, vv. 6/14).

abordar otros temas, como [...] la culpa o los celos” (2010b). Significantly, we get in touch with Assia’s thoughts for the first time, as she talks, directly, to Sylvia: “Lo único que hice yo fue pasar por allí / poner mi hocico en la tristeza, / husmear una parcela de futuro. / Tus celos me invocaron [...]” (35, vv.5-8). In this manner, Aceituno not only gives the reader the opportunity of witnessing a possible world in which a dialogue between the two ill-fated wives of Ted Hughes had taken place, but he uses Assia to describe Sylvia’s part of guilt for her personal situation.

All these aspects considered, it seems as if David Aceituno’s final aim with *Sylvia & Ted* is to depict universal themes, and not only confine his words within a closed story. Although it is obvious that the figures of Plath and Hughes are crucial, he would like to believe that, “[...] independientemente de los datos que tiene, se puede leer como un libro sobre una relación, no cualquiera pero más o menos fructuosa”. In relation to the readers, his “[...] intención era que le gustara a gente que no los conoce o que esto les impulsara a leer la poesía de Plath y Hughes” (2013), adding, thus, a possible new value to their texts. As a matter of fact, this last consideration recapitulates to perfection the reason why the existence of Plath’s biofictions is and will remain indispensable for her fiction never to be forgotten.

## Conclusions

The first part of this research has aimed at briefly observing and sketching the ways fictive worlds are created, and it has tried to intertwine that with some thoughts on the nature of the author's reasons for creating a work of fiction. This theoretical framework grounded on the work of theoreticians on narratology and possible world semantics has provided me with the necessary tools to analyse my corpus of choice from the perspective that I thought was most useful to defend my thesis in this project. Having established this background, and as a result of the exploration of the process undergone by Plath –from a character in her fiction, to biographical object, to a character in other writer's fictions–, some ideas took preeminence in my project. First of all, and as David Aceituno asserted, Sylvia Plath, “[...] de alguna manera, se [...] buscó [...] acabar convertida en personaje” (2013). He, of course, is making reference to Plath's predisposition to the fictionalisation of the events of her life –throughout her poetic oeuvre but also in the entries of her journals and in the letters to her family– with the intention of retelling them as she pleased. Although Plath's fictionalisation of her own self began as an attempt to manage her own, sometimes convoluted, life and the relationship of her inner world with the exterior one, it ended up in a complete reconstruction of her own self in fiction, and she inevitably became her own character. As I have tried to show in the body of this Master's thesis, this entailed a problem, since she started looking for experiences in real life so as to fictionalise them and, ultimately, this process, when taken to its extreme, blurred, in her mind, the line dividing fiction from reality, leading her to believe that what she wrote in fiction had to always be, in a sense, real. Thus, in order to be truthful and consequent with her final writings –and with the idea that to live, one needs to die first– she committed suicide. Nonetheless, as stated earlier in the text, life does not offer second chances in the way art does (Malcolm 1994: 7). All in all, and from this perspective, her suicide authenticated the truth of her poems.

Secondly, and after analysing the ultimate consequences of her having become a character of her own fiction, the last part of this MA thesis has offered an overview and analysis of the nature of Sylvia Plath as character in the fiction of other writers. The biofictions analysed in these pages have been shown to be, still today, fifty years from her death, logical ways to continue with her work and to keep turning her into a character. After all, Plath “[...] ha[...] dejado de ser [una] persona[...], ahora ya la gente puede hacer con ell[a] lo que quiera” (Aceituno 2013). Biofictions of Plath can be considered new ways of keeping Plath alive in the collective conscience of readers; they are also ways of continuing Plath’s work. By resuming her life and her poetry and developing new ideas evolving from her own words, biofictions bring Plath back to life as a character, which in Plath's own imagination would entail coming back to life in the flesh, too.

