

SYLVIA PLATH'S DARK NEW YORK VS CELLA SERGHI'S CRAMPED BUCHAREST WITH REGARDS TO BOSTON, CONSTANȚA AND BALCHIK¹

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Abstract: This article compares the literary representations of two capital cities – New York and Bucharest in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Cella Serghi's *The Spider's Web*² respectively. The analysis examines the habitation of the urban spaces in the two novels with regard to both authors' depression. It also delineates the dimensions of the protagonists' identification with the big city as well as some of the specifics of the feminine presence in the respective epochs and cities. Of importance is the actual lived experience of the two writers and its rendition into autofiction. Another aim is to compare the writers' responses to early twentieth-century modernism, with one writer living in the epoch, and the other writing 20 years later. The comparison is effectuated in compliance with the framework of Comparative literature in the 21st century according to Ben Hutchinson in his *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. In its analysis the article also draws on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Key words: autofiction, 1950s, 1920s, New York, Bucharest, identification

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In his *Comparative Literature: A very Short Introduction* (2018) Ben Hutchinson outlines the framework within which modern comparative studies are made. He also clearly states what we gain from such comparisons while dealing with and operating in a perennially unstable critical environment: "This instability is the very essence of comparative literature. By looking at literature comparatively one realizes how much can be learned by looking beyond one's own tradition; one discovers not only about other literatures, but also about one's own" (Hutchinson 2018: 1). Aiming to benefit from such knowledge, the article examines comparatively autofictional urban experience from a "longitudinal" perspective with the necessary sensitivity to the changing contexts (Ibid: 20). It also meditates on the differing responses to recurring questions across a range of languages (Ibid: 17), in this case English and Romanian, with the responses concerning feminine habitation and perceptions of big cities in important periods of their development, as well as combating the characters' ensuing depression. The close reading that such a task presupposes will be drawing on Merleau-Ponty's key work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) with the concluding judgements and understanding obtained from the resulting (inter)textual analysis.

During her lifetime Sylvia Plath had only one published novel, *The Bell Jar* in 1963, the year of her suicide, which offers one of the most memorable openings to a literary representation of a city based on Plath's own personal experience of New York in the summer of 1953. It contains a rendition of the temporary bond between the narrator

¹This article is based on its author's monograph entitled *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction*. – a. n.

² Original title: *Pânza de păianjen*; all quoted passages from this novel appear in my translation. – a. n.

and the urban topos. In this case, it is of an unsuccessful identification, with the jarring ingredients of discord: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York. I’m stupid about executions” (Plath 2000: 1). The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is the naïve virgin that we have in the opening of the *Journals* (Plath 2007:8). Her proclaimed ignorance of the reason of her being there does not mean that such a reason does not exist – she has won a place as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* magazine and is living with other bright girls in a sort of a convent at the Amazon hotel which serves the purpose of a boarding house. What she means is that there is no connection between herself and New York and she does not really belong to the city in the traditional kind of way, the early identification with Manhattan’s landmarks – the famous skyscrapers where the fictional urban residents of John Dos Passos, for instance, go in his novels of the Roaring 20s, *Manhattan Transfer* and *USA*, in a sort of a mammonic pilgrimage. This seeming disconnection 30 years later, however, rests only on appearances since Esther (Plath) *does* belong to the city but in a different category of belonging – that of the visitor who is to spend a month there, enough time to become familiar with what she will consider to be important for her since everything will be new and potentially fascinating.

