

## ‘Silence of another order’: Negativity and trope in the late poems of Sylvia Plath

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Sylvia Plath is a negative poet. This, I think, few would deny. The popular conception of Plath as the depressed poet *par excellence* has made her a fantasized conduit of the death-drive. Plath as the word-made-death involves her readers in a drama where poetry-as-logos impels her participants to death-as-telos. In such a reading the poems enact a drama in which she plays the wronged, vengeful, and ultimately self-liberated heroine. The negativity of death aids the triumph of rebirth. This is the theme of the textual drama that is *Ariel*.

The above represents a reading that is all too common in Plath criticism. Its increasing contestation has seen numerous useful analyses of Sylvia Plath as a mythic figure in cultural consciousness, a myth that crosses the usual boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. (At the time of writing, a long-stifled movie version of the Plath-Hughes marriage starring Gwyneth Paltrow is in the offing.) I have opened with such a reading partly to demonstrate the ease with which Plath criticism becomes containing of its subject, how it can produce an authorized version of an artist’s life, a grid through which their works are to be read. It is against this authorized version that an alternative vision of Plath’s negativity can be constructed. In this essay, I would like to analyze the ‘negativity’ of Sylvia Plath by partly accounting for the affective energy of some of the late poems and how they make ‘morally’ and ‘existentially’ negative states available to the reader. In doing so, I will attempt to analyze a brand of figural performance in which frequently used tropes become, through repetition, a breed of tropic sign. Signifying what? Often, a sense without literal representation, an emotional excess, a wilful loss of self imagined by reader and writer alike. In all cases of the above, a no-thing. As such they become a textual

trajectory that allows a consistent engagement with discourses of negativity in a polyvalent way, one that exposes the illusory nature of poetic figures, approaching them not as sites of pre-determined meaning but as sites of textually-generated and multi-referential meanings. Analyzing Sylvia Plath's tropes of negation raises questions not only about Plath herself, but also of poetic figuration more generally.

*Plath and metaphor*

An early poem, 'Metaphors', written in 1959 and included in *The Colossus*, provides a useful starting point in considering Plath's treatment of metaphor:

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in half.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.<sup>1</sup>

This playful rumination on the processes of pregnancy is structured around conceits that leap from one referent to the next, wittily weaving a host of referential strains. Engagingly self-reflexive, this riddle-like pregnancy poem consists of nine lines, each of nine syllables, which allusively parade its subject. Organic images such as melon, fruit, and apples coincide with those of containment and construction, such as the 'ponderous house' and the 'fat purse' housing 'new-minted money'. The embryo is figured as both organic, self-contained, natural, and also as a means and mode of production, a 'red fruit', that through the course of one line is transmuted to purloined luxury goods ('ivory') and means of construction ('fine timbers'). Thus the equivalence that the first line sets up between speaker-mother and speaker-poem grounds both the body of the woman

and the body of the poem as sites of self-contained regeneration as well as self-conscious construction. Both are, to embryo and metaphor respectively, a 'means, a stage'. Furthermore, the process of metaphoricality is itself metaphorised as object and figure (embryo and metaphor) are conflated. The poem is thus a maximalisation of the tropic register it self-consciously enacts.

The parameters of this exploration of metaphor may be applied to Plath's poetics more generally. In this poem Plath makes a correlation between the internal mechanisms of the body and the mechanisms of poetic figuration.<sup>2</sup> Such a contiguity is implied in a number of other poems in which the body acts as a spatialised trope for the boundedness of individual subjectivity. It can also act as the 'stage' or 'means' by which metaphor enacts the dazzling range of its self-generative processes. I am thinking here of the poem 'Cut', in which the partial severance of the speaker's thumb is the catalyst for the staging of a multivalent drama of conceits:

... Little pilgrim,  
The Indian's axed your scalp.  
Your turkey wattle  
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.  
I step on it,  
Clutching my bottle  
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.  
Out of a gap  
A million soldiers run,  
Redcoats, every one.

Whose side are they on?  
O my  
Homunculus, I am ill.

... Saboteur,  
Kamikaze man——  
The stain on your

Gauze Ku Klux Klan  
Babushka  
Darkens and tarnishes and when

The balled  
Pulp of your heart  
Confronts its small  
Mill of silence

How you jump——  
Trepanned veteran,  
Dirty girl,  
Thumb stump.