On the other hand, I also developed some notions on the role of biography in comparison to biofictions and mapped the problematic ways in which these two genres merge and/or diverge. Although Martínez Bonati states that, “[s]e han escrito [...] obras de ficción que pretenden referirse al mismo individuo imaginado en otras, y ello da lugar a un juego intertextual de interés, pero totalmente diferente del tipo de relación que tienen unas con otras diferentes biografías de un mismo 'personaje' histórico" (1992: 107), I have come to the conclusion that biofictions are as reliable as biographies, since both are composed on the basis of the same material: Plath's fiction and journal entries. Furthermore, both kinds of texts are deeply imbued with their author’s particular point of view, subjective interpretation and personal opinion.

My work when writing this MA thesis has been constrained by the required extension of a text of this kind. As a consequence, a series of concepts have remained to be developed further: firstly, the figure of the reader and his/her role in the reception of the text; secondly, and in relation to the figure of Sylvia Plath, mainly dealt with in the second part of this text, I

would have liked to focus on the significance of the figure of the Phoenix in Plath's poetry, as a constant in her work, and as a particularly relevant image which would have brought to the fore Plath's belief in resurrection after death which, in turn, it would have been interesting to link to my interpretation of her suicide as an attempt to authenticate her poetry. In this sense, a great part of the possible mythological analysis of her work has also been cast aside. Thirdly, given that it was not my intention to assume and accomplish a thorough analysis of Plath's poetry, the main sources of this dissertation are not primary ones: only a few quotes are taken from her work; namely, just a few verses and one or two letters and journal entries as a way of illustrating the points dealt with above. It was a decision taken in an attempt to remain coherent with the main objective of this MA thesis, clearly centred upon the life of the authoress and its relationship with her writing process, rather than with the texts themselves. Last but not least, I lament not having developed further the analysis of the poems in *Sylvia & Ted*, which have proved to be an original and innovative voice to add to the debate concerning Sylvia Plath and the manifold ways of portraying and fictionalising her.

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## Appendix A

### Interview with David Aceituno, author of *Sylvia & Ted*.

David Aceituno, was born in Badalona in 1977. He graduated in Philosophy from the University of Barcelona, and since then, he has been working as a reader, proofreader and editor in various publishing houses. Besides *Sylvia & Ted* (Ed. Olifante, 2010), he is also the author of the illustrated books, *Besos que fueron y no fueron* (Ed. Lumen 2011) and *Ensueños* (Ed. Beascoa 2012). The following interview was conducted in Barcelona, 29th April, 2013<sup>48</sup>.

***Pregunta Lara A. Serodio: Existen las infinitas posibilidades de la página en blanco... ¿Por qué Sylvia Plath?***

*Respuesta David Aceituno:* Bueno, en realidad era una máscara. Muchos de los poemas de *Sylvia & Ted* ya estaban hechos antes de que yo me fijara en la figura de Sylvia Plath. Yo había tenido una relación complicada con una chica y entonces de pronto, una manera de ocultarme fue a usar a Plath; la empezaba a conocer y cada vez me metí más. De Ted Hughes, además, me gusta mucho su poesía, entonces encontré que había paralelismos entre mi historia y la historia de ellos.

**P: Antes de nada, me gustaría partir preguntándote por el proceso del libro; cómo surgió la idea, qué querías conseguir con ella...**

D.A.: Mi intención un poco era, digamos, no posicionarme ni a favor del uno ni del otro. No veía tan claro que el culpable de la muerte o del estado anímico de Plath fuera Ted Hughes; ella tenía antecedentes, ya había tenido dos intentos de suicidio. Ni ella era tan buena, ni él era tan malo.

**P: Supongo que eres consciente del acto que supone crear ficción a través de la realidad que se lleva a cabo en tu libro, y no sé hasta qué punto tú tenías la realidad (las vidas de Ted, Sylvia, Assia y hasta de Frieda, Nicholas y Aurelia, que hacen su aparición como personajes breves) presente a la hora de desarrollarlo; es obvio que hay un conocimiento por tu parte...**

D.A.: No es del todo fidedigno; igual que hay descripciones que son muy fieles (el color rojo de Plath), hay cosas que son completamente inventadas en el libro. Utilicé la información un

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<sup>48</sup> The interview was conducted in Spanish.

poco en función de lo que le fuera bien a los poemas, y a lo que yo quería. Era un reto en ese sentido, por eso jugaba también con la máscara.