Jeff Malpas discusses *place*, *space*, and *event* in a manner presupposing that Esther, being a newcomer, white, and unmarried, will be having such “disclosive happening[s] of belonging”³ (Malpas 2006: 223) that will be compliant with her nonmarital state of a young white girl in her very early 20s. The opening lines of the novel are, however, indicative of another kind of journey, a sort of Conradian *Heart of Darkness* descent into an abyss where the New Yorkers become “the black savages” (Plath 2000: 266) that Conrad saw, not in the sense interpreted by Chinua Achebe, that Conrad was “a thoroughgoing racist” (Achebe 2006: 343), but in one of the senses that comes across from Marlow’s polyphonic narrative and namely that the blacks are inscrutable, impossible to know or understand, simply moving black figures in a whole world shrouded in darkness where inhuman practices are the norm. And indeed, the very first lines, together with the sensation of *sultriness* also introduce the forthcoming execution of the Rosenbergs. The sentences that Plath writes, so much like the polysyntagmatic rima terza of “Do not Try to Trick Me with a Kiss” (Plath 1981: 319), are also discordant, bringing seemingly contradictory ideas together, ideas whose logic becomes clear as one reads on, but at this point New York, smelly, hot, and electrical (Plath 2000:1), becomes an overwhelming foreboding of a live electric chair. We have the perception of the very hot concrete jungle of a city positioned next to an electrocution which adds to the sensation of *heat* followed by Esther’s (Plath’s) confession that she feels lost. And now we know why – not because she has no purpose of being there, but because she has a difficulty identifying with this hot, inhuman, dark New York. The truth is that Plath did feel strongly about the execution of the Rosenbergs, and her reporter-like mention of the event is reflected in her *Journals* where she says how impressed she

³As a phenomenological tool also discussed in *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities* (226) and *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (92) (original title: *Различната Добруджа в литературата между войните*). – a. n.

was with “the bare honest unemotional reporting that gripped the guts because of the things it didn’t say”⁴ (Plath 2007: 541).

The following lines manage to convey a sensation of the unknowable city through the sense of smell again next to the augmented sensation of her actually going through with the electrocution: “the papers – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves” (Plath 2000: 1). The city is presented as some sort of a deform *goggle-eyed smelly* creature with a *penchant* for peanuts that is always hungry, and the *mouths* of the subways are not unlike the stinking maws to its netherworld entrails.

The morning freshness of the Hudson River so palpably present in Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* is nowhere to be felt, nor are the possibilities of daydreaming: “New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-grey at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat” (Plath 2000: 1). While the gritty sensation of the New York air is present in Dos Passos’s city novels, there are the possibilities to see it and feel it differently. Not so with Plath. The sensation she creates invokes the inorganic simulacrum of nature in the highly influential *The Decline of the West*⁵ by Oswald Spengler without Dos Passos’s alleviating effect of daydreaming. Spengler’s “deep long gorges between high stony houses with coloured dust and strange uproar” (Spengler 1922 (2): 94) are well reflected in Plath’s vision of *granite canyons*, a city scorched in the sun heat: *the car tops sizzled and glittered*. By combining auditory details with visuals Plath’s experiential realism⁶, like Dos Passos’s, creates a physical sensation in the reader: the *cindery dust* enters unobstructed the exposed orifices of the streetwalker. The city is constantly moving in an optical illusion in the sweltering heat: *the hot streets wavered in the sun*. These motor movements of nonanimate objects are typical of modernist texts and again they are strongly present in Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (Dos Passos 2000: 298)⁷ where one of the protagonists, Jimmy Herf leaves the Pulitzer Building and the Woolworth stretches a mocking tentacle after him like a telescope, taunting him with the inaccessibility of the skyscraper. The skyscrapers thus act like mocking stilt walkers –

⁴ In the *Journals*, Plath also has the following to say on the subject: “They were going to kill people with those atomic secrets. It is good for them to die. So that we can have the priority of killing people with those atomic secrets which are so very jealously and specially and inhumanly ours. There is yelling, no horror, no real rebellion. That is the appalling thing. The execution will take place tonight; it is too bad it could not be televised... so much more realistic and beneficial than the run-of-the mill crime program. Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored and casual and complacent yawn” (549). – a. n.

⁵ Also discussed at length in *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos* (101). – a. n.

⁶ A term proposed by Robert Alter in his *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, also discussed in *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities* (46-7). – a. n.

