Suicide-Authors: A Deconstructive Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to problematise the relationship between suicide and the author. On the basis of a deconstructive approach, it will study the effect of the self-inflicted death of the writer, namely the emergence of a dual figure, the "suicide-author". To deconstruct the suicide-author, this thesis will combine theoretical issues with examples taken from authors who killed themselves, including texts written by the suicides and by their survivors. Such texts will be referred to as "memorial texts" and will constitute a key element in the deconstruction of the figure of the author, namely his/her "posthumous persona".

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part I, comprising the first three chapters, will propose an anti-teleological theorising of suicide, followed by a study of the role of memorial texts in the deconstruction of the figure of the suicide-author and a problematising of Roland Barthes's concept of the "death of the author" in the context of the multiplicity of deaths of the suicide-author. In Chapter Two, the study of memorial texts will be developed in conjunction with analysis of selected examples, such as Yukio Mishima, Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Esenin, Raymond Roussel, Walter Benjamin, Anne Sexton, and Virginia Woolf.

Also divided into three chapters, Part II is dedicated to an extended analysis of the thesis' case study, namely Sylvia Plath. Rather than focusing on Plath's suicide as an individual unique case, the second part aims at extending and complementing the discussion of the issues previously proposed. Of particular interest is the magnifying of such issues offered by the mythical aura of the Plath case. Chapter Four deals with the "voice of the other", the deconstruction of Plath's image by the living, including both those who had known her in person and the so-called "anonymous witnesses" to her suicide, namely critics, journalists, *et al*. Chapter Five focuses on the "voice of the deceased", as emanating from Plath's writings. Finally, Chapter Six analyses the Plath-Hughes dialogue, with attention to Hughes's particular role in the deconstruction of her posthumous persona.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

In a letter to Olwyn Hughes, concerning a proposed publication of *The Bell Jar* in the UK, Aurelia Plath wrote: "It's the suicide of the author that gives the novel its 'piquant flavor' and value. This is the sort of thing the publishers would not need to present—it was done for them..."[1] The statement is particularly compelling, for it embeds some of the key issues pertaining to this thesis. Immediately, it begs straightforward questions such as "What is the 'piquant flavour'" Aurelia Plath refers to? and, "What is its relationship with the suicide of the author and why is there such a relationship?" The answers, however, are not quite so straightforward. In order to problematise and discuss the issues involved, such a "piquant flavour" will be here understood as an effect whose relation with suicide affects, in various volatile ways, text, author, and reader, in a transit through intra- and extra-textual frames.

The impact of such a "piquant flavor" as a "suicide-effect" concerns directly the ambivalence of suicide, which will be dealt in detail in the first part of the thesis, especially in Chapter One, which will provide a theorising of suicide essential for the development of the discussion. Suicide can be described as a magnifier of abject elements intrinsic to every form of death, which, in combination with its theatrical and ritualistic aspects, provides a powerful instrument of aesthetic defamiliarisation. Thus, not surprisingly, on a thematic level, the disquieting fascination exercised by the ambivalent nature of voluntary death is expressed in a multitude of fictional suicides in literature. Shakespeare alone depicted a total of fifty-two cases, excluding failed attempts, between 1589 and 1613.[2] Other examples include Racine's tortured heroines, Werther's "epidemic" suicide, Kirilov's philosophical self-sacrifice, and Septimus Smith's fatal flight, among many others.[3]

The proliferation of fictional suicides during the Renaissance is particularly illustrative of the effectiveness of suicide as a dramatic artifice. In the early modern period, the ambivalence of suicide was heightened by contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion, characteristic of cathartic states. Most importantly, whereas proximity to the scene caused fascination and fear, it still kept the audience at a safe distance from reality. Through the distorted lens of artistic representation, the audience was protected from the overwhelming ambivalence of "actual" self-inflicted deaths. It is worth observing that suicide is, generally, a taboo, given the human impulse to save a life, which makes the actual presence of passive spectators utterly incompatible with it. Posthumously, suicide calls for reconstruction, for an attempt to neutralise the destabilising forces that bring

together killer and victim. Its disquietude is its source of attraction, causing death to be recreated, repeated. Nevertheless, at the actual moment of self-fragmentation, should it be devoid of the protective shield provided by fiction, suicide belongs to the obscene—"off-scene", the "not-to-be-seen". A recent example, outside literature, was given by the controversy over photographs of the falling bodies of those who had chosen to jump from the Twin Towers during the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The photographs, taken by an Associate Press photographer, were banned from publication in the United States.[4] Associated with deeply rooted taboos against suicide, what one finds here is a refusal to assume the role of an eyewitness to the act of death. Despite being delayed by representation, the moment in which one becomes killer and victim carries the unacceptable impact of immediate exposure.

In this context, what endows the suicide of the author with the "piquant flavour" Aurelia Plath refers to? The myth of the self-destructive artistic genius allied to a great number of authors who committed suicide is certainly a contributing factor. The following table lists some suicide-authors and the respective methods used when killing themselves:[5]

Name	Method
Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)	Overdose of morphine
John Berryman (1914-1972)	Jumped from a bridge
Paul Celan (1920-1970)	Drowning
Ana Cristina César (1952-1983)	Jumped from the seventh floor
Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770)	Arsenic
Hart Crane (1899-1932)	Jumped overboard into the sea
Osamu Dazai (1909-1948)	Drowning
Michael Dorris (1945-1997)	Suffocated himself with a plastic bag
Florbela Espanca (1884-1930)	Overdose of Veronal
Sergei Esenin (1895-1925)	Hanging
Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)	Shotgun
Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811)	Shotgun
Arthur Koestler (1905-1983)	Overdose of barbiturates
Primo Levi (1919-1987)	Jumped from stairs

Vachel Lindsay (1979-1931)	Overdose of Lysol
Jack London (1876-1916)	Overdose of morphine
Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930)	Shotgun
Yukio Mishima (1925-1970)	*Seppuku* (disembowelment followed by decapitation)
Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855)	Hanging
Cesare Pavese (1908-1950)	Overdose of barbiturates
Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)	Carbon monoxide (oven)
Jacques Rigaut (1848-1929)	Shotgun
Raymond Roussel (1877-1933)	Overdose of Soneryl
Akutagawa Ryunosuke (1892-1927)	Overdose of Veronal
Mário de Sá-Carneiro (1890-1916)	Strychnine
Anne Sexton (1931-1974)	Carbon monoxide (car exhaust)
Sara Teasdale (1884-1933)	Overdose of sleeping pills
Hunter Thompson (1937-2005)	Shotgun
Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941)	Hanging
Jacques Vaché (1895-1919)	Overdose of morphine
Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)	Drowning
Stefan Zweig (1881-1942)	Overdose of morphine

In addition, it is, again, the ambivalence of suicide that provokes a disquieting attraction for the living. For suicide transforms the interest in an author's life history into an inevitable interest in the undoing of such a history, that is in his/her "death plot". Most importantly, the suicide of the author combines the impact of immediate exposure with the protective shield provided by the fantasia surrounding author and work. On the one hand, one is protected by the interval created by representation; on the other hand, writing creates physical bonds with suicide *and* author, as the hand that writes is also the hand that kills and dies.

It is important to note that suicide is not here seen as an indisputable determinant of a particular mode of reading, but rather as an object of problematisation of such reading(s). Analysing a variety of examples, including

Mishima, Woolf, Mayakovsky, and others, Chapter Two will focus on the effects of ambivalence on the production and interpretation of writings both by and about the suicide. The scope of such an analysis, as elsewhere, goes beyond particular writings, encompassing a reflection on the recreation of the suicide-author's posthumous persona. The notion of a posthumous persona, to be here developed, begs questions regarding the very figure of the author and its role in the text. Articulating opposing authorial theories—namely author-centred and anti-representationalist—Chapter Three will offer a rereading of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" into "The Deaths of the Suicide-Author", as suggested by the chapter title. The destabilisation of the omnipotent author as well as of his/her total disappearance will enable a better understanding of the deconstructive forces exercised by and on the suicide-author through intra and extra-textual contexts.

In the light of the issues proposed in the first part, the second part is devoted to a detailed analysis of the case study. It is worth emphasising that this is a thesis about suicide-authors, not about Sylvia Plath specifically. The choice of Plath as a case study is, in many ways, self-explanatory, her being the most famous suicide of contemporary literature. By being so, the Plath case is characterised by an aura of exaggeration that magnifies aspects inherent to all suicide-authors, thus allowing the application and extension of the questions proposed. Accordingly, the primary sources chosen for analysis comprise texts by both the deceased and third parties, including unpublished material from The Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College. The chapters of this part have been divided according to the nature of the material used, more specifically, according to the vehicle of dissemination and deconstruction of the deceased's image and suicide. Hence, Chapter Four focuses on the voice of the living, encompassing not only the deconstruction of Plath's image by third parties, but also their own characterisation and recreation as the "audience" to suicide. Chapter Four concerns the deferral of the deceased's voice through her own writings, seen as "testimonies" of her own death. The final chapter is devoted to a discussion of Ted Hughes's role in the deconstruction of Plath's posthumous persona, developed so as to provide a further insight into the dialogue between the living and dead, to be here presented as a fundamental aspect of the problematisation of suicide-authors.

Writing in her diary about Virginia Woolf, Plath once stated: "But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating it in that black summer of 1953. Only I couldn't drown."[6] This thesis aims at opening possibilities of problematising the suicide of the author, allowing a rereading of the effects of its "piquant flavour" on author, text, and reader. Rather than assuming the role of a final signified, suicide will be

reduplicated—before and beyond the event of death—by a double figure, the suicide-author.

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[1] Aurelia Plath, Letter to Olwyn Hughes, 2 July 1968, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[2] Georges Minois, "L'historien et la Question du Suicide." *L'Histoire* 1995: 26. For a detailed study of suicides in Shakespeare, see, for instance, Bernard Paulin's *Du couteau à la plume: Le suicide dans la littérature anglaise de la Renaissance* (Lyons: L'Hérmes, 1977) and Rowland Wymer's *Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986).

[33] I here refer to, for instance, Racine's *Phaedra, Iphigenia, Andromaque*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Among the various editions, one finds respectively: Jean Racine, *Four Greek Plays: Andromaque-Iphigenia-Phaedra-Athaliah*, trans. R C Knight (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982); Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther (and other stories)* (London: Dedalus, 1987); Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. G Patton Wright (London: Vintage, 1992).

[4] Cf. Tom Junod, "The Falling Man", *The Observer*, Review, 7 September 2003, 1-3.

[5] Some of the suicides here listed are either uncertain or contested, such as Primo Levi, Raymond Roussel. The information provided derives from a variety of sources, being, in no way, definitive. See, for example: David Lester, *Suicide and the Writer: A Study of Novelists and Poets Who Killed Themselves*, Proceedings of The Pavese Society, vol 4, 1992 (manuscript provided by the author); David Lester, Betty H Sell, Kenneth D Sell, *Suicide: A Guide to Information Sources* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980).

[6] Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber, 2000) 269.

Part I

1. Theorising Suicide

Choosing not to be, suicides do not simply die. At the heart of such a deliberation lies a series of contradictions that define the very notion of self-destructiveness. Understood as an intrinsically ambivalent force, the self-destructiveness of suicide derives from the irresolvable interaction of its denial and search for the absolute. Contradictory in essence, suicide constitutes an apotheosis of individuality aimed at the very destruction of the individual. Torn by the simultaneity of opposing forces, it thus seeks annihilation through a supreme act. It, in other words, emulates the divine as it takes over the omnipotence of life and death in search for the ultimate and the irreversible. However, being inherently self-destructive, this very attempt becomes a threat to the sought absolute—a transgression, a "blasphemy". In its ambivalent apotheosis, suicide breaks its own identity in a continuous movement of self-dismemberment and recreation. Suicides are killer-victims that simultaneous kill (active) and die (passive), accepting a death they bring forcefully into life. They act in refusal, as the death wish occurs through not only a refusal to live, but also a refusal to receive death passively. Propelled by the cataclysmic motor of self-destructiveness, suicide makes the absolute passivity of death an impossibility. As life is cut short, so is the omnipotence of death.

The search and denial of extreme passivity can be illustrated by the etymology of the word suicide—*sui* (oneself)/*caedere* (to kill, to slay).[1] Marking the self-inflicted nature of the act, the prefix "sui" encloses destructiveness within the word. "Caedere" can be regarded as the very motor of destructiveness—it kills, murders, cuts down/off, it cuts to pieces. Paradoxically, it also implies the extreme passivity of a body in inertia; a body that "falls", that "dies".[2] The word is curiously a metaphor of self-dismemberment, bearing internally a movement of agency and passivity that breaks its own unity: *sui-cide*. By "cutting to pieces", suicide makes death, once the supreme subject of termination, an object of sheer deliberation. Ceasing to be a fatalistic external event, death is chosen and performed.[3]

Thus, in an interplay of action and passivity, suicide is defined and dismembered by contradiction, the motor of self-destructiveness. As noted by Maurice Blanchot, it involves a refusal of any further action concomitant to a wish to act supremely and absolutely, making death an act.[4] Effectively, suicide searches for the supreme—namely, non-existence—through the accomplishment of an act of termination. They are not, however, simply an act. Nor are they, in any way,

absolute. Self-destructive, suicide makes its own attempt to "act supremely and absolutely" an impossibility. It fragments itself, transforming the end into multiplicity and dialogue. In this context, I believe the problematising of suicide must consider the *relationship* between act and effect. Understood simplistically as an isolated unity, the self-inflicted act of death does not comply with the complexity of issues regarding self-destructiveness, including its own volatile characterisation.[5] As a denial of passivity aiming at the absolute termination of all action, the act of voluntary death is inherently self-destructive. To kill oneself means to materialise contradiction, proclaiming the apotheosis of individuality while annihilating an individual made supreme by the fusion of killer and victim. Mutilating its own impulse towards the absolute, the act of death becomes a microcosm of a broader movement of self-destructiveness, containing in itself the fatal contradictions between the absolute and the fragmentary.

Losing its sense of totality, the act of death becomes one of the elements of a network of relations. In this wider context, the killer-victim is the protagonist of an action that triggers the *performance* of voluntary death: suicide. Going beyond the act, the concept of performance transgresses spatial and temporal boundaries. As in histrionics, the notion of performance here involves a consciousness of doubleness.[6] In a vertiginous play of sameness and difference, the extreme passivity of death is intertwined with the deliberation of murder. Killing and dying simultaneously, the suicide is the "impossible" double that, falling in the gap between life and death, incorporates not only the act but also its relationship with the effect. Hence, in its drive towards annihilation, the suicide paradoxically denies him/herself the possibility of perishing. Instead, by making death an object of deliberation, suicide interlaces action and passivity, creating an "impossible" simultaneity that propels self-destructiveness. Suicide does not simply destroy, it dismembers and re-arranges, torn apart by an impulse towards wholeness and annihilation. By "cutting to pieces", suicide overflows the event of death, performing self-destructiveness through irresolvable intervals.

In its quest for the supreme, the act of death aims at establishing an absolute clause of cause and consequence: a single act resulting in a single irreversible effect—that is, self-annihilation. However, dismembered by internal contradiction, it subverts definitive self-destruction into a changing movement of self-destructiveness. By making death an object of personal deliberation, the act of death paradoxically makes the suicide totality (1) by making him/her nothingness (0). In this context, the coincidence between killer and victim produces an "impossible" simultaneity between action and passivity that breaks the intended monology in an internal movement of fusion and dismemberment—namely, self-

destructiveness. Thus, the desire for the establishment of a supreme opposition between totality and nothingness is replaced by rupture and ambivalence. Failing at promoting total destruction, the act of death triggers the transformation of the individual into another—i.e. a cadaver, a killer-victim.

On the borderline between life and death, the cadaver is paradoxically the most tangible evidence of the failure of absolute annihilation and its unfolding into ambivalence. Regardless of the cause of death, the sight of a cadaver (de)materialises a sense of fragmentation and continuity that simultaneously reaffirms and contrasts with the termination of life. For Julia Kristeva, the corpse is indissociable from the notion of the abject: the interstitial, the double, a frontier, an ambiguous opposition that is at once vigorous but permeable, violent but uncertain.[7] The cadaver, according to her, is the most sickening of all wastes; it is the obliteration of boundaries, the contamination of life with death. Disturbingly human-like, the dead body exposes us to the fragility of our own limits. It is subject-object, inside-outside, one and another, the mixed and ambiguous.[8] As a presence in absence, cadavers are particularly disturbing bodies of abjection, due to this mixed closeness and distance with our own living bodies. Lifeless and static, they seem nevertheless to haunt the living with the similarities and differences that approximates and detaches them from their human physical images. Underneath the paralysis of death, decomposition transfigures shapes and boundaries. The view of a fetid rotting body is the interstitial view of a transformation *in process*. It is a continuous movement of death taking over life as life thrives on death.

Seen in the context of decomposition, the cadaver (also from the Latin, *cadere*) is also illustrative of the extreme passivity of death, materialised in a body in *inertia*. Falling out of its contours, it is the stage of the obliteration of its own limits. Without resistance, the body slips out of its living condition, losing the image once attached to a name and a history. Being equally associated with a sense of inertia, non-voluntary death matches the extreme passivity of a putrefying cadaver. The decomposing body corresponds to a (de)materialisation of the inertia of the event of death. The absence of self-deliberation finds its counterpart in the extreme passivity of the process of decomposition. Nothing is chosen or performed by the one who no longer is (a living being, a subject). Instead, in both cases, an external force—namely decomposers and the cause of death—operates the transformation. Powerless, as if dragged by gravity, the dead body slips out of its melting contours. Through decomposition, the transformation into another threatens the bonds between body and subjectivity, as it points continuously to the precariousness of their individual limits. The "fall" of the corpse renders (in)concrete the movement of fragmentation and rearrangement impelled by the act of death. In a parallel

between decaying flesh and dismembered subjectivity, putrefaction mirrors the decomposition of the individual through the exposure of the interstitial as the "impossible" simultaneity of inside and outside, movement and paralysis in the rotting body.

Hence, in the case of suicides, the extreme passivity of the "fall" mirrors the outcome of rupture while being contradicted by the deliberation of the act. In this context, the process of depersonalisation of the deceased comprehends a double movement of decomposition of image and subjectivity. Such a dual character is also remarkable in suicide. The "fall" of the deceased is marked by the eruption of gaps between the broken individual (killer-victim; subject-object) and his/her changing corporality. In this dismantling of identities, the indissociable unity formed by the former and the latter is severed. Assaulting, once more, the oneness of the individual, the rupture corresponds to the detachment of the fragmented signified (identity) from its signifier (physical image). Being no longer recognisable as a living being, with a name and a history, the body ceases to be the signifier of the individual, becoming the signifier of death and suicide. It is important to note that the rupture between physical image and identity does not involve merely the inappropriateness of a body no longer recognisable as an individual or a human being. Conversely, in decomposition, both physical image and identity are broken to pieces and transformed.

Subjacent to the "fall" of the decomposing body, the eruption of a killer-victim problematises the extreme passivity of death, contradicting the process of annihilation. By removing death from its supreme role as a subject of termination, transforming it into an object of personal deliberation, the suicide provokes the rupture of the boundaries of his/her physical body and identity. The suicide, in other words, *performs* abjection. In this context, the relationship between the act of death and its effect—i.e. the decomposition of physical image and identity—can be described as the interplay between the "leap" (action) and "fall" (passivity) towards abjection. The "leap"—i.e. the act of death—is the propeller, the active force of rupture. By making death an object of deliberation, the suicide "brings death into life" forcefully and willingly. He/she chooses it and performs it, thus creating fissures in the limits between life and death, self and the other. After all, suicides do not simply slip out of life, impelled, either naturally or violently, by some external force. They throw themselves and fall at their deaths in an onset of a process of undoing identities.

In suicide, the "fall" of the putrefying corpse is, therefore, deliberation made into passivity. Characterised by self-deliberation, the killing act seeks and denies the inertia of death, paradoxically reinforced by its effect—the very materialisation

of such inertia. The dual aspect of decomposition refers precisely to the opposition between the unilateral process of putrefaction of the body from subject into object and the constant recreation of the deceased's posthumous identity. In the threshold between subject and object, bodies of suicides withhold temporarily a unique latent sense of agency that deconstructs the binary of agency and passivity formed on account of their deaths. As signifiers of a voluntary death, suicides' corpses carry the self-destructive clash of deliberation and passivity. They are the (de)materialisation of an impulse of self-objectification of a subject. Underneath the static dead flesh in decomposition lies, to the eyes of the living, the undeniable knowledge of the (active) nature of their (passive) deaths.

Thus, as silent witnesses to their killing *and* dying, bodies of suicides have their own "voice". They are bearers of marks of "impossible" simultaneities, in particular the fusion between killer and victim that characterises the self-inflicted character of their deaths. In dialogue with the "fall" of their identities, such cadavers exacerbate the exposure of the abject while "speaking" posthumously of the ambivalence of the deceased and his/her act—hence the supernatural stigma commonly attributed to them. Placed in the "in-between", the "fall" of suicides may leave them dangerously close to the realm of life. Throughout different periods and societies, taboos against suicides aimed at protecting the living. Suicides have been often associated with the living dead, who had to be stopped from wandering off, commonly through acts of desecration and punishment against the cadaver. However increasingly detached from the living identity of the deceased, bodies of suicides remain as evidence of a self-inflicted act of death, thus echoing an action that can no longer be seen.

The metaphors of "leap" and "fall" must not be read as a monological relationship between a single act and a single effect. Instead, it is important to emphasise that they both imply the existence of chains of acts and effects integrated to the act of death and the process of decomposition of body and identity. In no way do such terms refer to a linear finite relationship, marked by an immutable beginning and end. In its self-destructiveness, suicide performs abjection through "impossible" simultaneities, contradicting the possibility of an absolute end. Failing to be supreme, the act of death unfolds into an always incomplete metamorphosis, as the subject's identity is broken into pieces and transformed in its unending "fall". As rightfully emphasised in Blanchot's writings about death, contradiction is, effectively, an intrinsic and fundamental aspect of suicide. In *L'Espace littéraire,* Blanchot uses the metaphor of suicide as a "leap" [*saut*] in order to convey a movement towards abjection.[9] Death is, for him, pure possibility, a perpetual escape from death itself.[10]

Nevertheless, by nullifying the possibility of relationship, Blanchot fails to meet the "fall" (effect), as he reduces the uncertain to the absoluteness of non-existence. Despite the pertinence of his preoccupation with the contradictions of suicide, Blanchot's approach bears in itself a tendency towards contradiction, as he tends to apply notions of ambivalences that, nonetheless, point to a teleological end. For instance, instead of establishing relationship, his concept of suicide annuls the ambivalence of the so-called "double death". To kill oneself, he writes, "c'est prendre une mort pour autre".[11] It is, therefore, a cancellation ruled by mutually exclusive opposites, namely action and passivity, the graspable and the ungraspable, possibility and impossibility, and so forth. Blanchot's teleological logic replaces the leap into the uncertain by a hierarchical superposition of totalities that suppress the possibility of continuity. Hence, placed at the end of a series of preparations, the so-called ultimate gesture may only relate to its predecessors—it is an act without an effect, a leap without a fall, a definitive suspension of all relationships. Likewise, questioning the possibility of voluntary death, Blanchot argues against one's capacity of killing oneself ["se donner la mort"] before the inevitability of dying ["la recevoir"], thus suggesting an inevitable prevalence of the passivity imposed by death over the suicide's action.[12] However, due to the doubleness of the active killer and the dying victim, I believe that suicide promotes instead a self-destructive coexistence of "impossible" simultaneities, which causes hierarchical cancellations to unfold into rupture and deferral. Consequently, by simultaneously killing oneself and dying, the suicide triggers his/her transformation of into another—i.e. a living persona in the process of becoming posthumous. In other words, instead of promoting a final plunge into nothingness, suicide involves a *fantasy* of termination, an unceasing search for an unattainable end, which, therefore, also overflows the temporal limits of the event of death.

The contradiction of Blanchot's analysis of voluntary death lies precisely in its inapplicable univalent approach to contradiction, ruled by a true and false logic that renders the passage to the uncertain an impossibility. As the "highest realization of death as possibility",[13] teleological suicide is nothing but certainty. Blanchot's metaphor of a "controlled leap into the void" corresponds, in fact, to a monological shift into nothingness.[14] Its weakness is, therefore, to imply the accomplishment of destruction through the "ultimate gesture"—the "moment the "I" and its possibilities disappear".[15] In suicide, the self-destructive contradiction created by a desire to terminate every action through an act does not result in the aspired annihilation. Instead of being engulfed by non-existence, every totality is broken into pieces whilst creating relationships that deny the applicability of a teleological approach.[16] To make death a possibility, for Blanchot, paradoxically

means to become absolute. Removed from an unending system of relations, the act of death is for him an "authentic action", which not only seeks the supreme, but also successfully attains it as the individual personifies the realisation of totality.[17]

The idea of a *controlled* act that endows the subject with the absolute clashes with the very self-destructiveness of suicide. In Blanchot's "leap" into nothingness, self-inflicted death is an act of cancellation that paradoxically eliminates the individual whilst affirming his supreme totality. Although often planned in a series of acts surrounding the conscious decision that impels the killing/dying duality, suicide can never be controlled. Before the self-destructive eruption of contradictions, the apotheosis of individuality becomes a perpetually unaccomplished impulse towards the absolute. As one of the antagonistic facets of the process, the realisation of totality impels its own self-destructiveness. Consequently, the act of death, escaping from the control of the fragmented individual, fails to be ultimate, dilacerating the fantasy of termination. As death is performed through contradiction, suicide intertwines possibility and impossibility while the fractured "I", instead of being exterminated, is decomposed in plurality.

The sense of totality usually attributed to the act of death results precisely from the fantasy of ultimacy and absoluteness inspired by it. The "leap" *is* a planned act that aims at an irreversible effect of total destruction. Through one supreme event of self-killing, it attempts to establish clear boundaries between mutually exclusive antagonisms, namely being and nothingness, life and death. It attempts to follow, in other words, a monologism, reducing all relationships to the marked opposition between the void (0) and the totality (1), identified in the figure of the individual.[18] Placed in its relationship with the "fall", the "leap" is not, however, a controlled act that achieves its quest for nothingness. By considering the effect of the "leap" to an absolute void, one reduces the former to a supreme monologic act, leaving no possibility of dialogue or continuity. Nevertheless, as the individual is severed by self-inflicted death, so is the logic of the monad. The shift from the "leap" to the "fall" of the corpse is a movement of rupture and decomposition, the unfolding of the "one" into plurality. In the intended apotheosis of the individual, the fusion of killer (subject/active) and victim (object/passive) points to the precariousness between the subject and its identity. This constitutes a moment of undoing identities, when the interplay between subject and object exposes the interstitial. Contradicting the quest for the absolute intrinsic to the act of death, the "fall" decomposes body and identity, objectifying the subject. Thus, totality is not totally destroyed in an abrupt plummet from one (1) to zero (0). Conversely, it is fragmented and decomposed. From the self-destructiveness of the monologic, a network of acts and effects is formed, establishing a dialogue through

fractured limits. Suicide is the performance of the impossibility of an end impelled by a desire of termination.

In the interplay between act and effect, the irresolvable internal contradiction of suicide—i.e. its self-destructiveness—functions as the motor of an anti-logic, which, while fragmenting the monologic, leads to the creation of aporia. Moved by a play of contradictions, suicide performs the "difficulty of passing" in a constant interlacing of possibility and impossibility: possibility of repeated search and impossibility of achieving the absolute. Propelled by the rupture and decomposition of the one, it is a nonpassage with an unattainable destination. In this context, suicide does not allow the establishment of a fixed, immutable, organizational centre. Instead, as illustrated in the act of death, the absoluteness of every act is menaced and severed by an internal self-destructiveness. Consequently, all relationships are orchestrated by a movement towards wholeness and destruction, which results in a constant displacement and rearrangement of the centre, as acts trigger effects that become acts themselves.