**P: Tus poemas son recibidos como si los propios protagonistas nos estuviesen hablando, después de muertos han escrito poesía nuevamente ¿En algún momento trataste de copiar el estilo de la poesía de los autores? En el caso de que sea así, ¿por qué / con qué intención? En el caso de que no lo sea, ¿no te hubiera parecido una buena idea a seguir?**

D.A.: Supongo que estoy influenciado sobretodo más por Hughes que por Plath, he leído más a Hughes que a ella. No he pretendido imitarlos, a lo mejor sí que se ha escapado, o hay alguna influencia. De hecho, también me fijo un poco en Anne Carson, es una poeta canadiense muy recomendable. Tiene un libro que se llama “La Belleza del Marido”, que era también la historia de un matrimonio que se descompone que ya iba con el tema. Hay una influencia un poco de todo.

**P: ¿Qué método de trabajo seguiste? Como Sylvia en sus primeras fases, con diccionario, datos y listas a mano, o como la Sylvia de *Ariel*, dejando que saliera todo lo que había dentro...**

D.A.: No soy nada metódico, A lo largo de un año y medio que he estado escribiendo esto, había épocas que no trabajaba mucho ni seguía un método fijo. Había poemas que ya estaban escritos y que he adaptado a la historia.

**P: Me gustaría preguntarte por el idioma real de los personajes, es decir, la poesía concebida por ellos era en inglés. ¿En algún momento esto se te pasó por la cabeza? O tú ya concibes a tus Sylvia y Ted como castellano parlantes, y por lo tanto en ningún momento se te ha ocurrido pensar que ellos no hablaban el idioma en el que se están expresando ahora gracias a ti...**

D.A.: Bueno, en eso tuve mucha libertad, no lo podía escribir en inglés directamente. Había expresiones como *my significant lover* que usaba Sylvia para referirse a Ted, que aquí sería algo como ‘mi media naranja’. Había términos como estos que sí que llamaban mi atención pero no como para plantearme escribir en su idioma.

**P: Formalmente, ¿veías necesario poner esos títulos-situación de la escena? ¿Lo sentías como una necesidad para el lector o forman parte de tu obra como tal?**

D.A.: Eso también es una influencia de Anne Carson. Y que servían para contextualizar el poema. Eran también una especie de voz que daba la perspectiva, en la que había un distanciamiento con el lector.

**P: ¿Qué exigencia tienes de cara a tus lectores? ¿Crees que es necesario conocer la historia previa para entender los poemas, o más bien se capta la idea universal que pueden expresar, aun siendo consciente de que pueden perderse matices (aunque ganan otros propios, los ajenos a Plath y Hughes)**

D.A.: No, me gustaría pensar que independientemente de los datos que tiene, se puede leer como un libro sobre una relación, no cualquiera pero más o menos fructuosa. Mi intención era que le gustara a gente que no los conoce o que esto les impulsara a leer la poesía de Plath y Hughes.

**P: ¿Has tenido que explicarles a tus allegados quiénes eran Sylvia y Ted para que entendieran sobre quién escribías, o has preferido dejar que lo descubran por ellos mismos?**

D.A.: Nadie me ha preguntado, no. Los han concebido como personajes. Mi familia, que no lee mucho, los ha conocido por primera vez y ya se han enterado un poco de la historia, pero ya suponiendo que la historia no es verídica, que no es la misma.

