

Reading (and) the late poems of Sylvia Plath

One cannot help wishing to master absence and yet we must always let it go (Jacques Derrida). ¹

Many of Sylvia Plath's last poems are characterised by a poetic language on the point of collapse. As such, the voice of this work can be said to be in process or under erasure in the sense that it reveals an unravelling of signifying practice, manifested by both non-sense and, more paradoxically, the resonance of silence. Tim Kendall has recognised the difficulty that these last poems pose, commenting that, 'We are still learning how to read Plath's later work'. ² Moreover, it is noticeable that Kendall finishes his recent book on Plath's poems with this observation. Kendall, as critic, lapses into silence. In what follows, I will suggest that, rather than seeing silence as an endpoint, the critic can

utilize silence as a heuristic device to develop new approaches to Plath's late work. By applying the psycholinguistic approaches of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan to the poetry, silence (as a manifestation of the unspeakable) can be read as a space of desire within the text that resonates beyond the confines of Symbolic linguistico-logical categories.³ In the reading that follows, I will suggest that the critic must participate in the texts' ab-sense (and, thus, their *jouissance*) in order to displace signification -- 'the obsession with meaning' (Kristeva, *DL*, 142). As Roland Barthes explains, the effect of this critical position is to acknowledge a text as something that 'imposes a state of loss...unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions...[and] brings to a crisis his relation with language'.⁴ In this way, the critic positions him/herself at the borderline of discourse ('where meaning collapses' (Kristeva, *PH*, 2)), recognising *lalangue* as ultimately a condition of language and, thus, as incapable of constraining that which exists beyond the signifying network.⁵ Critical/textual 'truth', therefore, becomes 'the ultimate point where knowledge about desire and *jouissance* can no longer be put into words' (*BG*, 39). As a result, the poems' *signifiante*, the process by which they (dis)engage signifying practice rather than their communicative (coherent) meaning, it to be the focus of

my argument so that a fuller appreciation of the late poems' difficulty can be understood. As Julia Kristeva explains, 'What we call *signifiante*, then, is precisely [an] unlimited and unbounded generating process, [an] unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language' (*RPL*, 17).

Although I will read Plath's poems as *late work* and, thus, establish them in relation to the poet's life, I do not wish to suggest that a biographical approach is productive when analysing the texts. On the contrary, I will argue that such a paradigm is inherently problematic owing to the way in which it seeks to impose a stable authorial 'I'-identity onto the work despite there being resistance to this notion within the texts. Instead, my reading favours the view that Plath-as-author exists as a fetishized object, as an illusory eradication of the reader's desire, and, in this sense, that a biographical reading of her work cannot appreciate the effect that the unstable poetic voice has within the work/on the reader. With this in mind, reading Plath's late poems from a non-biographical position becomes an appreciation of the language of tonality, a movement towards psychosis (*IR*, 9).

1.1 Reading 'Sheep in Fog' via 'Ariel'

The voice of the late poems is noticeably different to that which characterizes the energetic intensity of Plath's earlier October 1962 poems. In those poems, experience struggles to be contained within the signifying practice of the Symbolic, creating a *negativity*, a profound tension between signification and the return of semiotic pulsion that Kristeva identifies as 'the mediation, the supersession of the "pure abstractions" of being and nothingness in the concrete where they are only moments' (RPL, 109). This negativity is manifested in texts such as 'Ariel' by the simultaneity of the poem's 'drive' and 'Stasis'⁶ -- its *signifiante*. The necessary product of the October 1962 poems' discourse is the subject in process. This allows for a *jouissance* that is, in Lacanian terms, a synthesis of the phallic (which is conveyed through signifiers) and *jouis-sens* (the *jouissance* of the unconscious), the motor of which is *lalangue*. As a result, the tension between the imposition of the signifier and language's inconsistencies (its gaps, ambiguity and silence) animates these texts to create poetry that is both disturbing and affecting. In consequence, the reader must participate in the dissolution and reconstitution of speaking/reading identity through these poems' problematic (a)signification. Yet, the same cannot be said for Plath's later work. In texts such as 'Sheep in

Fog', 'Edge', 'Words' and 'The Couriers', the brio of the earlier poems is replaced by a more sombre ambiguity and, in consequence, these works demonstrate a poetic voice that bears witness, I shall argue, to a *jouissance* of a different kind. Less confined within the signifying practice of the Symbolic, these texts intensify the role of silence and gesture towards an experience that remains unspeakable; towards a pure *jouissance* that must, inevitably, be situated beyond the phallus and which Lacan identifies as being feminine (*FS*, 145).