The absence of a fixed immutable centre is in itself an effect of multiplicity and the impossibility of attaining the absolute. The dialogue between the act of death ("leap") and the process of decomposition of body and identity ("fall") involves a series of relationships in which the temporary centre is displaced and rearranged. Once the act of death triggers the creation of effects that become themselves acts, it is removed from the temporary core of the network. Thus, it fails, once more, to be supreme, as it denies itself the possibility of being unique. The displacement of the centre occurs as a result of the fragmentation of the monologic relationship between totality (1) and nothingness (0). With the establishment of dialogue, the act of death unfolds into a chain of acts, deferring the search for the absolute indeterminately.

Consequently, suicide searches for an unattainable end. Characterised by ambivalence, self-destructiveness implies continuous fragmentation, the very impossibility of termination. Despite aiming at ultimacy, the act of death bears the double as the essence of self-destructiveness: passivity/agency; subject/object; killer/victim; act/effect. Killing and dying, the fragmented subject splits the event of death, projecting him/herself beyond its temporal limits. The "absolute instant" is, therefore, eternally receding. Suicide does not, as Blanchot suggests, maintain the power of an exceptional affirmation of the present.[19] Like the aimed apotheosis of individuality, the apotheosis of an instant defies the very movement of self-destructiveness and the consequent deferral of the absolute. The engulfment of the "past" and "future" by a perpetual "present" would correspond to an extermination of all dialogue, resulting in the suspension of the transformation of the deceased as

a continuous process. In other words, it would imply a rupture in the unfolding of relationships, with the impossibility of referring to both previous and following acts. Thus, the act of death is indeed a "fantasy of total affirmation".[20] However, failing repeatedly to attain the absolute, it breaks into pieces, deferring the "ultimate moment" indeterminately.

Effectively, seen in its ritualistic aspect, suicide presupposes an overflowing of the instant of death prior to its accomplishment. The search for uniqueness of the act of death is contradicted by its close interrelation with other acts in the "past" that equally aim at the annihilation of the individual.[21] Such acts constitute as much a part of the preparations for death as interlinked stages of the killing/dying process. Thus, in suicide, reverberations from the "past" contradict the impossible desire for a supreme instant, rendering the act of death an ambivalence long before the event of death. Likewise, the search for the ultimate is made impossible by the projection of acts surrounding the death of the individual into a posthumous "future". Meticulous preparations, such as the choice of killing method, suicide letters, arrangement of the scene for disclosure or secrecy, among others, point to a preoccupation with the after-death, the "post-ego"—i.e. the concern of the living individual with his own after-death reputation, survival, heritage, impact, image, memory, influence—those aspects of him which "live" after his cessation".[22] Aiming at annihilation, the actions of a suicide-to-be contradictorily presuppose the impossibility of an end. Despite personifying totality, he/she is already a double— killer and victim, living and posthumous personae, a presence and an absence.

As a result of the (anti-)logic of self-destructiveness, the non-interruption of history does not simply imply a continuity of elements organized chronologically. On the contrary, it imposes rupture and rearrangement. Transgressing the "end", suicide subverts linearity, combining diachrony and synchrony in the making of dialogue. The consecutiveness of "leap" and "fall" coexists with the synchronicity established by the possible juxtaposition of other acts and effects the relationship it incorporates. The inexactitude of temporal limits is also a direct consequence of the failure of the absolute. Due to self-destructiveness, the ultimate instant of termination gives place to the ephemerality of a constant projection to the effect, following the displacement of the network centre.

Thus, formed by relationships instead of events, the performance of death defies teleology. As in theatre, suicide comprehends interrelated acts that contain individually the broader movement of the "play". In this context, the act of death cannot be understood as the last act, which would produce a monology, a reduction of totality (1) into nothingness (0) via termination. Nor can it be seen as the first act to occur in actual time, from which all other acts are organised chronologically.

Instead, its failure of being totality makes it the *initial catalyst* of suicide. The act of death neither concludes nor initiates. Conversely, it refers to the "previous" and the "following", as it triggers relationships, deferring the desired end indeterminately. The notion of origin herein stated must be dissociated not only from actual time, but also from the possibility of considering it as an isolate self-contained unity. Such an assumption would contradict the act's own internal self-destructiveness. The act of death must not be understood as a static organizational centre, but as a catalyst of displacement. It legitimates, through interaction, other acts and effects, triggering the rearrangement of the temporary centre either to the "past" or "future". By attempting complete self-annihilation, reducing a presence to non-existence, the suicide treads the transgressed limits of life and death, making him/herself a *quasi*-presence. Like Derrida's "trace", the act of death is the catalyst of signification in suicide, the "origin" of all relationships.[23]

Impelled by internal contradictions, the rearrangement of the suicide's identity occurs through the oscillation between fractured totalities. Having as a direct effect the creation of the posthumous persona, memorial texts aim at recovering the lost integrity of the deceased, reconstructing its objectified subjectivity, by rendering it present through discourse.[24] With a volatile signifier, the fractured identity maintains its incompleteness as a signified in process of deconstruction. In the dialogue between the living and the dead, its rearrangement attempts to recover its integrity, by making the absent present through language. Juxtaposed to a fragmented living identity, the posthumous persona erupts. As the putrefying corpse, the deceased re-emerges as an "object-subject", whose constantly redefined identity performs death in its dialogue with the act of death.

Broken to pieces, body and identity are transformed. As opposed to complete obliteration, the idea of decomposition here implies ambivalent continuity, a process of transmutation tending to both wholeness and annihilation. In other words, it refers to a dialogue of "impossible" simultaneities that characterises self-destructiveness, incorporating a multi-directional movement impelled by the constant tension between elements similar *and* unequal. The suicide is a *quasi*-presence, in relation to which there are no mutually exclusive totalities. The antagonism created between the living and the dead by the event of death is paradoxically transgressed by the deceased's absence. Attached to the failed attempt of complete obliteration, the coincidence of killer (active) and victim (passive) results in the ebbing of a presence—the eruption of an absence. As opposed to non-existence, the *quasi*-presence of the suicide is a self-inflicted loss of presence. Triggered by the act of death, it is an unfulfilled void to be partially filled and unfilled by memorial texts constituting the posthumous persona. The emptying

and re-filing of a *quasi*-presence thus mark the transmutation of the deceased in his/her oscillation between life and death. In its inherent self-destructiveness of "impossible" simultaneities, suicide is thus haunted by an "impossible" tautology, which defies the quest for ultimacy by perpetually aiming at oneness through fragmentation. It is end and reverberation, difference and similarity, combination and substitution.

In the transit between fractured totalities, the transmutation of the deceased is marked by a constant undoing and re-doing of the subject-object. The emergence of the posthumous persona can be understood as the result of the very movement of self-destructiveness of suicide. Rising from the "impossible" simultaneities generated by the act of death, it undoes and re-does the fragmented subject in constant mutual nullification of apparently opposing forces. The image of mutual nullification suggests an association between the (anti)rhythm of suicide with the interlacing of metonymy and metaphor. Paul de Man relates the self-destructiveness of the relationship to Harold Bloom's concept of "kenosis": "a figure of a figure, in which the one deconstructs the universe produced by the other", breaking up "a totality into discontinuous fragments".[25] There is, in other words, a process of mutual decomposition, a constant ebbing of presences into absences that characterises suicide. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that such movement of self-destructiveness has no relation with the consecutiveness of actual time, implicit in Bloom's concept of kenosis.[26] Instead, suicide follows the (anti-)logic of relationships. As the temporary centre is dislocated and re-arranged towards both the "past" and the "future", the subverted linearity of the network points to a relationship between predecessors and successors that is in no way chronological. Conversely, in suicide, metaphor and metonymy must be understood as "impossible" simultaneities: intertwined antagonistic movements that undo and redo one another in self-destructiveness.

As the initial catalyst, the act of death is responsible for what can be described as a "metonymic contamination".[27] With the institution of dialogue through the dismemberment of totality, the act of death triggers relationships, disarranging continually the temporary centre of the network in an ambivalent movement towards wholeness and fragmentation. It is, as herein suggested, the (anti)origin of suicide, placed outside the temporal limitations of the event of death. The act of death unfolds into a web of self-destructiveness, in which each relationship metonymically relates to one another and to the fragmentary "totality" that it simultaneously contains and is contained in. [28] As one refers to another in contiguity, sameness and difference are united and separated over irresolvable intervals created by their discrepancy. Interrelated as sections of a dramatic

production, the acts *play* the doubleness of "impossible" simultaneities, performing self-destructiveness.

In such a "contamination" of dislocated acts, metonymy is the act and effect of the failure of oneness. Pushing the absolute to a perpetually receding end, it promotes the reverberation of the ultimate. It is, therefore, the very denial of *telos*, an impulse towards an always *differentiated* repetition of the "final" moment. Such an ambivalent notion of repetition is of particular importance to the understanding of metonymic displacement in suicide. In the propagation of the failed ultimate, repetition cannot ever signify a complete return to the same. Total identity would imply the termination of relationships, a halt in the process of transformation. The performance of transmutation through metonymic displacement is based precisely on the self-destructive play of sameness and difference, erupted as each displaced element refers, in contiguity, to another.

Breaking the "absolute" into another, repetition creates a further contradiction: the dismemberment of the "one" into a play of "impossible" simultaneities. The memorial act reverberates an unattainable supreme moment, unfolding into a network that forms the posthumous persona.[29] By denying the possibility of uniqueness, the construction of the posthumous persona reaffirms the inapplicability of a teleological approach, as each act postpones the end in their failed attempt to make the absent present. In contiguity with its initial catalyst, the memorial act emulates it, performing self-destructiveness as it repeatedly recreates the original self-fragmentation. Once more, however, repetition occurs elliptically. As a metonymic displacement of the act of death, the memorial act escapes a complete return to the same, intertwining sameness to difference by "veering off signification".[30] Here, the search for the absolute aims at restoring the integrity of the subject-object by rendering it present through language. The attempt, however, fails as in the act of death due to inherent contradictions.

The memorial act does constitute a distorted mirror image, an inverted double of the act of death, which seeks the absolute through an attempt to recover the deceased's broken identity. In other words, memorial acts perform self-destructiveness by trying to undo it. Through representation, they aim at inverting the "self-objectification" triggered by the act of death. As a result, in *kenosis*, a multi-directional transit between subject/presence and object/absence is established, as a process of re(de)personalisation (0 → 1) is juxtaposed to the existing process of depersonalisation (1 → 0). Failing to fill completely the void of the suicide's self-inflicted absence, the memorial act defers the recovery of a lost presence, reaffirming the ambivalence of the fragmented individual as a subjectifying object, a *quasi*-presence re-emerging as a volatile posthumous

persona. Previously, attention was drawn to the duality of the "fall", in which the detachment from the living signifier marked important differentiations between the decomposition of body and identity. In the transformation of the latter, such a duality is reinforced by the possibility to "haunt" the living as a "subjectifying object". Filling the voids of absence, the construction of the posthumous persona institutes a multi-directional transit between unattainable totalities (0 ←→ 1). Thus, the decomposition of the deceased incorporates a double impulse towards non-existence and recovered integrity, namely depersonalisation and re(de)personalisation respectively. Acts are, therefore, dislocated concomitantly towards opposed unattainable totalities, engaging the movement of self-destructiveness. Subjacent to such "impossible" simultaneities, the play of antagonist modes of arrangement perpetuates suicide in ambivalence. Denied of ultimacy, the act of death is the catalyst of a series of displacements, both metonymic and metaphoric. While the receding end slips through the metonymic chain in constant deferral, the contiguity of the enchained process of transmutation is repeatedly broken by the drive towards the absolute. The metaphorical displacement is a "mode of cancellation in *substitution* of one term for another"[31]. It is here identified with a dual search for the absolute, aiming simultaneously to recovered wholeness (1) and annihilation (0). Whereas metonym translates, making elements circulate, leaving their conceptual identities intact, metaphor is hierarchically repressive, "carrying across" in order to replace, submerging one element under another.[32]

In suicide, the metaphoric and metonymic modes coexist in self-destructive symbiosis. They are at once the origin and the end of one another. On the one hand, metaphor inhabits the metonymic dislocation towards transmutation. Aiming at the substitution of absolutes, metaphor threatens to eliminate the transit between (1) and (0), hence eliminating the possibility of decomposition. The seductive attraction to the end in suicide relates precisely to this urge to overtake and replace. In its quest for the ultimate, the act of death seeks a total reduction—a substitution—from existence (1) to non-existence (0). However, fragmented by "impossible" simultaneities, it results in dialogue, in the ambivalent void to be re-filled and unfilled by the construction of the posthumous persona.

Metonym, on the other hand, promotes the very displacement from presences into absences. By impelling the play of contiguity against *telos*, it paradoxically creates the impulses towards substitution, the need to fulfil the voids of absence. Contiguity is broken by each act's attempt to replace the absence of the previous act. Such a movement, described by Susan Handelman as "a displacement pretending to substitution", marks the rupture of the syntagmatic organisation of

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the acts in question, following the conversion of metonym into metaphor operated by self-destructiveness.[33] Dislocating the fractured subject from totality towards an unreachable non-state of nothingness, the act of death creates a quasi-presence, an original absence that calls for constant fulfilment, wholeness. As a metonymic displacement of the act of death, the memorial act repeats the ultimate, thus deferring the absolute. As a metaphor of the fragmented deceased, however, it attempts to stop the process of transmutation, by eliminating of the void through its substitution for a recovered wholeness. The memorial act is thus a metaphor of "resurrection" that attempts to make the absent present, "putting it before one's eyes", reintegrating the dead to the world of the living.[34] Defying continuity, it aims at cancelling further displacements, proclaiming itself as ultimate. Before the inner contradictions that impel the movement of self-destructiveness, the definitive cancellation is, nonetheless, an impossibility. The re-integration fails to be absolute, as the filling and unfilling of absences does not permit a teleological replacement of totalities. Failing to be hierarchical, metaphor obliterates itself, endlessly constructing its own destruction.[35] As a result, the drive towards the absolute remains a reverberation of the "ultimate". Transgressing the original, metaphor fails to cancel, creating instead a self-destructive dialogue between similarities and differences. Living and posthumous personae play, performing ambivalence in a constantly deferred search for the absolute.

The rearrangement of the deceased's identity through discourse begs questions regarding the interaction between the living and the dead. In the analysis of the posthumous persona in suicide, it is important to emphasise such a dialogue as a denial of mutually exclusive relationships, characteristic of the absolute. By transgressing linearity, suicide renders ambiguous the strict limits defined by the event of death. It transforms the abrupt fall of life (1) → death (0) into relationship, dialogue. In this context, the construction of the posthumous persona must not be associated with the idea of disclosure, easily contradicted by acts done in public or secrecy. As a movement of enlightenment, disclosure presupposes in itself an end, a final shift from secrecy to discovery. It, in other words, uncovers the unseen, involving a mutually exclusive relationship between absolute states of light (1) and darkness (0). Disclosure places the killing as a "penultimate act", in expectance of salvation, of resolution. Therefore, it is not congenial with the creation of interstitial states, the transmutation into another. As a catalyst of relationships, the act of death triggers the reverberation of the ultimate, hence the construction of the posthumous persona. Regardless of secrecy or disclosure, a dialogue is established.

Suicide is thus never totally covered or uncovered. In its veiling and unveiling, suicide speaks in changing tones of grey. The notion of disclosure—or,

rather, "unveiling"—can only be applied in relation to interaction between the living and the dead in the creation of a posthumous persona. Whether the body is or is not found is therefore irrelevant, as the possible event of disclosure does not mark the onset of the suicide's posthumous existence. Instead, the idea of posthumous existence is defined by the relationships triggered by the act of death. As the temporary centre is dislocated to both the "future" and "past" of the network, the limitations posed by historical time are transgressed and broken. Hence, a suicide letter is as much a memorial text as a post-mortem report. Subverting linearity, the living and the dead become flexible and abstract notions, detached from the event of death. Whereas the former refers to the fragmented image of the deceased— being him/her biologically dead or alive—, the latter incorporates anyone interacting through discourse with such an image, including the suicide him/herself. The dialogue between the living and the dead is the interaction between the creator(s) of memorial texts and their fragmented objects, namely the "posthumous" image. Here, the "impossible" simultaneity between killer and victim is potentially translated into an equally self-destructive coincidence between the witness and the "witnessed", moved by a disrupting play of activity and passivity. Despite occurring before the event of death, such memorial acts are made "posthumous", as they are legitimated by their relationship with the act of death, integrating the transmutation of the deceased into another. Through them, the suicide becomes part of his/her own audience, thus acting as a "witness" to him/herself, a contributor to the creation to his/her own posthumous persona.[36]

The notion of "post-ego", previously introduced, is of great relevance to the understanding of the subverted linearity of a posthumous existence. Interacting with the posthumous persona before the event of death, it nullifies in advance the certainty of termination paradoxically inherent to it. Since any concern with the after-death presupposes a pre-conceived image of oneself as deceased, the post-ego points necessarily to a dialogue that unites and separates the living and the dead before and beyond the event of death. It is precisely such an "impossible" simultaneity that makes it particularly relevant to suicide. Here, the post-ego goes beyond the idea of "concern" or "preoccupation". It is, above all, the expression of a dialogue between living and posthumous personae that subverts the temporal dictatorship of the event of death. Moreover, as death is made into a timeless object of self-deliberation, the post-ego becomes a prerequisite of the performance of an impossible termination. Hence, in their relationship with the "present" and the "future", the preparations for an unattainable dissolution engage in a killing while creating a posthumous existence. Suicide is thus the carefully planned end whose very act of planning is an effect of the impossibility of ending.

Interacting with an imagined and aspired figure of oneself as a deceased, the "post-ego" of a suicide projects the fragmented subject from a "posthumous past" into a "posthumous future", whose existence is denied by the search for termination. Posthumous dialogues thus reverberate, weaving self-destructiveness before and beyond the event of death. Among the various forms through which the post-ego is expressed, the most explicit is, undoubtedly, the suicide letter. Performing the fusion of killer and victim, the suicide-to-be treads the hazy limits between his/her living and posthumous persona. In a ritual of self-fragmentation, suicide letters materialise in writing the juxtaposition of the living and the dead. Their production and reception presuppose a consciousness of such a juxtaposition—the living figure writing as the posthumous persona, the posthumous persona speaking for its living counterpart. Suicide letters are a declaration of a certainty of an end made impossible by the sense of continuity therein involved. More importantly, they are the materialisation of an ambivalence that characterises the very construction of the posthumous persona as a projected double, never entirely dissociated from its fragmented living identity.

Memorial texts as such are not simply an abject exposure of death. Instead, they endow the deceased with his/her own voice, in a new dialogue between the living and the dead. Acting "posthumously", he/she becomes the first "witness" to his/her own suicide, while establishing a dialogue with him/herself and with the future audience. The killer-victim is a living-dead speaking before and beyond the event of his/her own death. Like memorial texts weaved in the "future" by "survivors", the voice of the deceased is represented presence of an absence, in this case, his/her own. Aiming at termination, he/she paradoxically projects him/herself into the "future", speaking to a belated audience of which he/she becomes part. Witness to his/her fragmentation, the suicide-to-be is a presence tending into absence due to its dialogue with its deferred presence. In the coincidence killer-victim, the suicide's life becomes posthumous.

Bodies and death scenes are equally valuable examples of vehicles of the "post-ego". They are non-verbal memorial texts, whose transient marks are impregnated with preoccupations of a posthumous persona created before the event of death. In a subliminal play of action and passivity, the evidence, left by a unique killer-victim, remounts the circumstances surrounding the act of death through the illusory perspective of the deceased. The dead teases the living to continue recounting a story partially revealed by self-addressed memorial texts. At this stage, the question of the actual deliberation of marks left by a "post-ego"—which are explicit, for instance, in suicide letters—becomes irrelevant. In the "future" interaction with the living, such traces tend to accumulate. Killing methods,

meticulous preparations, the disposition of the body and of the death scene all have a story to tell and to be continued and distorted as valid truth. In the search for a total unveiling of suicide, how many variations and presuppositions can be derived, for example, from a hanged body in the streets—like Gérard de Nerval's—or a drowned corpse of a woman writer, as Virginia Woolf's? Bearer of the "impossible" coincidence between action and passivity, the body of a suicide is the unwriting of a text, (un)signed by its killer-victim. Like any other memorial text, such ephemeral—and uncertain—marks of the "post-ego" are not only legitimated by the act of death, but also by the interaction with the living. Through the deconstruction of the posthumous persona, stories are woven and unwoven, constituting the always changing truth of suicide.

The post-ego thus also integrates the fragmentation of the subject, in a performance of "impossible" simultaneities before and after the event of death. Instituting a timeless dialogue that unites and separates the living and the dead, it subverts historical time and breaks the hermeticism of the so-called "ultimate" moment. In addition, it defies the incommunicability commonly attributed to death. Elizabeth Bronfen, for example, stresses such an incommunicability, by relating the aesthetic rendition of death to an "issue of misrepresentation". "Since death lies outside any living subject's personal or collective realm of experience," she writes, "this "death" can only be rendered as an idea, not something known as a bodily sensation."[37] Owing to its extreme teleological aspect, Bronfen's statement is monological and restrictive, being equally ineffective to the approach of death, regardless of the paradoxes of deliberation. Such general deficiencies prove to be of particular interest to the problematising of suicide.

Firstly, Bronfen's emphasis on the "realm of experience" begs questions regarding its pertinence to the issues of misrepresentation. As noted by Derrida, the general concept of "representation" is "the re-production of a presence, *even if the product is a purely fictitious object*".[38] In other words, the possibility of empirical contact with the object is utterly irrelevant. Effectively, the very notion of misrepresentation bears a redundancy. Denied of total identity in relation to its referent, every representation inevitably implies mispresentation. Regardless of its object being originally present, experienced or absent, a representation is invariably the interlacing of sameness and difference, a refraction. Hence, the irresolvable interval between object (deceased) and its representation (memorial text; posthumous persona), in which the re-arrangement occurs.

Secondly, by prescribing that death lies beyond the realm of the communicable, Bronfen restricts it to an event, limited by time, space, and, above all, its description as being hermetic and ultimate. On a general note, regardless of

any deliberation, death cannot be understood as a unique event silenced by an irreversible end. On the contrary, it is rendered present among the living in various forms that promote an experience of death that relates to the so-called "dying moment", breaking its uniqueness and incommunicability. The sight of a rotting cadaver puts one into contact with the fragility of one's own living boundaries, allowing one to experience death through abjection. Like the transit of a living body into lifelessness, it promotes, in an overflowing flux of attraction and repulsion, an experience of sublimation resonating to and from the death of the other and the imagined death of oneself. On a collective level, death can be experienced ritualistically. In the cannibalistic rituals of the Arawetés, for instance, the spirit of the dead enemy sings through the killer in a process that marks their fusion, in a sort of symbiosis between killer and victim.[39] Here, the shaman is a presence in absence, the very personification of the interaction between the living and the dead. Transiting between worlds, he possesses the interstitial quality of a decomposing corpse. Through the cannibalised flesh and word, the shaman experiences death both spiritually and as a bodily sensation. A dead man inhabits his body and soul, becoming part of him and transforming him into another. Nonetheless, the experience and transmutation are not only his. Before the eyes of the tribe, he does not simply replace the dead victim; he *is* the dead as well as the living. Death is exposed to the tribe, as its members are integrated in a performance of fusion and self-fragmentation.

As herein demonstrated, by making it an object of self-deliberation, suicide exacerbates the plurality inherent to death, having the so-called "ultimate moment" as a catalyst of multiple deaths. Like the Araweté shaman, the suicide performs the transgression of boundaries in a dialogue between the living and the dead. Unlike the former, however, the latter does not embody the victim (passive) following to his/her being prey to a killer (active). The coincidence of killer and victim is precisely the prerequisite to the killing/dying act. Fragmented, the suicide is necessarily a *quasi*-presence, playing action and passivity before his/her audience of belated witnesses. Moved by the self-destructiveness of the post-ego, the suicide-to-be experiences death, exposed in the "impossible" simultaneities that dilacerate the fragile boundaries of his/her living condition. The most evident example of such experiences is certainly the attempted suicide. For the suicide-to-be, a failed attempt or the very obsession for self-destructiveness constitutes an experience of self-fragmentation as much as the act of death itself. Unlike other terminal cases, suicides-to-be are not simply aware of the imminence of death. They construct their own destruction, paradoxically projecting their fragmented selves beyond an unattainable end. They live death in anticipation through a series

of acts that constitute a deferral into the "past" of the act of death. The self-destructive coincidence of killer (active) and victim (passive) establishes *before* the event of death a dialogue between the living (present) and the dead (absent) that transgresses the limits of life and death. Throughout the preparations that constitute the act of death, the suicide is a living corpse, a presence in the process of becoming an absence. For the suicide-to-be, death is lived as a continuous and unfinished experience of transmutation.

The multiplicity of the "ultimate" as well as the communicability of acts, exacerbated in suicide, thus defies the applicability of a teleological approach. The following extract, taken from Anne Sexton's memoirs of her encounters with Sylvia Plath, illustrates remarkably such an exacerbation in the dialogue between the living and the dead:

> Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail and in depth between the free potato chips. [...] We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric bulb. Sucking on it![40]

By referring their "first suicides", Sexton states the plurality of voluntary death. Reverberating the ultimate, the so-called "dying moment" is enchained to a series of acts both in the "past" and "future". Dying is, after all, a recurring act, staged in the fragmentation of the subject as killer and victim, witness and witnessed. Ceasing to be unique, the act of death has here a sense of triviality intertwined to its imperativeness. Hence, something addressed with "burned-up intensity" is laid "between the potato chips". For the suicides, death inhabits not only the so-called "ultimate moment", but also all the small details of acts that constitute the killing-dying process. In its relationships with the post-ego, the act of death is simultaneously origin and end, echoing the voice of acts it legitimates.

As a memorial text addressing the making of another, Sexton's memoir has a very peculiar metalanguage. It is a self-addressed memorial text about suicides by a suicide. Inside the tissue of text, the suicides weave their "posthumous personae" in a constant dialogue between the living and the dead. Transformed into word, their "first suicides" (de)materialise textually the self-destructiveness that propels the process of transmutation. While producing memorial texts, the suicides dilacerate themselves repeatedly in "impossible" simultaneities between object and representation, agency and passivity, living and posthumous personae. Talking suicide, they make out of speech a ritual of fragmentation. Protagonist of their "first suicides", the killer-victim extends self-destructiveness beyond the event of death,

emerging as a witness to its own death. Like Lazarus, suicides have many times to die. In an interplay of action and passivity, the killer-victim is the performer and the audience to his/her "suicide".