**P: Toda persona que escribe sobre Plath y Hughes acaba posicionándose, ¿tú también lo haces? Personalmente, ¿eres del Ted's Team o del Sylvia's Team?**

D.A.: Lo veo muy complicado, está claro. No sé si eso se puede resolver. No creo que haya un posicionamiento definitivo, a no ser que arranques ya con unas ganas de posicionarte. Hughes no era bueno, está claro que era *un pieza*, luego se demuestra también cuando Assia se suicida, las feministas le saltaron encima. Sylvia Plath ya venía con su idea de perfección: querer hacerlo todo y bien. Ser la madre perfecta y luego poder escribir, era complicada ya, con esa figura paterna siempre presente. Digamos que siempre tenía la sensación al leer a la Plath que lo quería todo. Y luego, el libro también ha sido una respuesta a Linda Wagner-Martin, que al leerlo había cosas que me indignaban

**P: ¿Cómo definirías tu libro? Una versión propia, que parte de una recreación de los hechos, algo completamente imaginario de pies a cabeza, etc....**

D.A.: Es una creación propia. Siempre he tenido la sensación de riesgo de ‘no sé muy bien qué estoy haciendo’ pero me apetecía hacerlo, me interesaba la parte de los diálogos entre vivos y muertos. Y luego también tiene un tono teatral, podría ser también una pieza de teatro. Y, básicamente, intentar decir que las versiones oficiales que hay, ninguna podría llegar a un acuerdo... Ataco la biografía como género, mi intención es esa. Un poco contradictorio porque al final yo estoy haciendo algo así.

**P: ¿Qué consideras que hay de verdad en la historia que cuentas?**

D.A.: Es una verdad parcial.

**P: Ya me has dicho que eres lector de Plath, aunque más de Hughes. ¿Esto te convirtió en autor al interpretar sus poemas? ¿O más bien sentías que en sus poemas estaba todo dicho y hacía falta otra vuelta de tuerca en su vida?**

D.A.: No me faltaba nada, en realidad yo quería hablar de mí. He hecho trampa, los uso a ellos por eso, porque se han convertido casi en un recurso. La gente conoce más la historia de Sylvia Plath que sus poemas.

**P: ¿Crees que Hughes sobrevivió a Sylvia Plath? Tomo de referencia, por ejemplo, el poema en el que Hughes habla sobre Sylvia en una conferencia y piensa “Fachada, fachada, fachada”.**

D.A.: ¿Ves? Eso es mentira, él nunca dio esa conferencia delante de esas personas. Pero es una situación perfectamente factible. Él, luego con Cartas de Cumpleaños posiblemente consiguió hacerlo.

**P: Yo he tenido la sensación de que rescatas y hasta reivindicas la figura de Assia Wevill. ¿Cuál es tu intención haciendo esto? (porque yo personalmente lo he agradecido mucho y considero que es una de las cosas que hacen al libro más emotivo y humano, menos dentro del ‘mito Plath’).**

D.A.: No soy consciente de eso. La rescato como recurso, para darle equilibrio al texto. Igual que cuando hablan también los hijos. Es para bajar la tensión, para cambiar de tema. El de Assia es un papel en el que ella también tiene algo que decir, también formaba parte de la historia. La escena era jugosa para representarla, Plath hecha polvo, imaginándose a los dos juntos, dale que te pego.

**P: Tengo que preguntarte por el atrevimiento que supone trasladar a Plath a un terreno erótico como hace el poema V. de la primera parte, donde ella “Empieza[...] a tocar[s]e”. ¿Eras consciente de que era así o simplemente formaba parte de tú ficción de ella y no te lo planteaste como algo novedoso?**

D.A.: Era un poco arriesgado, y uso la poesía para poder hacer estas cosas. Era lo suficientemente maleable como para poder poner a Plath masturbándose. También me intenté imaginar cómo ella sentía una atracción hacia el dolor, el dolor al final se convierte en una fantasía.

**P: Yo tengo una teoría conspiratoria sobre los diarios perdidos de Plath, creo que algún día aparecerán. ¿Qué opinas del gesto de haber hecho desaparecer semejante testamento? ¿Hay que tener en cuenta a las personas reales que para nosotros son personajes? ¿Tuviste tú esto en mente cuando escribías o más bien es algo que se te antoja bastante lejano como para reparar en ello?**

D.A.: No se me pasó por la cabeza para nada, la verdad es que no. Es muy complicado: han dejado de ser personas, ahora ya la gente puede hacer con ellos lo que quiera. En algún momento me imaginé: si esto lo llegan a leer en algún momento los hijos, pero no...