The experience of *jouissance* in Plath's October 1962 poem, 'Ariel', is constrained (and, thereby, rendered partial) by the speaker's attempt to circumscribe his/her utterance via a Symbolic economy. The repetitive use of the 'I' (/aɪ/) phoneme may be read, in Lacanian terms, as an imposition of the phallus onto the speaker's *jouissance*, rendering it partial and, thus, as an attempt to maintain the poem's (and reader's) experience within the realm of signification. As Verhaeghe explains, 'Sexual, that is, phallic enjoyment regulates enjoyment...because the phallic signifier has a restrictive and canalising function' (*BG*, 90). The potential dissolution of the (mythic) unified subject is (partially) averted so that, when the speaker 'Foam[s] to wheat, a glitter of seas' (*A*, 36), the experience may be interpreted as sexual in origin.⁷ By inviting the loss of

the speaker's subjectivity to be read in terms of orgasm, the text thereby constrains the interplay of phonemes [whi:t; si:z] and the lexical a-signification of the line. As such, 'Ariel' may be read, in Kristevan terms, as a representation of the tension that exists inherently within (poetic) subjectivity: the positing of the subject via the imposition of the phallic signifier (*RPL*, 47) and its partial dissolution through the destructive force of the semiotic. The textual scene of this conflict is noticeably fractious, split between the speaker's attempt to vocalise experience (to transmit meaning) and the chaotic interplay of phonemes that disrupt such signification by reducing the speaker's utterance to a series of incomprehensible (repetitive) sounds. In this way, 'Ariel' epitomises the scene of thetic division, the poet's struggle to render a discourse that is other to the Symbolic without lapsing into psychosis. Yet, 'Sheep in Fog', as an example of Plath's late poetry, is noticeably different in its effect. I will argue that, rather than embodying a thetic tension, this poem illustrates a movement beyond the Symbolic -- an intensified erasure of subjectivity -- so that language becomes unable to constrain the experience that the poem suggests. In consequence, the reader of this poem confronts the difficult issue of (poetic/critical) language as failure and, thus, it becomes necessary to

acknowledge that critical language, although capable of identifying the process of vocal erasure in 'Sheep in Fog', can never adequately represent the nature of this experience as it exists beyond language as the unspeakable.

In many ways, 'Sheep in Fog' demands to be read alongside 'Ariel' so that each text may better illuminate the other. On a phenotextual level, both poems focus on the same North Devon landscape and recreate a journey by the speaker on horseback, 'a dawn ride towards a kind of death'.⁸ Furthermore, reference to both poems in manuscript reveals the connection that Plath herself seems to have made between them, as several aspects of 'Ariel', edited from Plath's finished version of the poem, are instated into the initial drafts of 'Sheep in Fog' (before they too are deleted from the final typescript). For example, the edited lines from draft one of 'Ariel', 'God's lioness.../Pivot of heels and knees, and of my color'⁹ become reformulated in draft one of 'Sheep in Fog' to read, 'Horse, [I am your color] we are one color' (E, 195). For Ted Hughes, there is also an important connection between the poems in that 'Sheep in Fog' (in draft) represents a transitional poem, bridging the mood of the October 1962 poems and those written shortly before Plath's death. Hughes' observation relies

on the fact that Plath totally reworked the poem's final stanza on 28th January 1963. Previously, it had read:

Patriarchs till now immobile
 In heavenly wools
 Row off as stones or clouds with the faces of
 babies. (*E*, 193)

Hughes comments that, 'we see in these last three lines her main *Ariel* themes tangled in a strange fashion' (*E*, 192). However, the rewritten stanza that now exists in the published poem is felt by Hughes to signal 'the calamitous change of mood, the sinister change of inspiration' (*E*, 192) that characterizes Plath's late work.

1.2 Reading Hughes reading 'Sheep in Fog'

Hughes' reading of 'Sheep in Fog' has met with interesting responses. Despite both Roy Davids' and, more recently, Tim Kendall's praise for the work, Tracy Brain has sounded a note of caution.¹⁰ For her, Hughes' interpretation is an example of his unilateralist attitude to Plath scholarship, an attitude that is inconsistent with his attitude to the criticism of his own poems. Hughes' essay is certainly an important document. In it, he attempts to (re-)construct the

meaning of Plath's poem by analysing what she chose to edit out during the drafting process. For Hughes, the crucial lines in draft one of 'Sheep in Fog' (then titled 'Fog Sheep') are as follows:

[The world rusts around us
 Ribs, spokes, a scrapped chariot.]
 The train leaves a line of breath.
 O slow
 Horse, the color of rust,
 [I am a scrapped chariot] (*E*, 195)