In a further parallel with histrionics, the relationship between performance and audience emphasises the doubleness of the process of transmutation. The production of signification through memorial texts refers to a unique interaction between "performers" and audience", in which the former and latter may also constitute an "impossible" simultaneity, as in the previous example. As noted earlier, in the deconstruction of the posthumous persona, memorial texts are constantly legitimated by the interaction between the living and dead, in other words, between audience and "performers". Unlike in theatre, however, suicide does not presuppose a competence to "recognise the performance as such".[41] Conversely, the competence required from the audience refers solely to the knowledge and acceptance of the act of death as a catalyst of "impossible" simultaneities, in particular the coincidence between killer and victim. In suicide, the distortions resulting from displacements—that is, its "fictional aspect"—are an essential part of the very process of transmutation that characterises it. Such reverberations of the ultimate remain therefore separated and united to the illusory sense of reality surrounding the original act of death and the deceased's living identity. Like the interaction of the actor's identity with his/her dramatic persona, in suicide, the performance of "impossible" simultaneities is centred in a self-destructive play between the fragmented living identity and the posthumous persona, in which the latter is a displacement of the former. In their unfulfilled search for the absolute, memorial texts operate in an interval of similarity and discrepancy, re-defining continuously the dual reality of suicide.

Either in the "past", "present" or "future", the deconstruction of the posthumous persona thus disarranges the limits of life and death. The dialogue between the living and the dead is the very performance of the "impassable", of aporia. Weaving memorial texts, the living, in contiguity with the act of death, repeat a search for an always deferred state of the absolute. In the movement of self-destructiveness triggered by the act of death, the audience actively participates in the displacement of acts, undoing and re-arranging the threshold between life and death, made unreachable by constant deferral. As the undead, suicides repeatedly return to the living as a posthumous persona, without having, nonetheless, ever arrived at their supreme end, their impossible—"impassable"—destination.

Fragmented in their role as consumers (passive) and producers (active) of memorial texts, the audience is therefore "haunted" by their own creation. As

herein suggested, in the dialogue between "past", "present", and "future", the suicide's audience—i.e. the "living"—is often constituted by, on the one hand, the deceased him/herself, and, on the other hand, other individuals.[42] In the first case, the ambivalence of the audience is exacerbated by the coincidence with the "performer", split into living and posthumous persona. The "post-ego" weaves memorial texts, projecting·the fragmented subject to and beyond the event of death. Associated with the "impossible" coincidence between killer and victim, the consciousness of a desire of termination is a prerogative of suicide. Having the "post-ego" as its fragmented subject, the planning of death—however simple or complex, short or long—is the expression of such a consciousness. It is, in other words, the institution of a dialogue with the rising posthumous persona, the very denial of termination.

Memorial acts are therefore a reverberation of the failure of the ultimate. By interacting with the projected image of their dead selves, suicides-to-be subvert linearity, living their deaths in anticipation. Witnesses of their own death, they repeat a ritual of self-fragmentation to be legitimated by the act of death, hence dying in deferral, in a displaced performance of self-destructiveness. Drawn to their words on their "first suicides" like "moths to an electric bulb", suicides like Sexton and Plath die as they speak/write. Intertwined in their "posthumous personae", they make the weaving of memorial texts a part of the very killing/dying process.

Living and posthumous personae perform self-destructiveness under the veiling and unveiling by memorial acts. The interval of difference and sameness defined by the dialogue between the living and the dead is therefore inconclusive and volatile, following the rhythm of depersonalisation and re(de)personalisation. In the "future", the "impossible" coincidence between "addresser" and "addressee" endows memorial texts by the deceased with a morbid credibility: through bodies, suicide letters, and death scenes, the suicide speaks as the first witness of his/her own death. However, underneath the dialogue between living and posthumous personae, other voices echo in polyphony. Expanding the posthumous dialogue, voices from the grave are filtered by a new audience that legitimates them as "genuine" first hand accounts of a suicide. Interacting with the play of living and posthumous identities, these belated witnesses assume the double role as consumers (passive) and producers (active) of memorial texts.[43] They too perpetuate self-destructiveness, repeating the ritual of self-fragmentation whilst attempting to reconstruct the fragmented subject.

The belated witnesses reaffirm the projection of the posthumous persona, entangling and disentangling the multi-faceted voice of the deceased into further memorial texts. The relationship is reciprocal: as memorial texts multiply, de-

composing the posthumous persona, so does the "belated audience". In the unfolding of memorial acts, the collapse of individuality is reinforced: broken into killer-victim, "performer-audience", living and "posthumous-persona", the deceased's identity interacts with a community of belated witnesses that attempts to recover its integrity. Interacting with the fragmented subject, the belated witness becomes part of the performance: he/she is an in-betweener, carrying and translating the voice of the dead, as it transits across the suicide's impossible destination. Engaging in a self-inflicted process of transmutation of a subject-object/killer-victim, belated witnesses act as external decomposers of an already fractured subject. In their search for the supreme, they thrive in the decomposing identity, breaking it into pieces. Dilacerated by contradiction, the posthumous persona emerges as the unfinished and receding result of a timeless dialogue between the living and the dead.

Interlacing the processes of depersonalisation (1 → 0) and re(de)personalisation (0 → 1), the construction of the posthumous persona repeats the self-destructive pattern of wholeness and annihilation triggered by the act of death. In their search for the absolute, memorial acts continuously kill and resurrect the deceased in a perpetual displacement of the ultimate. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the metaphor of resurrection relates to the very impulse to fulfil the void left by the self-induced "ebbing" of the individual. Moving towards telos, memorial acts aim at the full recovery of the lost integrity of the subject, in other words, its disclosure. In the interaction between the living and the dead, the act of death is dislocated to a penultimate position, endowing the memorial act the "divine" power of resurrection. Nevertheless, before irresolvable internal contradictions, the position is only temporary, followed by a displacement of the displaced. Thus, with the failure of the absolute, transmutation remains the impossible, as, resurrection after resurrection, the subject is fragmented and transformed without ever reaching its totality. Similarly, the continuous drive towards annihilation defines the fragmentation of the deceased.

Repeated deaths are, in fact, inherent to the search for wholeness. In the movement of self-destructiveness, the "impossible" repetition of wholeness and annihilation corresponds to the very failure of the absolute. The absolute is, in suicide, the "impassable" destination to which non-mutually exclusive totalities play in kenosis. In the posthumous existence of the suicide, paradigms of death and resurrection inhabit one another in mutual deconstruction. Performing aporia, suicide is the reverberation of an unattainable absolute death. Derrida prescribes, in *Aporias*, that "death names the very irreplaceability of absolute singularity", noting that "no one can die in my place or in the place of the other".[44] However, in

its search of a receding end, suicide is neither irreplaceable nor singular. With the failure of the apotheosis of the absolute, the dismembered subject can no longer be one, thus integrating its audience in the performance of many deaths. Memorial acts make suicide interchangeable. As herein suggested, the projection of a posthumous persona is inherent to a conscious desire for death. By wanting to die, the suicide-to-be weaves memorial texts, interacting with a posthumous persona. Projected into an "impossible" future, the split identity performs self-fragmentation. From the birth of a death-wish, suicide is no longer individual or singular. Again, the example offered by Anne Sexton is remarkably illustrative. Her memorial text is an intricate mosaic of repeated suicides. In a metalanguage of death, she creates a network of intertextually related memorial texts, as she writes about the experience of talking suicide. While self-fragmentation is performed through the interaction between living and "posthumous personae", she also literally addressed past attempts, their "first suicides".

Likewise, belated witnesses are integrated in the movement of self-destructiveness, as co-creators of the posthumous persona. On the surface of the text, the drive towards the absolute is materialised through a thematic insistence on a re-constitution of the absent, namely the killer-victim and the event of death.[45] Even on the level of the signified, belated witnesses kill and resurrect the subject repeatedly. Displaced, the act of death is perpetuated and translated, in an attempt to retrace the deceased and the circumstances surrounding the "ultimate moment". In their search for oneness, memorial texts try to reduce suicide to a definable and limited moment. Nevertheless, as a self-destructive system of relationships, suicide overflows the event of death, thus belonging to the "untellable".

Finally, in the light of a constant dialogue with the dead, belated witnesses are never lone scavengers. Although it is possible that the deceased figures as the only creator of a posthumous persona, a similar idea is not applicable to belated witnesses. Split into fractured identities, the suicide may, in extraordinary cases, be his/her sole audience. Nonetheless, belated witnesses are inevitably co-creators. In the weaving of their memorial texts, lies invariably a dialogue with the deceased's fragmented living identity and an existing posthumous persona. As previously described, they are the in-betweeners, the translators of the dead. Subjacent to their memorial texts, the voice of the deceased echoes, performing self-destructiveness.

In its performance of the "impassable", the deconstruction of the posthumous persona is, therefore, the possibility of an unending search for its impossible destination, namely the realisation of the absolute and the consequent end of all dialogue. Representing metonymically the overflowing of the event of

death by suicide, the posthumous persona surpasses the inertia of the corpse. (De)materialisation of the "leap" into the abject, the putrefying cadaver is, nonetheless, a body in an irreversible process of depersonalisation (1 ➔ 0), which becomes increasingly unrecognisable as a signifier of the identity from which it is detached. Associated with such detachment, one finds an extreme passivity that characterises the "fall of the corpse" under the action of external decomposers. As signifiers of suicide, however, inert bodies are interlaced to "posthumous personae". They are not simply a carcass, but memorial texts endowed with their own voice. Underneath the fragile materiality of bodies, death scenes, images, and words lies an unfinished posthumous persona, displaying its volatile bonds with the "living". Re-enacting deaths and resurrections repeatedly, memorial texts perpetuate suicide, in a dialogue between the living and the dead. Carrying the voice of the deceased, which belated witnesses attempt to translate, the posthumous persona maintains a play of veiling (depersonalisation) and unveiling (re[de]personalisation) with its identity and living condition. It maintains, above all, a form of posthumous agency that guarantees a dialogue that approximates and distances it from the "living" in its constant search for an absolute end.

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[1] Ernst Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of English Language* (Amsterdam, London and New York: Elsevier, 1966).

[2] Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

[3] Despite its etymological Latin origin, the word suicide did not exist before the seventeenth century. Its first documented use, according to the *OED*, occurred in 1651, remaining, however, very rare at the time. A number of ambivalent expressions were commonly used instead, such as "self-destruction, self-killing, self-slaughter, sibi mortem consciecere (to procure one's death), vim sibi inferre (to cause violence to oneself), sui manu cadere (to fall by one's hand)". For a further discussion on the origin and the various definitions of the word suicide, *Lives and Deaths: Selections from the Works of Edwin S. Shneidman*, ed. Anton Leenars (Ann Arbor: Brunner/Mazel, 1999).

[4] Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris : Gallimard, 1955) 128

[5] The term act of death, henceforth used, incorporates both the idea of killing and dying, thus implying the self-destructive coincidence that characterises suicide.

[6] Cf. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: a Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996) 5-6.

[7] Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris : Seuil, 1980) 12-17.

[8] Cf. Kristeva 11-12.

[9] Cf. Blanchot 101.

[10] Cf. Blanchot 117-19.

[11] Blanchot 130.

[12] Blanchot 122.   .

[13] Simon Critchley, Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature (London: Routledge, 1977) 68.

[14] Critchley 71.

[15] Critchley 68.

[16] By (fragmented) "totality", one understands every element that may integrate the movement of self-destructiveness, such as the deceased, the act of death, life/death, totality/nothingness, action/passivity, and so forth.

[17] Cf. Blanchot 123.

[18] For a further discussion on monologism see: Kristeva, Le texte du roman: Approche sémiologique d'une structure discursive transformationelle (Paris: Mouton, 1970).

[19] Blanchot 129.

[20] Critchley 69.

[21] The terms "past", "present" and "future", henceforth used, bear no relation with actual time. "Present" refers to the time of the act of death, understood in its relationship with its effect—i.e. the "leap" and the "fall'. "Past" and "future" refer to the times preceding and succeeding the "present" respectively.

[22] Cited in Larry Kirkland, "To End Itself by Death: Suicide in Shakespeare's Tragedies," Southern Medical Journal, July 1999: 45.

[23] The terms "origin" and "absence" are here used with reference to Derrida's concept of différance. See, for instance, Derrida's Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) and Susan Haldemann's "Jacques Derrida and the Heretic Hermeneutic", Displacement: Derrida and After, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983) 98-132.

[24] The expression memorial texts will henceforth refer to every source of text—written or other—produced in relation to the suicide and the act of death in consequent construction of the posthumous persona.

[25] Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979) 275.

[26] In The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (London: Oxford UP, 1973), Harold Bloom defines kenosis as a "revisionary act in which an "emptying" or "ebbing" takes place in relation to the precursor" (87).

[27] Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) 74.

[28] The use of inverted commas in the word "totality" aims at dissociating it from its literal connotation. As stressed by the adjectives "fractured" and "volatile", such a "totality" is an impossibility, given the self-destructiveness of "suicide".

[29] As a double, the memorial act must equally always be understood as relationship. Hence, every reference to it is implicitly related to its effect, namely the memorial text.

[30] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990) 100.

[31] Handelmann 109.

[32] Cf. Derrida, *Positions* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972) 23; Grosz 100.

[33] Handelmann 109.

[34] Cf. J E Sandys, ed., *Aristotle's Rhetoric*, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1877) II, 13.

[35] Cf. Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy", *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* VI.1 (1974): 71.

[36] Transgressing their literal senses, the terms audience and "witness" will be henceforth used as metaphors applied to the living in relation to the posthumous persona.

[37] Elizabeth Bronfen, "Death. A Preface", *The Limits of Death: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,* eds. Joanne Morra, Mark Robson, and Marquard Smith (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) xx.

[38] Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, ed. John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973) 55. Italics are mine.

[39] Cf. Antônio Risério, "Palavras Canibais." *Textos e Tribos: Poéticas Extraocidentais nos Trópicos Brasileiros,* ed. Jayme Salomão (Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1973) 157. The Arawetés are an indigenous tribe of the Oriental Amazon, whose language and culture remained untouched from any contact with the Occident until 1976. The greatest particularity of the group concerns their image repertoire, which is almost entirely expressed through word and chanting.

[40] Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing", *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber, 1970) 175. The text will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

[41] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1994) 87.

[42] Attention is here drawn to the possibility of an audience being formed solely by the deceased him/herself, in which no interaction with others is established before or after the event of death. In either case, it is important to note that the dialogue between the living and the dead remains, as the suicide-to-be performs to him/herself the play between the already fragmented living identity and the projected posthumous persona.

[43] Belated witnesses will henceforth describe the audience comprehending the "living" other than the suicide-to-be. The expression does not, in any way, presuppose the presence of the individual(s) at the so-called "moment of death". It does, on the other hand, emphasise: a. the absence of a coincidence between addresser and addressee, characteristic of memorial texts left by the deceased him/herself, hence the adjective "belated"; b. the double role of action and passivity of any audience, here described by the "witnessing" of "suicide" through memorial texts and the co-construction of the posthumous persona.

[44] Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) 22.

[45] The "reconstruction" of the event of death must be understood as a recreation of it based on the intertextuality with other memorial texts. Such a "reconstruction" integrates the creation of the posthumous persona.

2. Memorial Texts: Suicide as a Posthumous Performance

In their projection beyond an unattainable end, suicides act posthumously. The death wish re-creates in anticipation the self-fragmentation established by the "impossible" simultaneity of killer (active) and victim (passive) in the act of death. It drives the individual towards an irreconcilable duality of termination and continuity: the doing and undoing of being and non-being, living and posthumous personae. Hence, it presupposes a dialogue with one's imagined dead self, establishing an interplay between the living and dead through which memorial texts are weaved. The living are the weavers and consumers of memorial texts; they are the audience of the performance of suicide.[1]

As memorial texts multiply, so does the audience. In cases of famous suicides, the "desecration" is public. "Exhibited" to an anonymous audience, the posthumous persona is further fragmented by innumerable re-creations of the act of death. In certain cases, such a public exposure is implicit in the very choice of place and method of death. Found in rivers (Woolf), on street lamps (Nerval), in hotels (Sá-Carneiro, Pavese, Benjamin), the bodies function as memorial texts left together with their decomposing authors. Public "acts of death" beg for an even more peculiar relationship with their audience. Like suicide letters with specific addressees, they often have their initial target audience to whom suicides do not simply leave their bodies—they deliver their cadavers in a most histrionic act. It is precisely the presence of such an audience that makes them unique, for passive spectators or peaceful mourners are incompatible with suicide. Public "acts of death" transform the "undisplayable" and "untellable" into a spectacle, while confronting a "reluctance of being a spectator" from the present audience.

The deaths of Mário de Sá-Carneiro and Yukio Mishima illustrate well such irresolvable discrepancies between "performer" and audience in public acts. After the loss of his mother at an early age, Sá-Carneiro was deeply affected by the death of Cabreira, a friend who shot himself in front of his teachers and colleagues at school.[2] Influenced by Cabreira's dramatic end, Sá-Carneiro is said to have become obsessed with the theatrical gesture of death, with the idea of suicide as a spectacle.[3] At the age of twenty-six, he prepared his death scene and invited an unadvised acquaintance to watch him die. On the evening of the 26th April 1916, at eight o'clock sharp, José de Araújo arrived, as arranged, at Sá-Carneiro's hotel room to find him lying on his bed in a dinner jacket. When asked whether he had a headache, Sá-Carneiro calmly replied, "I've just had five flasks of strychnine. Have a seat, please". Araújo left immediately in search of help, returning fifteen minutes

later with two policemen. Sá-Carneiro agonised in "horrible spasms", dying shortly after.[4]

Nearly six decades later, during the siege of a military base, Mishima committed ritualistic sacrifice in front of a selected audience. His death comprehended a series of deliberate, carefully planned acts. That same morning, without going into details, Mishima had phoned some reporters, whom he wanted to witness the events of the day. Subsequently, he handed in letters to his *Tatenokai* students with specific instructions for the siege.[5] Mishima and Morita were to commit *hari-kiri*; the other remaining three students were not to kill themselves. At the Ichigaya base, they took the chief of the Self-Defence Forces hostage and, armed with swords, threatened to kill him unless their demands were filled. Following Mishima's orders, all the soldiers of the Ichigaya garrison gathered in front of the headquarters at midday. At the balcony, the writer made a speech exhorting all soldiers to rise in order to protect Japan. With the sound of helicopters and the booing crowd, no one listened to him. Mishima finished by shouting a traditional salute, "Tenno Heika Banzai"—"Long live the Emperor". Back to the office, after failing to address the crowd of soldiers, Mishima started to undress for his ritual while the General's gag was removed. Even more disturbing than Sá-Carneiro's, Mishima's act of death was literally performed, from beginning to end, in front of his assistants and General Mashita, his hostage, tied up before him. After disembowelling himself with a sword, Mishima was beheaded by his assistants, completing the ritual of *seppuku*.[6] Subsequently, Morita, one of his followers and possibly his lover, was also beheaded after attempting to commit *hari-kiri*. Having received strict orders from Mishima not to commit *seppuku*, the remaining students handed themselves in. Outside the police, the press, helicopters and about one thousand soldiers awaited the development of events. [7]

Heightening the theatricality inherent in every suicide, both Sá-Carneiro and Mishima perform self-fragmentation to a selected audience, displaying the breaking of limits of their bodies. However fragmented, their "objectified subjectivity" persists through broken boundaries, interacting with their immediate audience. Suicides such as Mishima and Sá-Carneiro aim at defamiliarisation by an immediate exposure of the abject at the event of death. More than performance, their deaths are a spectacle—i.e. something to be displayed and seen. Such an "immediate exposure", to which their selected audience is submitted, is directly related to their exaggerated theatricality. The choice of the method of death, for instance, defines the dramatic intensity and the defamiliarisation of the agonising moments as well as of the immediate condition of the corpse to be displayed. Sá-Carneiro had "horrible spasms" and later, a dark stream of blood ran from his mouth, eyes, and

ears;[8] Mishima "smothered in his own blood" while intestines "slid from his belly".[9] Overflowing the sensorial possibilities of their audience, their deaths make a spectacle out of abjection. In Mishima's *seppuku*, for instance, every ritualistic gesture exposes and heightens the interstitial in death. The self-fragmentation of the subject is indissociable from the dilaceration of its materiality, the body. As he cuts himself open, he literally provokes an overflowing of physical barriers, the trespassing of the insides beyond fractured limits.

However, it is the very presence of "spectators" at the act of death— essential for the suicide-spectacle—that renders the relationship between "performer" and audience problematic. As in any other case, there is, on the one hand, the paramount necessity of the acknowledgement, by "performer" and audience alike, of the self-inflicted character of the act. Without the awareness of the "impossible" coincidence between killer and victim, the performance of suicide, through the interplay of living and posthumous personae, is impossible. On the other hand, in public cases such as Sá-Carneiro's and Mishima's, this very awareness clashes with the extreme histrionic quality of the act. Such an extreme theatricality before a present audience places them in the threshold of the fictional. Nevertheless, despite such a fictional appeal, there is not a perception of a dialogue between actor and character. Instead, maintaining, at all times, the bonds with reality, the individual fragments his body and identity, splitting him/herself into living and posthumous personae. Unlike in theatre, the audience is not protected by the safe distance provided by the fictional. Here, the tantalising unreality of the spectacular paradoxically exacerbates and reaffirms its reality. While the theatrical displays the abject, hypnotising with an aura of fantasy, the undeniable awareness presupposed by suicide provokes a feeling of repulsion. Exposed to the coincidence between killer and victim at the act of death, the audience attempts to reject its role of spectator.[10]

The movement of self-destructiveness, characteristic of suicide, is propelled by "impossible" simultaneities, among which are attraction and repulsion, characteristic of the abject. Even when absent from the act of death, the audience is also impelled by ambivalent impulses before the interplay between living and posthumous personae in memorial texts. However, such belated witnesses do not attend the self-induced transformation of the body into a corpse, in other words, the act of death. They are not exposed to the performance of abjection of what I have earlier described as the "initial catalyst" of self-destructiveness. As a result, there is not such an instinctive reluctance to assume the role of audience. On the contrary, despite the persistence of impulses of repulsion, in their attempt to

recover the integrity of the deceased, belated witnesses are drawn to the performance of suicide, through the consumation and production of memorial texts.

In this context, the exacerbation provoked by "suicide-spectacles" and their relationship with a present audience begs questions regarding the absence of a hierarchy between the acts involved in the movement of self-destructiveness.[11] As previously prescribed, suicide does not allow the existence of an immutable fixed centre. The act of death is, nonetheless, an *initial catalyst*, with which all acts maintain relationship. Thus, although memorial acts also perform self-destructiveness in the interplay of "impossible" simultaneities, they are displacements that must be legitimated by the act of death. The suicide-spectacle exposes the initial catalyst. It is, therefore, intimately associated with the presence of the body and its transformation into a corpse. Sá-Carneiro's and Mishima's deaths are an open visual display of abjection and self-fragmentation. As the subject overflows, losing its limits, so does the body that contains it.

Nevertheless, the preponderance of the act of death remains temporary. For the act of death is also a memorial act. After all, the dialogue with one's imagined dead self is inherent not only in the death wish but also to the killing/dying act. By committing suicide, the individual acts posthumously. With the presence of an audience other than him/herself, the idea is yet clearer. For Sá-Carneiro and Mishima, the very act of death is a public memorial act. As they "enact their deaths", they weave texts of which they are the authors and objects. Placed outside the coincidence between performer and audience, their spectators are already belated witnesses, who assimilate the spectacle and weave their own memorial texts.

Belated witnesses perform self-destructiveness, intertwining the voice of the dead with their own voice. They are the ones who, in the dialogue between the living and the dead, "gossip" about the deceased, decomposing the posthumous persona. Foreseeing their existence in the discourse of others, Mayakovsky and Pavese refer to such interminable "gossip"—the weaving of memorial texts by belated witnesses. In their suicide notes, their post-egos attempt to silence the living:

> I forgive everyone and ask forgiveness of everyone. O.K.? Not too much gossip, please.[12]
> Do not blame anyone for my death, and please don't gossip about it. The deceased hate gossip[13]

In the construction of the posthumous persona, "voices from the grave" have many stories to tell. Like Lazarus rising from the dead, suicides are the main witnesses to their deaths. They are the protagonists of "impossible" simultaneities between killer and victim, performer and audience. Their bodies are a temporary statement of their death, the physical bearer of marks of self-destructiveness. In its interaction with the living, their decomposition recreates the "spectacle" of self-fragmentation. Like all memorial texts by the deceased, the corpse "speaks" suicide as belated witnesses translate its voice in memorial texts of their own. Devoid of an immutable signifier, the fragmented identity becomes attached to a textual body that, attempting to recover the lost integrity, outlives the physical body. To belated witnesses, in the veiling and unveiling of suicide, the voice of the deceased is—an often enigmatic—means of access to the irretrievable truth, the "impassable". In this context, written memorial texts by the suicide acquire the value of documentation. Like the corpse, they (de)materialise self-destructiveness; they function as a statement of death.

Written memorial texts by suicides are, in fact, rather spectacular. They display self-fragmentation verbally, exposing their audience to the abject repeatedly. In the plurality of the text, they perform suicide indeterminately. Like the theatrical suicide-spectacle, they are also surrounded by an aura of fantasy. For the belated witness, they create an illusion of "direct" contact with the living identity of the deceased. The enunciator is, nonetheless, already fractured by the recreated coincidence between killer and victim. The most credible witness performs suicide before his/her belated witnesses, split in a dialogue between living and posthumous personae. Moreover, memorial texts by suicides promote a subliminal interplay between corpus and corpse. As a kind of spectacle, closely related to the act of death, they not only belong to the textual body of the deceased, but they also maintain a link with its failing signifier, the physical body. Effectively, as suggested earlier, any memorial act—either by suicides or third parties—is part of the movement of self-destructiveness. However, due to the illusion of a "direct" contact with the deceased's living identity, memorial texts by suicides enhance the sense of self-fragmentation as they expose "impossible" coincidences. They are a spectacle to belated witnesses.

It is important to note that the illusion of wholeness of the living identity is constantly shattered by the very exposure to the coincidence of killer and victim. Speaking of their belated witnesses, Mayakovsky and Pavese are already fragmented by an interplay of living and posthumous personae. Suicides-to-be write posthumously, dying in deferral as they dialogue with their imagined dead selves. *They write as though they were already dead.* Or rather, *they write as*

though they were already killing themselves and dying. Despite not having a similar sensorial effect of cases such as Mishima's and Sá-Carneiro's, the exposure of a displaced act of death by the suicide enhances the spectacular in such memorial texts.