(*CP*, pp. 235-6)

The fluency of these conceits, which are linked by the visual continuity of redness and movement denoted by the bloodied thumb, registers a playful abstraction seemingly at odds with a moment of bodily pain. They suggest a distance between the speaker and the act she undergoes, the tropological panorama implying a fetishisation, rather than illustration, through metaphor. Yet I would suggest that such a fetishisation may in fact have less to do with the masochistic ‘thrill’ of injury than with the pleasures of the text. It is possible to locate the conceits and the intense auditory tonalities and rhymes as a brand of play, a recourse to metaphor that attempts to bridge the gap between a moment of division—the experience of the ‘cut’ and the encounter of the bifurcated parts with the ‘tiny mill of silence’ that bridges them—and the possibility of its figuration in language. As a string of metaphors grounded in political and imperial violence—pilgrims and Indians, redcoats, the Ku Klux Klan—the poem also serves to reinstate within language the fusion of public and private, personal and political, that traditional dichotomies would disqualify<sup>3</sup>. The extreme metaphoricalness of this poem serves to enact an epistemology of violence by locating it both within and without the text. Yet it does so by providing a stop-gap between the violence that disjoins experience from the language that would embody it.

It is this radical and obvious materiality that has divided critics' response to Plath's use of tropes. Her intense rhetoricity and the level of artifice it signals problematise both her relation to contemporary poetic strategies and the poetics of unmediated self-presentation associated with the confessional school. Categorised by their excess to proscriptions of anti-sociality,<sup>4</sup> Plath's heightened rhetorical modes and tensely controlled free verse forms, which are often grounded in a primarily auditory logic, agitate at the limit of poetic language. It is this heightened rhetoricity that enables the negativity so abundant in her work, and acts as the arbiter of silence, unsayableness, and the realm beyond the subjective text to which the poet aspires.

If we return to 'Metaphors' in this light, we see that its intense and aleatory figurations may signal something in addition to a witty convolution of process and product. An embryo, as yet disassociated from the body of the mother, exists at the degree zero of self-consciousness and sociality. The range of figural representations in the poem may signal an attempt to locate some linguistic point at which the speaker may both comprehend the object and identify with it. The metaphor, which is (roughly speaking) a vehicle of equivalence, provides the site for such an attempted identification, being (to borrow Julia Kristeva's formulation) 'established not by the designation of a reference inevitably reduced to being, but by the relationship the speaking subject has with the Other during the utterance act'.<sup>5</sup> When the Other is located in / as a negative state, then the metaphorical dynamic is necessarily heightened. This can also be observed in the 1960 poem 'You're', which seems almost an extension of the language of 'Metaphors':

YOU'RE  
Clownlike, happiest on your hands,  
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,  
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense  
Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode.  
Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,  
Trawling your dark as owls do.  
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth

Of July to All Fools' day,  
O high-riser, my little loaf.

Vague as fog and looked for like mail.  
Farther off than Australia.  
Bent-backed Atlas, our travelled prawn.  
Snug as a bud and at home  
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.  
A creel of eels, all ripples.  
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.  
Right, like a well-done sum.  
A clean slate, with your own face on.  
(CP, p. 141)

Here the gap between the speaking subject and the object is again occupied by a wide range of conceits. The speaker conflates both the embryo as achieved and the embryo as possibility, that is as egg 'trawling' its 'dark' and 'looked for like mail'. This doubling of the negative space or value of the object makes the tender address a means by which the distant embryo is given linguistic identity through a sequence of tropes. Such tenderness in the face of this potentially abstracting sequence recalls Kristeva's analysis of metaphorical conveyance as 'placing love in concert with image-making, resemblance, homologation'.<sup>6</sup> Here, the love of the speaker for the embryo whose presence-absence marks it as a conundrum of language and identity-politics registers at a heightened metaphorical level of play. In analyzing this figural play, particularly in relation to 'Metaphors', it is useful to keep in mind that

part of the system of play insists that the text stages transformation and at the same time reveals how the staging is done. Transformation is an access road to the inaccessible ... Staged transformation makes that which is inaccessible both present and absent. Presence comes about by means of the staged transformation, and absence by means of the fact that the staged transformation is only play. Hence every presented absence is qualified by the caveat that it is only staged in the form of make-believe, through which we can conceive what

would otherwise elude our grasp. Epistemologically speaking, [play] imbues presence with adumbrated absence by denying any possibility to the possible results of play. Anthropologically speaking, it allows us to conceive that which is withheld from us. By allowing us to have absence as presence, play turns out to be a means by which we may extend ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

In this analysis, the heightened playfulness of ‘Metaphors’, ‘Cut’, and ‘You’re’ may be viewed as a mode by which figuration may serve the ends of negation, and the poem made the stage for a heightened performance of language.