These lines allow Hughes to postulate that the poem concerns the death of Phaeton, son of Apollo (the god of Poetry) who died when he crashed his father's stolen chariot. The final, later rewritten stanza is then interpreted as a reference to Icarus so that, Hughes concludes, 'Sheep in Fog' illustrates the transition from the Phaeton myth (of 'Ariel') to the Icarus myth (of her last poems). He comments that, 'We understand [the poem] far better, because we have learned the peculiar meaning of its hieroglyphs. These drafts are not an incidental adjunct to the poem, they are a complementary revelation, and a log-book of its *real meanings*' (*E*, 206) [my italics]. Hughes' insistence on 'Sheep in Fog' having 'real meanings' would seem adequate to support Brain's

objection. Furthermore, his explanation as to why he feels the need to analyse the poem in this way -- to 'understand [it] far better' -- is particularly revealing. Hughes clearly feels that the published version of 'Sheep in Fog' is weakened by its failure to deliver an adequate level of comprehensibility (signification). Yet, on another level, it is possible to detect in Hughes' comments a more fundamental justification for his reading. In interpreting the poem as having a 'terrible large-scale psycho-mythological drama' (E, 207), his intention is to impose the logicality of signifying practice onto a poem that, in its finished version, resists such a reading. In effect, therefore, Hughes' reading may be read as a defensive strategy against the inability of (the critic's) language to convey the poem's unspoken truth.

It is interesting to note how Hughes' reading of 'Sheep in Fog' may be interpreted in Lacanian terms as being motivated by the desire to impose a master-discourse onto the poem:

$$\underline{S^1} \text{ (Agent)} \rightarrow \underline{S^2} \text{ (Other)}$$

$$\$ \text{ (Truth)} // \quad a \text{ (Product)} \quad (\text{Adapted from } BG, 26).$$

For Lacan, the master-discourse is the ultimate fantasy of unified identity. Under this scenario, the master-

signifier (S^1) attempts to disguise its instability by suppressing the divided subject ($\$$) under the bar. Yet, the attempt of S^1 to join the second signifier (S^2) at the place of the Other must fail as, having divided itself between two signifiers, the subject is necessarily split. As a result, the structure of the master-discourse precludes the lost object of desire (a) from ever being brought into relation with $\$$ (represented by the double bar, //). With this in mind, it may be argued that Hughes' reading of 'Sheep in Fog' is dependent on his (illusory) status as a unified subject (S^1). From the position of agent, Hughes as 'I' (the master-signifier), seeks to interpret Plath's Ur-text (the original version of the poem that exists in draft) so that it becomes his projected other (S^2), the place at which his own sense of stability is upheld. The outcome of such a discourse is to foster the notion of completion (wholeness) -- to suggest the poem's 'real meanings' -- and, yet, in doing so, Hughes' 'obsession with meaning', his prioritisation of the Ur-text over the redrafted text, is at the expense of the ambiguity that is offered by the published poem. As a result, this text is, in Hughes' reading, suppressed under the bar (at the position of hidden truth ($\$$)). Despite Hughes' insistence that his reading of 'Sheep in Fog' reveals the nature of 'its power to affect' (*E*, 207), his denial of the poem's ambiguity, silence and

gaps seriously undermines such a claim. Unwilling to acknowledge the importance of the published poem's *lack* (a) for his own status as reader, Hughes denies the as-signification within 'Sheep in Fog' and, thereby, achieves only a *comfortable practice of reading* (PT, 14), one that maintains the critic's objectification of the text.

2.1 Reading 'Sheep in Fog' via *lalangue*

Like 'Ariel', 'Sheep in Fog' needs to be appreciated as aural experience. Although Tim Kendall believes that the late poems dispense with 'the motors of rhyme and repetition as motion gives way to stasis' (SP, 190), repetition of a phonemic nature is still an important element of these texts. Indeed, it is the circular, non-developmental sounds that Plath weaves in several of her poems that create the effect of stasis within them. Stasis, as opposed to progression -- a condition of the linear structuring of Kristeva's Symbolic (SM, 192) -- becomes a necessary condition in the last poems' vocal subversion of signification and, as such, in its expression of a *jouissance* beyond the Lacanian phallus.

In 'Contusion', this stasis is enacted by a dense cluster of repetitive morphemes throughout the first half of the poem:

Color floods to the spot, dull purple.
 The rest of the body is all washed out.
 The color of pearl.

In a pit of rock
 The sea sucks obsessively
 One hollow the whole sea's pivot.