⁷*Ibid.*, 32- 50. – a. n.

alluringly divine, but effectively grotesque in their Mumfordian critical disdain for the ordinary man. However, their place in Plath's novel is insignificant and rather matter of fact: "They showed us how to make an all-purpose neckerchief out of mink tails and a gold chain, the sort of chain you can get an exact copy of at Woolworth's for a dollar ninety-eight" (Plath 2000: 29). The young girl feels no desire for this kind of lofty identification which also appears outdated, the mythological skyscraper being reduced to an ordinary place for shopping. Instead, she keeps identifying with the Rosenbergs: "I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterwards, the cadaver's head – or what there was left of it – floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard" (Plath 2000: 1). Plath's physical portrayal of New York is completely associative, like Virginia Woolf's London in *Mrs. Dalloway*. She uses the exact same technique to introduce characters – Esther's boyfriend, the medical student, Buddy Willard. By placing *the Rosenbergs* and a *cadaver* next to each other, Plath strongly suggests that the family are as good as dead while the positioning of the standard *English breakfast* next to the *cadaver's head* could be yet another prophetic premonition of what lay in store for Plath in England. It has been suggested that the choice of the girl's name – Esther is not accidental. If we follow the logic of the Brontë sisters in the proximity of the male pen names and the actual names, it should not come as a surprise that Esther is not very dissimilar to Ethel. Moreover, the first and last name of the wife before she was married were Ethel Greenglass, not a far cry from Esther Greenwood. In search for her true identity, Plath says emphatically in "Daddy", "I think I may well be a Jew" (Plath 1981: 223). Whether or not Sylvia Plath has the right to such an identification is a very different matter. With both her parents from German and Austrian heritage, the likelihood for her to have been part Jew is not small. What Plath shows time and again is that she would rather be a Jew than a fascist, being the two viable options for a person from German origin. As a result, her Jew identity is played out against a gestapo-like New York, more of a dystopian setting, where she is accosted by lewd men in traffic jams, called upon by unknown people, food-poisoned *en masse* with the other guest editors at a festive luncheon given by the magazine, and almost raped. And as Robin Peel argues, "The Rosenbergs cast a shadow across the whole novel, with their electrocution for espionage serving an important metonymic function" (Peel 2019: 203). And so, she sees her superiors and peers, the editor Jay Cee, the coed Doreen, in Sartre-like nausea terms, being disgusted by close contacts with their flesh, as a corporeal extension of their consumption in the city – food and other commodities, which receives considerable literary space in her novel, food serving as "a conveyor of identity" (Woodward 2019: 118). In an eerie presence in the created by Plath dystopic setting women's fashion is also strikingly ubiquitous as a reminder that life goes on, regardless of the protagonist's persistent recreations of repugnant images of sickening urbanity. Just like the portrayal of food, it is given in minute details of playful senseless pageantry for the narrator who invariably feels lost. Still, Rebecca Tuite underscores an important role that it plays – as a continuum: "Plath exhibited an instinctual understanding that fashion did not exist in a vacuum, but rather functioned across boundaries of history, culture, art and design" (Tuite 2019: 126). In *The Bell Jar*, however, Plath employs her art designer's impulses and skills so she can impart to it a strong sense of vacuity as a tangible upgrade on Fitzgerald's rather schematic symbolic representation of hollow glamor in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and

less jarring than the ostentatious outpour of it in the movie trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2012). Plath's vision, albeit the flashy outbursts, is persistently dark, as bleak as the blinding whiteness that welcomes the protagonist to the city in yet another confirmation of the disapprobation Plath had for the white color (Plath 1981: 84, 98).

New York as a place of darkness both natural – dark spaces or darkly colored parts of the human body and metaphorical – dark human nature, has numerous manifestations in Plath's novel. In such places and around such people, Esther usually dissolves into the darkness and manages to remain almost invisible: "It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen [...] I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life" (Plath 2000: 10); "I could see downtown to where the UN balanced itself in the dark, like a weird, green, Martian honeycomb" (Ibid: 19-20); "I swung to my feet and balanced dizzily for a minute in the middle of the dark room" (Ibid: 22); "her head was hanging down on her chest and her stiff blonde hair fell from its dark roots like a hula fringe" (Ibid: 23); "The carpet stretched from one end of the hall to the other, clean and eternally verdant except for a faint, irregular dark stain" (Ibid: 24); "A short dark man with a high, lisping voice" (Ibid: 36), etc.

