Signs not taken for Wonders: Disavowing the Poetic Function in the Writing of Sylvia Plath

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Since their posthumous publication in 1965, Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems have often been isolated and treated as hysterical confessions. This paper revisits the derisive and insistently psychological/biographical commentaries which have cropped up around Plath's first-person texts. Drawing on Roman Jakobson's 'Closing Statement' (1960), it asks what it might mean to read these poems instead in terms of the "poetic function", the flaunting of the sign as a graphic and phonic object. The insistence on Plath's language as a transparent communicative device, it argues, represents a striking inversion of the poet's own, at times repulsed, fascination with the opaque nature of words.

> *Poetics deals primarily with the question: "What makes a verbal message a work of art?"*
> Roman Jakobson (1960: 350)

How does the poetry of Sylvia Plath negotiate the six linguistic functions described by Roman Jakobson in his 1960 'Closing Statement'? What might be revealed, and what omitted, by reading Plath's poem 'Words heard, by accident, over the phone' through the prism of Jakobson's theory? This paper undertakes the rather perverse – or, we might say, 'retro' – project of reading Plath's writing for evidence of the 'poetic function', the flaunting of the graphic and phonic material of the sign first valorised by the Russian Formalists and Futurists as a distinctly 'literary' device (*priem*) and later integrated into the functionalist models of Viennese scholar Karl Buhler and the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle. My interest in dragging this dusty structuralist machinery out of the closet is fairly pointed; I would like to chart the ways in which Plath's work might be read as 'verbal art', Jakobson's term for messages dominated by the poetic function, precisely because this poetry has been more readily aligned with the other ('non-poetic') functions in Jakobson's model. My aim here is not so much to extol the hermeneutic virtues of Jakobson's model or to restore Plath to some

rightful position in the high-ceilinged Poetic Hall of Fame; rather, I wish to return to the question of Plath's language, and to examine what might be at stake in the denial of its translucency, its ambiguity – and keeping in mind that a poem is literally a 'making' or an artisan's feat – its poetry.

Under the model adapted by Jakobson, language operates as a kind of communication or meaning machine used to transmit different kinds of messages between two entities (the addresser and addressee). In general, this apparatus has an overwhelmingly practical or expressive purpose; its overriding aim, as J.L. Austin might put it, is *to do one of five things with words*: to transmit information about a factual context (referential/cognitive function); to indicate the mood and intentions of its speaker or writer (emotive/expressive function); to influence the interlocutor to whom it is addressed (conative function); to clarify whether the physical communication channel ('contact') is working (phatic function); or to establish that both entities are using the same communicative system or 'code' (metalingual function). Where this machine is not geared towards producing one of these practical results, its focus is instead on 'the message for its own sake' or, again reworking Austin, on *making words into things*; in these situations, the dominant function of the machine is poetic or, in the term originally used by Czech structuralist Jan Mukařovský, aesthetic. The poetic function re-values the hierarchy of elements found in practical and expressive uses of language; according to Jakobson, this happens incidentally in mnemonic lines, slogans ('I like Ike' in Jakobson's example, or 'Bush is Mush' in my own assonant one) and prose when our attention is drawn to the substance of the signifier. In 'true poetry', such foregrounding is set up more deliberately and consequentially; it has a "coercing, determining role [...] transform[ing] the meaning of the remaining components, [and] guarantee[ing] the integrity of the structure" (Jakobson 1960: 359). Jakobson puts it:

> The distinctive feature of poetry lies in the fact that a word is perceived as a word and not merely as a proxy for the denoted object or an outburst of an emotion, that words and their arrangement, their meaning, their outward and inward form acquire weight and value of their own. (cited in Hawkes 1977: 64)

On Jakobson's account, poetry differs from prose because it is not propelled by regular syntactic sense-making and information-dispensing demands. The latter, he argues, require us to select only one of many substitutable elements to be combined with other contiguous units on the linguistic chain. In contrast, poetic language arranges units according to another principle: the balancing of word stresses and unstresses, prosodic longs and shorts, word boundaries and pauses. A 'scientific' or 'expert' analysis of a poem, according to Jakobson, will reveal its phonological and syntactic equivalences and oppositions down to the level of individual phonemes; this analysis will work by reading anagrammatically, that is, through a non-linear (backward then forward) scanning of the physical material of words (the prefix *ana* denotes upward or backward motion). This was the kind of quibbling structualist study that Jakobson and Levi-Strauss famously undertook on Baudelaire's *Les Chats,* a type of literary border inspection intended to prove that the poem was indeed a poem was indeed a poem (see Riffaterre 1966).