Although alliteration and assonance are techniques that Plath employed throughout her poetic career, it is interesting to note the very different effect that they have in 'Contusion' compared to her earlier work. In a poem such as 'Ode for Ted', phonemic repetition serves to intensify the poem's signification by reinforcing a sense of the man's natural vigour:

Ringdoves roost well within his wood,
 shirr songs to suit which mood
 he saunters in; how but most glad
 could be this adam's woman
 when all earth his words do summon
 leaps to laud such man's blood! ¹¹

Here, sound techniques combined with rhythmic variation produces the song-like quality typical of an ode. Yet, as Sylvianne Blosser comments, 'Because these elements were

so to speak "safely" embedded in strictly traditional poetic forms and subject matter, they did not represent "a threat" to the symbolic'.¹² As a result, Plath's use of sound within her early poems reinforces the poetic voice, drawing "attention to the paradigmatic processes which reveal how the poet works" (Blosser, 50). Yet, in 'Contusion' the combination of looser poetic rhythms and a disconnection of the signifying chain -- in the quotation above, the movement from 'the body' to 'the sea' that seems to have only a suppressed or even a nonexistent logicality -- suggests a more intense irruption of the semiotic within the symbolic space (or 'body') of the poem. Alliteration no longer acts to reinforce (and, thus, assist) the poem's transmission of meaning but, instead, illustrates a voice whose signification is under collapse. With this in mind, it is worthwhile remembering Kristeva's view that the speech of the depressed is 'repetitive and monotonous...they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill...A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge...on account of the pressure of silence, the melancholy person sink[s] into the blankness of asymbolia' (BS, 33). In this sense, the phonic repetition of 'Contusion' serves as an illustration of vocal erasure in Plath's late poems. As such, the speaker's melancholia, manifested by his/her failure to signify,

leads the reader to confront the somatic and, in consequence, the Freudian *Zeitlos* or a temporality outside of time (*IR*, 31).

The repetition of /aɪ/ phonemes that was enacted in 'Ariel' as the scene of thetic rupture is replaced in Plath's last poems with echoic assonantal rhythms of a different kind. In 'Sheep in Fog', this rhythm may be detected in the dense cluster of /o/ sounds that dominate the middle of the poem:

O slow
 Horse, the colour of rust,

 Hooves, dolorous bells--
 All morning, the
 Morning has been blackening,

 A flower left out.
 My bones hold a stillness (*A*, 13).

Plath frequently uses the horse as a symbol of the poet and poetry. In 'Ariel', Plath refers to the horse only as 'lioness', a word that embodies the phonetic tension between /aɪ/ ('I') and /ɪ/ (not-'I') sounds [laɪonɪs] and, thus, the simultaneous positing and dissolution of poetic identity (the subject in process). In 'Sheep in Fog',

however, reference to the horse is phonetically foreshadowed by the repetition of /o/ sounds in 'O slow', a device that is also found in 'Words':

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,

And the echoes!

Echoes travelling

Off from the centre like horses. (A, 86)

Here, the horse is related to the /o/ sound in 'echoes' (which literally resonates owing to Plath's repetition of the word). Rather than being a symbol of poetic vibrancy, the horse now seems impotent. Later in the poem, Plath identifies the failure of the poem's signifying practice when she comments that, 'Words [are] dry and riderless' (A, 86). Speaking of Mallarmé's poems, Robert Greer Cohn has commented that the /o/ phoneme is associated with 'stasis and circularity...A corollary of the circularity is evidently the feminine principle', a judgement that seems to be highly appropriate to 'Sheep in Fog' and 'Words'.¹³ In Plath's poems, it is arguable that, genotextually, the repetitious /o/ sounds invite the reader to associate them with a shattering pre-oedipal fusion with the primordial mother (Lacan's *objet a*). In the same way that the frequent /aɪ/ ('I') morphemes graphically convey

phallic identity in 'Ariel', so the /o/ sound in 'Words' and 'Sheep in Fog' indicate a hole in which Symbolic identity falters. Like the elusive female character Lol in Marguerite Duras' *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, the /o/ depicts the problematic of (textual) identity. In Duras' novel, Lol's inability to speak is a response to language's failure to convey the loss of her identity ('*ravissement*): '...she remains silent. It would have been a word-absence, a word-hole, dug in its centre by a hole, this hole where all the other words have been buried. One could not have said it but one could have echoed it. Immense, without an end, an empty gong...' ¹⁴ Here, as in Plath's text, the failure of language is an outcome of that which remains unspeakable: the loss of identity in an echoic *word-hole* without end – that is, a (pure) *jouissance* in death that is destructive to unified subjectivity (*RPL*, 191). In 'Edge', the dead woman's *jouissance* is enacted in a series of clustered /o/ phonemes: 'scrolls', 'toga', 'over', 'rose', 'close', 'odours', 'throats', 'bone' (*A*, 85). As such, these assonantal echoes, although registering within the Symbolic (by perhaps creating a mournful tone to the work) also elude the reader's ability to give them concrete meaning as they are textual gaps through which the experience of pure *jouissance* escapes signifying practice. Kristeva has described Sylvia Plath as a poet

'disillusioned with meanings and words' (*ACW*, 157) and, in this sense, the last poems can be read in terms of a 'language that gives up' (*PH*, 11).