*From presence to absence*

I would like to turn now to the opposite process, that of converting presence into absence—which is, I believe, the dominant mechanism of figurative language in the poems. I am going to argue here for a system of imagery that enacts what Michael Riffaterre has termed a process of conversion and expansion. Expansion is the means by which one sign is transformed into several, while conversion makes clear an equivalence between signs by ‘transforming several signs into one collective sign’, that is, by ‘endowing the components of a sequence with the same characteristic features’ by ‘modifying them all with the same factor’, thus enacting a ‘permutation’ of key words and terms.<sup>8</sup> While I do not believe Riffaterre’s model to be a viable one for poetry wholesale, I do believe it can provide a means by which to explore the interrelationships of several systematic tropes within Sylvia Plath’s late poems. In such poems certain attributes or factors are re-contoured to evolve a sequence of metaphors and figures which collectively exceed the limits of individual poems and are promoted from simple illustrative tools or embellishments to resonant sites of meaning-making. What I wish to explore is a heightened catachresis that ritualistically *displaces* signifiers, drawing from them not simply the significance of analogy but of meaning.

*'Whiteness I Remember' ...*

Central to many of the poems is the trope of white and whiteness. Connoting absence by its very substance, white entails first and foremost a series of 'lacks': lack of colour, lack of darkness, lack of substance, and, within a socio-cultural context, lack of experience, lack of vice. White is the colour of virginity and cleanliness. It connotes purity just as it denotes a marmoreal coldness. Whiteness as negative value becomes the dominant mechanism of a catachresis that creates relationships grounded in a logic of aural, visual, and auditory contiguity. The following examples taken from a variety of poems demonstrate the centrality and permutations of whiteness and roundness in such images as the moon, plates, clocks, and featureless faces. Of particular note is the repeated application of baldness, which signals an obvious lack, and often denotes sphericity and shininess:

A bonewhite light, like death, behind all things.  
(*'Insomniac'*, *CP*, p. 163)

White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.  
(*'The Rival'*, *CP*, p. 166)

The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven.  
(*'The Surgeon at 2am'* *CP*, p. 170 )

The light falls without let-up, blindingly.  
A woman is dragging her shadow  
About a bald, hospital saucer.  
It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper  
And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg.  
(*'A Life'*, *CP*, p. 150)

On this bald hill the new year hones its edge.  
Faceless and pale as china  
The round sky goes on minding its business.  
Your absence is inconspicuous;  
Nobody can tell what I lack.

... Now silence after silence offers itself.  
The wind stops my breath like a bandage.  
... The day empties its images

Like a cup or a room. The moon's crook whitens,  
Thin as the skin seaming a scar.  
(‘Parliament Hill Fields’, *CP*, pp. 152-3)

The white sky empties of its promise, like a cup.  
(‘Three Women’, *CP*, p. 177)

Bald eyes or petrified eggs.  
Grownups confined in stockings and jackets,  
Lard-pale, sipping the thin  
Air like a medicine.  
(‘Whitsun’, *CP*, p. 153)

The bald slots of his eyes stiffened wide-open  
On the incessant heat-lightning flicker of situations.

... Already he can feel daylight, his white disease,  
Creeping up with her hatful of trivial repetitions.  
(‘Insomniac’, *CP*, p. 163)

In the extracts from ‘A Life’ and ‘Parliament Hill Fields’ in particular, Plath’s most familiar images converge to create an overall sense of obliteration. In the first the (white) light is blinding, effacing sight; a woman is described in terms of her shadow only, and the moon-like, blank hospital saucer is described as bald. In ‘Parliament Hill Fields’ these tropes are heightened further, as the ‘bald hill’ transfers its roundness to yet another reference to pale china and the trope of roundness continues in the ‘round sky’ that goes on ‘minding its business’. The cumulative effect of these persistent privations—which result in a loss of speech at the hand of an infolding silence and an implied death in the stopping of breath—is to create a landscape of empty surfaces, a sequence of self-contained patinas identifiable only by their lack of attributes. They thus constitute a pathetic fallacy, corresponding to the speaker’s ‘lack’ as the poem, like the day it depicts, ‘empties its images /

like a cup or a room'. In other poems, whiteness and roundness are also conflated in more explicit references to featurelessness and facelessness:

