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SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE JOURNALS OF SYLVIA PLATH* AND *DIARIES* OF *VIRGINIA WOOLF*

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> This question of the subject and the living "who" is at the heart of the most pressing concerns of modern societies.
> —Derrida 1991, 115

AS Derrida's poststructuralist theory implies this focus on the self has become one of the defining issues of modern and postmodern cultures and at the same time the topic of subjectivity has interested scholars from variety of fields such as philosophy, psychology, and literature. Due to multiplicity of approaches, subjectivity and self have become problematic concepts. Some twentieth century novelists and theorists declare that it is hard or even impossible to describe the nature or character of the subject, the others, for example Frederic Jameson, even reject the existence of "the self" or "the author." Furthermore a number of novelists such as D. H. Lawrence, reject in their fiction the old stable ego of character and as Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" human character had changed around December 1920.

Another reason why the term subjectivity has a challenging concept is, as Regenia Gagnier has argued in her incisive investigation of Victorian self-representation, that it can mean in critical terminology today many things at the same time:

> First, the subject is a subject to itself, an "I," however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this "I" from its viewpoint, within its own experience. Simultaneously, the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an "Other" to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity. (Gagnier 1991, 8)

Moreover, all of these above mentioned descriptions of the subject, Gagnier asserts, are also bound up with the division commonly attributed to the seventeenth-century philosopher René

Descartes of "the difference between "objectivity," the perspective of impartial "truth," and "subjectivity," the limited, error-prone perspective of the individual" (Gagnier 1991, 9). Therefore, we may assume that only when all these viewpoints merge, can we gain an overall definition and picture of one's self. Furthermore, taking into consideration Gagnier's two distinctions, subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to reflect on the origin of identity—how and from where identity arises—but it also it points out at the limitations of understanding of our own identity and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence and control.

Subjectivity and its representation differ according to genre, when talking about the subjectivity in the autobiography the matter becomes problematic since the approach to autobiography is highly ambivalent since the common perspective understands autobiography as a genre that carries only biographical and historical value and it omits its aesthetic importance. Nevertheless, in twentieth century literary criticism autobiography is still understood to be containable and identifiable as an "authoritative form of truth-telling" (Gusford in Olney 1980, 43). Only after poststructuralist interventions brought by Paul de Man the opposing ideas are present. In his radical essay on autobiography entitled "Autobiography as De-Facement" De Man signals the end of autobiography as it was previously perceived. Autobiography, he argues, is "plagued" by a series of unanswerable questions, which arise from the original attempt to perceive autobiography as a separate genre (1979, 919–30). Most important of all, however, is the obstacle that one encounters as soon as one attempts to make a distinction between fiction and autobiography, and finds oneself taken up in what Anderson calls "the whirligig of undecidability," inhabiting contradictory ideas (2011, 11). Therefore, de Man proposes his own alternative approach to autobiography – according to his view; it is not a genre but a "figure of reading and understanding" (1979, 919–30).

Thus when one understands autobiography as a mode of perception of the text, the question remains whether this public exposure of private self produces a truthful and accurate self-image. In this article I will focus on these limitations of autobiography as a genre and claim that it cannot represent the verifiable absolute identity of its object. I will study the question of

the autobiographical "I" and how it emerges in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* and *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath (1950–1962)*. Furthermore, I will attempt to answer the question what are Woolf and Plath referring to when they use the word "I" in their autobiographical writings, where does their sense of self come from and whether it alters in different environment. Thus I will not analyze the truthfulness of the texts or factual verifiability of diaries and journal; rather I will focus on the construction of authorial "I" and its position in the self-narrative. In this article I want to look at the diary and journal as primary texts, rather than as a corollary to their poetry and fiction. I will attempt to investigate the multiplicity of Woolf's and Plath's selves and disintegrated ego and how it shapes the form of these autobiographical writings.

Sylvia Plath began writing her journal during the summer of 1950 before leaving for college in Northampton, Massachusetts. The published journal excerpts, dating from 1950 through 1959, represent about one-third of the material that can be found now at Smith College. However, the journal does not attract attention of literary theoreticians and public because of its artistic or aesthetic value, but rather because they believe the journal to be the access to Sylvia Plath's inner self and the answer for her suicide. Nevertheless, the publication in 2000 did not fulfill these expectations since the question remained unanswered due to journal's incompleteness. Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, explained in his foreword that there were two other journals, however he destroyed the last one, containing entries from the last several months of Plath's life in order to protect their children from sensitiveness of the journal. The other volume, which can be assumed to cover from late 1959 to mid-1962, has according to Hughes's words disappeared and is therefore considered a missing "puzzle" to interpretation of Plath's identity and poetry.