2.2 Re-reading: unspeakable *jouissance*

One of Plath's last poems, 'Edge', describes the corpse of 'The woman' (*A*, 85). The poem has become one of Plath's most infamous not least because of the sensationalist terms in which it has been discussed.¹⁵ David Holbrook has described the poem as an 'idolisation of suicide and infanticide' and, even more tenuously, Jillian Becker speculates that 'Edge' 'suggests that [Plath] was thinking of killing her children when she killed herself'. Other critics have also sought to draw the connection between the woman in the poem and Plath herself. Seamus Heaney comments that the 'perfected economy line' particularly disturbs the reader because the poem is 'A suicide note', a point echoed by Sandra M. Gilbert who describes 'Edge' as a 'Poem...with [its] head...in [the] oven'. It is interesting to note the difficulty that several critics have experienced when discussing 'Edge'. As Tim Kendall states, 'The final and unanswerable mystery which Plath leaves is how to read the woman's achievement' (*SP*, 208). Even those who have sought to resist biography, most frequently by suggesting that the identity of the woman is not Plath but Medea,

have often been unable to truly disregard such an interpretation. ¹⁶ Thus, Susan Bassnett suggests that, 'A reading of Plath's poems that hunts for prefigurations of her suicide...is a restricted reading', yet she goes on to ask, 'Is there...a thought of dying *with* her children, like Medea'. Similarly, Linda Wagner-Martin, despite laying emphasis on the poem's use of persona, is unwilling to differentiate this voice from the person of Plath: 'the persona here has...[found] a mystical unity with the spiritual world, and she has thereby finally escaped – by journeying to the edge of the known world – that world that so increasingly frustrated her, and her writerly ambition'. Wagner-Martin's (non-) biographical position seems to be even more confusingly posited by Susan Van Dyne. In her introduction to *Revising Life*, Van Dyne states, 'I am not arguing for a "poetics of transparency" in which the woman writer is assumed to be writing directly and authentically from her lived experience' (*RL*, 1). Earlier, however, she writes, 'In one of the last poems she wrote, Plath regards her life as if it were a completed oeuvre...*"The woman is perfected"*' (*ibid*). Van Dyne's argument relies on the distinction that she makes between the person of Plath and the Plath-persona that is used in her work. For Van Dyne, the poetry illustrates Plath's view of 'her life as if it were a text that she could invent and rewrite' (*ibid*). While

this is a valid and interesting approach to the work, it is important to note that Van Dyne's reading of 'Edge' does not escape the biographical as she refers to Plath's situation at the time of the poem's production: 'Now, in February of 1963, barely thirty, Plath found herself a mother alone with two young children...The family script Plath hoped perhaps most to revise was her mother's self-sacrifice in her devotion to her children' (RL, 174). To employ a biographical framework of analysis for 'Edge' is, however, to erroneously suggest that, in Foucault's words, the author is 'the unity and origin of [the text's] meanings'.¹⁷ Furthermore, such readings ensure that the hegemony of the phallus is again imposed upon the poem, thus, canalising its subversive (a)linguistic qualities.

Much debate has surrounded the attitude of the speaker to the woman's death, particularly in the context of the poem's opening lines:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment.

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga (A, 85).

Some critics feel that the woman is judged positively as she has 'resolved all the contradictions of her present life...She is completely contented', ¹⁸ whereas others point out the problematic terms in which the speaker's attitude is couched. For Janice Markey, the use of irony is key to understanding that the woman is condemned rather than applauded as her suicidal imperative is exposed as being an 'illusion', the 'shoddy pretence of an idealistic heroic act' (*JRE*, 49). However, both approaches are noticeable for their failure to observe that the distance between the speaker (in his/her detached position as observer) and the woman who has died is crucial because the speaker's attempt to give meaning to the woman's experience (that is, to register it within the Symbolic) serves to enact the critical position. Whether the speaker's judgement is positive or negative is, in this context, irrelevant, given the more important point that, in interpreting the woman's actions, s/he tries to read the corpse as if it were a text. In this sense, it is noticeable that the speaker-as-reader emphasises his/her problems to do so:

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over (A, 85).