The intensity of the dark colors, as the proximity of the pages indicates, is striking if one recalls the very opening of the novel where the city appears to be dazzlingly hot. On one hand, this can be an effect of the tall buildings and the deep dark gorges that are formed at street level. On the other, the reason why Esther sees dark stains, apart from the vomit which occasionally causes them to appear on carpets, by people getting drunk, could be a blinding effect of the searing sun – when one moves aside from the direct sunlight, one sees dark blotches that will move with the moving of the gaze. In its darkness New York looks apocalyptic: "It wasn't the nice kind of rain that rinses you clean, but the sort of rain I imagine they must have in Brazil. It flew straight down from the sky in drops the size of coffee saucers and hit the hot sidewalks with a hiss that sent clouds of steam writhing up from the gleaming, dark concrete" (Plath 2000: 42). Despite the seemingly alluring homey feel rendered by the raindrops likened to *coffee saucers*, it just adds to the unpleasant *peanut smelling* taste that one feels in the air, creating an overall sensation of a bad meal. New York remains consistently dark regardless of where Esther is, even when she is visiting Constantin, the Russian UN translator she has a crush on (a dream come true with regards to the *Journals*): "Constantin's room had a balcony, and the balcony overlooked the river, and we could hear the hooing of the tugs down in the darkness" (Ibid: 84). The return to the scene does not show much of a difference: "It was pitch dark. After a while I deciphered the faint outlines of an unfamiliar window. Every so often a beam of light appeared out of thin air, traversed the wall like a ghostly exploratory finger, and slid off into nothing again" (Ibid: 87).

Esther manages to peek into the dark heart of the human animals populating the city twice – when she goes off with Doreen to a stranger's apartment and where Doreen almost gets raped, but her friend seems to encourage it (Plath 2000: 18). As the sight is shocking for Esther, once back at the hotel, she treats herself to her usual redemptive cure – a tub of hot water: "I said to myself: 'Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter anymore'" (Ibid: 21). Still, Esther contrives to get entangled in yet another situation where rape is in the air, this time her own, and again in the company of Doreen. At that

party she is tempted with a diamond and because she slips it into her handbag when shown to her, Marco, the diamond owner, decides that he has bought her consent to sex. In that he is gravely mistaken, and Esther has to fight for her chastity. At that point she, like Holden from Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), has had enough of it, and it has become a burden. Holden is unwilling to lose it with a girl who is "phony", so he opts for a prostitute, but takes pity on her and only talks to her while paying her for a sexual service that does not take place. The ambiguous act of taking the diamond – on one hand Esther seems to encourage Marco's advances, but she seems to be of two minds about it – suggests that she may have accepted the inevitable act of being corrupted in the city by having sex with a "woman hater" (Ibid: 111), who, as Kate Harding convincingly argues, "were like Gods" (Harding 2019: 180-190) in the 1950s. Ironically, Harding continues, "it is the most *feminizing* experience the protagonist has that summer" (Ibid: 181).

Plath has had her rape dream from the beginning of the *Journals* and while resisting Marco, Esther believes at one point that *it is finally* happening (Plath 2000: 114), leaving Harding wondering what "it" refers to – the *rape* or the *first sexual act*, or perhaps both (Harding 2019: 184). Back in the hotel, the city's blackness reflects the darkness of the incident: "A stiff breeze lifted the hair from my head. At my feet, the city doused its lights in sleep, its buildings blackened, as if for a funeral" (Plath 2000: 117). With Plath, we no longer have the early modernist contrast between the lonely individual in the crowd beneath cerulean skies as we do in Dos Passos. Nor is this a return to 19th century portrayals of nature in unison with the protagonist's experiences or emotions. Plath's portrayal of New York is the product of a unique dark vision, similar to Ravi Hage's representation of Montreal in his *Cockroach* (2008), in which even if the protagonist could be less depressive, the city would be overwhelmingly oppressive until depression sets in. It would be a mistake, however, to link the darkness of the city to Esther's fast deteriorating mental state as being the sole reason for that. It is rather the profound sensation of her inability to fit in and her lessening desire to do so that play a crucial role. From an overachiever who has shown assertiveness and determination in pursuing her goals, Esther starts feeling increasingly insecure in her dealings with the people of New York – from taxi drivers and bellboys to the magazine's editor, the pervasive kind of dark inscrutability Conrad projects from Marlow's narrative.