Sá-Carneiro's final correspondence with Fernando Pessoa offers a remarkable example of the display of self-fragmentation through written word. In his last letters, Sá-Carneiro anticipates his death, projecting his imagined dead self to his addressee. The peculiarity of this projection is that it "serializes" death, repeating, in successive "final" episodes, the re-enactment of the ultimate. Sá-Carneiro thus materialises in writing the repetition of the killing-dying process, characteristic of the movement of self-destructiveness. Through written word he announces and proclaims the end, subsequently denying it to himself and his audience, as his writing unfolds in a new memorial text. On March 31st, he reveals his plan, stating preferred and alternative method:

> But for a miracle, next Tuesday (or perhaps even on the day before), your Mário de Sá-Carneiro will take a strong dose of strychnine and disappear from this world. [...] Farewell. If tomorrow I can't get hold of a sufficient dose of strychnine, I shall lie under the "Métro"... Don't be cross with me.[14]

Three days later, he writes again, announcing his death on the *Métro* on that very day:

> Good bye my dear Fernando Pessoa.
> It is today, Monday the 3rd, that I die by throwing myself under the "Métro" (more specifically, the "Nord-Sud"), at the Pigalle Station.[15]

Note here the theatricality of these opening words. The enunciator—a "living-dead" speaking death in the hands of his audience—starts the letter by saying farewell. Subsequently, the reinstatement of the date—"today", "Monday the 3rd"—creates a feeling of urgency, an ebbing of time, as though proclaiming the end of the text as the end of life. Nevertheless, on the following day such an ebbing is temporarily suspended and all messages—i.e. the writing that kills as one reads—are to be disregarded. He writes in a postcard:

> Disregard my messages until I say otherwise – everything is getting worse and worse. However, there has been a waiting interval. Until Saturday.[16]

After the letter cited above, Sá-Carneiro wrote on the same day a telegram and a letter reading "Bien" and "I am sending you a telegram to calm you down" respectively.[17] Death, however, was not suspended; on the 26th Sá-Carneiro would die before the eyes of José de Araújo and two policemen. Pessoa would learn about the death through a letter from Carlos Ferreira.[18]

In addition to the repetition of the ultimate in the unfolding of multiple "last words", the serialisation of death, here described, contains elements of the spectacular. Sá-Carneiro performed histrionically his death not only on the 26th April, but also throughout the weeks in which he died repeatedly before a chosen spectator, namely Fernando Pessoa. The richness of details of his letters constructs the scene and the act of death to his audience. Reading, in this sense, becomes a way of killing. Like in a sacrifice, the reader is also an executor; as Pessoa read, Sá-Carneiro's death became real. At each announcement, he would resurrect only to die again after simple sentences of effect: "It is today". Possibly with the intention of "inviting" his addressee to witness his death, Sá-Carneiro gives detailed information in advance, including preferred and alternative methods, date, and place. By doing so, he creates a range of sensorial effects around his imagined death, staging it textually to his chosen "spectator". Each letter, each death, is a morbid spectacle in which the killer-victim is exposed and intertwined to the image of his corpse—a poisoned and dilacerated body lurking behind words, waiting to be authenticated by a definitive announcement of death.

Displayed in the public domain, Sá-Carneiro's letters serialize the ultimate, in a spectacle performed by living and posthumous personae, to a much wider audience. To anonymous belated witnesses, they unveil momentarily the act of death through an illusory contact with the deceased's living identity. These letters tempt readers and critics with the reconstruction of the untellable. However, to Pessoa—the chosen "spectator", oblivious of the development of events—, the proximity with the act of death was yet more overwhelming. In a performance with no actors or characters, the theatricality of the suicide-spectacle only augments the impact of the abject. In its papery materiality in Pessoa's hands, Sá-Carneiro's fragmented identity plummeted repeatedly from the threshold of life and death, shifting from presences to absences and vice-versa.

The memorial act of writing "posthumously", therefore, presupposes a juxtaposition between author and object, namely his/her imagined dead self. The author of such memorial texts is a double, an interplay of living and posthumous personae that weaves itself through the text. Inseparable from the memorial text, the writing of suicide cannot be seen simply as an act, but also as a performance. As the suicide writes posthumously *as though he/she were killing him/herself and*

dying, the writing of suicide integrates the killing and dying process. It intertwines the living and the dead, undoing an existence and redoing it as a posthumous existence. It is a ritual of self-fragmentation, a displaced spectacle of the act of death.

In her memoir of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton addresses the making of a memorial text in a memorial text. Talking death is a re-creation of a spectacle, hence performed "at length, in detail and in depth" for the living:

> We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it! [...] We talked death and this was life for us, lasting in spite of us, or better, because of us, our intent eyes, our fingers clutching the glass, three pairs of eyes fixed on someone's—each one's gossip.[19]

It is important to note that the living, as defined in Chapter 1, comprehends not only the belated witnesses, but also the suicide-to-be, personifying the dead enunciator. Talking death is an experience of "burned-up intensity" for the latter who, weaving memorial texts for him/herself, emerges as a performer and witness of his/her own death. The metaphor of the moths drawn fatally to the electric light establishes the weaving of the memorial text as an act inevitably simultaneous to the dying process. Talking suicide means to be drawn to the "electric light", to the "burned-up intensity" of self-inflicted death, here performed verbally. It also means to be the witness of one's own *suicides*, in other words, to re-emerge from and because of one's self-destructiveness: life lasted in spite of them, or better, because of them. Here, the interlacing of living and posthumous personae is therefore a ritual of rebirth as well as death. The suicides rise and die, re-enacting the spectacle of impossible terminations in the construction of memorial texts.

Another feature worthy of note in Sexton's text is the enhanced double role of the author. "The Barfly Ought to Sing" comprises various intertextually related memorial texts. Speaking of an encounter of suicides, the author has a double role as a suicide and a belated witness. In either role, she and her interlocutor are irresistibly attracted to death. They "suck on it"; death—or rather, suicide—is the propeller that kills them and maintains them alive in spite of themselves. As a suicide, Sexton is no ordinary belated witness. Inevitably, she continually takes over Plath's role as the dead object, weaving a memorial text of her own. For her as well as for the remaining audience, she is also the killer-victim; the death of the other is also her own. Their repeated deaths dialogue through printed word, offering their belated witnesses with a memorial text that is also an encounter of

suicides. Writing death, Sexton re-enacts death in anticipation, leaving behind—as a (textual) body abandoned in a public place—unfinished posthumous personae and their memorial text.

Being legitimated by the act of death as part of the "body" of the posthumous persona, memorial texts acquire the value of suicide notes. The suicide rehearses death while killing him/herself and dying by fragmenting his/her identity through written word. Writing a farewell letter means to act as a dead enunciator, a subject dilacerated by a self-induced absence. In the ambiguity of their fragmented authors, suicide notes are documents pertaining to the living and the dead. Whereas the act of writing is, in many ways, an extension of the act of death, the materiality of the written text functions as a replacement of the cadaver. Memorial texts are the voice and the body of posthumous personae.

To pronounce one's own death is a solemn act, a statement, a performance. The implicit notion of "last words" creates a parallel between the end of the text and the end of life. In other words, the text metaphorically (de)materialises a self-inflicted absence, the ebbing of an existence. Pavese's last entry in his diary finishes with the following words: "I am sickened by all this. Not words. Action. I shall write no more."[20] The end of the text calls for a supreme action that would bring perpetual silence. Nevertheless, fragmented by self-destructiveness, the suicide cannot act supremely. The teleological impulse fails to be accomplished before the unending multiplicity of the text and of its producer—a double living and posthumous personae. Announcing death, the fragmented subject behind the text is already a presence-absence at the time of the enunciation. The figure of the dead enunciator, so explicitly presented in Sá-Carneiro's letters to Pessoa, pertains to the memorial text by the suicide as a materiality of the "end".

The last words are in themselves reverberations; they echo the act of death. Writing as "moths attracted to a electric light bulb", suicides engage in a verbal part of the suicide process; a verbal suicide weapon.[21] The re-creation in anticipation of self-fragmentation is heightened in cases in which the writing of suicide is repeated in multiple memorial texts. Displayed to a selected audience weeks before his death, Sá-Carneiro's letters to Pessoa are a particularly remarkable example of such an intensification. However, the sense prevails, in different forms and degrees, in other cases. Pavese's final entry, for instance, was written ten days before his suicide note and so was Virginia Woolf's first suicide letter to her husband. Legitimated by the act of death, the writing of memorial texts performs and proclaims the death of their enunciator. In the plurality of texts and within the text, the performance is repeated, spreading the fractured voice of the dead enunciator to its audience.

The teleological notion inherent to "last words" is in Pavese stressed by the suggestion of a rupture, a sharp opposition between action and words. Such an antagonism is, nonetheless, dismantled by the very memorial act of writing. The suicide kills/dies as he/she writes, enchained to the act of death in a performance of suicide. In his body of ambivalence, Pavese is writer *and* suicide, using words as a "suicide weapon", while weaving his posthumous persona. The doubleness of writer and suicide is, in fact, essential in the characterisation of an author as a producer of memorial texts. For literary suicides are not, after all, simply suicides. Their writing of death integrates a textual body that relates simultaneously to their figure as an author and as a suicide. Suicide letters, journals and literary works alike cannot be dissociated from an author's (textual) body. For a suicide-author, the notion of "last words" is also commonly applied to their last work, very often acquiring legendary proportions.[22] Mishima, for instance, submitted the last volume of *The Sea of Fertility* on the morning of his death. In a letter, sent a week earlier, he had written, "the end of this work will mean the end of my world".[23] The parallel states an irresolvable contradiction. It verbalises the teleological impulse towards the end—"the end of my world"—while deferring such an end in the plurality of memorial and literary texts. For Mishima, the death of the man is the death of the writer. The merging of the end of life and the end of writing bring together suicide and author.

The posthumous personae of suicide-authors reflect such a duality. Hence, memorial texts written by them cannot be deemed ordinary. When the dead enunciator speaks behind suicide notes, for instance, he/she extends the interplay of living and posthumous persona to that of writer and suicide. Mayakovsky offers an explicit example of this duality. In his suicide note, he includes a message to the Briks in verse, a variant of his poem "At the top of my voice":

TO ALL OF YOU
"Don't blame anyone for my death, and please don't gossip about it. The deceased hate gossip.
Mama, sisters, comrades, forgive me. This is not a good method (I don't advise others to do it), but for me there's no other way out.
Lili, love me.
    Comrade Government, my family consists of Lili Brik, Mama, my sisters, and Veronica Vitoldovna Polonskaya.
    If you can provide a decent life for them, thank you.
    The verses I have begun give to the Briks. They'll figure them out.
    As they say, "the incident is closed."

Love's boat
Smashed on the everyday.
Life and I are quits,
and there's no point
in counting over
mutual hurts,   .
harms,
and slights.

Best of luck to all of you!

Vladimir Mayakovsky

4/12/30

Comrades of the Proletarian Literary Organization, don't think me a coward.

Really, it couldn't be helped.

Greetings!

Tell Yermilov it's too bad I"ve removed the signboard—we should have fought it out.

V.M.[24]

In his double figure as suicide and writer, Mayakovsky establishes an intertextual dialogue between his suicide note and his literary production. Announcing death through the poetic word, he deliberately makes it a signifier of suicide—the voice and the body of the dead enunciator. Unlike literary texts that, legitimated by belated witnesses, become memorial texts, the poem "At the Top of my Voice" is placed by the author himself in the realm of the "auto-thanatographical". Mayakovsky communicates and re-enacts death with poetry.

Announcing death through the poetic word has another objective: the veiling of suicide. To Ossip and Lili Brik, Mayakovsky speaks in "riddles". The sense of revelation is, nonetheless, maintained, as they "will figure them out". Overall, his letter aims at disclosing the unsaid, silencing the "gossip" around the deceased. From the very beginning, his words are imperative—"don't blame", "don't gossip". His concern was not unfounded. After Esenin's death, Mayakovsky had described ninety per cent of the flood of memorial texts as "just rubbish or dangerous rubbish". His intent with his own memorial text to Esenin was to "paralyse the action of Esenin's last lines, *to make Esenin's end uninteresting*".[25] Like Sexton's "electric bulb", suicide was "interesting" to belated witnesses. Speaking as though he were already dead, Mayakovsky tries to act supremely, expressing his after-death wishes and suppressing the overflow between cause and effect, characteristic

of suicides. His letter is a remarkable example of the expression of the post-ego in a variety of issues, namely family, work, love, and after-death reputation. He thus maintains the agency of the dead through written word, constructing his posthumous persona as an entity with desires, a deep concern for its reputation, and need for attention and love.

Another example of the "post-ego effect" is found in Virginia Woolf's suicide letters to her husband, Leonard. Woolf wrote two letters, very similar but not identical, one of them on the day of her death and another, dated "Tuesday", probably ten days earlier, on the 18th.[26] In them, the post-ego tries equally to act supremely, with the intent to explain her act through a series of *statements*. Suicide letters are, after all, "statements" of death, in which the suicide "signs the corpse" in an attempt to tell the untellable. Woolf starts the first letter by justifying her decision to die, subsequently proceeding to express her utmost love and thankfulness to her husband:

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going mad again: I feel we can't go through another of these terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer, I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is that I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me & incredibly good. I want to say that—everybody knows it. If anyone could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.
V.[27]

The particular interest of the expression of the post-ego in these letters lies in the manner in which Woolf constructs her posthumous persona, addressing issues that would become central to the Woolf myth, namely her writing, her mental illness, and the devotion to and from her husband. Not only is the impossibility of writing presented as one of the reasons for her decision, but also the very writing of the memorial text in question is interrelated with death. She is, in fact, dying as she

writes: "You see I can't write this even, which shows I am right". The ebbing of the subject and the ebbing of writing seem to occur simultaneously in a joint movement of self-destructiveness.

The role of Leonard Woolf as a loving companion is, in both letters, almost as remarkable as that of death itself. The second letter, in fact, begins and ends with the following words: "I want to tell you that you have given me complete happiness"; "No one could have been so good as you have been. From the very first day till now. [She added with fresh ink]: Everyone knows that".[28] Her gratefulness was to be echoed in the reaction of third parties. Unlike Ted Hughes, Leonard Woolf is often depicted as a loving and caring husband, a figure to be pitied rather than blamed. After Woolf's death, he received over two hundred letters, praising her qualities and assuring that he had done what he could.[29] In his biography, Bell even implies that Leonard was, in fact, a victim, who "had undertaken the care of a woman who had twice been mad and had once attempted suicide" without "any serious and wholly unequivocal warning of what he was letting himself in for".[30]

It is, however, Woolf's mental illness that is the focus of her letter and the axis around which her posthumous persona has been constructed both by herself and her belated witnesses.[31] According to her letter, death is an inescapable effect of a "terrible disease", which forms an irresolvable antagonism with life and happiness: "It is this madness. Nothing anyone says can persuade me", she writes in her second letter, "All I want to say that until this disease came on we were perfectly happy."[32] Going beyond the interaction with its chosen addressee, the extended effect of Woolf's "last words" is the dissemination of a mythical aura of "madness" associated with her emerging posthumous persona. In the interplay of public and private spheres characteristic of suicide, the extended post-ego effect affects a much larger audience, recreating indeterminately the posthumous persona. Teleological, her letter describes and justifies her death as the unavoidable end of a life tainted by a recurrent disease. In it, as in other memorial texts to follow, her death is a "final act" of a history of mental illness.

If the writing of death is a ritual of self-fragmentation and memorial texts as such are, in various degrees, spectacular, who is their audience? In the first instance, the suicide-to-be, in the memorial act of writing, is killer and victim, performer and audience. Secondly, where applicable, there is an "immediate audience", a select group of belated witnesses—either chosen by the deceased or not—that are close to the corpse and the death scene. Lastly, one finds an anonymous audience, who witnesses suicide through the consumption and production of memorial texts. Its existence and extent depends on each particular

case, being particularly notable in famous suicides. Separated by time and place from the original act of death, these "de-composers" are granted access to the body and the death scene through the network of memorial texts, both by the deceased and the "immediate audience" of belated witnesses. Hence, they are endowed with the role of witnesses, assuming an active part in the construction of the posthumous persona. Memorial texts by literary suicides are part of their textual body—the volatile signifier of the posthumous persona. Bringing the re-created act of death closer to the audience, they provide the voice and the body of the absent deceased. Like literary works, they belong to the public domain; they are a part of a body that needs to be exposed in order to engage an unending attempt to recover lost integrity.

With the fragmentation of the subject in "impossible" simultaneities, the "most individual act" fails to be individual. Suicide presupposes an audience, even if restricted to the split identity of a suicide-to-be in the performance of intertwined living and posthumous personae. The belated witnesses extend the transmutation of the deceased, restructuring it as new memorial texts are weaved. Anonymous intruders, they are, at times, expected by the fractured performer, who, projecting his/her posthumous persona to his/her belated audience, extends the dialogue between the living and the dead beyond the coincidence of killer and victim. Such is case of the suicide-spectacle, as well as of suicide notes and deaths in public places. In any case, a textual and physical body is always left by the suicide.

Suicides calls for the voice of the other. As dangerous taboos or potential crime scenes, they leave marks that need to be translated or simply purified. They require the re-enactment of the death and resuscitation of the dead, the weaving of memorial texts. The immediate witnesses of a suicide are legally bound to produce memorial texts, in an attempt to reconstitute the abject verbally. The documentations of a suicide thus aim at reconstructing the acts behind death, presenting an irrefutable cause to the belated witnesses. The coroner's report of Woolf's death states that "the cause of Death was immersion in the River on 28 March 1941 by her own act so killing herself while the balance of her mind was disturbed" and "do further say that death was due to drowning".[33] It is interesting to note that the report does not simply state the cause of death, but, instead, dwells on the possible reasons that might have led to the death. The "statement" of death is a memorial text interrelated with a network formed by the discourse surrounding the suicide. There could not have been, for instance, any physical evidence from which the coroner could have derived that the deceased's balance of mind was disturbed at the time of death. By bringing up the question of madness, the report echoes stories of Woolf's mental illness, in particular the suicide letters.

Woolf speaks through the words of the coroner in a dialogue between the living and the dead.

Invariably, the suicide leaves a testimony of his act, which takes the form of a textual body as well as of a putrefying corpse. Attached to a latent posthumous persona, the textual body, usually related to writings such as suicide letters and diaries, also comprehends an intricate death scene, at the centre of which the dead body figures as a motionless protagonist. In such contexts, corpses also function as memorial texts left by the deceased in which belated witnesses read marks of self-fragmentation. In the amplified performance of Yukio Mishima's death, for instance, the dilacerated body carried the ritualistic significance of each movement of the sword. Left in a pool of blood in the General's office, his remains continued to perform abjection after the event of death had taken place. In an indeterminate future, such a performance would be prolonged by descriptions and reproductions of the author's remains in further memorial texts.

Unlike writings of suicide, the corpse figures as a temporary memorial text. Its unique existence as a memorial text depends on the links with the undoing subjectivity of the deceased and the consequent possibility of interaction with belated witnesses. Once the link is broken, the absence of a body remains as a catalyst of self-destructiveness. To the immediate audience, however, a cadaver in a suicide scene functions as a "prime witness", the carrier of the voice of the deceased, who transforms a post-mortem into a personal account of its own death. The belated witnesses are the "coroners", who, dealing with marks of self-fragmentation, translate and spread the voice of the dead in an attempted reconstruction of the acts behind the effect.

Descriptions of the disclosure of Sergei Esenin's scene of death often endow his body with the role of an eyewitness. Commenting on the position of Esenin's corpse, Georgy Ustinov, who was also at Hotel Angleterre at the time of his death, writes:

> The corpse was holding with one hand on to the central heating pipe. Esenin had not made a noose, he had wound the rope around his neck just like a scarf. He could have jumped out at any moment. Why did he seize hold of the pipe? In order not to fall out—or in order to avoid the possibility of dying?[34]

Esenin offers also an interesting case in which the corpse plays a role in the attempt, by belated witnesses, not only to retrace the acts behind the effect, but also to fulfil the void left by a self-inflicted absence, reconstructing the fragmented

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identity of the deceased. Soon after his death, a death mask was made along with sketches and photographs that were taken of his corpse.[35] Such memorial texts have an ambivalent effect. On the one hand, they objectify the individual, functioning as a statement, by belated witnesses, of his/her passing away. On the other hand, they are re-presentations of a lost presence, which, in the attempt to fill the void left voluntarily by the deceased, paradoxically reaffirm the profound ambiguity of the irresolvable interval between object and re-presentation. Death masks, sketches, and photographs of the deceased are the tangible presence of an absence. Bringing the corpse from the death scene to the eyes of an anonymous audience, they portray the interstitial, the newly dead on the threshold of subjectivity. Furthermore, in the search for the recovery of the deceased's lost integrity, such memorial texts display the image of a cadaver with disturbingly human attributes. By "freezing" the undoing of subjectivity, they maintain the role of the physical body as a signifier, perpetuating the bonds with the fragmented identity. However, such a body is no longer physical, but textual. The illusion is, nonetheless, maintained.

In the reading of the cadaver as a text, the voice of belated witnesses is intertwined to the voice of the deceased. The textual body is transformed, as memorial texts are created, attaching new signifieds to the posthumous persona. Esenin and Mayakovsky, whose open coffins were filed past by thousands of people, were not only suicides, but also, above all, the greatest writers of Russia. Described by Davies as a "traditional suicide" of creative minds, Esenin's death is, in fact, inseparable from his (non-)existence as a writer.[36] Hence, he dies as a suicide and as a poetic genius. Translators of the dead, belated witnesses inscribe in their reading of the body attributes that unravel and rearrange the posthumous persona.

> Esenin died in Ryazan fashion, as the yellow-haired youth I had known…
> Sergei Esenin wrapped twice round his neck the rope from a suitcase imported from Europe, kicked the night table from under his feet, and hung facing the blue night, looking out into St. Isaac's Square.[37]
> He [Mayakovsky] was lying on his side, face to the wall, stern, big, under the sheet reaching up to his chin, with his mouth half-open, as if asleep. Proudly turned away from everyone, even lying here, even asleep thus, he was stubbornly tearing himself away and going somewhere. [...]It was the expression with which one begins life, not the one to end it…[38]

Here, the plasticity allied to the profusion of details is utterly intentional. The authors of these memorial texts make use of rhetoric to produce a spectacle. Their

carefully chosen words materialise the body and the death scene before the remaining audience. Each sentence is thus charged with significance, weaving a constellation of signifieds to the multi-faceted image of the deceased. In a mosaic of interchangeable parts, apparently superfluous remarks such as the "suitcase imported from Europe", the "blue night" or the proud and stubborn expression of the corpse recreate the posthumous persona while proliferating "absolute" relationships of cause and effect.

Mishima's decapitated head with the *hachimachi* headband next to Morita's on the floor at General Mashita's office was photographed and published by the Japanese press and by *Life* magazine.[39] In the December 11th issue of the latter, a short article by a friend of the writer, Jerrold Schecter, figures in between photographs, under the headline: "The Samurai who Committed Hari-Kiri". "I suspect", writes Schecter, "it [*Mishima's death*] was, to him, a classic statement of style and sincerity and honor".[40] Mishima was, after all, a "warrior". In the article, the description of the act is rather short; the images, however, re-construct the spectacle. On the left, one finds a whole-page photograph of a very muscular and stern looking Mishima, wearing a headband and holding a sword, as though in position of combat. On the top right, there is a small picture of the writer during his speech at the military base. Below, Mishima's decapitated head, next to Morita's, catches the reader's eye at the corner of a large photograph of Mashita's office, where, at the other end, a few defence officials point at them as objects in a display.

Lying on the cluttered floor of the office, the heads get mixed up with the litter, looking barely human at first sight. However, after the initial recognition, the defamiliarisation is irresistible. The severed heads have a hypnotic effect on their anonymous audience, an overwhelming mixture of attraction and repulsion, characteristic of the abject. The combination of the photographs is a powerful memorial text that re-enacts visually the theatricality of Mishima's suicide-spectacle, feeding the imagination of belated witnesses from act to effect. Together, all figures are beheaded; Mishima's image is a dilacerated body in display. As temporary memorial texts, the dissociated torsos and heads have today disintegrated, losing the link with the identities that allowed an interaction with the living. Nonetheless, their voices are not yet extinguished. As objects of representation, they echo a renewed performance of abjection through the memorial texts of a growing audience. Depictions of the corpse—either visual or verbal—constitute a portrait of the interstitial, freezing textually the moment of undoing subjectivity.

The dissociated torsos and heads have today disintegrated, losing the link with the identities that allowed an interaction with the living. Ceasing to be, they have lost their voice. Nonetheless, as objects of representation, they echo a renewed performance of abjection through the memorial texts of a growing audience. Like death masks, photographs and descriptions of the corpse depict the interstitial. As part of a narrative of death, they make the absent "tangible", offering the corpse and the death scene to other belated witnesses.

There was a bubbling from the corpse; blood pumped from the neck, covering the red carpet. A raw stench filled the room. Mishima's entrails had spilled onto the carpet. [...] They took up the men's jackets and spread them over the bodies, covering the torsos. They lined up the two corpses on the floor, feet pointing toward the main door of the office. Then they took up the heads and placed them, neck down, on the blood-soaked carpet. The headbands were still in place.[41]

Defense officials stare at the severed heads of Mishima (foreground) and his leading disciple in the disordered office of General Kanetoshi Mashita, who was held prisoner during the suicides.

Fig. 1 General Mashita's office after suicides

Fig. 2 Detail: Decapitated heads on the floor

As translators of the voice of the dead, belated witnesses establish an intertextuality between memorial texts weaved by them and those weaved by suicides. [42] The voice of the dead dialogues with the voice of the living as the spectacular in suicide is re-enacted. In this context, a parallel can be drawn between the display of the corpse in extreme cases of suicide-spectacle and the exposure of the textual body, decomposed by the further interaction with the living. The textual body is an unfinished body in transformation, formed—and mutilated—by a network of memorial texts by both the suicide and the belated witnesses. Integrating the spectacular in suicide, the textual body is displayed and decomposed by and before its audience. Weaving memorial texts, the belated witnesses re-enact self-fragmentation in a paradoxical attempt to recover the lost integrity of the deceased. They offer a changing materiality to the present-absent personified in the posthumous persona.

In this context, memorial texts such as biographies and memoirs exhume the dead in order to display the unseen, exposing a body in transmutation. A biography of a dead person is inevitably a teleological account, delimitated by one's life and death. Biographies of suicides, however, embody the search for and denial of the end. As part of the textual body, they are, in fact, "thanatographies", for it is death, not life that propels writing—the weaving of a memorial text. In "thanatographies", a sense of "vertigo" draws belated witnesses—authors and readers alike—towards an unreachable final apotheosis. The defamiliarisation caused by thanatographies is, effectively, comparable to the search for the absolute in a suicide's death wish. Thanatographies place belated witnesses in a whirlpool in which death is the beginning and the end, the force of attraction and repulsion. From the very first sentence, the awareness of the individual's self-inflicted absence re-writes life in terms of death. Explicit examples of this "whirlpool-effect" can be found in *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath, The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima,* and *A Morte de Mário de Sá-Carneiro.*[43] Carrying death in their title, all three works reverse the traditional life to death format, beginning with the suicide of the subject. Such an inversion juxtaposes origin and termination, reflecting the omnipresence of death in memorial texts. Suicide permeates every word of these works, dismantling them as in intrinsic force of creation and disintegration. Like a metaphor of the deceased, such memorial texts deconstruct themselves in self-destructiveness, attracted by an apotheosis of an end they fail to convey. As in repeated suicides, such an end is receding and multiple. Thanatographies thus represent the ebbing of an existence, a descent towards the end of life that is simultaneously the end and the beginning of the text.

Exposing a textual body, memorial texts speak in polyphony, interlacing the voice of the deceased to a chorus of belated witnesses. Thanatographies bear an attempt of reconstruction, in which the belated witnesses uselessly unravel the untellable, retracing the acts behinds the effect, in other words, the story behind death. There are, however, multiple acts and stories, which are interwoven in intertextuality. In this process, life and text are continuously fragmented. During the attempted reconstruction of life through death, each sentence and life event is deconstructed by the suicide of the re-presented subject. Mishima in his early days, before becoming muscular and internationally well known, is already a fragmented killer-victim. So is the two-year-old Sá-Carneiro at the time of the death of his mother or the young Plath at Smith College. Propelled by a self-inflicted absence, the unending ebbing of life and text becomes their very source of re-creation. The exposure of the textual body thus integrates a spectacle of re-enacted death and decomposition. Consequently, in thanatographies, with the continuing transformation of the posthumous persona, the final apotheosis, to which author and readers are drawn, recedes beyond the last page. The narrative of an end becomes the unfinished narrative of an impossible teleological search for the absolute.