The word 'seem' here stresses that any reading of the corpse can never represent a master narrative and, in this sense, makes redundant any speculation as to whether the woman's "perfect[ion]" is actual or illusory. Instead, the text foregrounds language's (and, by extension, the critic's) failure when the borders of the Symbolic are ruptured. As Elisabeth Bronfen comments, 'the scene [Plath] depicts is one where the power of language has utterly dissolved'.¹⁹ 'Edge' thus concerns the erasure of the woman's voice that occurs with the dissolution of signifying practice. It is noticeable that in both 'Edge' and 'Sheep in Fog', the poems close with a repetition of phonemes:

Her blacks crackle and drag ('Edge', A, 85).

Starless and fatherless, a dark water ('Sheep in Fog', A, 13).

Of the former, Steven Gould Axlerod comments, '[this is] the sound of silence registering not as language at all but as noise, as radio static'.²⁰ Thus, in Plath's late poems, signifying practice becomes problematic to such an extent that, rather than signifying, the texts often

unravel to reveal a silence that is inherent within language itself -- the loss usually disguised by the paternal signifier (the 'I'-identity of the speaker).

Like 'Ariel', the speaker of 'Edge' necessarily has to maintain some degree of Symbolic subjectivity in order to vocalise at all and yet it is never posited to the same degree as in the earlier poem -- there is, after all, no 'I'-identity given to the speaker, a device that reoccurs in several of Plath's late poems such as 'Contusion' and 'The Munich Mannequins'. This weakening of subjectivity is furthered in 'Edge' by establishing the woman in a counter-position beyond language -- a point echoed by Axelrod Gould (*WCW*, 218)-- so the woman's silence threatens to erase the speaker's (and critic's) vocalisation by causing him/her to share in the woman's unbridled, a-linguistic *jouissance*, an experience that 'implies leaving the Symbolic, and thus entails disappearance, that is, the death of the subject' (*BG*, 91). This failure of language is reminiscent of Kristeva's patient, Anne, who is recorded as saying: 'I speak as if at the edge of words, and I feel as if at the edge of my skin, but the depth of my sorrow remains untouchable' (*IR*, 22). Significantly, an alteration that Plath makes to draft one of 'Edge' illustrates the unspeakable nature of the poem's *jouissance*. When writing about the woman's dead children, the line, 'She has

folded them back into her self' is amended to read, 'She has folded them back into her body' (RL, 173). The emphasis that Plath places here on 'body' (soma) rather than 'self' (speaking subject) is important as it indicates the loss of subjectivity that occurs in death - that is, in Lacanian terms, the erasure of the body-as-signifier and its return to organism. In this sense, Plath's revision of the title from 'Nuns in Snow' to 'The Edge' is significant for the way in which it stresses the possibility of transgressing the limits of marginal discourse. Furthermore, as Wagner-Martin (LL, 104) and Kendall (SP, 195) note, Plath's deletion of the phrase 'Down there' that begins 'Edge' in draft, revises the place of the reader so that, in the published poem, s/he is immediately forced into the woman's position at the border. For the speaker (and critic) to say anything about the woman is, thus, a defensive strategy against the loss of subjectivity that pure *jouissance* threatens, a point that is reminiscent of 'Sheep in Fog''s redrafted final stanza where death is depicted as 'Starless and fatherless, a dark water' (A, 13). Here, 'fatherless' may be read in terms of the loss of the paternal signifier and, thus, *jouissance* beyond the phallus can be understood as (m)otherness -- a pre-Oedipal fusion that is experienced by the woman in 'Edge' who through death achieves an eradication of subjectivity:

She has folded

Them back into her body as petals

Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odours bleed

From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower (A,
85).

3.1 Reading silence

The critical difficulty that 'Edge' represents may be described as a product of how the poem exists at the limits of (and, through 'The woman', beyond) signifying practice. Silence, as a necessary condition of writing in its confrontation with (m)otherness, is thus intensified in many of Plath's last poems as a condition of the pure *jouissance*. It is interesting to note the very different effect that this inscription of silence has in 'Edge' compared to Plath's earlier poem, 'I Am Vertical', in which the speaker also seeks a fusion with the natural world. In language reminiscent of that that will later occur in 'Edge', Plath writes:

Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,

The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool
odours.

I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.

Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping

I must most perfectly resemble them --

Thoughts gone dim.

It is more natural to me lying down.

Then the sky and I are in open conversation,

And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:

Then the trees may touch me for once, and the
flowers have time for me. ²¹

Here the use of the 'I' persona creates a noticeably more emphatic statement of Symbolic identity than in 'Edge', even if, as Anna Tripp suggests, ²² this is far from unproblematic: 'lying' [laɪɪŋ], 'sky' [skaɪ], 'I' [aɪ], 'finally' [faɪnlli:]. The speaker's separateness from the 'trees' and 'flowers' that 'fail to notice' her is, thus, indicative of a signifying practice that maintains the division of subject and object: 'I must most perfectly resemble *them*' [my italics]. Only with the word 'finally' does the speaker seem to relinquish her subjectivity in the closing line of the poem, producing a cluster of /i:/ phonemes in 'tree' and the repeated word 'me' that reminds the reader of a similar loss of 'I'-identity in 'Ariel' and 'Contusion':

And now I

Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas ('Ariel', A, 36).