**P: ¿Crees que Sylvia no quería morir, cómo dicen algunas teorías? (Álvarez, más particularmente)**

D.A.: Bueno, no se puede saber. Pero... yo creo que quería volver a ser rescatada como las otras veces. Incluso las otras dos veces habían sido intentos más difíciles, se había escondido mucho. Creo que ella creía en que los suicidios le daban una especie de renacimiento y creo que como había llegado a un final, quería volver a empezar. No creo que quisiera morir, pero bueno, hay riesgo cuando intentas suicidarte; el vecino al que le llegó el gas, la niñera que no llegó a tiempo... En Mondadori me pidieron que escribiera un artículo, ahí hablaba un poco de eso. El tema de qué hacer con el suicidio de los demás: cómo la gente le intenta dar un sentido cuando el sentido sólo lo tiene para la persona. Hay una parte también aleatoria: muchos intentos de suicidio son errores de cálculo. Calculaba mal, pensaba que sólo iba a llamar la atención y al revés... Sobre el libro de Álvarez: es un poco ego, un poco ‘yo’ ‘yo’ ‘yo’, y no ella.

**P: ¿Has leído alguna bio-fiction más de Plath y/o Hughes? (Algún poemario sobre ellos, o alguna novela, la película, etc.). Si es que sí, ¿compartes alguna visión?**

D.A.: No, la película sí la vi pero me pareció malísima, hay escenas cliché. Claro, yo hablo de esto y critico tal o cual pero luego también acabo haciéndolo. Pero bueno, mi intención era eso, dejarlo lo suficientemente borroso como para que nadie tenga oportunidad de venir con un hacha. Yo los utilizo como recurso pero no para llegar a ninguna verdad de ningún tipo. Justo lo que quiero es difuminar o emborronar lo que la gente piensa, por eso hablan ellos.

**P: En este país Plath y Hughes no tienen tanto tirón mediático, ni se ha creado firmemente un mito como en Inglaterra o EEUU, sin embargo, ¿crees que tu poemario llevado a otra lengua hubiera tenido el potencial que toda historia verdadera tiene? Ya sabes, la coletilla de ‘basado en...’ Lo comento porque hay páginas web en las que estudian hasta el último caso de bio-ficción sobre Plath y son unos cuantos.**

D.A.: Bueno, parece que poco a poco van a más, cada vez son más conocidos. Ahora rescatan las cartas, etc. Sin embargo, no me había planteado nunca si en USA o en UK hubiera tenido tirón. De hecho, no sabía que hasta ese nivel estaba la locura por ellos. Me suena aquí una novela, de Tennant, que se publicó en Lumen, pero poco más.

**P: Siguiendo la línea de la pregunta anterior, ¿tuviste problemas para encontrar editorial o alguien que creyera en este libro, y en su tema?**

D.A.: Envié a unas cuantas. Fue gracioso porque lo envié a Bartleby, entonces me respondió el jefe que era interesante pero que no. Al final lo envié a Olifante un viernes y el lunes me respondieron que les había gustado. Está complicado publicar. Al cabo de un año y pico salió una crítica muy buena de Manuel Rico, que es el director de la colección de poesía de Bartleby. Quiero decir, este hombre, que dirige la colección a la que yo aspiraba, el libro no le llegó a sus manos. Estuve a punto de enviarle un mail y todo... Pero esto pasa mucho en el mundo editorial. Desgasta mucho.

**P: Vivimos como personas, existimos como personajes. Tú, como autor al igual que Sylvia, también eres un personaje como ella, difuminado ¿Qué hay de ti en *Sylvia & Ted*?**

D.A.: Lo que es mío es el sentimiento de dolor, la experiencia del dolor. Y ella, de alguna manera se lo buscó, acabar convertida en personaje.

## Appendix B

### Sara Morante, illustrator: *Traces of Her Sylvia Plath.*



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Sara Morante, born in Cantabria in 1976, has quickly become one of the most recognised illustrators of literary publishing in Spain. She studied Applied Arts in Spain and Ireland. In her career, she has been awarded with the Premio Nacional de Arte Joven in 2008 and with the Premio Euskadi de Ilustración in 2012. Among her works stand out her illustrations for the following books: *The Red Shoes* by H. C. Andersen, *The Red Flower* by Vsevolod

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<sup>49</sup> Image reproduced with permission of the author.