Associated with the permeation of death in every word in memorial texts, one finds a recurrent notion of predestination. Thanatographies, for instance, portray suicides, from birth, as the living dead. For, after all, death is the beginning and the end of their mortal coil. In any memorial text, the signified suicide is hence attached to every field of existence, or rather, non-existence. Suicides and belated witnesses try to speak supremely, both reverberating self-destructiveness in a dialogue between the living and the dead. They seek the disclosure denied by the veiling and unveiling that characterises the discourse of suicide. Memorial texts such as suicide letters and thanatographies aim at establishing a logical, unique, and irrefutable relationship between cause and effect, reducing suicide to a monology. The examples are multiple and so are the reasons binding the individuals to death: Sá-Carneiro was obsessed with the suicide-spectacle; Esenin suffered from the malaise of creative minds; Pavese had an "absurd vice", a suicidal fever; Zweig was overwhelmed by homelessness; Benjamin by the prospect of being a war prisoner; Woolf had a life-long history of mental illness and suicidal behaviour and so did Hemingway, Sexton, Crane, Plath, and others.[44]

Nevertheless, in the inexact logic of voluntary death, the overflowing of memorial acts in search of a monology provokes further fragmentation. The very search for the "untellable" truth results in plurality. Often, the deceased is torn apart by the proliferation of "absolute" relationships of cause and effect in a

network of memorial texts. Speculating about the reasons behind the act, belated witnesses decompose the textual body of the suicide. The death of Mishima, for example, was soon followed by a flood of memorial texts spread by the Japanese press. As his corpse lay disembowelled and headless on the General's office floor, his textual body started to be dilacerated and transformed by a thriving community of belated witnesses. The "critical reactions, whether literary or political, were clear reflections of individual taste", Fukashiro writes in an article entitled "Post-Mortem", published in the spring of 1971.[45] Quoting a contemporary critic, Fukashiro explains an existing classification of the numerous interpretations of Mishima's death:

> [...] the "insanity theory", which needs no further explanation; "the aesthetic theory", which holds that the beauty sought by Mishima in his literary pursuit could only be completed by his own ultimate dramatic death; the "exhausted talent theory", which suggests that Mishima had written himself out in the course of almost thirty years and now had nothing left to look forward to but despair; the "love suicide theory", which asserts that he was a homosexual who committed double suicide with a 25-year-old disciple [...] in pursuit of some ultimate eroticism; and finally the "patriotism theory", which postulates that Mishima sought to incite members of the Self-Defense Forces to carry out a *coup d'état* [...].[46]

In the profusion of memorial texts and theories about his death, the search for the absolute and consequent fragmentation is repeated in the deconstruction of his posthumous persona. Dilacerated by multi-faceted relationships of cause and effect, Mishima dies again and again as his ritualistic death is re-enacted by his belated witnesses in a kaleidoscope of theories, speculations, reflections and conclusions.

The particular importance of the search for the absolute in speculations of cause and effect lies in their part in the construction of the posthumous persona. The dialogue of Mishima's ritualistic death and the response of his belated witnesses conjugates all theories and theatrical gestures in a textual body still displayed to an audience of decomposers. Rather than facts, it is, effectively, the interaction of the living with the textual body that defines the non-conclusive characterisation of the posthumous persona—hence the diversity of images of suicides. A posthumous persona is never identical to another; they are changeable, but unique. Both Plath and Woolf, for instance, were female writers with a history that includes suicide attempts and hospitalisation. Nonetheless, whereas the question of "madness" plays in the latter an essential role in memorial texts, such a question is important, but not central, to the former.

Plath's death does not revolve around the myth of "madness"; instead, it rejects a focus on the medical logic, involving mental illness and suicide. Acquiring different mythical proportions, it follows a belief in a pattern of annihilation and rebirth that makes her posthumous persona a personification of her poetic "Lady Lazarus". Plath's existence, in her work and as a textual body display, is thus marked not only by a predestination to die, but to do so repeatedly: "And like the cat I have nine times to die./This is Number Three./What a thrash/To annihilate each decade".[47] In "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals", Hughes writes:

> [...] the drama proper began with a "death", which was followed by a long "gestation" or "regeneration", which in turn would ultimately require a "birth" or a "rebirth" [...].[48]

In the construction of her posthumous persona, Plath's attempted and actual suicide thus integrate a sequence of deaths, belonging to a "pattern she believed she could not escape".[49] Inserted in a cycle of destruction and rebirth, such deaths are legendary. Like Racine's Eriphile, she is doomed to die, a death that Alvarez describes as "a debt to be met once every decade in order to stay alive as a grown woman, a mother and a poet".[50] She can, therefore, only exist by dying. All signifieds attached to her posthumous persona are bound to death.

In their double role as suicides and authors, to stay alive and die as a writer has special significance to author-suicides. Often, the notion of predestination in such cases is linked to an interlacing of Art and death, as clearly defined in the aesthetic theory of Mishima's death. The belief in the search for the ultimate aesthetic beauty in death suggests an interpolation between Art and suicide. In Mishima, such an interpolation is highly motivated by the author's insistence on the theme of self-sacrifice. In the film version of his story "Patriotism" (1966), for instance, Mishima plays a character that dies by self-disembowelment. Here, the play between actor and character is juxtaposed by a dialogue between living and posthumous personae. In this context, Mishima's *seppukku* is described as an act he rehearsed many times in his artistic life.[51] The idea of rehearsal implies a teleology, according to which, for the belated witnesses, death stands for an illusory "*final* apotheosis", the "last act": "His life *and* his death", writes Turco, "became high theatre".[52]

Yamanouchi suggests that "Mishima came to find complementary to each other what were originally supposed to be antithetical: the world and words, life and art, body and spirit, and so on."[53] The association of Art and death in the figure of suicide-author has direct implications in the notion of predestination. For the

audience, such a dangerous association is legitimated by the act of death of famous authors. In their double role, being a writer is part of being a suicide and vice-versa. Addressing the interrelation between creativity and self-destructiveness, Alvarez speaks about Plath in a memorial talk:

> The very source of her energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness. But it was, precisely, a source of living energy, of her imaginative, creative power. So, though death itself may have been a side-issue, it was also an unavoidable risk in writing her kind of poem.[54]

Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem, as suggested by Sexton.[55] Like Mishima's antithesis, it is its opposite and also an "impossible" coincidence. It is, effectively, fatal in the sense that it re-creates death as a memorial text. For the belated witnesses, it is, nonetheless, yet more than that. The memorial act behind it—i.e. writing—is a factor and a symptom of a predisposition to suicide. Exploring the implications of such a predisposition, Mark Runco suggests a rather confusing interlacing of causes and consequences:

> Depression could be a reaction to creative work. Perhaps depression is a reaction to writing. More realistically, writing might contribute to depression, as well as result from it.[56]

In any case, the images of the suicide and of the writer remain inseparable. Moreover, often, authors such as Plath, Esenin, and Mishima are bound to death not only by their memorial texts but also by their very activity, seen as a "risky profession" integrating a "death facilitating process."[57] Thus, in this context, as death is turned into writing—and vice-versa—, the latter also becomes a "verbal suicide weapon" that moulds the posthumous persona in the movement of self-destructiveness.

Paradoxically, in many cases, the notion of predestination is juxtaposed with a denial of the deliberation of the act, in other words, of the very basis of self-fragmentation that defines suicide. Esenin's belated witnesses, for instance, oscillate between his notorious flirtation with death and a scepticism with regard to his suicide. As with Mishima, hypotheses about Esenin's suicide were numerous.[58] But, unlike the Japanese writer, whose *seppuku* had been performed before an audience, Esenin left behind a corpse inscribed with doubts about the very deliberation of his fatal act. In the latter, the overflowing between act and effect is also characterised by conflicting views that do and undo the link between intention

and the act of death. "Esenin shouted from the rooftops about death," writes Davies, later adding:

> It is very interesting that Doctor Hetherington, who had no knowledge of Ustinov's writings, came to identically the same conclusion as Ustinov about Esenin's suicide: [...] [*he*] had made a hysterical suicide gesture which went wrong, that he had, in fact, not meant to kill himself, but miscalculated the force of his fall, that it was, in fact, some kind of showing off, attention-seeking, exhibitionism.[59]

In the case against deliberation, Esenin's corpse seems to engage, as a text, in the speculations about the position of the hand holding the central heating pipe, and the manner in which the rope had been wound like a scarf around the neck. Its "statement", however, is enigmatic, merely veiling and unveiling the unending search for disclosure. Outside the coincidence between killer and victim, all other witnesses remain belated, separated by an unsurpassable interval with the deceased.

In the acts related to the death of Raymond Roussel, the word suicide never occurs. Descriptions of the body and of the death scene tell stories weaving labyrinthine accounts that do and undo the killer-victim. For Leonardo Sciascia, who compiled and commented upon these acts, the fact that Roussel caused his own death by taking an excessive dose of medicines—as stated in the acts—does not mean that he intended to kill himself.[60] Conversely, based on the reconstruction of events from the testimony of belated witnesses, Sciascia presents a theory of non-deliberation, his argument hinging on the circumstances of death and Roussel's own self-destructiveness:

> The fact that he returned to Soneryl, the barbiturate which [...] afforded him a long sleep followed by extraordinary euphoria, makes us believe that he did not wish to die. [...] If he had wanted to commit suicide, he would have taken a higher dose than ever before. [...] We have proof of this with Roussel's suicide attempt in the bath, by cutting the veins of his wrist. This was the second tine he had tried this method of killing himself. He had noted —as he said after the first time—how easy and pleasant it is to die in this way. He only had to tear off the dressing on his wrist and he would have slipped easily and pleasantly into death.
>
> But, that evening, Roussel did not wish to die; we believe he simply wanted to sleep.[61]

Sciascia here builds his argument around Roussel's death wish. He denies the possibility of a premeditated death on that particular night by affirming the writer's desire to die. Like Esenin, Roussel had flirted with death, playing the role of a killer-victim at his suicide attempts, dying, however, simply as a victim, not a self-murderer. According to arguments of non-deliberation, such flirtations were therefore mere attempts, never legitimated as re-enactments by the self-inflicted act of death. Failing to reject the ultimate passivity of death, they both slip into it accidentally—off the night table and out of a miscalculated overdose.

Similarly, the deconstruction of Plath's posthumous persona includes a paradoxical undoing of her suicide. For Alvarez, she gambled [*with death*], not much caring whether she won or lost; and she lost".[62] In the scene surrounding her act of death, the textual body is a piece of evidence on which the belated witnesses perform a *post-mortem*, dilacerating and reassembling the parts repeatedly. In the body of her suicide, one reads other signifieds—the poet, the mother, the betrayed wife, the daughter. Dr Horder, for instance, who declared that "no-one who saw the care with which the kitchen was prepared could have interpreted her action as anything but an irrational compulsion", also "believed that the presence of the children would tide her over until the nurse arrived the next morning."[63] Together with other factors in the Plath myth, the presence of the children is one of the elements that exacerbates the "obscenity" of the killer-victim, to which the audience is simultaneously attracted and repelled.

The "obscenity" of Plath's suicide is nowhere more evident than in Alvarez's memoir. The description of a corpse found "still warm" at Sylvia's flat is congenial with his memorial text.[64] Like a death mask, the body he displays is the body of the newly dead, still pulsating with the acts that have made it lifeless. Although explicitly denying "the myth of Sylvia as a passive victim", Alvarez reinforces it by interlacing the figure of the deceased with images of a "passionate mother", a betrayed wife going through "the same piercing grief and bereavement she had felt as a child when her father, by his death, seemed to abandon her".[65] Consequently, he exposes self-fragmentation not only in an author-suicide, but also in the abandoned daughter, the betrayed wife and the passionate mother. The death of Plath, sprawled in the kitchen floor at Fitzroy Rd, is also the death of a multitude of signifieds that integrate her myth—and that, too, is an "obscenity".

Refusing to face the "obscenity" he displays, Alvarez denies Plath's suicide, suggesting that she actually expected to be saved. In his memoir, her suicide is presented as "a chain of accidents, coincidences and mistakes", a cry for help that fatally misfired.[66] However, there are neither accidents nor mistakes in suicide. The

denial of premeditation corresponds to the denial of every action, hence dismantling the "impossible" coincidence between killer (active) and victim (passive). Suicides are ambivalent figures, who are not simply victims of themselves or of the circumstances. By transforming a suicide into an accident, one removes the authorial role from the individual, undoing the link between the act and the intention. In other words, he/she is no longer the author of his/her death. Therefore, neither the corpse nor the textual body are intrinsically related to a self-inflicted absence, of which he/she is the protagonist, as living and posthumous personae.

Certainly, theories against deliberation beg questions regarding the possibility of a non-intentional death. Regardless of such a remote possibility, Plath, Roussel, Esenin, and others, remain as suicides to their belated witnesses. Their posthumous personae are deconstructed on the basis of a self-destructive coincidence of killer and victim and so is their act of death. Theories against deliberation simply integrate the weaving of memorial texts, as their very argumentation derives from such a coincidence. The denial of premeditation is the ultimate attempt to recover the lost integrity of the deceased. It is, nonetheless, part of the public decomposition of the textual body, therefore, integrating the very process of self-destructiveness. By denying the "obscene" in suicide, one paradoxically promotes its exacerbation, intensifying the defamiliarisation of the remaining audience.

In the context of the "obscene", Ted Hughes, facing the exposure of Plath's "warm" body, described Alvarez's memoir as an exhumation, a public sacrifice:

> [...] Sylvia now goes through the detailed, point-by-point death of a public sacrifice. Her poems provided the vocal part for that sort of show. Your account [...] completes the performance. Now there actually is a body. [...] You present in the flesh what the death cries were working up to. The public isn't really interested in death cries unless they guarantee a dead body, a slow painful death, with as many signs as possible of what it is feeling like. And you present that, the thing the public really wants and needs—the absolutely convincing finalised official visible gruelling death...

Metaphors of public sacrifice are here intimately related to the idea of "desecration". Hughes blames Alvarez for offering a body to a public show. Like the staking of cadavers at crossroads or their hanging upside down in public areas in times of suicide horror, a "warm" body was here also "desecrated", as the newly dead was exposed publicly and dilacerated for close inspection of its scars. In this

show, the deceased is the performer, acting through her body and her poems. Author and readers alike are the belated witnesses, the decomposers who expect a "spectacle", thriving on death—on a "slow painful death". In their active role, they are also the executioners of a sacrifice. Having her remains displayed publicly, suicides like Plath do not simply die by their own hands; they are killed again and again by an audience of decomposers.

The above notion of desecration undoubtedly presupposes a parallel between the textual body—the materiality of the posthumous persona—and the corpse—the failed signifier of a fragmented identity. Hughes accuses Alvarez of presenting "in the flesh what the death cries were working up to". Exacerbating the "obscene", Alvarez's memoir, in fact, amplifies the possibilities of such a parallel. In the case of this particular memorial text, the exposure of a warm corpse can be, on the one hand, partially related to the familiarity of Alvarez's recollections of Plath. By emphasising a sense of intimacy with the deceased, he places himself at the scene of death, thus portraying himself as a particularly credible witness, someone who is "closer to the corpse". On the other hand, such a sense of intimacy is associated with the graphic quality of his memoir. Like Sexton, he talks death "at length, in detail and in depth"[67], putting the deceased and the death scene before the eyes of the audience. He creates a sensorial experience for the reader, re-enacting Plath's death as a "public sacrifice". The "official gruelling death" is thus a spectacle. Exposing, mutilating, and reassembling Plath's textual body, it offers the "flesh" and the reconstruction of the death scene and of the acts behind the effect. Speaking supremely, the belated witness is the omniscient narrator of a story revolving around its end.

Whereas Alvarez exaggerates the "obscene", the notions of "exhumation" and "desecration" are, in various degrees, intrinsic to the description of every memorial act. In their dialogue with the dead, the living metaphorically dig out the textual body, so as to expose it and transform it. This occurs both to suicides-to-be and belated witnesses in the construction of the posthumous persona. It is, however, in the case of the latter that the metaphors are particularly effective. In their attempt to recover the lost integrity of the deceased, belated witnesses exhume the textual body in order to bring to the surface the unseen. Failing to fulfil the self-inflicted absence, they paradoxically promote further fragmentation while deconstructing the posthumous persona with the production of memorial texts. They are, therefore, the decomposers and desecrators, who expose, break into pieces and transform the textual body of the deceased.

In the Plath myth, it is, however, Hughes, not Alvarez, who is considered as her great desecrator. As her posthumous editor, Hughes became "the official

violator" of her textual body. Two cases are particular remarkable, raising questions regarding the relationship between the dead and its belated witnesses, namely the destruction of some of her journals and the reordering of the Ariel poems. In "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals", Hughes writes in 1982:

> Two other notebooks survived for a while after her death. [...] The second of these two books her husband destroyed, because he did not want her children to have to read it (in those days he regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The earlier one disappeared more recently (and may, presumably, still turn up).[68]

For Paul Alexander, biographer of Plath, if "Hughes did either lose or destroy these notebooks, their loss would be as lamentable as the burning of Byron's memoirs".[69] Memorial texts as such are considered as much in the public domain as her *Complete Poems*. Despite belonging legally to the literary estate, memorial texts as such are considered as part of public domain. They are part of the textual body of the author, whose full exposure is *expected* by the thriving audience of decomposers—the belated witnesses. In Alvarez, the personal link with Plath endows his memoir with the vividness of the spectacular. Out of intimacy, he is closer to the corpse, hence capable of unveiling it greatly. One must note that the disclosure is never complete. However, the very objective of the spectacle is to unveil as much "flesh" as possible, filling the gaps of the absent.

In the Plath legend, no one was closer to the corpse or the death scene than Hughes. His role, however, is not one of disclosure. Conversely, while Alvarez's aim is to unveil the warm corpse sprawled in the kitchen, Hughes's every effort, at the time of the letter, was to cover it. To the remaining audience, eager for contact with the presence-absence of the deceased, Hughes became the obvious desecrator, who destroyed her illusory unity, mutilating it and hiding body parts away from the public. The destruction of an author-suicide's journals in these circumstances means not simply the mutilation of a textual body, but, above all, its manipulation by a single belated witness. The destruction of the journals excluded other belated witnesses from access to the lost entirety of Plath's body, reinforcing the impossibility of reconstructing the full history of the deceased.

Therefore, in the eyes of the "excluded", Hughes, as the posthumous editor, "dilacerated" and rearranged the body prior to its exposure to the public. "Hughes's writings on Plath construct himself as the author of a story about Sylvia Plath", suggests Churchwell in "Ted Hughes and the Corpus of Sylvia Plath".[70] He is indeed an author among many authors and stories about Plath. In *Birthday Letters*, for

example, he discloses some of these stories that, in polyphony with other memorial texts including Plath's own, unveil facets of the unattainable body, mutilated by all belated witnesses. However, among all authors of stories and facets of Plath, he remains as an intruder to the "real" story and profile. Due to his relationship with the deceased, he was, during his life, a belated witness with unfair privileges over the remaining audience, who had an illusory access to the "corpse" and the death scene; a primary decomposer who "legally owns[ed] and strategically deploys[ed] the "body" of Plath's work".[71] Such a body of work, constituted by autobiographical and literary writings, is here seen as part of the textual body of the deceased, desecrated by the living. Through posthumous editing, Hughes not only mutilated Plath's textual body, but also excluded the remaining audience from access to the "real" story they comprehend. He was literally the "executor" of not only Plath's literary estate, but of her entire textual body. Such is the "heinous crime" of which he is accused by critics and readers.

The inclusion of literary texts—henceforth defined as "literary memorial texts"—in the textual body of the deceased is a recurrent aspect in literary suicides. As seen earlier in Mayakovsky's suicide letter, the dialogue is sometimes established deliberately by the suicide him/herself. In such cases, communicating death with the poetic word is, in other words, an expression of the post-ego. Esenin's last poem is a remarkable example of literary memorial text. In the early hours of the eve of his death, he wrote a poem with his own blood from a self-inflicted cut on his wrist. Later that morning, he would give a folded sheet of paper with the poem to his friend Erlikh, who would only read it on the 28th December, after Esenin's death. Despite its contents, there is no definitive evidence that the poem was meant to be a suicide letter. However, in the context of Esenin's suicide, it acquired such a value. The circumstances of the enunciation, validated by the death of the poet, place it at the death scene, making it a memorial text. As a literary memorial text, Esenin's "farewell" poem is indeed unique, bearing an amplification of the usual characteristics. In it, the poetic word literally constitutes part of not only the textual body of the deceased but also of his actual cadaver. "Saying farewell with his own blood", Esenin creates an amalgamation of the literary corpus and the corpse.[72] Here, the materiality of the poem "bleeds", displaying the insides of the dead enunciator. It re-creates the performance of abjection both in the dialogue of the living and dead and in the exposure of the insides of the (dead) physical body.

In the morning papers of the following day, Esenin "announced" his own death with his last poem—his "death-bed lines", as described by Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky's metaphor is worthy of note: the idea of "death bed lines" inserts

explicitly the writing of the poem in the chain of acts inseparable from the act of death. Like the suicide note, the writing of such poems involves a ritual of self-fragmentation as a dialogue with one's imagined dead self takes place. Speaking death by speaking poetry is therefore part of the killing-dying process. Undoubtedly, Esenin's poem in blood is an extreme example of the placing the literary at the scene of death. Nonetheless, legitimated by the author's self-inflicted death, other literary texts are endowed with the value of suicide letters, thus also becoming memorial texts by the deceased.

> Only now, after twenty-seventh of December, can all of us who knew the poet, little or not at all, fully estimate the intimate sincerity of Esenin's poetry, in which almost every line is written with the blood of wounded veins.[73]

Unlike suicide letters, such memorial texts by the deceased often do not have a clear purpose other than the literary. They do not openly or explicitly announce suicide or express one's death wish. At first, death exists only in the space of the text. Nonetheless, in the interaction with the audience of belated witnesses, the voice in the text is intertwined with the voice of the deceased, therefore performing the interplay of living and posthumous personae. In this context, despite the defamialiarising and enigmatic messages of poetic writing, such memorial texts also function as documentation, raising voices from the grave as witnesses of their own deaths. In discussion of *The Bell Jar*, Hughes writes: "The material itself is doing something else. It is disinterring its own actuality *for the first time*, and dictating its own document, telling the simple truth.[74]" This short quotation is particularly interesting, due to the metaphors used by Hughes in relation to Plath's work. The material is "disinterring its actuality", exhuming it and exposing it as a corpse dug out. As a memorial text by the deceased, such a material is not static. Conversely, it maintains the agency of the dead enunciator, continuing to deconstruct the posthumous persona in the interaction with the living. It has therefore a voice of its own, a voice that has autonomy and credibility and is capable of dictating its own *document*. Author-suicides choose death and leave their writing as documents to their suicidal mind, speaking the "simple truth" through their memorial texts. [75] This "simple truth" is nothing but the illusion of disclosure behind such texts, the revelation of the unattainable "full story" of suicides. Failing to fulfil the void left by the dead enunciator, the belated witness discards the unachieved simple truth before the plurality of self-destructiveness and of the poetic text.

Literary memorial texts are incorporated into the textual body of the deceased; hence their role in the construction of the posthumous persona and the notion of desecration applied to posthumous editing. The controversy surrounding the reordering of Plath's *Ariel* poems by Hughes brings forth some central issues on the relationship of literary suicides and their belated witnesses. Marjorie Perloff suggests that Plath's *Ariel* and Hughes's construction of *Ariel* both have a plot, "but the two plots are so different that we cannot help but wonder what it means to reconstruct a poetic sequence after the fact."[76] Undoubtedly, as a memorial text, *Ariel* has a plot, or rather, a network of *possible* plots to be unravelled and rearranged by the audience. Hughes bears the explicit role of the belated witness as a "desecrator", a role exercised, in different ways, by the entire audience of readers and critics. We are all the decomposers of a textual body exposed to us and by us. Hughes's part as a desecrator of Plath's body has been, nonetheless, amplified by the circumstances, acquiring mythical proportions. ""Plath legend", as it gained ground over the years, necessarily engendered a "Hughes legend"—she the victim, he the male oppressor".[77] She is "Lady Lazarus", coming back from the dead, charging for "the eyeing of her scars"; he is the desecrator of her body, who mutilates and destroys in order to silence the dead.

For the remaining belated witnesses, the destruction of the journals and the posthumous editing of literary memorial texts were not simply a sacrifice, but a blasphemy. The desecration and sacrifice of the dead are fully acceptable and motivated as long as they are public. In this context, Hughes was an intruder in a public sacrifice, who stole body parts, standing in the way of the impossible reconstruction of the deceased's living identity and story. Concluding her article, Perloff writes:

> But the attic was soon invaded, the dangerous notebooks were destroyed, and the poems that were permitted to enter the literary world had to get past the censor. The words of the dead woman, to paraphrase Auden, were modified in the guts of the living.[78]

As Hughes stated, the "public isn't really interested in death cries unless they guarantee a dead body, a slow painful death, with as many signs as possible of what it is feeling like"; the audience wants a spectacle. It wants to have access to as many parts of the textual body as possible and take part in its decomposition. Are there "censors" in this process? Was Hughes silencing Plath?[79] I would say no. The language of suicide is the language of a secret, veiled and unveiled continually in the movement of self-destructiveness. There is neither disclosure nor total

secrecy, as the dialogue between the living and the dead is presupposed by the very death wish. In cases such as Plath's, the absence or the very destruction of the journals, for instance, function as a void, an invisible memorial text that prompts controversy, hence integrating the deconstruction of the posthumous persona. The deceased are not silenced; they speak through absences and, above all, through the audience.

Memorial texts stage the exposure of the abject, the performance of self-fragmentation in the impossible attempt to reconstruct broken identities. They are not only the voice—"the vocal part for that kind of show"—, but also the body of the posthumous persona, decomposed and transformed continually by the interaction between the living and the dead. Speaking of *Ariel*, Hughes defines it as "not much more like any other poetry. It is her. Everything she did was just like this, and this is just like her—but permanent."[80] The memorial text metonymically represents the deceased; it forms its body, constantly rearranged in a kaleidoscopic mode. Unlike the remains of the author, doomed to disintegrate with the elements, the memorial text remains through the plurality of the text and the unending fragmentation of the individual, "sui-cide".

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[1] As defined in Chapter One, the expression "the living" refers to anyone interacting with images of the dead, including the suicide-to-be in cases of memorial texts by the suicides themselves.

[2] Tomás Cabreira was also the co-author of *Amizade*. After Cabreira's death, Sá-Carneiro dedicated to him the poem "A um suicida" ["to a suicide"]. See Mário Sá-Carneiro, *Obra completa: volume único,* ed. Alexei Bueno (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguiar, 1995) 240.

[3] Cf. João Pinto de Figueiredo, *La mort de Mário de Sá-Carneiro,* trans. Simone Biberfeld (Paris: La Différence, 1992) 77; 87.

[4] Cf. Figueiredo 201-211. The narrative is based on Araújo's accounts of Sá-Carneiro's death.

[5] Cf. Henry Scott Stokes, *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) 9. The *Tatenokai* was a civilian militia, Mishima's "private army", formed with the intent to "restore the sword" to Japan.

[6] Ritualistic suicide.

[7] Cf. Stokes 27-54.

[8] Cf. Figueiredo 202; 205.

[9] Stokes 50.

[10] An exception to such reluctance can be found, for instance, in the presence of the students at Mishima's suicide, who willingly watched him die. As

with other possible examples, however, this is a special case. Unlike General Mashita, who was forced to watch the deaths, the students *participated* in the act, completing the ritual.

[11] See Chapter One.

[12] David Lajolo, *An Absurd Vice: A Biography of Cesare Pavese,* trans. Mario and Mark Puetralunga (New York: New Directions, 1983) 242.