The sea slides back.

The mirrors are sheeted ('Contusion', A, 84).

However, it is apparent that this erasure of 'I' is incomplete as it is offset against the reinvestment of a linear Symbolic structuring. The speaker establishes a delay to her fusion with nature - 'Then' -- that is phonetically marked by the word 'time' [taɪm]. As such, 'I Am Vertical' plays with the speaker's loss of subjectivity in a way that denies the invasive destructiveness of the *jouissance* in 'Edge'. Significantly, whereas the ten-line stanzas in 'I Am Vertical' have a noticeable physicality that allow the poetic voice its efflorescence, the text of 'Edge' with its emaciated unrhymed couplets is radically dissected by blank space. If, as Barthes suggests, eroticism consists in the voyeuristic excitation of viewing 'a body where the garment gapes...the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing' (PT, 9) [Barthes' italics] then Plath's last poems often graphically mark this 'gaping' in the blank spaces that surround and dissect the texts -- the clash of the signifier and its

forbidden other (a). In 'Edge', textual space is as prominent on the page as the words of the poem. Plath's use of the two-line stanza form here serves to emphasise the instability of a poetic voice under erasure so that its silence challenges and subverts the poem's ability to signify -- in effect, the 'edge' that the poem depicts is visually represented by the clash between script (voice) and space (silence) on the page. In 'The Munich Mannequins', a similar visual (and textual) erasure is enacted at the end of the poem:

And the black phones on hooks

Glittering

Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice. (A, 75).

It is at this border, where language (the paternal signifier) is juxtaposed against unconditioned, maternal space, that *jouissance* beyond the signifying practice of the Symbolic can(not) be represented as ex-istent: the 'appearance-as-disappearance' (PT, 9). In 'The Couriers', textual silence is noticeably marked by the double line break that exists between stanzas three and four:

A ring of gold with the sun in it?

Lies. Lies and a grief.

Frost on a leaf, the immaculate

Cauldron, talking and crackling (A, 12)

Foreshadowed by the elliptical statements that indicate a disconnection of the signifying chain, the irruption of *lalangue* via, for example, the assonantal echoes in 'grief' and 'leaf' exist on the borders of the poem's central (psychic) silence where meaning collapses. In this space, the speaker/reader is plunged into a heterogeneous non-site, beyond the realm of the signifier and, thus, into silence, a fusion with the mother (that is experienced as pure *jouissance*). That this cannot be brought into language (and, thus, eludes signification) is a signal that *jouis-sens* (as a thetic position) is unable to constrain the destructiveness of a *jouissance* that exists beyond the Symbolic. Given this, it is noticeable that, in a poem that resists positing the subjectivity of the speaker (the phallic signifier 'I' never occurs and is only marked in the phonetics of 'Lies' [laɪz]), the reinvestment of the signifier after the gap is associated with language: 'the immaculate/Cauldron, talking'. This pattern is repeated later in the

poem when, with the reference to a 'disturbance in mirrors' (the dissolution of unitary identity signalled by the assumption of phallic law), the voice lapses again into silence (indicated by the double line break) only to be reconstructed in the final line: 'Love, love, my (mar) season'. Rather than mythologizing Symbolic identity as a constant, the textual space that surrounds this dislocated line suggests the continued instability of the subject position. As Derrida states, 'Arch-writing...marks the *dead time* within the presence of the living present...Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming unconscious of the subject' (OG, 68-69). It is in this textual space that the paternal signifier is erased, allowing for a destructive silence -- a *jouissance* beyond language -- to ex-ist.

From the above, it is clear that the late poems of Sylvia Plath are remarkable for the manner in which they gesture towards an experience that must, by its very nature, defy the possibility that it can be fully posited in language. Although *lalangue* (as *jouis-sens*) is an important textual strategy in this work, as it was in the poems of October 1962 -- an illustration of the poetic voice at the border of thetic division, undergoing a symbiotic construction/destruction ('I'/not-'I') -- the late poems also intensify the role of silence in a way in which Plath's earlier work does not. In consequence,

poems such as 'Sheep in Fog', 'The Couriers', 'Words' and 'Edge' offer Plath's most radical subversion of Symbolic language (and, thus, expose the instability of the phallic signifier) by placing the poetic voice under erasure. The effect of this is, as Kristeva explains, 'Erasure of subject/object, assault of the drive...music of the body and of matter' (IR, 9). In this way, the pertinently titled poem, 'Edge', can be read as the ultimate (and final) manifestation of Plath's transgression of language's border. As a result, the *jouissance* that this invites (for the woman/the reader) is one that ultimately defies the speaker's/critic's ability to constrain it within textual analysis. Rather than attempting to understand the late poems for what they communicate to the reader (*signification*), therefore, the critic should acknowledge their textual *signifiance* -- *how* rather than *what* the texts (do not) signify -- so that the *jouissance* of reading is not canalised by the imposition of a phallic critical practice.