The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful.  
The body under it is in my hands.  
As usual there is no face. A lump of chinese white  
With seven holes thumbed in. The soul is another light.  
I have not seen it; it does not fly up.  
Tonight it has receded like a ship's light.  
(*'The Surgeon at 2am'*, *CP*, p. 170)

It is a world of snow now. I am not at home.  
How white these sheets are. The faces have no features.  
They are bald and impossible, like the faces of my children,  
Those little sick ones that elude my arms.

The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,  
The face of the dead one that could only be perfect  
In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.  
(*'Three Women'*, *CP*, p. 178)

The sheets, the faces, are white and stopped, like clocks.  
Voices stand back and flatten. Their visible hieroglyphs  
Flatten to parchment screens to keep the wind off.  
They paint such secrets in Arabic, Chinese!  
(*'Three Women'*, *CP*, p. 179)

My mirror is clouding over—  
A few more hooks, and it will reflect nothing at all.  
The flowers and the faces whiten to a sheet.  
(*'Last Words'*, *CP*, p. 172)

The hospital landscape of winter whiteness that recurs through a variety of poems from 'The Surgeon at 2am' and 'Three Women' to the more famous 'Tulips' is seen as etherised and static in its 'heavenly' hygiene and is figured variously as 'a snowfield' and 'a world of snow'. Snow—the 'nothing that is', as Wallace Stevens would say—is an application of coldness and whiteness, registering the privative, the nullified, the silenced. The various faces, 'white and stopped', 'a lump of

chinese white', 'bald and impossible', with 'no features', register the effaced and the static, as well as a problematic perfection signalled by their utter self-containment. Being defined by their lack of attributes, they achieve a 'frozen' peacefulness. Being total lack, they in effect lack nothing, are complete. Both roundness, which has no end or beginning, and whiteness, whose identity depends upon its lack of other shades, signal the impermeable, the self-contained. As such they connote both stark implacable presence, and, by relation of their featurelessness, a veiled absence. One could reformulate this equation and call it a negative presencing in which the privative and impermeable are made startlingly manifest. By re-contouring the objects of her metaphors by a forcible catachresis, Plath negativises them. Given that it is the speaker's perception that classifies as bald things as diverse as 'cries' and 'days', it is, to some degree, subjectivity that is negated here, because absence is perceived as an attribute of the objects she sees. By endowing the objects with negative attributes, Plath is able to construct a sense of absence even as she establishes presence.

What is the effect of the repetition of these tropes? By making such adjectives as 'white' and 'bald' the most common adjectives of the poems, Plath elevates them above mere embellishments, and accords them the status of tropic sign. By this I mean that she heightens their adjectival function from illustration or property to value. Their poetic effect of connoting emptiness, absence, coldness, or privation is reinforced in various contexts by repetition and becomes, through extensive use, almost a sign within a sign. Or, to put it slightly differently, a sign signifying a sense. It is in this sense that Riffaterre's conversion is applied, as the mere single sense of words becomes multi-valent by the instant availability of a whole tropic register at the moment that the sign is read. Given that the speed of composition and the inter-referential nature of the language of the poems invites a reading of them that is, if not a narrativising one, then at least an inter-textual one,<sup>9</sup> it is possible to see such metaphors as the following from 'The

'Hanging Man' as an expansion and conflation of tropes that signify privation:

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:  
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.  
(CP, p. 141)

Here an extended metaphor of a light bulb partakes of tropes of whiteness, light, and roundness, so that the incongruence of a day that is 'bald' and 'white' is made metaphorically striking by its relation to a tropic strain that continually enacts what Pound has termed a *phanopopeia*, a 'casting of images on the visual imagination'. To apply Pound's terminology more generally, the key words and terms undergoing permutation and conflation here may also be termed a *logopopeia*, a 'diversion from ordinary usage' that motivates them to a heightened degree of metaphor marked by a continual catachresis.<sup>10</sup>

In 'The Munich Mannequins', frequently used tropes multiply and converge on the speaker, eventually bringing about the close of the poem:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.  
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,  
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.  
The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.  
It means: no more idols but me,

Me and you.  
So, in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight  
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,

Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind.