[13] Ann and Samuel Charters, *I LOVE: The Story of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979) 350.

[14] Sá-Carneiro 969. All translations from the original Portuguese are mine.

[15] Sá-Carneiro 970.

[16] Sá-Carneiro 971.

[17] Sá-Carneiro, *Correspondência Inédita de Mário de Sá-Carneiro a Fernando Pessoa,* ed. Arnaldo Saraiva (Porto: Centro de Estudos Pessoanos, 1980) 136.

[18] Following the correspondence sent on the 4th April, Sá-Carneiro wrote again on the 17th and 18th and probably on the 26th, as inferred in letters from José de Araújo and Carlos Ferreira to Pessoa. Unaware of his friend's death, Pessoa wrote on the 26th, apologising for having taken so long to reply. In this letter, he mentions the great suffering Sá-Carneiro had caused him See Sá-Carneiro, *Cartas a Fernando Pessoa,* 2nd ed, vol. II (Lisboa: Ática, 1992) 222. There is evidence that Pessoa wrote to Sá-Carneiro after the first death announcements and before the letter written on the 26th by the former. In a letter dated 17th April, Sá-Carneiro writes "I've received your letter and your post card". However, there are no other published letters from this period sent by Pessoa. It is possible that they have disappeared together with manuscripts after Sá-Carneiro's death, in a trunk that would mysteriously reappear years later containing nothing but old clothes.

[19] Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing", *The Art of Sylvia Plath, A Symposium,* ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) 175.

[20] Cesare Pavese, *This Business of Living. Diary: 1935-1950,* ed. A. E. Murch (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1961) 276.

[21] Cf. Terhi Utriainen and Marja Liisa Honkasalo, "Women Writing their Death and Dying: Semiotic Perspectives on Women's Suicide Notes." *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies,* 1996, 109: 199.

[22] The "finitude" of the author's work suggests a parallel with Barthes's differentiation between work and text, the contradiction lying precisely in the clash between the teleological impulse and the plurality of the text.

[23] Quoted in "Mishima Yukio and his Suicide" by Hisaaki Yamanouchi (paper presented at the Far East Centre, St. Antony's College, Oxford, on 5th May 1971).

[24] Chaters 350-351.

[25] J. Davies, *Esenin: A Biography in Memoirs, Letters and Documents* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982) 215. My italics.

[26] Cf. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1996) 756.

[27] Lee 756-57.

[28] Lee 759-60.

[29] Cf. Lee 763.

[30] Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1972) 18.

[31] In memorial texts by belated witnesses, issues regarding Woolf's mental illness are possibly as remarkable as the emphasis on her suicide itself. The theme is addressed in biographies, with particular attention being paid to her major breakdowns. Note, for instance, the chapters "The Question of Madness" and "Madness" in Lyndall Gordon's *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) and Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* respectively, and also Thomas Caramagno's *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* (afterword by Kay R. Jamison. Berkeley: California UP, 1992).

[32] Lee 760.

[33] Quoted in Lee 765.

[34] Gordon McVay, *Esenin: A Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976) 293

[35] There are on McVay's *Esenin: A Life* pictures of the death mask (taken on Dec 29), of a drawing (done on Dec 28) and also photographs of the dead Esenin, one of then taken a few hours after his death, and two others at the funeral in an open coffin. Mayakovsky also had death masks and a cast of his hand made.

[36] Davies 219.

[37] McVay 292. Esenin was born from a peasant family in Ryazan, southwest of Moscow.

[38] Description by Pasternak in Wiktor Woroszylski, *The Life of Mayakovsky* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972) 530.

[39] Mishima's headband had a medieval samurai battle slogan, saying "serve the nation for seven lives."

[40] Jerrold Schecter, "The Samurai who Committed Hara-Kiri", *Life*, 11 December 1970: 37.

[41] Stokes 50-51.

[42] Besides suicide letters and other writings of death, I am here considering the corpse as a memorial text left by the deceased. The notion of the suicide as the author of such texts is based on the deliberation of the killing method and of other

details, such as the choice of location for death. Undone by its very creation, the corpse is at once the content and the ephemeral signature of such a text.

[43] Figueiredo, La Mort de Mário de Sá-Carneiro; Stokes, The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima; Ronald Hayman, The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath 1950 - 1962 (London: Minerva, 1992).

[44] Please refer to the table in introduction for further details on method, date, etc. of these and other literary suicides.

[45] Junro Fukashiro, "Post-Mortem." Japan Quarterly, 1971, (Spring 1971): 138.

[46] Fukashiro 138.

[47] Sylvia Plath, The Collected Poems, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 244-255.

[48] Ted Hughes, "Sylvia Plath and her Journals", Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose, ed. William Scammell (New York: Picador, 1995) 179.

[49] Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (London: Penguin, 1990) 297.

[50] A. Alvarez, "Prologue: Sylvia Plath", The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (London: Redwood, 1971) 17.

[51] Cf. Stokes 26; Ronald Turco, "Mask and Steel: Mishima--When Life Imitates Art", Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, 1999, 27 (2): 265. Besides "Patriotism", Stokes (26) notes that in Run Away Horses the protagonist commits hari-kiri and in the film Hitogiri, Mishima plays the part of a man who opens his stomach.

[52] Turco 266.

[53] Yamanouchi 9.

[54] Alvarez, A. "Sylvia Plath". Wagner, Linda W., ed. Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage. London: Routledge, 1988, 68.

[55] Sexton 175.

[56] Mark A Runco, "Suicide and Creativity: The Case of Sylvia Plath." Death Studies, 1998, 22 (7): 645.

[57] Cf. Runco 643; Edwin S. Shneidman, The Suicidal Logic of Cesare Pavese." Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, 1982, 10 (4): 547. There are a number of other studies in suicidology devoted to the interrelations between suicide and creativity, e.g. Suicide in Creative Women. (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1993) and Suicide and the Writer (unpublished) by David Lester, and, by Edwin Shneidman, "Risk Writing: A Special Note About Cesare

Pavese and Joseph Conrad." *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis,* 1979, 7: pp. 575-592.

[58] Davies 204.

[59] Davies 205.

[60] Cf. Sciascia, "Acts Relative to the Death of Raymond Roussel." *Raymond Roussel: Life, Death and Works,* eds. Alaistair Brotchie, Malcolm Green and Antony Melville (London: Atlas, 1987) 126.

[61] Sciascia 132-33.

[62] Alvarez 68.

[63] Jane Feinmann, "Rhyme, Reason and Depression," *The Guardian,* 16 February 1993, Features: p. 18; Stevenson 297.

[64] Alvarez 31.

[65] Alvarez 31.

[66] Alvarez 28; 31-32.

[67] Sexton 175.

[68] Hughes 177.

[69] Paul Alexander, "In Search of the Complete Plath," *The Guardian,* 1 August 1992, Features: p. 4.

[70] Sarah Churchwell, "Ted Hughes and the Corpus of Sylvia Plath," *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts,* 1998, 40:103.

[71] Churchwell 104. It is worth noting that Ted Hughes's sister, Olwyn Hughes, being also an executor of Plath's literary estate, also suffered criticism for the veiling of the material. However, given the circumstances and their implications here discussed, Ted Hughes remains indisputably the "great desecrator" in the Plath legend.

[72] Davies 227.

[73] Davies 229-30.

[74] Churchwell 124.

[75] Cf. Leenars and Wnckstern 619.

[76] Marjorie Perloff, "The Two Ariels: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon," *Poems in their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections,* ed. Neil Fraistat (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 311.

[77] Ian Hamilton, "Whose Sylvia: the estate's or the biographer's?" *The Observer,* 29 October 1989: 47.

[78] Perloff 331.

[79] Cf. Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath*. (London: Papermac, 1995) 71.

[80] Hughes, "*Sylvia* Plath: *Ariel*", *Winter Pollen*, 162.

3. The Deaths of the Suicide-Author

The spectral figure of the killer-victim constitutes a focal point in the conflict that commonly characterises the approach to the literary writings of suicide-authors. As the relationship between life/death and work is further problematised by suicide, strictly biographical and anti-representationalist criticisms engage in an endless battle for primacy, thus emulating the movement of self-destructiveness in its unceasing search for wholeness (life/presence) and annihilation (death/absence). However, while deepening differences, suicide also emphasises the "memorial" quality common to all approaches to authorship. To address the author implies the "conjuration" of a voice that no longer *is* and, yet, cannot be fully retrieved retrospectively. Whether aiming at the glorification or nullification of the writing subject, authorial theories are permeated with death, that is, with the ebbing of a *dying* subject as it is swept away by writing. Moreover, by "speaking of the dead", the critical debate renovates the spectral existence of the authorial figure, thus contributing to the deferral of total disappearance even when attesting to it.

In view of the infinite rise and disappearance of the author, this chapter will promote a re-reading of key perspectives on authorship, focusing specifically on the effect of the writer's suicide on his/her corpus and its relationship with the emergent posthumous persona. With particular attention to anti-authorial approaches, I shall examine the interrelation between "actual" and textual self-destructiveness, aiming at demonstrating the performance of a dialogue between the "Death of the Author" (removal of the writing subject) and the repeated "deaths of the author" (self-destruction as deferral), emphasised by suicide.

Split into the noticeable and the intangible, suicide-authors have their existences constantly recreated by self-destructiveness, thus potentialising simultaneously opposing paradigms of life (agency) and death (passivity). In other words, the process of deferral and "re(de)personalisation"[1] opens up a cataclysmic threshold of friction and convergence between killer and victim, the omniscient "father" of the book and its reverse,[2] "an anonymity, an absence, a blank space".[3] Throughout this chapter, suicide will therefore be conceived in its supplementary aspect, as a catalyst of self-destructiveness in an ambivalent space where both polysemy and totalisation are magnified.[4]

Despite its apparent simplicity, the intensified seductiveness of biographical approaches is, in fact, founded on a series of contradictory aspects inherent to suicide. In the posthumous dialogue with the "living", the self-destructive conflict between the "divine" manipulation of the absolute and the "heretical" subversion of

hierarchies is expressed as abjection.[5] Such an irresistible disquietude evoked by the figure of the dead author can generally be associated with a variety of violent and unusual forms of death. Should one, for instance, randomly list the causes of death of some famous authors, the immediate response would certainly include the observation that a majority of deaths occurred in extraordinary circumstances. After all, the more natural and "ordinary" a death is, the less memorable it is, for, like a dead metaphor, it is devoid of any power of defamiliarisation. Suicide, on the contrary, is a self-inflicted superlative performance of abjection.

Another intensifying factor of the attraction to an author's life/death as the absolute origin of all meaning is the influence of pre-existent associations between death/suicide and literature. The question at stake concerns instead the role of such pre-existent associations as an *effect* of suicide in both its most immediate and collective implications. A noteworthy example of the recreation of the suicide-author's image by his/her death is offered by the posthumous existence of Thomas Chatterton. In fact, his existence as a poet as well as a suicide is essentially posthumous. Stricken by poverty, Chatterton killed himself by arsenic poisoning, aged seventeen. His body was buried in an unmarked grave.[6] Embodying the myth of the dying poetic genius, Chatterton exists as such because of his failure to be—a poet, for instance—in life. In other words, his existence was, in many ways, triggered by self-inflicted death. The creation of myths is also closely related to the incorporation of fictional aspects that distort the actual event, while rendering it paradoxically more attractive and, therefore, realistic for the belated audience. As an example of a visual memorial text, *The Death of Chatterton*, by Henry Wallis, offers a likeness of a death scene. It is, nonetheless, a theatrical scenario, whose elements convey reality by distorting it. Interlacing suicide and poet, pieces of torn-up manuscripts next to a flask of poison seem to act as an extension of the dead body, gleaming under the attic window. At the centre of the scene, the beauty of the cadaver disquiets the eye even more than its exaggerated paleness. Still, all the elements of the painting seem convincingly to appeal to a "reality-effect", screaming: "nous sommes le réel".[7]
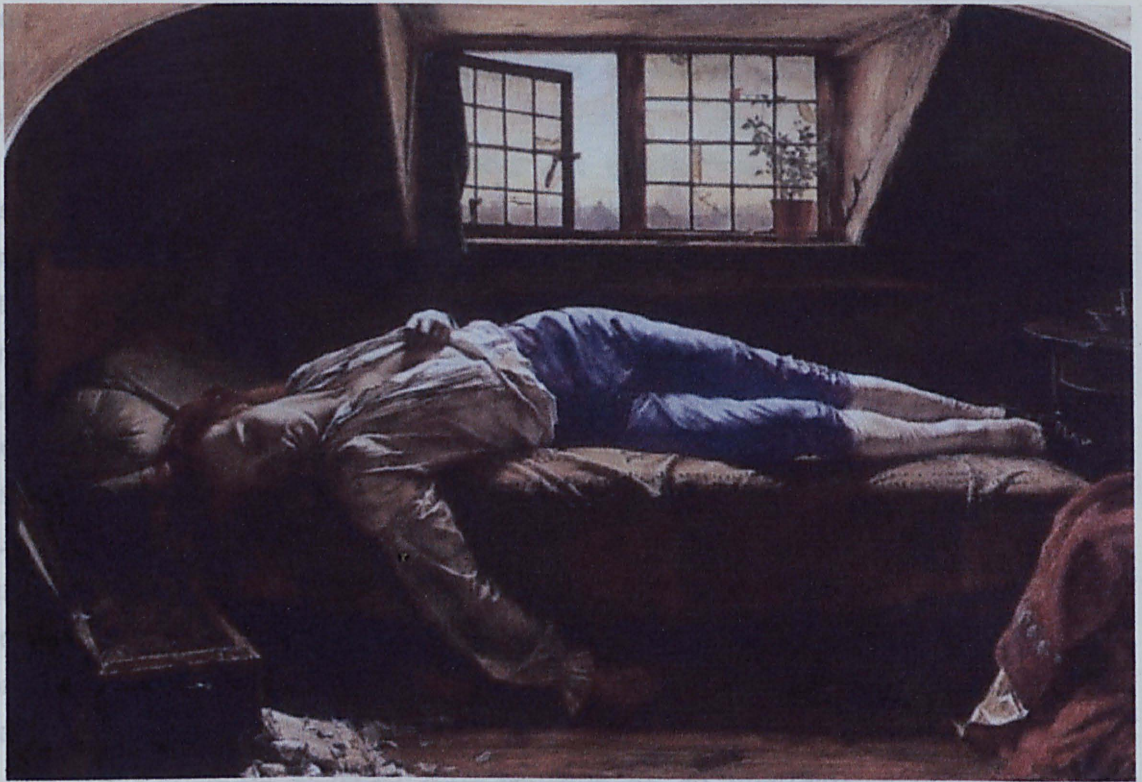
Fig. 3 Henry Wallis, *The Death of Chatterton* (1856)

Furthermore, as suggested in Chapter Two, suicide calls for the voice of the other, for the unravelling of the trail of death left by the deceased, of which his/her writings are also part. In this context, the biographical appeal for simplification is propelled by a desire for a unique "true" story, that is, the "canonical interpretation of the signified", defied by Barthes.[8] It implies, in other words, an irreversible movement of disclosure towards the "elucidation" of suicide and its ambivalences. Nonetheless, the final signified remains as an unattainable object of desire, a deferred death sentence, whose fulfilment would inevitably put a halt to the proliferation of meaning, thus annihilating both the author and the reader. Hence, placing the author at the epicentre of textual practice, author-centred criticism revolves around an illusion of absolute identity. By promoting a complete identification between the (living or dead) writer and his/her work, it produces a fallacious mutual corroboration, a fantasy triggered by self-destructiveness, which, in parallel with Barthes's "reality effect", [9] will here be described as a "suicide-effect". Based on the primacy of the referent, the verisimilitude of this equation derives from a masking of the unsurpassable interval between object and re-presentation. Thus, textual plurality is neutralised by a monological operation of mutual reflection between work and life, which, in cases of suicide-authors, is heightened by a compulsion to revert the movement of life (causes) into death

(consequence) through the reconstruction of the suicide process. Nevertheless, antagonised by difference, absolute synonymy inevitably unfolds in dialogue, remaining as a fantasy.

Like the living-dead, suicide-authors act posthumously, remaining as a restless *quasi*-presence, ebbing endlessly into death, absence. Suicide, thus, supplements the ambivalence intrinsic to the text. In this context, the writing subject is a double, speaking posthumously through the volatile materiality of the text—in other words, the "corpus" and the "corpse" of the suicide-author. Representing metonymically the lost presence of the deceased, the text offers the audience an illusory sense of wholeness, of access to the irretrievable "truth" about the author and the suicide. The voice in the text, however, is also belated, hence continually breaking the fantasy of wholeness as the suicide-author speaks posthumously about his/her own death. In contact with such a self-destructive space of ambivalence, the author's "last words" are therefore constantly displaced, postponing the possibility of absolute silence—the irreversible death of the dead enunciator.

The transcendental signified thus remains as an unattainable object of desire, denied by the impossibility of resurrection into an absolute presence.[10] In this context, since the absolute identification of the author in the text is a fallacy, so is the notion that the literary corpus of a suicide constitutes a serialised autobiography, containing the "truth" about his/her life/death. Nonetheless, it would be equally erroneous to rule out the role of autobiographical discourse in the works of authors who not only committed suicide, but also performed it repeatedly in writing. Effectively, as Paul de Man suggests, autobiography is a "figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts".[11] In writings by suicide-authors, autobiography assumes the form of an "autothanatographical" movement derived from the integration of the act of writing with the act of death, which magnifies the self-destructive reflexivity inherent to both. The testimonial aspect of writings by suicides constitutes a factor of further problematisation, for it also implies a co-authorship between the author's living and posthumous persona in the composition of a "self-addressed memorial text"—that is, suicide through the written word, performed before and after the actual event of death. Thus, veering from an ultimate return to the same, the auto(thanato)biographical movement causes the literary corpus of suicide-authors to refract stories of life and death, re-enacting them while dismantling portraits, and the hegemony of unquestionable truths.

As part of the need to reconstitute the irretrievable trail of death, the appeal for a total fusion of the suicide-author into his/her work integrates the fantasy of

wholeness and identity produced by the movement of self-destructiveness. In this context, as opposed to simplification, the notion of "literary memorial texts" implies a further re-doubling of the writing subject in an indeterminate play of mirrors between the text and his/her life/death. Speaking of the posthumous editions of Plath's work and biographical material, Elizabeth Bronfen states that "the full meaning of her life never became entirely visible nor was it ever totally dissipated".[12] The suggested movement of veiling and unveiling is congenial with the multiple rises and deaths of the authorial figure. However, what does "the full meaning of her life" attempt to convey? Inevitably, it implies an impossibility, a cry for totalisation that contradicts the play between the attainable and the unattainable. Similarly, Bronfen subsequently suggests a "mutual authentication" between life and work. Juxtaposing images of sameness and difference, Esther Greenwood is not Sylvia Plath in disguise nor is Septimus Smith a mere projection of Virginia Woolf's symptoms of mental illness.[13] Such correlations fake an unmanageable truth that is so blatantly reiterated, it becomes an illusion. Literature does not speak the limited language of obviousness and perfect reflections. Hence, the dead cannot be irreversibly resurrected by the (impossible) materialisation of a hermetic presence in the text. The illusion of wholeness and identity is a self-destructive play that mirrors the theatrical duality between actor and character. In the literary performance of suicide, the deconstructive interaction between living and posthumous personae is supplemented by an unlimited dialogue between the suicide-author and the elements of the text. Instead of imposing a final signified, non-identical pairs such as Esther Greenwood and Plath's posthumous persona rearrange the textual body, as they recreate one another in intertextuality.

Defying the simplification of the literary by the fallacious identification of the—dead or living—writer in the text, anti-biographical criticism aims at the elimination of the institutionalised author. Expunged and powerless, the author in Barthes is "never more than the instance of writing", born "simultaneously with the text", devoid of all voice and identity.[14] In a ritualistic sacrifice, the death of the author proclaimed the birth of the reader and of writing. The assassination of gods, however, is never a simple task, as their auras are not easily obliterated. In a homonymous article, published in 1984, William Gass criticises Barthes' anti-authorial theory, arguing that even when one is no longer a god, one still is.[15] Reviving the author, Gass, however, shifts to another extreme pole, debasing the reader—and his "caprices", which Barthes supposedly falls for.[16] "That is why we need authors: to re-fuse", he writes at the end of the article, "Readers, on the other hand... readers... readers simply comprise the public".[17]

Effectively, the notion of self-destructiveness depends on the desire for omnipotence, on Manichean oppositions, which are, nonetheless, beset by inner contradictions. Suicide functions as a catalyst of self-destructiveness, disrupting the solidity of binaries while breaking logocentric relationships into a shuttling movement between polarities—the incessant power struggle between life and death through which author and reader deconstruct themselves. Another aspect worthy of note is the contradictory notion of the temporary, on which the primacy of the time of the enunciation, proposed by anti-authorial theories, is based. In discussion with Barthes, Paul de Man rightfully describes such a contradiction as a distorting "historical myth of progress".[18] Effectively, the obliteration of "the voice of a single person" from the text is grounded on a paradoxical association of the "here and now" of the enunciation with a concept of historical evolution. In this context, the author is regarded by Barthes as a "modern figure", "a product of our society", whose appearances and disappearances are, therefore, historically located, the latter being considered by Foucault as a "desirable and foreseeable future."[19] Nonetheless, from Sappho to Anne Sexton and beyond, the abject nature of killer-victims as suicides and writers contradicts the temporal limits of the instant of death or of any historically defined pre-determined period. Suicide-authors are, in other words, ambivalent figures with no age, rights or history, whose cadavers kept warm by their repeated deaths.

By tempting the living to reconstruct death, suicide stresses the need to preserve the tension between the living (readers) and the dead (author), lest the production of signification is taken over by absolute silence, thus annihilating both author and reader. Thus, in general terms, the inadequacy of the biographical and anti-authorial approaches lies in the teleological aspect inherent to both. Whereas the former revolves around an omnipotent creator, the latter proposes a substitution of deities. By defining the reader as the space that holds "together in a single field all the traces by which the text is constituted,"[20] Barthes treads the dangerous territory of hierarchical cancellations, where the divinity of the "Author-God" would simply be transferred to the reader. By replacing the "dead" author with a newly born empowered reader, one presupposes a supreme opposition between life and death, which Barthes, in fact, neutralises by allowing an "amicable return" of the author in a relationship of interdependence with the reader based on mutual desire.[21] Similarly, despite displacing the writing subject from a logocentric position at centre of the text, Derrida denies its removal, arguing, instead, that one must simply reconsider the problem of the effect of subjectivity as it is produced by the structure of the text.[22]

Suicide accepts no gods; it is a transgression. Writers such as Plath, Woolf, and others, leave their self-slain textual bodies to interact with their posthumous audience. They return only to die again in their repeated suicides. Moreover, as noted in the previous chapter, suicide calls for the voice of the other.[23] The silencing of either the author (suicide) or the reader (belated witness) would deny the deconstruction of the posthumous persona after the actual death. Without the bridge between the living and the dead, established by both instances, the subverted posthumous existence of the deceased would be limited to the dialogue between the suicide-to-be and his/her imagined dead self in the "past".[24]

It is important to note that, despite stating "the disappearance of every voice" and the "total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer",[25] both Barthes and Foucault explicitly relate the figure of the author to an institution, a social status located historically in a given period. Both oppose the conception of the author as *a person*.[26] The dead, however, have no age or fingerprints: the killer-victim is *not* a person, but the effect of a self-destructive dialogue between fragmented living identity and posthumous persona. Transiting between life and death, the suicide-author "embodies" abjection as a subject-object, whose disarranged identity is recognisable but indefinable. Hence, instead of the "inanimate" "it", the alternate double "he/she" will continue to be used to replace, as in the previous chapters, the term "suicide-author", so as to convey the sense of ambivalence surrounding a *quasi*-presence with a name and a broken identity, but no rights or history. The killer-victim, in other words, is *not a person*, but the "trace" left by a self-destructive dialogue between fragmented living identity and posthumous persona.[27] In fact, defying Barthes's claim that the writing subject cannot be seen "as a projection, not even as a fantasmatic one", I would suggest that the "suicide-effect" of the author's *quasi*-presence in the text leaves behind a "fantasmatic" impression, a sense of loss that is also that of a presence.[28]

One of the most immediate and obvious implications of the transformation from human being into cadaver is the extinction of the bonds of legal possession tying work ("propriety") and author ("proprietor"). Ceasing to exist as a "person", the dead author becomes devoid of rights of ownership and copyright.[29] The author, like writing, always comes back from his/her own absence. Nevertheless, physical disappearance—whether self-inflicted or not—inevitably "kills" the author's status as the legal owner of the tangible elements of the literary work. The dead, after all, have no social position or material possessions—they are not individuals. As a commodity, the work left by the deceased becomes the property of living individuals/institutions, and is thus subject to the agency of third parties.

The interplay between tangible (limited) and intangible (unlimited) aspects of a dead author's legacy draws attention to Barthes's binary differentiation between "Work" and "Text". According to his definition, there is, on the one hand, the literary production of an author, seen in its most limited, tangible aspect—"a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books".[30] Associated with it, in cases of dead authors, there is the estate and its executors, who retain the legal rights over the work of the deceased. On the other hand, there is the text in its multiplicity, whose inner destructiveness aims—like the act of death—at the absolute: "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin".[31] Deconstructing the posthumous persona, the textual body intensifies its ambivalence by incorporating not only the "Text", but also the dead author's "Work". Like a corpse inscribed with marks of self-destructiveness, the suicide-author's "Work" also functions as a "Text". Subverting the supreme opposition between the two instances, this "fragment of substance", no longer "closed on a signified", becomes a body of abjection.[32] In the preface to *Sade, Fournier, Loyola*, Barthes suggests the possibility of an "amicable return of the author ", described as a mere plural of "charms", the space of some tenuous details—*not a (civil, moral) person, but a body*.[33] Although this description is, to a certain extent, congenial with the concept of the "textual body", it is worth noting that the subversion of antagonisms does not imply a total dissolution of contours or a complete disregard for aspects regarding "Work" and biography, which are, on the contrary, incorporated to the textual body.

Addressing the scope of the concept of "Work", Foucault questions the practical possibilities of extracting a work "from the millions of traces left by the individual after his death", such as "a reference, a reminder of an appointment, an address or laundry bill".[34] Effectively, the limits of the "literary work" are often trespassed by what Barthes describes as an anxiety to unite the author's person and work through diaries and memoirs.[35] Suicide deepens these overflowing literary and autobiographical traces into one another, due to the very undecidability between suicide and author. As part of the "materiality" of the textual body, the "Work" reaffirms the deceased's absence while offering an illusion of proximity. Instead of an interrelation between the "Work" with a "person" and his/her "life", it is a fascination with a fragmented persona that provokes the flood of the (thanato)biographical: a killer-victim and his/her "life/death". Hence, like the corpse, the "Work" also loses its contours, merging in the textual body as part of an "untellable" suicide story. In this context, one question arises: who owns the textual body? Given that the textual body of a suicide is an unfinished product of memorial acts by the living and the dead, the most plausible answer would

certainly be "no one". Nevertheless, the issue is not quite so straightforward. Firstly, the inclusion of the "Work" in the textual body implies the association of aspects of material property and institutionalised authority with the abject elusiveness of a killer-victim fragmented by action and passivity. Secondly, trespassing beyond the limits of death, the uncanny presence-absence of the suicide causes the refraction of the concept of ownership and authority.