Interestingly, this model of the poetic function is endorsed in a series of near contemporaneous remarks made by Sylvia Plath about her approach to writing poetry. Where the linguist emphasises the decisive role of parallelisms of sound, stress and rhythm in creating the musical effect of poetry, the poet draws attention to the centrality of phonemic structure – over and above any emotional state or experience – to her construction of verse. Let me quote Plath here:

> [M]y poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife or whatever is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences. (cited in Kenner 1979: 35)

And later again:

> Technically I like it to be extremely musical and lyrical with a singing sound. I don't like poetry that just throws itself away in prose. I think there should be a kind of constriction and tension which is never artificial and yet keeps the meaning in a kind of music too […] I like just good mouthfuls of sound which have meaning […] I like to work in forms that are strict […] I lean very strongly toward forms that are, I suppose, quite rigid in comparison certainly to free verse, I'm much happier when I know that all my sounds are echoing in different ways throughout the poem." (cited in Kenner 1979: 41)

In spite of these comments, Plath's *Ariel* poems, including 'Words heard, by accident, over the phone' have generally been received as unmediated expressions of their author's psychic state or biographical experience since their publication after Plath's suicide in 1965. Reacting to Ted Hughes' claim that Plath created these poems "at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter" (cited in Kenner 1979: 41), her critics have consistently assumed the role of this letter's privileged addressees, claiming to expose the traumatised personality communicating through her first person texts. With a single tear of the imaginary envelope, they have uncovered the suicide note, and had little trouble slipping behind what Jacqueline Rose (2004: 50) calls "the closed doors of the past where they can enter the room, see the knife slit the finger, catch the raised voies, watch the vase shatter, hear the baby cry." In Jakobsonian terms, they have read the poems as utterances in which either the emotive or referential function is dominant and the poetic stacking of language is merely a "subsidiary, accessory constituent" (Jakobson 1960: 356). On the first count, Plath's poetry is said to be a direct (and usually pathological) psychic expression; it comes to us straight from the loose mouth of its I-speaker – here assumed to be the poet herself rather than any implied narrator. Hughes, for example, describes the *Ariel* collection as the "direct speech of a real self [...] as if a dumb person suddenly spoke" (Hughes 1982: xiii). Similarly, David Shapiro argues – without batting a Derridean eyelid – that Plath's writing has the immediacy of speech, or what he calls "utterance", a self-pleasuring orality or baby talk which is somehow the opposite of structured poetic writing: "She took to utterance and her poetry, which she loved to utter, is exactly deficient in the consciousness of writing itself […] [L]et us remember that poetry is not voice or utterance but is structure" (1979: 49). Hugh Kenner, on the other hand, cannot help acknowledging the structure (parallelisms, rhyme schemes and repetitions) of the *Ariel* poems, but he dismisses them as passive and profoundly manipulative expressions of a psychological disorder:

> Sparse rhymes come and go nearly at random, and the number of syllables in a line swings with the vertigo of her thought. Perhaps some of the[se poems] only play the desperate game of repeating again and again the stanza the opening fell into; there's more of a compulsion neurosis than mathematics in these forms […] The resulting control, sometimes look of control is a rhetoric, as cunning in its power over our nerves as the stream of repulsions. (1979: 42-43)

Neurotic rather than mathematical, obsessive compulsive rather than structured, Plath fares here about as well as one of Charcot's hysterics. Like the hysteric, she is accused of a certain psychological rather than writerly craftiness, a contrivance more pathological than any mere rhyme scheme; in Jakobsonian terms, she is an adherent to the conative rather than the poetic function, bent ultimately on influencing and manipulating her addressee.

These attacks on Plath's poetry share an odd taxomic preoccupation: the urge to re-cast her as a prose writer. (Plath, of course, also published several prose works, most notably the novel, *The Bell Jar.*) The word 'prose', it turns out, derives from the Latin *pro + vertere*: to turn forward, literally straightforward speech. At work here is a negative understanding of prose as language that lacks metrical structure, is matter-of-fact and commonplace, hence prosaic. So Stephen Spender accuses Plath of working in an apparent state of prose-ish "formlessness", a sort of flabby, boneless textuality with "little principle of beginning or ending […] an outpouring that lapsed only with the poet's hysteria" (cited in Rose 1992: 24). Shapiro similarly chastises Plath for her sins against high poetry; *Ariel*'s author, he says, is a writer of realist prose whose work belongs within the debased popular culture associated since Mary Wollstonecraft's condemnation of the sentimental novel with a female readership – in Plath's case, these are the readers of potboilers, the subscribers to women's magazines:

> [O]ne feels in the poems a constant program of the referential in an age of degraded public realisms. While many of her critics have lamented her prose for women's magazines, few have noted the relative ease in which that realism and hyperbolic Grubean prose modulates to the poetry of hyperbole. (Shapiro 1979: 48-49)

And again:

> [I]t is distasteful to recall a period in which poetry was called upon to deny itself, as it were, in a new form of naturalism […] A whimsical naturalism modulated to a hysterical melodrama was part of her recipe in youth for successful 'heartbreaking' potboilers […] But it is impossible not to sense in her apotheosis and that of the late poems a flight from construction and self-regulating wholes. (Shapiro 1979: 48)

Proposing a more sympathetic reading of the *Ariel* sequence, Marjorie Perloff seems to do Plath a favour by putting the poems in historical and social context. Her urtext for this project is Plath's correspondence to her mother, collected and published in 1975 as *Letters Home.* "[W]hat *Letters Home* reveals," this critic argues, "is that the various roles Plath assumed – Dutiful Daughter, Bright and Bouncy Smith Girl, Cambridge Intellectual, Adoring Wife and Mother, Efficient Housekeeper – were so deeply entrenched that they determined the course not only of her life but also of her writing" (Perloff 1990: 156). Turning to "Words heard, by accident, over the phone", Perloff proceeds to assign biographical referents to the poem's various shifters – Jakobson's term, taken from the work of C.S. Peirce, for the deictic features (first and second-person pronouns, temporal and spatial markers and tenses) whose meaning changes when pinned to a specific moment of discourse. She writes:

> In April 1962, just three months after the birth of her second child, Nicholas, Plath found out that her husband was having an affair with Assia Wevill; the discovery is documented in her unpublished letters as well as in the poem "The Rabbit Catcher", which Plath put in *Ariel 1*, and in an even more explicit poem, called "Words Heard, by Accident, over the Phone" with its pun on Assia's name (1990: 183)

Perloff's approach to this "explicit" text – including her detection of the apparent pun on Assia – aims to establish her authority as a decoder of the concealed referents of the Plath opus. Interestingly, this is very much the opposite tack to the one she takes in her analysis of Plath's contemporary, Robert Lowell. Her book *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*, with its rather Jakobsonian title, raises serious objections to readings of Lowell's first person poetry as either referential or expressive text. She complains, for example, that "the predominant lyric genre [of which Lowell is part] […] is consistently treated by critics as confession rather than as poetry"(1973: 81), and furthermore, "[w]hether or not the poet is presenting actual facts or experience is irrelevant since he [sic] must give the 'illusion of a True Confession'" (1973: 80). Just why the critic makes these distinctions between Plath and Lowell turns very much, I would suggest, on a fantasy of Plath's language as something quite sheer and diaphanous; Plath's words do not need to be situated as an engagement with "the predominant lyric", or for that matter even with the magazine genre of the weekly "True Confession" – one that Plath evidently admired – precisely because they look out plainly on a particular life, a self, a woman's naked body. (Compare Ted Hughes' (1982: xv) comments: "When a real self finds language, and manages to speak, it is surely a dazzling event"). In fact, Plath herself rehearses this scene of bald public exposure in poem after poem; "I notice you are stark naked", the woman applicant is told in neutral tones in "The Applicant". "Lady Lazarus" gives us the resurrected woman as performance artist, promising to strip herself bare for the gallery, offering various metonymies or souvenirs of herself: "a word" or "a touch" or "a bit of blood". Notice how the word here is equated with the corporeal, the actual and self-present. "Gentlemen, ladies," the poem's narrator lures, "I am the same, identical woman."

In contrast, Plath's "Words, heard by accident […]" – the "explicit" text targeted by Perloff – presents a highly ambivalent view of the relationship between language and the transmission of (auto)biographical information. Like several other works in the *Ariel* collection, the poem is narrated not by the intended (and, by implication, privileged) addressee of a message, but rather by an eavesdropper, someone who encounters private words without their addresser's intention or knowledge; "Burning the Letters", for example, describes a speaker who sets fire to a pile of disturbingly unreadable correspondence ("I made a fire; being tired of/the white fists/Of old letters and their death rattle//What did they know that I didn't?") while "Eavesdropper" and "The Detective" each rehearse what might be called the epistemology of the interloper, the construction of knowledge by a clandestine surveillant. The word "eavesdropper" is a back formation of the late Middle English "evisdroppyr" (from the Old English "yfesdrype"), literally one who stands on the evesdrope (the ground onto which water drips from eaves) in order to listen. This leaking language – this found text – has none of the truth value or social hygiene of a statement delivered in a public confession; or to put it in more Foucauldian terms, if the confessed text profers truths that appear to expose their speaker, then overheard words are suspect and mainly incriminate their listener; where the confession, even when whispered, unrolls itself in complete sentences, intercepted words are often cut up and distorted beyond recognition. In 'Words, heard', language overheard is effectively drained of all intelligibility; the panicked eavesdropper cannot give content to the words on the other end of the phone; in her ensuing synesthesia – that visual and tactile translation of an aural sensation – she imagines them as a sticky, glutinous substance, a slime of sound pouring out of the phone's headpiece:

> O mud, mud, how fluid!-
> Thick as foreign coffee, and with a sluggy pulse.

Diverted from their proper addressee ("Is he here?"), the poem's overheard words are horrifying precisely because they resist clarification; they are viscous entities – what Mary

Douglas calls "matter out of place" – mud, coffee, spawn and muck resisting treatment and purification. As much as the eavesdropper tries, she is unable to explain them by resort to any of Jakobson's linguistic functions, there is no point for example, in metalingual (code-testing) probing ("What are these words, these words?"), conative (addressee-interpolating) inquiry ("Speak, speak! Who is it?") or phatic incantation ("Speak, speak!", "Muck funnel, muck funnel"). Instead, they fall back into the medium of pure estranged sound; these are words (morphemes or sense units) whose contours the eavesdropper must make out over background noise; as the poem's title insists, they are only heard accidentally – or, as Saussure might say, imposed arbitrarily – over the 'phone', a term also denoting the smallest sound units of speech (allophones or phonemes). In linguistics, 'phone' or 'phon/e' designates a speech sound disconnected from its role as a phoneme or an allophone in a language; etymologically, it is a sound, a voice, that is to say an undifferentiated emission, a plopping expletive which may or may not coalesce into meaning. These sound kernels may not amount to words; they do, however, "achieve syllables" which contort and rebound off one another in a rapid sensory onslaught; their insurgence takes place in the parataxis of the poem's longest line:

> They are pressing out of the many-holed earpiece,
> they are looking for a listener.

In fact, this is not the only horrifying confrontation with non-symbolic language that takes place in Plath's writing. In 'Daddy', the poem's speaker has a crisis at the physical level of her own articulations; here once again the words that assail and alienate her are "thick" and "foreign"; but this time, they are German syllables, failed attempts to symbolise in her father's language, here ejected from her own mouth:

> I never could talk to you.
> The tongue stuck in my jaw.
> It stuck in a barb wire snare.
> Ich, ich, ich, ich,
> I could hardly speak.
> I thought every German was you.
> And the language obscene.

"And the language obscene". Plath's recoil at the foreignness of language – a foreignness which arguably belongs just as much to the mother tongue as the father's one – is figured in terms of obscenity, that is to say, of dirty words. It calls to mind Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, the repudiation of the body's excretions, the various fluids, substances, and – we might add- emissions of sound that fall away from it. Abjection for Kristeva is a state of fascinated repulsion triggered by our exposure to our own expelled matter, "waste products from which we do not entirely part. These are what disturb identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules […]" (Kristeva 1982: 4) Such repudiation, she argues, also occurs upon our entry into language: "'Learning to speak,' she says, 'is like trying to make one's own oral 'object' which slips away, and whose necessarily deformed hallucination threatens us from the outside.'" (cited in Rose 1992: 34)

At a glance, both 'Daddy' and 'Words Heard' stage the drama of language terrorising the subject from outside; in both cases, the signifiers penetrate through the ear, via the telephone; 'Daddy', thus, ends with a scene of disconnection and jammed wires as the speaker announces: "I'm finally through/The black telephone's off at the root/The voices just can't worm through." In 'Words heard by accident', the phone becomes an intrusive appendage, an

"instrument" that seizes and interpolates the eavesdropper and then abruptly "withdraw[s] its tentacle."

What we have here in Plath is a far cry from Alexander Bell's optimistic technology for transporting voices 'over distance' (*tele*), the communication machine easily domesticated in every inhabited home. It is also a long way from the practical and expressive functions of Jakobson's functionalist linguistic model. On Plath's account, the phone does not so much transmit messages, helping words to "get through", as it creates subjects who are thoroughly alienated in the face of language, who claim to "be through" with speech's waste products, the indiscriminate word-things spewing out of the receiver; thus, the eavesdropper wishes to transcend the irreducible and indigestible "muck" (from *myki,* cow dung), the verbal shit of "the bowel pulse" in 'Words heard'. Earlier, she complains with the conviction of Roland Barthes's believers in the purifying force of soap powders (Barthes 1972: 36) that the onslaught of dirty words cannot be eliminated or mopped up ("O god, how shall I ever clean the phone table?"). "You are too big," she tells the overheard syllables "They must take you back".

Of course, this fantasy of abjecting the abject can hardly be realised because the language has, as the speaker admits, already been introjected. Just as the speaker in 'Daddy' recognises that the syllables which she would cast out – 'Ich, ich, ich' – are also her first person self, so too is the fantasy of a self beyond the impurities and excesses of the body or language inconceivable. The foreign coffee words of the first stanza are now "percolat[ing] inside [her] heart." They are "spawn", "fertile" eggs already in the process of inhabiting and impregnating their hearer. Their release leaves "the room […] ahiss", a newly coined sibilance that in turn prompts a sudden tercet in the poem (tentacle/fertile/funnel). This is the productive excess of language, the uncontrollable phonic resonance of re-arrangements of letters and phonemes, expressed throughout the poem in its paromasias, its rhythms, repetitions and consonantal and assonant echoes.

In short, we arrive in Plath's poem at a place very similar to the phonemic cross-reference and multiplication of meanings which Jakobson attributes to the poetic function. This spread of language can no more be cleaned up and controlled by the poem's eavesdropper than Plath's critics can feasibly impose their biographical and psycho-diagnostic grids over the linguistic play of *Ariel*. I will end, then, with an excerpt from Plath's own meditation on the percussive effects of language, a poem she calls 'Words', those signs taken for objects in all their obscenity and wonder.

> Axes
> After whose stroke the wood rings,
> And the echoes!
> Echoes traveling
> Off from the center like horses.
>
> Years later I
> Encounter them on the road----
> Words dry and riderless,
> The indefatigable hoof-taps.

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