It should also be noted that New York is dark, but not dark by comparison to the countryside as would be the city in Dickens, it is just the place where Esther quickly unravels, making a precipitous descent into depression. As a result, the eye lens of the cinematic presentation is colored darkly and through this filter, very much as in Conrad's novella, everything around her assumes this color: "First Mr Willard drove and then drove. I don't know what we talked about, but as the countryside, already deep under old falls of snow, turned us a bleaker shoulder, and as the fir trees crowded down from the grey hills to the road edge, so darkly green they looked black, I grew gloomier and gloomier" (Plath 2000: 91). Mr Willard (Buddy) is her tubercular boyfriend, the medical student who has a relationship with a nurse while undergoing treatment, thus earning Esther's eternal contempt since she finds him *hypocritical*. This persistence of the vision remains linked to the sanatorium as well, with the unsettling comparisons to a human anatomic organ and the creepy visage of the President of the country who takes the form of a ghastly Big Brother from Orwell's *1984* (1949): "The colour scheme of the whole sanatorium seemed to be based on liver. Dark, glowering woodwork, burnt-brown

leather chairs, walls that might once have been white but had succumbed under a spreading malady of mould or damp [...] The face of Eisenhower beamed up at me, bald and blank as the face of a foetus in a bottle” (Ibid: 93).

The ubiquitous presence of Eisenhower as the person under whose presidency the decade passed is linked to images of death and dying, without the spiteful vitality we see of Truman’s doppelgänger representation in Sexton’s “Rumpelstiltskin” (Sexton 1981: 233). While images of Buddy Willard are aligned to cadavers, they appear alongside with homecooked food, thus instilling the sensation that he, together with the fancy food Esther consumes at the magazine’s expense, is for the girl’s consumption even though he is less worth it by comparison. Ironically, it is the fancy food that poisons her. Eisenhower appearing in bottled fetuses is greatly diminished, like Sexton’s Truman, to be the plaything of medical students, thus occupying a much lower position than Esther’s boyfriend in the male entourage that she builds of men to command with her dead father being God Almighty. Esther’s goodbye gesture to the city is also symbolic: “Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one’s ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York” (Plath 2000: 117). Her leaving the city is accompanied by a dissociative action which is yet another rebirth through dying that she is to undergo in Boston.

The Boston that Esther (Plath) returns to is not the Boston of her childhood – this is the city where she sees the first signs of her post-New York depression – the merging of the letters in one long word which she cannot read (Ibid: 130-8) accompanied by severe insomnia and her inability to even write (Ibid: 137). The beach with its irradiating chronotope of blue sea magic no longer functions, the effect of the sea being felt only on the beach itself – and that becomes yet another place Esther creatively uses in her tragicomic attempts to commit suicide – a sinister transformation of the desired identification with the sea. However, this time around, it is completely devoid of romanticism. Even when she is in the park, under the “Weeping Scholar Tree”, near a pond, all she can think about is suicide – the Japanese specialty, the double-knifed *seppuku* invoked through an association with the possible origin of the tree (Ibid: 120). In Boston Esther feels like a prisoner because people know her, and she does not look presentable at all. She starts feeling paranoid about her bank account being blocked by the observing doctor, Gordon, and dreams of escaping to Chicago (Ibid: 146). The magical city of her childhood is turned into a city of torture and the electroshocks she is subjected to, similar to the ones Winston from *1984* is given, are described with unsettling vivacity:

I tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment. Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead and gave me a wire to bite. [...] Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done (Ibid: 151).