The beginnings of Woolf's diary keeping started when she was 14. The diary titled *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Years, 1887–1909* started as a possible method of helping Woolf to cope with the breakdown after the death of her mother. Woolf's main diary was published in five volumes between 1977 and 1984 and was edited by Anne Olivier Bell—scholar and wife of Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew and former co-literary executor of Woolf's estate. The five volumes cover 30 handwritten man-

uscripts and consist of entries from the years 1915 to 1941. These volumes begin when Woolf is 33 years old, with the last entry made only a few days before she drowned herself in the river Ouse. The entries vary in regularity as well as in form from the earlier dated ones in *Passionate Apprentice*. Even though the editor Anna Olivier Bell noted in the preface that the diary "is not only a key to the art of Virginia Woolf; it is a work of art in itself," suggesting the artistic value of this diary, the approach of literary critics has been the opposite (Woolf 1980, n.p). Most scholars have used the diary to acquire more information about Woolf's life; however, it also reveals their attitudes towards writing, reading and her development as a writer.

According to Campbell Tidwell the most important features of good autobiography are its authenticity and truthfulness (2007, 38). A good autobiography is expected to offer a key to author's life-story and the insight to his/her inner self. Therefore, the main indicator of well-written autobiography became the "intention" "that has persistently threaded its way through discussions of autobiography" (Marcus 1994, 3). The concept of "intention" was attacked by the New Critics of the 1930s and 1940s as a misleading notion since at the same time "intentionality" became the question of trustworthiness and seriousness of the author indicating the belief that the author is behind the text, directing its meaning, and guiding the reader. As a result "the author becomes the guarantor of the intentional meaning or truth of the text, and reading the text therefore leads back to the author as origin" (Anderson 2011, 2). Because of the supposedly non-fictional nature of the diary, readers want to believe that what the diarist writes is true. In addition, the self that is communicated is seen as more accurate because it is not influenced by literary devices. In fact, according to Rita Felski,

> the more obviously "literary" the text—the more clearly it signals its fictional status through such textual features as irony, parody, and self-reflexivity, extended use of symbolic and "poetic" language, or elaborated narrative structures—the less likely the reader is to respond to the text as the authentic self-expression of the authorial subject.
>
> (Felski 1989, 97)

Even though Woolf's diaries and Plath's journals incorporate all of the above-mentioned characteristics, the readers still ignore the aesthetic factors of these autobiographical writings and consider them truthful representations of diarists' self.

When looking at Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath's intention we may see the resembling motive in the diary-keeping. Firstly, the diaries and journal fulfilled the basic need of diary keeper—they functioned as the storage of memories, feelings, and description of social events. Secondly, diaries and journals concern Woolf's and Plath's creative methods and became a place to exercise and practice their writing style, which shape the narrative style of these autobiographical writings. As a result, Woolf and Plath were able to craft their writing as well as personality and the autobiographical writings arose from their need to share and judge the "inner self." Therefore the diaries and journal became the mirror of self, making the constant struggle to find their own subjectivity their central topic.

From Woolf's and Plath's point of view the diary-writing was some kind of self-exposure and the opportunity to share their private intimate life experience they were impossible to talk about with anyone else. For example, in her journal Plath uncovers her desire but also inability to communicate and share the problems with her mother. "I can't tell mother; not yet, anyway" (2000, 9). Therefore, the process of revealing her inner self became for her self-healing practice, however unsuccessful. In another diary entry from 1950 Plath admits the difficulty of self-exposure but at the same time she expresses her need for it:

> Some things are hard to write about. After something happens to you, you go to write it down, and either you over dramatize it or underplay it, exaggerate the wrong parts or ignore the important ones. At any rate, you never write it quite the way you want to. (Plath 2000, 9)

In this diary entry Plath becomes aware of the fact that the experience she is sharing with the audience sensationalized and dramatized since she is responsible for their choice. Therefore, whatever she shares is modified by her own individual perception and at the same time the journal became the place for possible self-fashioning.

This self-fashioning, according to Nancy Miller, suggests the desire to fulfill the expectations of the outer environment—

in Woolf's and Plath's case family, publishers and readers. Moreover, this concern with the construction of their identity according to socially accepted standards caused Woolf and Plath to create a distant self. Having no possibility to step out of the assigned roles they find their true self repressed at every turn. The creation of double self is visible in Plath's journal entry from 10 January 1953, when Plath stands next to a photograph of herself: "Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it. It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison behind it, like the death angel. It s what I was this fall, and what I never want to be again" (2000, 155). This excerpt reveals Plath's discontent when realizing the duality of her selves. This inability to fit the acceptable roles defined by her social and educational background seems to have been one of the possible causes of her first mental breakdown in 1953.

This division between inner and outer self would later become manifested in Plath's obsession with doubles and represents her idea of multiple selves. "I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions, as that person. But I am not omniscient" (2000, 9). Plath admits the gap in her self-knowledge realizing that by the embodiment with the others may help her to become more self-aware. Another identification with others comes later when she describes the yearning for a closeness and unity. "I love Mary . . . Mary is me . . . what I would be if I had been born of Italian parents on Linden Street" (10). Plath does not demonstrate an account of closeness or similarity of characters but represents the view of the identity that can be seen in others. Another entry observes the other girls in the Smith College library, and asks, "God, who am I? . . . Girls, girls everywhere, reading books. Intent faces, flesh, pink, white, yellow. And I sit here without identity, faceless" (26). Such crises are too common throughout Plath's journals to be considered solely as youthful insecurity and anguish. Plath finding herself "faceless" must struggle to prepare a face. Moreover, she realizes she must arrange different faces for different situations and her belief in an underlying identity remains unconvincing.