Speaking of Blanchot's "suicidal artist", John Gregg claims that the book is a survivor, existing on its own in two different occasions: the figurative death of the author and the definitive disappearance of the deceased author.[36] However, the difference between such occasions is, in effect, hardly definite, as, despite the "death" of rights of material property in the latter, there is not, in either case, a total detachment of the writings from the suicide-author. As the literary word is confounded with the writing of death, the dead rise and die among the letters, deferring destruction with the latent agency of a subverted posthumous existence. Consequently, the nullifying effects of actual and figurative death are rendered ambiguous by the reverberation of the author's failed self-annihilation: a tantalising *quasi*-presence that engages in its own mourning rituals, speaking suicide in spite of the decomposed body and undone living identity.

Contradicting the absence of legal rights after death, the deferred agency of killer-victims can be traced in the direct implications of the concept of the institutionalised author. Following the idea of "object of appropriation", Foucault states that in a system of ownership and strict copyright rules, the author is subject to punishment in exchange for the benefits of property.[37] Although the concepts of ownership and penal liability cannot be applied to the dead, their distortions and ambiguities are noteworthy in cases in which the "Work", as a commodity, is associated with a *suicide writer*—i.e. an author who committed suicide and/or a "writer of suicide". In the previous chapter, the "crime" of posthumous editing, supposedly committed by the Plath estate, was addressed in the context of the "desecration" of the textual body of the deceased. Given its magnitude, the controversy over the handling of the Plath's legacy is particularly illustrative, for it brings forth the unearthly role of the suicide-author's presence-absence in concrete and socially defined questions of ownership and punishment.[38]

The relationship between the living—i.e. the Estate, readers, critics, *et al.*—and the dead—i.e. the suicide-author (de)materialised in a textual body—is characterised by a series of ambiguities that reflect the undecidability between writer and suicide. On account of the suicide of the author, notions of appropriation are transformed, as systems of copyright and ownership may also acquire a rather figurative value. In Plath's particular case, one finds an amplification of the belated

witnesses' inherent search for disclosure, resulting in the correlation of legal rights over the deceased's (memorial) writings with deception and infamy—a desecration. The aggravating factor particular to suicide is that the literary and biographical material belonging to the Estate also constitutes memorial texts forming a very significant part of the deceased's textual body. Thus, copyright owners not only retain the control over the artistic implications of certain publications, but they can also regulate the exposure of the body. Nevertheless, in practice, the urge to uncover the killer-victim is not regulated by system of ownership and copyright. Ted Hughes was often accused of not only suppressing vital material, but also working against the right of free speech of Plath scholars.[39] An explicit example of the undermining of ownership over a textual body is the publication of unauthorised biographies and memoirs.[40] As mentioned in the previous chapter, the audience expects a spectacle and, more importantly, it believes in its right to have access to the unattainable truth behind suicide. The weaving of memorial texts—which includes their consumption as well as production—is the paradoxical infinite unravelling of stories. Thus, out of the memorial act of reading, belated witnesses make a movement of recreation and appropriation of the textual body, in which the death of the suicide-author is re-enacted.

The reader therefore performs the "authorial" role of executor and creator in a hermeneutical sacrifice through which he/she actively performs the suicide-author's death and recreation while passively watching suicide as a spectator. Engaged together in a dialogue of dualities staged by the text, neither reader nor author corresponds to a space of totality. Conversely, being mutually bonded by a self-destructive inter-dependence, author and reader "write" and efface one another in the deconstruction of the textual body and consequent production of meaning. In contrast with the suggestion of a complete loss of every trace of identity, in *Le plaisir du texte*, Barthes illustrates such an inter-dependence by referring to a mutual desire between reader and author. In the text, he writes, I *desire* the author, I need his figure as much as he needs mine.[41] Hypnotised by abjection, the audience *desires* disclosure, the apprehension of the unseen contours of the suicide-author. Hence, resisting destructiveness, the voice of the author reverberates, deferring obliteration through transformation.

Returning to the idea of control and ownership of a suicide-author's writings, one must note the existence of various levels of "appropriation". On the surface, there are the holders of copyrights, the executors of the literary estate, who have legally appropriated the *corpus*. Secondly, one finds the rest of the audience, who, like scavengers, decompose unveiled parts of the body in their "illegitimate" search for disclosure and power. Making the suicide-author a personal "object of

appropriation", the audience attempts to fill his/her self-inflicted absence, making it clear-cut and tangible. However, in this process, the illusion of proximity is perpetually broken by the rearrangement of the textual body, as the re-enactment of suicide impels the process of appropriation into self-destructiveness. Thirdly, in its double nature, the killer (active)-victim (passive) also constitutes a deferred subject of (deferred) appropriation, thus opposing the absence of legal rights with the deranging impact of a *quasi*-presence.

It is worth noting that a certain sense of posthumous authority can also be attributed to authors other than suicides. As Derrida suggests, the testamentary reverberation is an intrinsic aspect of the author's signature, as its very readability depends on its being "a repeatable, iterable, imitable form" that may be "detached from the present and singular intention of its production".[42] A signature is therefore a legacy, a projection into a posthumous future. John Gregg claims that the book is a survivor that outlives the author both upon his/her "figurative death" and his/her "definitive disappearance" as a deceased.[43] However, considering the possibility of iteration beyond/because of death, I would argue that if the book is a "survivor", so is the author. As opposed to an irreversible end, the death of the author unfolds instead into a constant struggle against the self-destructiveness inherent to the text. Thus, the fragmentary figure of the (living or dead) author persists, haunting the textual space with a testamentary presence that it is virtually impossible to disregard.

In this context, even the "non-signature" of an anonymous writer leaves the trace of a nameless voice, an absence. An example of the overwhelming legacy of the author can ironically be given by a poet largely used to demonstrate the author's disappearance in writing: Stéphane Mallarmé. According to Philippe Sollers, Mallarmé frequently compared the book with a "tomb", a space where what counts is no longer the subject, but his/her language.[44] Undoubtedly, poems such as "Un Coup de Dés" have the power of the aleatory, making language speak, writing itself [*ça s'écrit*].[45] However, how to detach and ignore the iconic figure of the author from the "Mallarmean" play with hazard and rupture? As Seán Burke rightfully argues, placing the desacralisation of the author away from paradigms of elimination and destruction, "if a text has been 'unglued' of its referentiality, its author need not to die; to the contrary, he can flourish, become an object of biographical pleasure, perhaps even a 'founder of language'".[46] Expressed in the entire network of self-destructive relations, the heightening of ambivalence provoked by suicide transforms not only notions of authorship, but also the interaction between writer, reader, and text. The very condition of being a "living-dead"—a "moribund survivor"—implies a greater proximity with the reader on

account of the posthumous agency, reinforcing the restlessness of the dead author without, however, allowing a full resurrection. As a result, the iteration of the suicide-author's signature is accompanied by an intense sense of "posthumous appropriation" that brings his/her posthumous persona closer to the text.

Firstly, posthumous agency threatens the living with the "danger of writing",[47] brought to the surface of the text by the wavering closeness of the author. The "infectious" aspect of suicide leaves its marks on the corpus and the corpse of the author. In his book *Surviving Literary Suicide*, Jeffrey Berman gives a list of twentieth-century writers who killed themselves and asks: "Given what clinicians call the contagion effect—suicide's ability to "infect" other people, rendering them susceptible to self-death—should literature teachers take special precautions when discussing self-destructive authors?"[48] In this context, Berman draws attention to the omission of a particular line from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*: "He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun."[49] The line, found only in the American edition of the novel, describes Clarissa's positive reaction to Septimus Smith's suicide. Berman notes that the line was deleted from the English edition, for the editor, G. Patton Wright, found it to be "'gratuitous' to think that Clarissa could feel this way about a serious subject".[50] The word "gratuitous", highlighted by Berman, is, in fact, used by Wright in his list of textual variants: "given the serious nature of Clarissa's internal monologue in the room apart, it is *gratuitous* to have her think that Septimus Smith's suicide "made her feel the fun".[51] The matter, however, is not quite so straightforward, having, in fact, a story of its own. The line is, in fact, also found on the copy of page proofs Woolf corrected for the first American edition and on her personal copy of the page proofs, which was sent to a friend in 1925. It is not known whether she made the same change on the set of proofs for the first British edition, as they were apparently destroyed during the Second World War. Wright believes that Woolf probably either forgot to make the change in the British edition or decided against it.[52] Regardless of the veracity of any of the versions, the question here at stake concerns the relationship of the unknown "truth" and its effect. The interest provoked by this particular sentence draws attention to the allegedly "infectious" and "dangerous" aspect of writing, here exacerbated by the posthumous agency of an author whose *hand* not only wrote—and continues to write—death, but also performed it. In this context, the legibility of the author's voice despite his/her physical disappearance preserves a sense of authorial "responsibility". David Holbrook addresses precisely the question of (posthumous) responsibility in *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*.[53] In an introduction punctuated by the words "I believe", Holbrook affirms that "Sylvia Plath's work presents us with a disturbing

problem, not least in education [...] What, then, do we say about the effects of her art on us? And especially the young?"[54] Unable to punish the dead, the censorship applied to the corpus targets the dissemination of the deferred voice of the author and the "danger" therein contained.

Secondly, due precisely to their dual nature, suicides inhabit the text not only as authors, but also as killer-victims, hence intensifying their elusive proximity. In the controversies surrounding the Plath Estate, for instance, the belated witnesses' desire for appropriation of the textual body is directly associated with a belief in the agency of the dead. Even if the author could have all his/her individual characteristics obliterated, the amalgamation with the suicide would decompose such an anonymity into a dual figure whose posthumous persona would maintain a dialogue with its fragmented living identity. Since primordial times, taboos led communities, for fear of death, to act as though suicides were "alive". The relationship between suicide-authors and their audience is hardly different from such superstitions applied to the living-dead. Suicide-authors cannot be punished for their writing. However, being dangerous or even infectious, their words can be—to a certain extent—controlled and manipulated.

Similarly, despite not having the copyright to their works, a distorted sense of "ownership" is preserved in connection with their deferred identities. Hence, posthumous editing may become a "crime" that not only deprives the audience of access to the "truth", but also silences a dying enunciator whose voice is still alive. The notion of "posthumous appropriation" is, therefore, directly associated with the effect of self-destructiveness, notably the interplay of action and passivity characteristic of the undead. Whereas, for most dead writers, the "status" of "deceased" is mere biographical information, suicide-authors are (un)defined by their deaths and so is their relationship with the reader and the text. Their *quasi*-presences are not simply a projection from the time of production; instead, they must be understood as a transformation in process. The infinite restlessness of suicide-authors re-enacts death on the text, involving the reader in an incomplete process of self-undoing, performed in a timeless space of killing and dying: the literary memorial text. In this context, the signature of a suicide-author acquires a unique testamentary function marked by a series of dualities. Eminently, it refers not only to a literary work, but also to the entire textual body. Seen as a text, the corpse, for instance, can be described as a testimony "signed" by the deceased-to-be. By defying the extreme passivity of expiration, the killer-victim attempts to become the "author" of his/her own death. This dual (destructive) sense of authorship permeates the *quasi*-presence of the suicide-author in the interaction

with the audience, reinforcing the impossibility of characterising him/her as a "person".

Described by Derrida, as "the name of a problem",[55] the proper name of the author oscillates between living and posthumous personae, life and death, thus relating to a *deferred* identity—neither a cause nor a person, but an effect of suicide related to a textual body. Furthermore, as the remains of the living-dead, the suicide's name does not iterate from the time of production only as a result of its readability. Conversely, being charged with posthumous agency, it engages in its own deferral and decomposition, triggering a fundamental contradiction: suicide involves a dual eruption of the killer-victim's self-inflicted absence *and* presence—that is, a phantom-like image, a *quasi*-presence. In other words, the appropriation and deferral of death by the suicide-author simultaneously push him/her away and towards disappearance, constituting a guarantee of his/her elusive yet undeniable *quasi*-presence in the text. Being associated with a *quasi*-presence, the name of the suicide-author also has a fundamental performative aspect: it functions as a death announcement to be repeated by the deferred voice of a dead enunciator. By being readable, the signature of the suicide-author exposes his/her self-inflicted absence to the audience. Thus, the name of the author is in itself a memorial text, where death and self-fragmentation are re-enacted in the plurality of the literary word. As identity is undone, the author kills and dies in the very name that keeps him/her "alive".

Having a "repeatable, iterable, imitable form", the signature provides a dialogue across the interval between the time of production and the present of the text.[56] Consequently, the *quasi*-presence of the suicide-author, to which his/her name is attached, compels the reader to challenge its ambivalence, thus participating in the deconstruction of meaning, and, in a wider context, in the weaving of the textual body. Considering Barthes's concept of the reader as a plurality of other texts and infinite codes, it is legitimate to conclude that the interaction—as opposed to substitution—of this network with the textual body of the author would undoubtedly enhance the possibility of dissemination.[57] Effectively, such an interaction can be illustrated as an interpenetration of the suicide's network of "impossible" simultaneities into the tissue of the text. Becoming also memorial, the literary text is, therefore, problematised by self-destructiveness. Instead of being provided with a final signified, its inherent plurality is maximised through the establishment of further dialogue. Playing with presences and absences, suicide breaks identities, uniting and opposing authors and characters, textual and "actual" life/death.

In addition to the effect of the *quasi*-presence of the killer-victim, the interpenetration of suicide into the text inevitably begs questions regarding the existence and nature of the "outside-text". Derrida's famous line—"Il n'y a pas d' hors texte"[58]—can, in fact, be read in two opposing ways, namely as a statement of the non-existence or of the existence of the "hors texte" as opposed to an intra-textual space. Undoubtedly, the two ideas seem to be antagonistic, because the network of acts pertaining to suicide is often associated with the so-called *hors texte*—e.g. failed attempts, meticulous preparations, the death scene, *et al*. Given that the suicide-author is (de)characterised precisely by the doubleness of writing and suicide, what are the parameters that differentiate self-destructive interpenetration from a restrictive imposition of final signifieds? There are no parameters. As "galaxies of signifiers", text, reader, and the textual body of the suicide-author are interlaced in *intertextuality*. "Behind the work", Derrida states, "there is nothing but writing".[59] In this context, I suggest that nothing exists outside the text, for every relationship it establishes with the "extra-textual" becomes an intertextuality, textualising author, reader, and all elements by them associated during the deconstruction of meaning. There is, in other words, a common movement of self-destructiveness that (un)defines a mutual (un)weaving. Hence, the notion of "productivity" here involves a "theatre of a production", where, in an interplay of action and passivity, text, author, and reader work tirelessly, writing one another.[60]

Such a semi-permeable frontier where life and death, inside and outside, cohabit in exaltation and confusion is found in the concept of "hymen": *L'entre deux* of writing, which Derrida describes as a spasm, a space of undecidability, indecision, fusion, and continuity—crime, sexual act, incest, simulacrum, *suicide*.[61] Identified with the "textual death drive", the "hymen" promotes a process of dissolution of the writer's identity as a person—i.e. as an "institution". It is important to note that, in an anti-teleological context, differences are not entirely effaced in spite of being repeatedly undone. Resisting yet surrendering to the "supreme spasm" in the text,[62] the author's identity is broken into traces, surviving obliteration, as it becomes a deferral.

Writing and dying at the posthumous present of the reader, the suicide-author thus cannot be excluded from the textual space into which he/she is interwoven. Instead, being a performance of abjection, suicide finds a counterpart in the obliteration of boundaries between the "inside" and "outside" of the text. As Foucault suggests, despite advocating authorial elimination, the name of the author remains "at the contour of texts", "in the breach, among the discontinuities".[63] In suicide's search and denial of the absolute, the act of writing/reading emulates the

act of death by pushing beyond the contours of the text. Instead of a "god", the suicide-author is better described as a "living-dead", a "ghost" transiting across the discontinuities of life and death. Disquieting the living with an abject posthumous existence, his/her *quasi*-presence neither limits nor explains whilst making words memorial. Interpenetrated with the writing of death, the killer-victim invites belated witnesses to fill self-inflicted absences, participating in the undoing of text, author, and reader.

As it has been so far demonstrated, the concept of "suicide-effect" is based on its simultaneous defiance and dependence on the search for wholeness and annihilation, performed by biographical and anti-authorial criticisms. Thus, the possibility of tension and fragmentation, fundamental for the iteration of the posthumous dialogue, derives from the interrelation between elements of self-destructiveness inherent to any text by any author, dead or alive, and the network of relationships triggered by suicide. Despite inspiring a notion of annihilation of the possibility of meaning, the self-destructiveness immanent to the text is fundamental to the understanding and defiance of anti-representationalist approaches to the author. In Blanchot's concept of Literature as the work of death in the world ("l'oeuvre de la mort dans le monde"),[64] one finds an example of such a monological appeal, masked underneath the implied ambivalence. In *La part du feu*, for instance, he states, in a somewhat problematic simplification of undecidable simultaneities, that Literature erects itself from its ruins, as a negation of itself that sometimes coincides with nothingness, and immediately is everything.[65] Subliminal to a sense of ambivalence, lies a monological appeal, clearly described in *Part du feu* as an almost uninterrupted passage from nothingness to totality, the affirmation of the absolute as an event and of each event as absolute.[66] However, as a performance of abjection, suicide defies such a misinterpretation, drawing attention from isolated polarities to the shuffling effect produced by their dialogue. It is precisely in such a blurry and elusive interval that the author's concomitant rupture and retrieval of wholeness occurs. Maintaining (barely) alive the subject they insistently kill, nothingness and totality do not simply coincide—as in suicide; they are the prerequisite for the existence and annihilation of one another.

In parallel with the division and preservation of the Freudian self through "dismemberment" and a "retrieval of lost wholeness",[67] the (self-)destructiveness of the text can be described as a "textual death drive": a menacing yet sustaining force of repetition that keeps the author "alive" by insistently pushing him/her into sublimation. With reference to the disappearance of the subject in discourse, proposed by Lacan's rereading of Freud, Kristeva defines language as a derivation of the death drive ("pulsion de mort"), the text being precisely its verbalisation.[68] In

her semiotic theory, concepts such as "signifiance"—the displacement of language and subject—and "intertextuality"—the construction of a "mosaic of citations"[69]—illustrate the continuous splitting and fading of the writing subject on account of the textual death drive. The possibilities implicit in these processes undoubtedly relate to a movement of self-destructiveness—*la jouissance de la destruction*—similar to the play of "impossible" simultaneities in suicide. Effectively, defining the death drive in terms of the possibility of its own renewal, Kristeva inevitably associates it with an ambivalent perpetuation of tension and life.[70] Nonetheless, like Barthes, she tends to mask a teleological approach underneath an illusion of plurality, by constantly implying the reduction of the author to a non-existence—a "non-person", an "absence", a "loss".[71]

Thus, the notion of the "textual death drive" can be simultaneously regarded as the very foundation of anti-authorial approaches and their greatest contradiction, as the completion of the process of authorial disintegration is rendered an impossibility by the very destructiveness of the text. Similarly, anti-authorial theories undo themselves in a kind of "conceptual suicide", as, in self-inflicted contradiction, forces of extinction and anonymity presuppose a counter-movement that preserves life in spite of death. In this context, the irreversibility applied to the concept of absence is, effectively, inconceivable, given the inevitable eruption of presences with the institution of "freeplay". Therefore, displaced from "non-existence" to a limbo of dualities, the "Death of the Author" becomes its own denial: "life death", a "desperate affirmation of life".[72] Instead of being sublimated into a blank space, anonymity,[73] the author is "re-undone", dying without ever being "extinct".

The manifestation of juxtaposed forces of destruction ("death") and (re)creation ("vital instinct") is evidently a fundamental aspect of the signifying process. In a self-destructive relation of action and passivity, the author becomes subject through language as he/she is subject*ed* to language. Such a duality is clearly expressed in the self-undoing of the "Death of the Author". In Barthes's works, for instance, the "destruction of every voice"[74] coexists with the persistence of a subliminal active role of the "scriptor". Despite being undone by language, the writer is also its agent of destruction, who takes it to the limits in order to savour its *disfigurement*.[75] Moreover, by triggering textual destructiveness, the writing subject emerges as an indispensable element not only to the production of signification, but also to his/her own consequent process of dissolution in the text.

Thus, in an anti-teleological context, the concept of the "Death of the Author"— or rather, the *deaths* of the author(s)—is better defined as the various expressions of the intrinsic attraction towards "death" in the tissue of every text.

Effectively, death permeates language as a means of representation. "The letter kills, but we learn this from the letter itself," Lacan writes.[76] Inhabited by deathly forces, language irradiates meaning and destruction, promoting a mass assassination of subject, object, and itself. Death speaks as one speaks, according to Blanchot, who elsewhere relates language to a "hecatomb", an endless act of self-destruction similar to suicide.[77] Emphasising the ambivalence of the fatal loss associated with language, Lacan defines the word as already a presence made of absence through which the latter gives itself a name.[78] In other words, like a suicide, it renders itself absent in self-destructiveness. Like a murderer, language promotes the splitting and effacing of the subject, but, concomitantly, it promotes also that event called meaning. Such an "overflowing" of (self-) destructiveness—characteristic of the "Death of the Author" and related notions of anonymity—may suggest a certain "trivialisation" of relationships between language and death, which would undoubtedly defy the singularity—or even the pertinence—of the interaction of the suicide-author in the text. Nonetheless, as pointed out in Chapter One, suicide does not belong to the ordinary category of passive forms of death, for it primarily comprehends a contradictory struggle, by a killer-victim, to resist expiration while making it an act of personal deliberation. Similarly, performing contradiction in writing, suicide hyperbolically exercises self-destructiveness through the osmotic limits between the *intra-* and the *hors-texte*, where the suicide-author's wavering body is hidden and exposed.

As an effect of the textual death drive, the endless undoing of the subject in the interstitial constitutes, effectively, a general trait of the concept of repeated deaths, hence applicable to relationships of destructiveness, regardless of the form, nature or actual occurrence of the author's physical disappearance. However, impelled by posthumous agency, suicide-authors stand out from the textual scene of death, heightening the impact of their (lost) presence as they re-emerge as a transformed, but uncannily recognisable absence. More importantly, such cases problematise and reinvent the concept(s) of the "Death of the Author", by provoking the correlation of "intra-textual" and "extra-textual" deaths—namely, the destruction of the writing subject in the text and physical disappearance of the writer. It is precisely from this undecidable frontier, where textual forces of death merge with reverberations of the writing subject's suicide, that the overwhelming spectral presence of the suicide-author emanates. As a result, while amplifying the voice of the dead author, memorial texts by suicides stage a (re)doubling of deaths produced by an encounter of bodies of (self-)destructiveness, namely the suicide-author and his/her instrument of representation/death—language.

"L'auteur était de trop",[79] Blanchot states in *Le pas au-delà,* arguing that the death of the author unveils his/her superfluity in a text that, in its eternal return, derives life from this very death. Nevertheless, transiting the interstitial, the suicide-author is also a *revenant,*[80] leaving behind traces of his/her *quasi*-presence while revisiting the text. Being neither "supreme" nor "superfluous", the suicide-author performs the desire and the impossibility of imposing a final signified, as the attempt to assume control over death inside and outside the text fails repeatedly. Thus, instead of an oppressive deity, the writing subject becomes a transgressor of the figure of him/herself as an absolute limit or origin. Effectively, in suicide, the survival of the text is expressively associated with the writer's resistance against forces of annihilation paradoxically triggered by his/her own act of writing/death. As a transgressive force, self-destructiveness erupts as a "supreme spasm" caused by the clash between the textual death drive and reverberations of the eruption of the author as a killer-victim.

The re-doubling of death is a key aspect of the relationship between writing and the killer-victim, being, therefore, inherent to cases in which the *hand* that writes death also perpetrates it, performing it simultaneously inside *and* outside the text. Here, one must note that the notion of "excess", implicit in the movement of re-doubling, does not indicate redundancy or superfluity. On the contrary, such a continuous unfolding is responsible for the very possibility of repetition and, consequently, of posthumous existence. In this context, the dual performance of death in memorial texts is, therefore, an effect of this re-doubling: a supplementation of a supplement constantly duplicated by the relationship of textual destructiveness and the subject's suicide.

The magnifying effect produced by the interpenetration of suicide can be identified in the continuous process of deconstruction of the memorial text. As the memorial act of writing threads suicide-author and textual tissue together, the consequent displacement and re-doubling heightens the impact of self-destructiveness, (de)materialised word and, as its *quasi*-present counterpart, the killer-victim. Besides, defamiliarisation is enhanced by the somewhat seductive threat to life often attributed to the paradigmatic association of death and writing. For instance, in *Of Grammatology,* Derrida affirms that "the danger itself"—"the abyss from which all menaces announce themselves"—is indirectly named by the supplementary series, death being its "master-name".[81] In this context, the re-doubling of death in the memorial text means also the re-doubling of the threats posed by it either through language or otherwise.

Such a deadly exorbitance is an essential aspect of the uncanny doubleness that characterises posthumous existence and, also fundamentally, singularises

suicide, making it unique and incomparable while remaining, essentially, a form of death. Similarly, the dual nature of the killer-victim implies a constant simultaneity in the process of becoming "another", in other words, an impossibility to be—simply one (killer, suicide, presence) or the other (victim, writer, absence) *inter alia*. Consequently, they highlight the illusion of presence and absence by being one and another, (re)emerging despite apparently excluding their own possibility of existing. By writing and dying by their own hands, suicide-authors set off a hyperbolic play of "dangerous supplements" that establishes an interstitial dialogue between textual and "actual" death. Thus, the refusal to be "simply mortal" is translated into the transgression of the limits of the death of the "paper author", the "scriptor" undone by textuality itself.[82] Supplementing presences and absences as killer, victim, and writer, suicide-authors die *in excess*, as death is defied, re-doubled, and extended in and out of the textual tissue.

As self-destructiveness proliferates, immanent deadly dangers seep through the boundaries of literary representation along with the deceased's *quasi*-presence, hence coming into contact with the reality of the so-called *hors-texte.* In other words, stepping into "forbidden territory", the suicide-author moves in defiance of a process of annihilation inflicted by language and him/herself. And that, too, is an interdict. Besides problematising the non-existence of author and the absolute superfluity of the extra-textual, such a "leakage" antagonises the nature of both suicide and writing through a constant reversal towards an unattainable restitution of a deferred presence. Being singularised by an exaggeration of sameness, suicide-authors are dead writers who die and write—*but not simply*. Supplementing the emergence of the killer-victim as the catalyst of self-destructiveness, the trespassing of borders by the suicide-author coexists with the intertwining between the act of death and the act of writing, in other words, a dual performance of self-destructiveness through the institution of a dialogue between textual and physical bodies—i.e. the corpus and the corpse. Therefore, having its absolute autonomy violated by a "forbidden" reflux to and from "nonexistent" territories, the poetic word can no longer relate solely to textual death, merely offering, as Blanchot suggests, a means to experience danger without being at risk.[83]

Unlike the death(s) of authors whose relevance to literary criticism relates predominantly to their undoing inside the text, the dual performance of death by suicide-authors occurs both in their textual and physical bodies.[84] As the author weaves the literary text and the body of his/her own posthumous persona, the effluence of destructiveness triggers a dangerous process of equivalence between the act of writing and the act of death. Consequently, the protective barriers against "actual" danger are washed away by excess, drenching textual death with a

certainty of physical annihilation peculiar to suicide. Like a suicide attempt, writing, for the killer-victim, defies the incommunicability of death, by offering an experience of self-fragmentation as living and posthumous personae dialogue, supplementing one another in deferral. Thus, dying repeatedly and in excess, the suicide-author is exposed not only to the risk, but also to the fall.