The depiction is visceral and terrifying. It is through testimonies like these that ECT practices have come under investigation, but ECT is still used even in contemporary times in treating several psychiatric disorders, certainly in better conditions than the ones

Esther (Plath) was exposed to, one of them involving the administration of anesthesia. ECT was introduced to US psychiatric hospitals as early as the 1940s and as *The Bell Jar* testifies, it was considered revolutionary in the 1950s. Its effects on the patients though, without the anesthesia, were not known. When asked how she feels, Esther cannot tell the truth because she is afraid the torture will be repeated: “But I didn’t. I felt terrible” (Ibid: 152). She is naïve to think that this will stop them and indeed ECT is used repeatedly on her until she is rendered in a vegetative state. It is after the treatments though that Esther (Plath) resorts to her attempts to kill herself so she can end her suffering. And she is not the only case, there is another girl, Joan, who kills herself after receiving the same treatments and tricking the doctors into believing that her condition has improved. As Anita Helle poignantly observes, the fact that the initial pseudonym – Victoria Lucas for the writer of Plath’s novel, was removed and *Ariel* was published in its restored version, after the elimination of Hughes’s intervention, have all played a role in foregrounding the electroshocks as a highly traumatic experience and research has been done to establish its role in Plath’s prose and poetry. The emphasis has been so great that “one Turkish translation of *The Bell Jar* blatantly features a head pinned between electrodes on its jacket” (Helle 2019: 264).

Boston is represented as a place much worse than New York where Esther (Plath) at least can be free and be a mistress of herself in her position of a prestigious visitor to the city. Boston is the place where Plath lost her father and without him around, the city seems to be poised for her effective annihilation. Not much of the physical chronotope is given, the camera eye of the narrator moving in some sort of tunnels with restricted visibility straight ahead, strongly contrasts the endless literary vistas of Boston and Massachusetts of her childhood which once turned the city into a place of wonder and magic.

The Spider’s Web published in 1938, the novel I propose to compare Plath’s portrayal of 1950s New York to, is Cella Serghi’s representation of the Romanian capital in the 1920s. As with Plath, the comparison of the feminine experience of the big city will be effectuated with references to places of fond memories related to an earlier period in the character’s development. What also brings the two female characters together is experiencing depression in the capital city and reproducing the experience from the point of view of autofiction. In Serghi’s novel it is initially connected with the sensation of moving from the magical Constanța of her childhood where, just like with Plath, she was happy to be near the sea, to the city of the wonderful unknown in her dreams of acquiring that uncanny superiority that Bucharest children have over others, something she can observe in her hometown while seeing them play on the beach and where she has to answer the strange question if they have schools in Constanța, too (Serghi 1978: 56). At 14 Diana Slavu (Serghi) finds herself in Bucharest after the movements of the family during WWI, which include a spell in Braila, Romania and Sofia, Bulgaria where her family has relatives. But the fact that she is already there, in the mythological capital of so many Romanian interwar novels where Bucharest comes across as a city of pure wonder, but also of misery, e. g. Cezar Petrescu’s *Calea Victoriei* (1930), earns her the appellation “Miss” (*domnișoară*) (Ibid: 72), a term which she cherishes and which indicates a higher position in society for a young girl who is to become a lady, corresponding in its social semantics to the French *mademoiselle*. Serghi’s presentation of Bucharest is mostly reportorial – through insightful contrasts and comparisons between stereotypes and lived experience: “‘Bucharest girls are more emancipated,’ they

would say, but it seemed to me, on the contrary, that here in the country they were freer, bolder” (Ibid: 72). The protagonist’s emotions in the capital are subject to occurrences and events concerning the beloved grandparents: what happens in Constanța is reflected in Bucharest: “When I returned to Bucharest, the house appeared empty, desolate... My granny had died” (Ibid: 73). Serghi’s Bucharest is topographical, with the possibility to trace the trajectories made by the city dweller, which is entirely in line with representations of this city by classical interwar writers such as Liviu Rebreanu (*Embers*⁸), Mihail Sebastian (*The Accident*⁹) and Cezar Petrescu (*Victory Avenue*¹⁰). In that she stays close to the early modernist tradition in Europe and across the Atlantic. Serghi’s portrayal of Bucharest is also similar to that of Edith Wharton’s New York from *The House of Mirth* (1905). The perspective is often from inside out and just like in Wharton’s novel we can trace the evolution of the houses inhabited by the protagonist. While Lily Bart moves from riches to rags, with Diana Slavu, the movement is from very poor housing where she lives with her family – mother, father, and sister, to a room to herself in a recollection of Virginia Woolf’s famous essay “A Room of One’s Own” from 1928 and again as in Wharton’s novel, these houses are very important, to the point that, not having a dowry, the young Romanian woman marries the first man that takes her without requiring it of her, with numerous references to this unjust unwritten law across her text (Ibid: 42, 125, 130, 147, 152, 156, 161, 164, 190).

Bucharest is often revealed through another kind of comparison – Diana’s recognizability on the city streets after she has exposed herself to the hot Constanța sun and has bronzed up (Serghi 1978: 120). The first-person perspective, as in Plath’s novel, offers the possibility to see the city through the eyes of a woman, who just like Esther (Plath) is poor and white, but who is not living in the multicolored multi-ethnic metropolis with the massive immigration from both inside and outside the country. During the epoch Bucharest had its own immigration from other parts of Romania and from Bessarabia (Moldova), but, naturally, on a much smaller scale by comparison. Another point of comparison to Constanța is the *ștrand* (*strand*) Kiseleff – a swimming pool contrasted to the infinity of the sea (Ibid: 121). Of great significance in the novel is the mythological cafeteria Capșa, today also a hotel, on the legendary boulevard Calea Victoriei (Victory Avenue), which, like Corso, or Café de la Paix, in other Romanian novels between the war, becomes a place of identification and dissociation, at the same time, with the world of the rich. For the teenage Diana Slavu, it becomes a place of reveries and identification, like the skyscrapers from Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, and where she is invited by an admirer of both her mother and herself, Cobadin. In one of the most revealing scenes from the novel she has to make a very important decision which will predetermine the way her life will unfold. When with her mother, she has been used to ordering only the cheapest items on the menu, so she is reluctant to order for fear of showing her humble preferences. Cobadin makes an order for her and so she gets an assortment of tempting sweet delicacies. Unlike Esther, who seems to enjoy the luncheons she is offered by the magazine and who chooses on purpose the most expensive items on the menu (Plath 2000: 25), Diana is painfully aware that for her one-off feast there is a heavy price to pay, and it will have to do with restraining her freedom

⁸ Original title: *Jar*. – a. n.

⁹ Original title: *Accidentul*. – a. n.

¹⁰ Original title: *Calea Victoriei*. – a. n.

of choice – the poisoned lunch in *The Bell Jar*. Still, Cobadin tells things that sound terrible to an innocent girl in her sweet sixteen, but they turn out prophetic for Diana: “Mark my words, if you don’t make a serious compromise in life, especially in the beginning, a single but a good one, you end up making a hundred, a thousand...” (Serghi 1978: 152). Diana (Serghi) will always be haunted by the suspicion that men want to take an advantage of the fact that she is poor and so will want to be with her knowing fully well that she is not in the position to refuse, but she keeps denying them in a frantic attempt to be herself. Esther (Plath) has a similar complex, but she refuses to accept hypocrisy, and believes she should meet a godlike figure, not the underachievers in manliness she encounters at Smith College. It can be said with certainty that Esther (Plath) would never have accepted a boring self-absorbed prick like Michi (Alfino Seni) – the man that Diana (Serghi) marries. She would probably have found Alex (Camil Petrescu) – the man who becomes Serghi’s heroine’s lover interesting because he seems to be knowledgeable about literature and she also might have considered him for a lover, certainly not for a husband for lacking godliness in the big city.

Being surrounded by friends at almost all times, in her descent into depression Diana is alone in a Bucharest room which looks a bit better than the miserable small apartments she has occupied with her parents and later with her husband. It should be noted that this state is not dissimilar to the situation Plath found herself in after being abandoned by Ted Hughes, but in the retrospective account from *The Bell Jar* Esther does not reach it for the simple reason that she is not married. It has been said that Plath burned certain manuscripts together with some stuff belonging to Hughes, one of the items possibly being an unfinished novel of hers, a sequel to *The Bell Jar* where she presumably pointed out the salvation for her depressive protagonist – a happy marriage to a loving husband. Unfortunately, Plath was bitterly disappointed in that, and being confessionally truthful, she might have destroyed what she saw as unfounded optimism in life, respectively in a novel.

At the end of *The Spider’s Web*, Diana is in Bucharest in her room, all alone, and here we have some of the best modernist depictions of the city related to the protagonist’s perspective of reordering her life, which also gives some motor functions to streets, houses, furniture, and people through the prism of ticking time:

The clock makes the same sound with each second that passes. The sky is all light, transparent as a lake, the whitish clouds in the shape of streaks, like the rippling of quiet waters on a windy day. The sun is now over a house, now covered by a house corner, which seems to have cut a slice from it. The houses in the background are profiled against the backdrop of reddish fumes. The blueness of the sky is streaked everywhere by red lines. The lines have merged now. The sky is like some cloth that is changing colors incessantly. From the background, towards me, loom larger the roofs and fragments of houses, with just a window, with more windows, here with a green wall, the other one – with red, most of them – with gray. The ones in the back, as if made of smoke, assume texture as they come towards me; their roofs are of bluish snow under the twilight which is coming down... (Serghi 1978: 397).

Serghi’s Bucharest becomes modernist in the play with colors, forms, and shapes at the end of the novel, but before that point it is just an urban environment without any meaningful modernist transformations as we have with Plath or Dos Passos. The important buildings on Calea Victoriei are still mythological and have their social role in experiencing the Romanian capital as is the case with Capşa or Ateneu – the place

where the mysterious painter Petre Barbu is supposed to present his paintings, or the Cișmigiu Gardens – a magical place for reading French poetry. Not so with Balchik, the fairy-tale place of Diana’s falling in love with the mysterious Alex Dobrescu and where the author’s flair for modernist depictions provides undoubtedly the best there are to date of this Black Sea town. Balchik is a locus of the magical unknown where Diana is in a new role – that of the brief visitor and her “disclosive happenings of belonging” reveal her as someone who wants to see and experience as much as it is possible of the town¹¹. Despite its overall gray depressive colors, Bucharest emerges as a city where one learns to be honest and live on one’s own, thus becoming a necessary experience for a young Romanian woman where Diana will be able to say that she is finally through with “the toxins of Mangalia and the unsettling charm of Balchik” (Ibid: 391). A place of self-quest and self-awareness for both Esther and Diana, the big city – New York and Bucharest – is dark and inscrutable, gray, and depressing, respectively.

Just as a big city typically affects its new inhabitants, the time spent in the two respective capitals in key periods of twentieth-century modernism serves as insightful unrelenting soul-searching for both female protagonists. Plath’s New York and Serghi’s Bucharest have revealed strong reactions from both women writers as regards feminine urban habitation, both demonstrating how young women remained underprivileged in 1920s/1930s Romania and 1950s USA. Both their heroines try to comply and improve the skills that are demanded of them, with Esther not trying too hard since she is aware that that would mean too much compliance and compromise. With disappointment setting in, both Esther and Diana find themselves in a state of depression, much more serious in Esther. Plath’s harsh criticism of the ECT therapy is yet another solid proof that she managed to turn her lived experience into powerful literature, an important personal account of a decade, in certain ways not unlike the 1920s, that also came short of women’s expectations.

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¹¹ See Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (87-128). – a. n.

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