Garshin, *Xingú* by Edith Wharton, *The Watsons* by Jane Austen and *Dictionnaire de Littérature à l'usage des Snobs* by Fabrice Gignault. She has also undertaken several collaborations in press and advertising, and has been curator of exhibitions of illustrators and writers.

On the score of the publication of the *Dictionnaire de Littérature à l'usage des Snobs*' translation to Spanish, Morante had to illustrate dozens of writers, among which there was Sylvia Plath. Her choice when deciding on representing Plath as the perfect American housewife is, indeed, slightly ironic. Plath's pose and clothing try to illustrate the image that she wanted to expose in front of everyone's eyes. The sardonic touch comes from the baking sheet that softly insinuates Plath's final. In connecting these aspects of her life, Morante depicts the authoress with two of her most famous features: her willingness of perfection and her tragic end. In a sense, it could be understood that the Plath illustrated in this image is holding her necessity of accomplishing it all in her hands, and, at the same time, she also holds her fate as a kind of prediction.

Nothing better than Morante's own words to explain her intentions in portraying Plath: "Sylvia Plath se encontraba entre varios de los escritores de los que hablaba, con elegancia y mucha mala baba, el escritor Fabrice Gignault en su *Diccionario de literatura para esnobs*. Fue un encargo de la editorial Impedimenta, una entre los 30 escritores más que retraté.

El texto de Gignault habla de un episodio en la vida de Plath que me impactó sobremanera, su suicidio. Me conmovió el hecho de que atendiera sus obligaciones de madre antes de poner fin a su vida, dejando el desayuno de sus hijos preparado y servido antes de meter la cabeza dentro del horno. Por supuesto, a raíz de este encargo me interesé por la vida y obra de la Plath buscando información al margen de la que ofrecía Gignault, pero aun así esa escena se quedó fija en mi cabeza, me pareció que era colosal a la hora de retratarla a ella. Barajé diferentes opciones, todas ellas situándola en el lugar de su muerte, la cocina, y al final

opté por ese uso "dulce" del electrodoméstico: horneando magdalenas. Más tarde supe que Sylvia Plath sufrió un episodio "maníaco" y sorprendió a su esposo, Ted Hughes, horneando decenas y decenas de magdalenas, encontrándose él la cocina completamente llena de estos dulces de buena mañana. Desconozco si es verídico. Para "vestirla" opté por una pose y una vestimenta típica en la publicidad de los años 50 y 60; mujeres perfectamente vestidas y peinadas ocupándose de las labores del hogar y a la espera de la llegada de sus maridos tras una dura jornada laboral. Esto creo que encierra cierta ironía con la vida de Sylvia Plath"<sup>50</sup>.

Even the author of the illustration admits that the place where Plath must be portrayed is, inevitably, the one of her own death, considering in this manner that her suicide and her figure are inseparable. Nevertheless, Morante chooses a "sweet" way in doing so –as she states–, given that this image of Plath should also be inseparable from her name. In fact, the "maníaco" episode that Morante refers to is represented in *Sylvia*, the 2003 film, where Plath, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, is not capable of writing and, consequently, she bakes without being able to stop.

As a matter of fact, visually, these two Sylvias (Morante's and Paltrow's) are quite similar to a certain extent. Both are dressed in the same polished way and emit a similar appearance of perfectionism. Nonetheless, there is a slight difference between them, relying on her face's expression. Morante's Sylvia is not happy; she seems unnatural, forced to play the role that she is so enthusiastically offering along with her muffins. It could be said that something in her eyes wishes to be elsewhere, probably writing. While Paltrow's Sylvia asks her husband in the film whether he is not happy with all the baked cakes –as any husband would be–, and Hughes' character answers that he would be happier if she would have been writing (Jeffs 2003: min.27), Morante's Sylvia seems to think in the same line of Hughes' last thought: she should be writing.

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