The same expression may be observed in Woolf's early diary, where she makes a distinction between *Passionate Apprentice* and diaries of her brother and sister. This fact represents an

effort to distinguish her life and her self from the lives and selves around her. She uses the diary to construct a linguistic reflection of herself, at times falsely unified and separate. According to Tidwell, Woolf in her early diary begins to see a separation between the "I" who writes and the "I" who feels and thinks (2007, 19). The sense of self is not yet mature, it is detached and vague nonetheless it expresses its development but this process is neither smooth nor continuous. Woolf often quits writing or changes her method of writing to fit the self that is emerging, eventually finding a subject position that allows her to express her sense of self. Consequently, the narrative technique present in the journals resembles the dialogue between the multiple selves. Campbell Tidwell argues that Woolf often presents life events as if she is explaining her life to someone she does not know (19). The detachment that Tidwell describes is not only a separation from the life experiences, but also the separation from her other "self." By creating an outside distant "I," Woolf unintentionally filters and controls what she writes in her diary. Furthermore, she also regulates what she is willing to put into language and therefore many aspects are left out even though one may expect a whole picture of self in her diaries.

In her maturity Woolf realizes that each person has more than one self and that we are not each a unified consciousness. In 1935, she writes, "I see that there are 4? dimensions; all to be produced; in human life; & that leads to a far richer grouping and proportion: I mean: I: & the not I: & the outer & the inner— no I'm too tired to say: but I see it:" (Woolf 1983, 353). Woolf sees the variety of selves that combine to make each person in different moments. Anderson argues that Woolf's position as woman allowed for a different representation of self, "producing a multiplicity that cannot be captured within one and the same, the singular "I" of masculine discourse" (2011, 98). Woolf allows all people this freedom in her fiction, and in her diary she shows her own grappling with the self.

Both Woolf and Plath deny the idea of old stable Victorian ego. Their "I" is not unified but fragmented and split into multiple selves. The "I" in the diaries is not created only by Woolf and Plath themselves but the environment—the others also play significant role in self-creation opening a space for image and self-image As a reason, according to de Man, the self is so

detached that the author cannot be identified with the object (or subject) of autobiography. So "the name of the name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable of self-knowledge, but the signature that makes the contract legal (de Man 1979, 923). The possible result of this multiplicity, however, is according to Miller a suicide. She interprets Plath's suicide as the desire for the unity of self since "suicide really is . . . the only possible way to express the true self—at the expense of life itself" (1983, 13). It is the need to destroy the false self-image after which the true "I" reveals and therefore remains united. Having to hide her true self, Plath feels discontent. In her analysis Miller argues that Plath's *Letters Home* are testimony of the false self she constructed whereas her true self is speaking in Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1981, 256**).** Letters, as journals and diaries, represent another form of private writings on which the reader has the tendency to rely, however the self may not necessarily be authentic and truthful. As Susan Bassnett provocatively argues:

> Only by accepting that Sylvia Plath's writing are filled with contradictions existing in the dialectical relationship with each other can we move beyond the dead-end "reading to find the truth" kind of process . . . It is impossible to try to discover the "real" Sylvia Plath, to work out the "real" reason for her suicide, because there is no "real" person and no "real" explanation. (Bassnett 2003, 33)

Even though many critics do not consider the genre of diary an art because it lacks author's control over literary devices, the subjectivity adds the diary the aesthetic value, however at the same time it cannot be considered reliable. Woolf and Plath were attempting to find a writing style that would further reader's interests and would be aesthetically original. Both were successful in this attempt since their autobiographical writings destroy boundaries between the literary and non-literary, fiction and nonfiction, masculine and feminine, personal and public. Therefore the diary functions as a maternal space for Woolf's and Plath's intellectual development. The diary and journals not only enhance and inform their other writing, but they also function as originative documents because both Woolf and Plath revised and abandoned traditional autobiographical forms.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of the "I" in Virginia Woolf's and Sylvia Plath's autobiographical writings, namely *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* and journal *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath.* It will identify their different "selves" and describe how these function and affect the form/genre of diaries and journals. Further, it will focus on identity as a temporary but relatively fixed mode of subjectivity, since this focus of identity as lived experience and of discernible meaning has become one of the defining issues of modern and postmodern cultures.

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Martina Bilá graduated from University of Prešov in Slovakia at the Institute of English and American studies in 2010. Her bachelors and masters theses focused on the role of women in the works of the Brontë sisters. As a PhD candidate at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, she has shifted her focus to the representation of subjectivity in the novels and diaries of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath.