

MONA LISA:
ALONE, ABSOLUTELY ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE

by
Fjoralba Miraka

Alone, Absolutely alone in the Universe

1

They might call me a romantic poet,
for I am a woman.
But what is there to write about if not love
first?

2

Isn't it the joy and the bliss and the pain in our lives?
It scares me to death to think of Death,
so I choose not to write about it.

3

My pencil always demands for an urge, an impulse, a need,
it always writes when the heart cries out for explosion.
Frank says that Lady Day Died, so will I, so will you
So I choose to write about what we don't know, not for what we expect!
I' ll tell you about Mona Lisa

4

for only a romantic poet can deduce her
loneliness
alone, absolutely alone in the universe,
for only a romantic poet can *appercept* and love her
lovely, lonely, smile.

5

Did you know how far away you stand when you are just
in front of her, looking at her,
in admiration, in confusion, even in love with her!
Did you know that the wet substance of her essence
is not the painter's colorings
but the liquid jumping out from her eyes,
when *your* eyes are not watching!

I might write for Mona Lisa,
 yes I will,
 for only a romantic poet can feel how
 alone, absolutely alone in the universe
 She feels...

After having read Anne Sexton's poem "Sylvia's Death" (1966), I came across a few paintings as for example Faith Ringgold's *Sonny's Quilt* (1986) which portrays the jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins playing while being on the legendary Brooklyn Bridge in New York. The image of the artist being in the midst of a crowded world became the driving force behind the writing of the poem my piece starts with entitled "Mona Lisa." I thought of this painting standing alone in a museum, away from stares and gazes of the viewers, a picture of total isolation within the same crowded world. This was enough to encourage me put into words what isolation could possibly be like in a world so infused with crisis and constant change, in a world like the one Greek reality is confronted with nowadays.

What does it mean to be living in a changing world, one of crises on all levels – cultural, political, economic, religious, and personal – and who is to define that change? A consequent question to this one would be what could possibly serve as a point of reference on which one could rely and start building the response to all this crises so as to eventually create a new or a fresh approach? Another question that demands an answer then is whether it is the non-static nature of the world which brings about crises or crises are the ones that bring about change! We might suggest that the answer to this question could be what defines change: external change and internal crisis interdependently work providing us with various definitions and, consequently, numerous opportunities so as to move beyond crises. Depending on each person's personality, difficulty could arise either in realizing change or in accepting it, and this is the point where diversity of articulation originates from. But how can we use this prerogative in order to re-evaluate, re-define and eventually realize the crises within a changing world? When one senses the need for transition from being the object of a transient society to acting as the subject within it, then articulation can become a weapon of both destruction and creation. This is exactly the same need I experience to state my views in written form.

The most influential source of expression for me has been contemporary American poetic writing as is the case of poets such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, Frank O'Hara and Amiri Baraka, and definitely Charles Olson. I have always been interested in finding out the extent to which writing deals with reality. It has always fascinated me the way different people respond to the world in so many different ways in order to deal with what revolves around us, affects us and shapes our individuality. Every artistic form discloses a different path of artistic expression, all responding to changes of the surrounding world and all trying to gain ground within it. Most of all I enjoy discovering varieties of literary voices that do speak to every person and tell something different every time. Contemporary poetic voices, as the ones mentioned above, have been very influential for me due to their strength of voice against crises within the American changing world, precisely because it has gone

through different stages of change and crises, resulting in a literary canon replete with challenge.

With this poem I have tried to give my own answers to all the above questions. Language can become the carrier of reason and emotions, triggering thus numerous interpretations and reactions. In practice, this is obvious from the very first line of the poem at the opening of my piece which strikes the reader with a very powerful image, that of isolation and loneliness. The image becomes more intense due to the usage of contradictory terms, for instance the Universe, being an expansive space, and loneliness: the idea here is to examine what the world has come to mean for the individual so as to make it feel such absolute loneliness in the whole universe. Is it because of the speed with which things change or this has to do with how fast these changes take place by leaving us behind in our thoughts and emotions and interpretations until they become our only version of reality? Immediately in the first stanza there is a clear-cut distinction between the self and the public, the “they” and “I”. It is as if the persona says, “they might call me as they please but I am here and I am a woman!” Language here works perfectly in casting doubt on the authority of the others. They often attribute certain labels to the “I”, so the persona gives its immediate reply by claiming its own identity and position within the community. This reply makes the reader sense the persona’s need for change, but why does the persona feel this need? Obviously, this is because the world imposes roles and labels on the individuals, leading them thus to a personal crisis. Next comes the point of internalizing the new: the poet is not just a “romantic poet” but, as the poem reveals, a female self. As an end to this whole idea, the persona raises a rhetorical question apparently because she is the one who already knows the answer, but most importantly she is the one who wishes to invite the readers join her in this process of thinking.

“Mona Lisa” opens with a question which a few lines below is followed up by another rhetorical question. This in itself implies a circular mode of thinking, or a circular way of how things move and change in the world, meaning that in life things constantly move probably in circles, so nothing is ever lost. The same applies for life and death, the greatest of all changes that human nature confronts. Since in the world it is the circulatory pattern that prevails, death is nothing more than a transitory stage to the next phase since death follows life and life follows death. The link to this idea is enhanced and made more obvious by reference to the idea of death in this same stanza. However, here the persona again is gaining power over the object of its fears by definitively choosing life and rejecting death, just like Anne Sexton does in her own poem “Sylvia’s Death,” where the persistent reference to the very word “death” minimizes its meaning, making it nothing more than a disposable idea. Here, by excluding it from her life the persona chooses something permanent, positioning herself as the only authoritative subject. One senses her need for something tangible to hang on so as to keep on moving on, as clearly stated in the third stanza of the poem. While reading it, one comes across subjects and objects. In particular, the pencil is the poet’s tool with the aid of which she destroys the old and brings the new as well as claims authority over creation. The demand, then, is not for creation but for acknowledgement. Again we sense this intense need of the poet to mean, to matter, to offer and act within the community, but most of all, her need to be!

Everybody is likely to sense this need, thus everybody could be a source of creation. The suggestion that emerges here is that we can all write poetry, we are all capable of

writing, of creating, given that we can all perceive or react against the world in different ways. This is what diversity of articulation means as evidenced in the first stanza of the poem. For instance, painters are inspired by their surrounding environment, their paintings inspire musicians to compose, and their music gives food for thought to writers! This is what diversity of expression is all about. Linguistically, the pronoun “we” is the linking word that unites the persona with the world and all that exists in it. At this point, the persona decides to make itself heard among all that exists in the world and it is at this point that the subject matter of the poem, Mona Lisa, is established. Could it mean that the persona feels the obligation to talk to us, to inform us, or does she just feel the need to disclose something of her own? Who is this Mona Lisa? Is she the poet herself? The answer is given implicitly by the very form of the poem. The word loneliness stands alone in the line. Moreover, the first line of the poem is repeated here again so as to enhance the intensive rhythm, but then the rhythmic “lovely- lonely- smile” comes in to smoothen the tension. This pattern of changing moods corresponds to the changes reality itself undergoes. Changes come and go. We just need ourselves and the others around us in order to deal with them. This is the reason why the “romantic poet” can understand and “deduce her loneliness”! In a few words, we can become much more interactive in the face of crisis, and be each other’s Mona Lisa and each other’s Poet.

Further down in the poem, things change. The persona is put at the centre leaving the possessive “her” occupy the position of the object of vision. Now is the time for the others to go under scrutiny. Certainly, subjects and objects are grammatical terms but language is a living body. There are things to be read between the lines and we are challenged to review and decide who the subjects and the objects on a social level are. Is there a hint that “you” is a male figure on the grounds that “her” is obviously a female one? We need to keep in mind that we still live in a male-dominated world either we like it or not. The male and the female have always been in opposing fields; probably they will always be despite sharing the same world. Plainly put, is it necessary that the pronoun “you” should stand for a male figure? Does this poem then address exclusively the other sex? Why not challenge instead these sexual norms and create new theories, new dimensions, and unexpected possibilities? On a cultural level, the pronoun “you” is exclusively male, most probably because the female mind cannot appreciate art, at least not at the same level as males do! This idea came to me when I thought of Anne Bradstreet’s “Prologue,” in which she briefly argues that women cannot appreciate art and language but they can be productive if they are given the chance to prove it. No matter how far-fetched this might sound, it could work as one more interpretation proving that poetry has a diachronic quality, and as such in different places and to different audiences it can trigger different perceptions and responses.

The next lines in the poem take this idea a step further, as the poet now decisively rejects the authority of the other and tries to regain her own subjectivity. The other (the male) usually attributes traits, “colorings,” that do not always coincide with the true “substance of her essence.” So what is her essence? The answer is obvious: the image of Mona Lisa in tears “when nobody is watching” delineates the picture of a world where loneliness, isolation and alienation prevail. It is as if the poet now lets all the masks fall as she is the only person who understands Mona Lisa’s dilemmas. What matters now is that Mona Lisa is alive, “She feels,” she has grown older and wiser and in the end she stands proud in a world marked by difficulties and changes.

Thus, Mona Lisa becomes the portrait of every individual who lives in a world marked by instability and fluidity. She can only confront the modern world if she uses the necessary tools, in other words if she achieves the wholeness that she needs so as to secure and strengthen her place within it.

Works Cited

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