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¹ *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 142. Hereafter this text is referred to as *OG*.

² *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 208. Hereafter this text is referred to as *SP*.

³ In the course of my argument, I shall make reference to the following works by Julia Kristeva: *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). Hereafter this text is referred to as *DL*; *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Hereafter this text is referred to as *PH*; *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Hereafter this text is referred to as *RPL*; 'About Chinese Women' and 'Stabat Martyr', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Hereafter these texts are referred to as *ACW* and *SM* respectively; *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989). Hereafter this text is referred to as *BS*; *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Hereafter this text is referred to as *IR*. I shall also refer to Jacques Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell & Jacqueline Rose (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982)-- hereafter this text is referred to as *FS* -- to Paul Verhaeghe's interpretation of Lacanian ideas in *Beyond Gender, From subject to drive*

(Other Press: New York, 2001)-- hereafter this text is referred to as *BG* - and to André Patsalides' & Kareen Ror Malone's, 'Jouissance in the Cure', in *The Subject of Lacan: A Lacanian Reader for Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Kareen Ror Malone & Stephen R. Friedlander (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). Hereafter this text is referred to as *JC*.

⁴ *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14. Hereafter this text is referred to as *PT*.

⁵ 'The motor of... unconscious *jouissance* is *lalangue*, which "hinges" the language that we speak and the unconscious that desires...*Lalangue* is that which bubbles, springs forth, weaves, and dwells parasitically within the holes of language S(Ø)...Alliterations, assonances, and phonetic similarities are the elements that weave and animate *lalangue*' (*JC*, 130).

⁶ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 36. Hereafter this text is referred to as *A*.

⁷ See Janice Markey, *A Journey into the Red Eye* (London: The Women's Press, 1993), 29 -- hereafter this text is referred to as *JRE* -- and Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 339.

⁸ Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog'', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William

Scammell (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 199. Hereafter this text is referred to as *E*.

⁹ Sylvia Plath (1962) Manuscripts of 'Ariel', unpublished. Facsimile from Smith College.

¹⁰ See Roy Davids, 'Ted Hughes's 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog' - The Onlie Begetter', in *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Nick Gammage (London: Faber & Faber), 122-123; Tim Kendall (*SP*, 190); and Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 195.

¹¹ Sylvia Plath (1981) *The Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber), 29-30.

¹² Sylvianne Blosser (2001) *A Poetics on Edge: The Poetry and Prose of Sylvia Plath* (Bern:Berlin, Peter Lang), 141.

¹³ Robert Greer Cohn (1980) *Towards the Poems of Mallarmé* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 270.

¹⁴ *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (France: Gallimard, 1964), 48. Translation by Aude Dupuis. The original version reads, '...elle se tait. Ç'aurait été un mot-absence, un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou, de ce trou où tous les autres mots auraient été enterrés. On n'aurait pas pu le dire mais on aurait pu le faire résonner. Immense, sans fin, un gong vide...'

¹⁵ David Holbrook, *Poetry and Existence* (London: The Athlone Press, 1976), 2; Jillian Becker, *Giving Up: The*

Last Days of Sylvia Plath (London, Ferrington, 2002), 22; Ronald Hayman, *The Death & Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Minerva, 1992), 178; Seamus Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', in *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 164-5; Sandra M. Gilbert, 'A Fine White Flying Myth: Confessions of a Plath addict', in *Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 51.

¹⁶ Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), 25-26; Susan Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill & London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 1. Hereafter this text is referred to as *RL*; Linda Wagner-Martin (*Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 105. Hereafter this text is referred to as *LL*.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: William Arnold, 1989), 227.

¹⁸ Elaine Connell, *Sylvia Plath: Killing The Angel in the House* (Hebden Bridge: Pennine Press, 1993), 120-121.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath* (Plymouth, Northcote House Publishers, 1998), 95.

²⁰ Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 21. Hereafter this text is referred to as *WCW*.

²¹ 'I Am Vertical', in *Crossing The Water* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), 26.

²² Anna Tripp, 'Saying "I": Sylvia Plath as Tragic Author or Feminist Text', *Women: A Cultural Review*, Volume 5, Number 3, pp. 253-263.