(*CP*, pp. 262-3)

Here the white, round moon acts as the metaphor for ova, and menstrual blood as the tool of narcissism. So isolated in their self-containment and perfection that they are incapable of reproduction, the mannequins exist in a liminal state of petrification and near-death. Both naked and bald, 'without mind', they appear featureless and incapable of communication. The poem then moves from an empty street-scape into the interior of a hotel, where the inhabitants are registered only as their dismembered parts:

Hands will be opening doors and setting  
Down shoes for a polish of carbon  
Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.

(*CP*, p. 263)

And, like the obsolescence of each of the objects figured, the image of the phones that closes the poem also centres around silence and impermeable self-containment:

And the black phones on hooks  
Glittering  
Glittering and digesting  
Voicelessness. The snow has no voice.

(*CP*, p. 263)

Perfection, it seems, is also silent, and 'snow' once again is the harbinger of silence. Silence as steady encroachment also marks 'The Night Dances', where the gestures of the speaker's child filling the 'black amnesias' of night cannot halt the obliterating whiteness of the snow-like stars that bring about the close of the poem:

Why am I given  
These lamps, these planets  
Falling like blessings, like flakes  
Six-sided, white

On my eyes, my lips, my hair  
Touching and melting.  
Nowhere.

(CP, p. 250)

Like the snow in 'The Swarm', which marshals its 'brilliant cutlery / Mass after mass, saying Shh!', the 'white smile' of the snow in these poems often denotes a steady obliteration of consciousness on the part of the speaker.

It would be easy to dismiss such repetitions as symptomatic of a pathological echolalia. Yet to do so would be to undermine the extent to which they contribute to the sense of gravitational inevitability of imagery in the poetry, in which each poem is seen as a force-field attracting imagery that appears pre-existing in its 'rightness'.<sup>11</sup> The building of these inter-related negative images allows a simultaneous sense of accumulation and privation, as the objects figured are given stark presence even as they connote nothingness. Yet nothingness or featurelessness need not be symptomatic only of ends, but also of beginnings, of the *tabula rasa*, the 'mind as yet free of impressions'.

Such a newness or self-effacement is, I would argue, both the effect and the ends of many such images. And it is their playing out through the mediating mode of the ritual, particularly in the poetry that utilises the transcendent discourses of the divine, that they are brought most cogently to bear.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 116, Further quotations from Plath's poems are taken from this edition.
- 2 For a detailed psychoanalytic-literary analysis of the relationship between writing and the body in Plath, see Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), Chapter 1.
- 3 Rose's political analysis of 'Cut' provides an excellent account of this process. As an example of a heightened metaphoricalness in the service of political critique, I would also cite Plath's later

- poem 'The Swarm', in which a swarm of bees is metaphorised as Napoleon's army. As Frederike Haberkamp has noted, the exclusion of this poem from the bee sequence of the 1966 edition of *Ariel*, despite its being written in the same five day period as the other poems, radically alters the possibility of a political reading of the sequence: *Sylvia Plath: The Poetics of Beekeeping* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1997), p. 69.
- 4 A state of affairs I believe is reliant on gendered notions of the female as the guarantor of sociality.
  - 5 Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 274.
  - 6 Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 269.
  - 7 Wolfgang Iser, 'The Play of the Text', in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 338.
  - 8 Michel Riffaterre. *Semiotics of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 46-7, 63.
  - 9 Marjorie Perloff has argued that the late poems, as collected by Sylvia Plath, have an implicit narrative structure, undermined by Hughes's ordering: 'The Two Ariels: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon', in *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. Neil Freistat (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). For the contents of Plath's projected *Ariel*, see *CP*, p. 295.
  - 10 Cited in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 755. On the term motivated: 'The figurative term is essentially motivated, and motivated in two senses: first, quite simply, because it is chosen ... instead of being imposed by the language; second, because the substitution of terms always proceeds from a certain relation between the signifieds ... that remains present (connoted) in the displaced and substituted signifier' (Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Columbia University Press, 1982], p. 95).
  - 11 I think particularly of Judith Kroll's analysis of Plath's imagery as made up of 'releasers' of a 'pre-determined meaning' imposed by her adherence to archetypes and a personal mythology: Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 19.

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