The insertion of the suicide-author in a context of death in excess—or death *by* excess—highlights the performative aspect of texts by killer-victims; in other words, the lifting of protective veils as a connection is established between writing and the self-slain body. Barthes, with reference to Oxford philosophy, controversially states that writing designates a performative form in which the voice has "no other origin than language itself".[85] On the one hand, as Peter Lamarque rightly points out, Barthes's defence of the "Death of the Author" is not congenial with the concept of performative act, as one of its conditions is the speaker's having appropriate intentions, thus relying crucially on the disposition and authority of the speaker.[86] On the other hand, in the light of forces of creation and destruction associated with language, the performative aspect in question is applicable to Barthes's reading of the verb "to write" as a hybrid form in which transitivity is maintained as one (the *scriptor*) effects "writing in being affected oneself", leaving oneself inside the writing "as the agent of the action".[87] In either case, the undeniable discrepancy between the "Death of the Author" and Austin's concept clearly reinforces the internal contradictions of the former, as it paradoxically draws attention to an "agent of the action" elsewhere deemed a superfluity, an absence. Notably, in a movement of self-denial, such conceptual ambivalence announces the inevitable iteration of the author's death in the text and, consequently, the impossibility of a definitive removal. Thus, even in cases where a posthumous persona does not insistently haunt the text with the insertion of its "actual" death, the writing subject resists annihilation as the "agent of the action" that triggers the play with language and his/her own undoing in the text—in other words, danger without risk, death without death.[88]

References to the added performative aspect of writing, acted out by suicide-writers, can be found in associations between the act of writing and death/suicide. In "Literature and Totality", for instance, Sollers addresses the uniqueness of the "*sacrifice* of the one who writes", affirming, with reference to Mallarmé, that "genuine suicide can only be literary".[89] Reverberating the words "sacrifice" and "genuine", Blanchot, in *Faux Pas*, suggests that the "writer is summoned by his anguish to an actual sacrifice of himself".[90] The two terms in question are particularly noteworthy, for they render both statements disturbingly problematic. Is the author's "death without death", therefore, a so-called actual

suicide? Like "Death of the Author", previously discussed, the expression "actual suicide" is, in fact, self-destructive, as the second term challenges the possibility of truth and uniqueness, thus constantly denying the qualifying adjective that precedes it. Similarly, the notion of "sacrifice" is made impossible by the non-existence or removal of the author, for it necessarily presupposes the existence—more precisely coincidence, in the case of self-sacrifice—of an agent that kills and also undergoes the killing. If the subject is reduced to a "loss", it can neither sacrifice nor be sacrificed. Furthermore, the implicit need of a living body to be immolated contradicts not only the "substancelessness" of the *scriptor*, but also the author's safe experience of "death without death". Nonetheless, along with the idea of "genuine suicide", one finds multiple allusions to the risks and dangers to which the writer exposes him/herself through writing. Sollers, for instance, defines it as "an experience that will also entail a grave and unsuspected risk"; Blanchot speaks of a risk that takes away the physical security of living, thus exposing the writer to death, real death, the death of his person/being.[91]

What is "real death" but another totalising paradigm such as "actual suicide"? Evidently, the same self-destructive camouflage of teleological foundations under concepts of plurality is repeated here. Nevertheless, one must note that the "inclusion despite the exclusion" of fatal risks in writing, effectively, points to wider possibilities of reading the author's textual death. Removed from the hermeticism of anti-authorial theories, it reveals deflated traces of "fatal dangers" threatening the limits of the text without, however, overflowing the "stability" of internal forces of destructiveness. While contradicting the non-existence of an author of an *hors texte*, expressions such as "sacrifice", "risk", and others, allow theorists to maintain focus on textual death while breaking its limits by alluding to traces magnified in texts by suicides such as ritual, theatricality, self-fragmentation, and a contradictory exposure to death.

Thus, although in such cases death resides primarily in the word—"*la parole moribonde*"[92]—the intrinsic supplementarity of death and language establishes a dialogue—often unplanned and unwanted—with death *hors texte*. This is particularly evident in ideas of "exposure" to tension and death through writing, which is indeed congenial with the link established between the activity of writing and predisposition to suicide by suicidology's theories of risk writing, discussed in Chapter Two. Similarly, Barthes's radical reversal of "life into work", according to which the author's life would be made a work for which his/her own book would be the model, contradictorily provides a final signified to the text by, for example, defining it as the origin of the author's suicidability. More enlightening, however, is his allusion to sacrifice and writing in "To Write: an Intransitive Verb?". Here, he

associates the transitivity of the verb "to write" with Benveniste's notion of "middle voice", affirming that in both cases the subject is part of the process, as its centre and actor, affecting himself in acting.[93] "It is the middle voice", he writes, "if taking the knife from the priest's hands, I make the sacrifice for myself."[94] By addressing a writing subject who takes control of his/her own sacrifice, Barthes allows one to turn away from death as annihilation to a performance of textual death, containing aspects of suicide.

The effusion of destructiveness and danger in writings by suicides relates precisely to the exaggerated theatricality of the one who indulges self-sacrifice for oneself. Suicide institutes a dialogue with the "immolated living body" that causes the overflowing of "dangers without risk" into a *quasi*-reality of the "hymen" of the text, to which the subject is exposed. In other words, it endows the memorial text with an enhanced performative effect, which aims to destroy the writing subject while being incompatible with its disappearance.

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[1] See Chapter One for details.

[2] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977).

[3] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 74.

[4] I here make reference to Derrida's concept of "supplement", which will be discussed throughout this chapter.

[5] Kristeva's notion of "abjection" as well as the dual aspect of suicide herein mentioned are discussed in further detail in Chapter One.

[6] Cf. Arthur Bradley, "Chatterton, Thomas, 1752-1770", *Literature Online Biography*, 2000, available at

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO000457&divLevel=0&area=ref&forward=critref_ft

[7] Barthes, "L'Effet de réel", *Roland Barthes: Oeuvres completes,* ed. Éric Marty, vol. 2 (Paris: Seuil, 1994) 484.

[8] Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text," *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader,* ed. Robert Young (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 33.

[9] Cf. Barthes, "L'Effet de réel".

[10] For further details on Derrida's concept of "transcendental signified," see, for instance, Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the

Human Sciences," *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 1970).

[11] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 70.

[12] Elizabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath* (Plymouth: Northcote House / British Council, 1998) 17.

[13] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992); Jeffrey Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

[14] Barthes, "The Death of the Author", 142, 145.

[15] William H. Gass, "The Death of the Author". *Salmagundi,* 1984, 65: 3.

[16] Gass 17.

[17] Gass 26.

[18] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970) 50.

[19] Barthes. "The Death of the Author" 142-43; Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?", trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell UP, 1977) 15.

[20] Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 148.

[21] Cf. Barthes, "From Work to Text", *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977) 161.

[22] Cf. Derrida, *Positions* (Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972) 122. (My translation).

[23] It is worth reiterating that the posthumous audience in suicide comprehends not only the belated witnesses, but also the suicide-to-be, who, in the killing and dying process, interacts with his/her posthumous persona.

[24] As stated in Chapter One, the notion of "past" has no relation with the actual time, referring instead to the acts performed by the suicide-to-be.

[25] Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 142; Foucault 117.

[26] Barthes, 142-43; Foucault 115.

[27] The concept of "trace" is herein applied in the context of Derrida's deconstructive strategy. The concept is discussed in many of his works; see, for instance, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs,* trans. David B. Allison, ed. John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973) and *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1974).

[28] Barthes, "Theory of the Text" 38.

[29] Cf. Foucault 124-25.

[30] Barthes, "From Work to Text" 156-57.

[31] Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 142.

[32] The cited terms refer to Barthes's description of "work" in "From Work to Text" (156; 158).

[33] Barthes, "Preface to *Sade, Fournier, Loyola*", *Roland Barthes: Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Éric Marty, vol. 2 (Paris: Seuil, 1994) 1044.

[34] Foucault 119.

[35] Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 143.

[36] John Gregg, "Blanchot's Suicidal Artist: Writing and the (Im)Possibility of Death". *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism* 17:1.55 (1988): 57.

[37] Foucault 124-25.

[38] A detailed analysis of specific aspects of Sylvia Plath, as a test case for the proposed reflection on suicide-authors, will be provided in the final chapters of the thesis. At this stage, focus is primarily given to the critical approach to literary memorial texts, offering examples, such as the controversy around the Plath Estate, as an argumentative tool for the problematising of the death(s) of the author.

[39] Ted Hughes, "When Research Becomes Intrusion", *The Observer*, Books, 29 Oct. 1989.

[40] In the article above cited, Hughes addresses the defiance of copyright laws with reference to two unauthorised biographies: Edward Butscher's *Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury, 1976) and Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987).

[41] Barthes, *O prazer do texto*, trans. J. Guinsburg (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1996) 50.

[42] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well', or the Calculation of the Subject: an Interview with Jacques Derrida", *Who Comes After the Subject?* eds. Eduardo Cadava and Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991) 107.

[43] Gregg 57.

[44] Cf. Philippe Sollers, "Literature and Totality", trans. Philip Barnard and David Hayman, *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, ed. David Hayman (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 74-75

[45] Cf. Sollers 66; 74.

[46]Seán Burke, The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998) 47.

[47] Foucault refers to the "danger of writing" when discussing the notion of "objects of appropriation" in "What is an Author?" (125).

[48] Berman 1.

[49] Berman 2.

[50] Berman 2.

[51] Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, ed. G. Patton Wright (London: Vintage, 1992) 213. My emphasis.

[52] Cf. Woolf 175.

[53] David Holbrook, Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence (London: Athlone, 1976).

[54] Holbrook 4. I shall return to the issue of posthumous responsibility in chapters four and five.

[55] Derrida, Of Grammatology 144

[56] Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" 107. The dialogue between the time of production and the present of the text will be further discussed still in this chapter, in relation to the reader's attempt to recuperate the enunciation.

[57] Barthes, S/Z 15.

[58] Derrida, Of Grammatology 158.

[59] Derrida, Of Grammatology 158.

[60] Referring to Kristeva, Barthes defines "productivity" as "the very theatre of a production where the producer and reader of the text meet: the text 'works', at each moment and from whatever side one takes it". See "Theory of the Text", 36-37.

[61] Cf. Derrida, La dissémination (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 236-50. Analysing the work of Mallarmé, Derrida discusses extensively the double value of "hymen" in "La Double Séance" (published in La Dissémination, pp. 200-317), where he relates it to other concepts of ambivalence developed by him, such as "pharmakon", "supplement", and "différance".

[62] Derrida, La Dissémination 237.

[63] Foucault 123.

[64] Cf. Maurice Blanchot, La part du feu (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) 69; 326.

[65] Cf. The teleological tendency found in Blanchot's reflection on suicide is discussed in Chapter One. Despite being recurrent in his work, the coexistence of opposites sometimes transpares a tendency towards polarisation, particularly

remarkable in the approach to the relationship between life (creation) / death (destruction).

[66] Blanchot 308-09.

[67] Elizabeth Wright, ed, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 52-56.

[68] Cf. Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

[69] Among the various references made by Kristeva to processes such as "signifiance" and "intertextuality", a detailed definition can be found in *Séméiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil). Additionally, Bathes revisits Kristeva's concepts in the "Theory of the Text" (31-47)

[70] Kristeva, *La Revolution* 137.

[71] Kristeva, *Sémiotiké* 95; Barthes, "Theory of the Text" 38.

[72] Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 285, Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977) 105.

[73] Kristeva, *Sémiotiké*, 95.

[74] Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 142.

[75] Cf. Barthes, *O prazer do texto* 50.

[76] Cited in John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990) 45.

[77] Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard: 1955) 37 ; *Part du feu* 312-13.

[78] Lacan 65.

[79] "The author was an excess". The translation is mine. Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 122.

[80] For Derrida's concept of *revenant* see, for example, *Post Card*, Aporias (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993); *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, ed. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

[81] Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 151; 183.

[82] Barthes, "Death of the Author" 145; "From Work to Text" 161.

[83] Cf. Blanchot, *Part du feu* 142.

[84] It is worth drawing attention to the deliberate choice of the adverb "predominantly" as opposed to a term charged with a teleological connotation, such as "totally". Evidently, the intention, here emphasised, was to affirm a certain primacy of the death of the author in the text while denying the possibility of disregarding so-called extra-textual aspects in the interpretative process.

[85] Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 145-46. According to J. L. Austin's concept, as defined in the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language,* edited by Tzevetan Todorov and Oswald Ducrot (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1979) 342, an utterance is performative if "it describes a certain action accomplished by its speaker" and "producing this expression amounts to accomplishing that action", being, therefore, its meaning dependent of such an action.

[86] Peter Lamarque, "The Death of the Author: an Analytical Autopsy", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 30(4): 329.

[87] Barthes, "To Write: Intransitive Verb?" *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 1970) 142.

[88] Blanchot, *La part du feu* 142; 327.

[89] Sollers, "Literature and Totality", *Writing and the Experience of Limits,* trans. Phillip Barnard and David Hayman, ed. David Hayman (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 68.

[90] Blanchot, *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001) 5.

[91] Cf. Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* 106; Sollers 67.

[92] Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà* 128.

[93] Cf. Barthes, "To Write" 142; Emile Benveniste, "Actif et moyen dans le verbe," *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale*, vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) 172.

[94] Cf. Barthes, "To Write" 142.

Part II

4. Speaking to/about the Dead: Plath's Belated Witnesses

An "eyewitness", according to the *OED*, is "one who gives testimony to what he has seen with his own eyes", in other words, "from personal observation".[1] In cases of suicide, however, the concept of "belated witness" is not fundamentally associated with one's physical presence at the specific time and place of death. Instead, as herein proposed, the presence of "belated witnesses" is defined by their interaction with memorial texts while remaining absent from the suicide's self-fragmentation into a killer-victim. To become a belated witness means, in other words, to see suicide "personally", yet in deferral. Consequently, the greater the reverberations are, the more detached from the "corpse" the witnesses can be. Given the sense of "revelation" inherent to memorial texts, all witnesses, to a certain extent, bear the claim for the legitimacy of their testimonies, regardless of their actual relationship with the suicide. This can be explained by the indeterminacy of the "death scene" as the space in which the killing and dying *process* occurs beyond the actual site where the subject became a corpse. The role of "exhumers" and "scavengers" played by distant witnesses such as biographers and journalists is an effective illustration of the alleged power of the "anonymous" to reveal the truth, or rather, the unseen.[2]

Effectively, a certain degree of sensationalism is applicable to the discourse of most witnesses, notably as a form of compensation for detachment in the case of anonymous "scavengers". The symbolism and dramaticity subjacent to the referential dominant in journalistic language, for instance, plays an essential part in the exposure of the body and, consequently, in the proliferation of witnesses.[3] Such an exploration of the abject attraction to self-induced death is considered to have been especially notable in Victorian times when accounts of "spectacular" deaths and detailed reports on suicide inquests fed the public imagination.[4] One of the most famous and well-publicised suicides occurred in 1838, when Margaret Moyes flung herself from a monument in Central London. However ordinary her life might have been, the collective taste for the gory instantly transformed her death into a fascinating object of extensive speculations. Soon after the fall, "the press enthusiastically took on the job of interpreting the event for those not present."[5] Newspapers thus provided the power of "personal observation" to their readers, presenting a re-enactment of the event masked as an identical replacement for the irretrievable. As in other memorial texts, the lexical selection and style function as

the materiality of the fallen body. In *The Observer*, for instance, the sequence of words seems to dismember Moyes's body as it falls: "Her left arm, near the shoulder, came in contact with the bar, and was so violently severed that the part cut off flew over the railings several yards into the square."[6]

Although Plath killed herself in the privacy of the Fitzroy Road maisonette, the image of her lifeless body in the gas-filled kitchen has become even more public than the flight of Moyes's mutilated arm across the crowded square at Charring Cross. Similarly, the secluded spot in the cellar where she overdosed, ten years earlier, and waited to die, did not protect her from public exposure. At the time, her failed attempt received the attention of the community, including the local press, which would interpret and disseminate information on the case to other witnesses. The public aspect of Plath's "first death" in 1953 is particularly remarkable due to its role as a metonym and a prelude of a collective funeral rite performed by a much greater anonymous audience.

On the first page of a 1953 newspaper, the headline "Find Girl in Cellar" announces the end of the search for a "brilliant Wellesley girl student".[7] Resembling Victorian suicide snippets, the report emphasises the scenario of (attempted) death, thus creating a highly visual reconstruction:

Missing Wellesle

juries," a hospital spokesman said.

Police Chief Robert McBey of Wellesley said that the sleeping

Search Ends

Find Girl In Cellar

A brilliant Wellesley girl student who has been missing since Monday was found unconscious today in a closed-off section of the cellar of her home.

SYLVIA PLATH, 20, of Elmwood Rd., Smith College senior, was lying on a blanket.

At her side were any empty water jar and a bottle of sleeping pills—with 40 tablets missing.

SHE WAS RUSHED to Newton-Wellesley Hospital in a police ambulance.

Initial examination showed she was in fair shape despite her "comatose" condition.

"THERE ARE NO serious in-

MISSING

pill bottle had contained 48 tablets of sodium butisol.

Eight pills were left in the bottle.

Sylvia was found while a 100-man party was ranging through woods near her home in search of her.

The Plath family was at lunch at about 12:40 p.m. when Sylvia's brother, Warren, 18, heard moans.

Suddenly he recalled an unused space under the porch and he traced the moans to this unused area.

This space, 20 feet by 10, has cement walls—part of the foundation—and a dirt floor.

It can be reached only through a 2½ by 2½ foot opening shoulder high above the cellar floor.

The enclosure opening is usually filled with kindling and scrap lumber.

Sylvia had pushed aside the wood, crawled in and replaced the lumber to give the entrance to the enclosure its usual, unused appearance.

Police and members of the family, searching the cellar Monday, did not venture into the space because it did not seem to have been disturbed.

"We should have looked there anyway," said Chief McBey today.

When Warren crawled into the under-porch space he found his sister stretched out on the blanket.

She was wearing dungarees, slippers and a green jersey.

Her water jar was practically empty.

Police were called and Chief McBey and Officer Theodore McGlone removed the girl.

RUSHED TO HOSPITAL

She was rushed by ambulance to the hospital.

A blue skirt and white blouse Sylvia was thought to be wearing was found later in a clothes hamper.

She had been wearing a halter and shorts the day she disappeared but changed before crawling into her hiding place.

Relatives and classmates of Sylvia attributed her depressed state to intellectual overwork.

She had set impossibly high standards for herself in classwork and was also engaged in writing poetry and an academic thesis.

Sylvia's work has appeared in several leading magazines, including Harper's Seventeen and Mademoiselle.

The girl had been disappointed in her own work lately, intimates said, although she was considered one of the most brilliant members of her class.

Fig 4. Newspaper clipping (1953)

Of particular interest, due to its symbolic signification, is the attention given to the hiding/dying place—a "closed-off section of the cellar", "20 feet by 10" with "cement walls" and a "dirt floor".[8] As the plasticity of the text guides the mind's eye through the once undisturbed cellar enclosure, it endows every reader with the power of "personal observation".

Therefore, Plath's hiding place becomes a space of disclosure, of a reluctant return to life:

> Sylvia had pushed aside the wood, crawled in and replaced the lumber to give the entrance to the enclosure its usual, unused appearance [...]. When Warren crawled into the under-porch space he found his sister stretched out on the blanket. She was wearing dungarees, slippers and a green jersey.[9]

However, like the living-dead, killer-victims cannot be utterly exterminated or resurrected. When Plath was found in the cellar in 1953, her body was not simply unconscious; it was *also* lifeless. Hence, she was—and continues to be—brought back from the dead in a process of disclosure similar to a public autopsy, which, in "Lady Lazarus", is poetically (de)materialised as "the eyeing of my scars", "the hearing of my heart", " a word or a touch/Or a bit of blood/Or a piece of my hair or my clothes".[10]

Plath's self-inflicted death by carbon monoxide poisoning ten years later reverberates such an interplay of elements of secrecy and seclusion while supplementing its ambivalence through an escalating degree of transformation and exposure. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that upon Plath's death, her image as a deceased did not offer the added appeal of the dead writer as an "illustrious suicide". In fact, if considered at the exact moment of enunciation, the discourse around the deceased following the events of 11 February 1963 is characterised by a sense of defacement and anonymity. News about Plath's death published in the *St. Pancras Chronicle*, for instance, reinforce the ebbing of all identity associated with death.[11] The short report shares the official tone of "official memorial texts", explicitly transposing the Deputy Coroner's words in Plath's death certificate into the journalistic text: "she died of carbon monoxide poisoning while suffering from depression" and "she did kill herself".[12] Despite necessarily referring to a specific individual, such statements of death address the deceased as an object that "non longer is" subject, the name seems to cease to be proper, denominating nothing, speaking of death, regardless of the ebbed identity of the deceased. Accordingly, the headline—"Tragic Death of Young Authoress"—introduces the reader to a

nameless and faceless dead woman, clearly prioritising the "tragic death" over the victim. Instead of describing and qualifying, the headline words have a paradoxical blurring effect, effacing even the fundamental duality that makes the "young authoress" a suicide-author. However, as the article unfolds, a certain profile of the deceased emerges: "Found with her head in the oven [...] 30-year-old authoress Mrs. Sylvia Plath Hughes, wife of one of Britain's best known modern poets, Ted Hughes." Such an unravelling of the deceased identity in this subheading reveals the impossibility of isolating an individual memorial text or sentence from the wider context of suicide as a performance. By addressing the deceased as an impossible referent, made simultaneously present and absent by discourse, memorial texts cause the deferral of the ultimate moment as an act in progress. Consequently, the posthumous voice of the suicide seeps through the voice of the living, continuously taking over the role of enunciator. The subheading plays with simultaneous paradigms of obscurity and revelation as part of the performance of Plath's suicide, thus doing and undoing the cloud of anonymity over her identity.

The following figures are reproductions of Plath's death certificate and the news at *St Pancras Chronicle*:

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH

Given at the **GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE**

Application Number .... PAS 838804

	REGISTRATION DISTRICT					St. Pancras		
1963	DEATH in the Sub-district of South West St. Pancras				in the	Metropolitan Borough of St. Pancras		
Columns:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of Death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
282	Eleventh February 1963 Dead on arrival University College Hospital St. Pancras	Sylvia Plath HUGHES	Female	30 years	of 23 Fitsroy Road St. Pancras. an authoress Wife of Edward James Hughes an author	carbon monoxide poisoning (domestic gas) while suffering from depression did kill herself	Certificate received from Geo. M. McEwan Deputy Coroner for London Inquest held 15th February 1963	Sixteenth February 1963	Alice K. Kimmance Registrar

See note overleaf

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the .... Thirteenth .... day of .. December 2002 ....

DAZ 057005

CAUTION: THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE °CROWN COPYRIGHT
WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.

010317 3667 03/02 SPSL 002842

Fig 5. Sylvia Plath's death certificate

Tragic Death Of Young Authoress

He Must Keep Away From Hospital

Admitting at Clerkenwell that he was in breach of a £100 recognizance, a 55-year-old man told the magistrate that he had been undergoing psychiatric treatment, but had discharged himself from hospital.

It was said that the man had burst into the office of the administrator and secretary of University College Hospital, Gower-street, W.C.1 and shouted: "I shall report you to the Kremlin and the Vatican — you are driving me mad."

William Gray, of Percy Cottages, Chilworth, Surrey was in July last year bound over in the sum of £100 to keep the peace for two years, a condition being that he should not enter the hospital during that period or communicate with any persons there.

In court last week he admitted breaches of that order by writing to Sir Alexander Maxwell, chairman of the Board of Governors and to Mr. J. Cross, the deputy administrator.

He at first denied that he had also entered the hospital out after hearing Mr. Thomas MacKeown, administrator and secretary, tell the magistrate how he had burst into the office, he said: "I have always respected you, Mr. MacKeown. Everything you say must be correct."

This was Gray's third appearance in court since July 10. On November 8 he admitted being in breach of his recognizance, having entered the hospital on September 28 and 29.

When he first appeared, Mr. Derek Muskett, prosecuting solicitor, said Gray was dismissed from employment at the hospital on July 23, 1960 and this seemed to have caused him considerable grievance.

Adjourning the case until March 1, the magistrate (Mr. L. E. Burke) asked for medical and mental reports to be prepared. "I must ask you to keep away from the hospital between now and March 1," he told Gray.

HOUSING LAND FOR ROAD IMPROVEMENTS

At their meeting on Tuesday members of the London County Council approved a recommendation from their Roads Committee to appropriate half an acre of land originally scheduled for housing purposes in

Authoress

FOUND with her head in the gas oven in the kitchen of their home in Fitzroy-road, N.W.1, last week was 30-year-old authoress Mrs. Sylvia Plath Hughes, wife of one of Britain's best known modern poets, Ted Hughes.

At St. Pancras Coroner's Court, Dr. John Horder, of Regent's Park-road, N.W.1, said that he had arranged for Mrs. Hughes, who was suffering from depression, to see a psychiatrist in the week prior to her death. But the letter was delivered to the wrong address.

He said that he did not know whether it could have made any difference if Mrs. Hughes had received the letter.

During recent weeks Mrs. Hughes, who had a nervous breakdown at the age of 19, but had no record of nervous troubles since then, had told him increasingly of her nervous troubles.

On Friday, February 8 — three days before her death — he became so worried as a result of a long talk with her that he spoke to three psychiatrists, trying to find a hospital bed for her. Two could not provide one and although the third could he did not think it would be suitable for her.

Later that day he saw Mrs. Hughes again and she seemed better and said that she was going to spend the weekend with friends. He arranged for a nurse to be sent to her home on Monday, February 11, to help her during what he regarded as a critical time.

The nurse, Miss Myra Norris, said that when she arrived on Monday morning she found Mrs. Hughes lying on the floor of the kitchen with her head resting on the oven. The room was full of gas and the windows and doors were sealed with tea towels and cloths.

After Mrs. Hughes had been moved to another room she gave her artificial respiration until the arrival of an ambulance, said Miss Norris. All the taps on the gas oven were on, and a workman switched off the gas at the mains she added.

Mr. Hughes told the Deputy Coroner (Dr. George McEwan) that his wife had lately had mysterious temperatures and nervous trouble.

The Deputy Coroner recorded his verdict that she died of carbon monoxide poisoning while suffering from depression, and that she killed herself.

PROTEST OVER GUARD RAILS

"Faster Traffic," Says Ratepayer

At St. Pancras Town Hall, Euston-road, N.W.1, on Wednesday, a St. Pancras ratepayer, Mr. W. O. Whitehead, of King's Cross-road, W.C.1, raised an objection at the council's annual audit before the District Auditor (Mr. S. V. Collins). He was the only objector.

Mr. Whitehead queried expenditure by the council on pedestrian guard rails outside the Odeon Cinema, King's Cross, and at the junction of Tottenham Court-road and Torrington-place.

Mr. Whitehead claimed that the council only had powers to erect safety barriers in the interests of safety. In his view the rails in question only promoted a faster traffic flow and a greater traffic density.

Mr. Collins said that he would study a report from the council on Mr. Whitehead's objections at a later stage.

Man Who Had An Axe Is Sent To Prison

At Marlborough Street a 21-year-old man was recommended for deportation under the Commonwealth Immigrants Act and sent to prison for two months when he appeared on remand charged with possessing an offensive weapon — an axe — in Robert-street, N.W.1.

At a previous hearing, Antonakis Elia, a radio tester, of no fixed abode, had been convicted with another man, despite their denials, of the charge and the magistrate (Mr. Edward Robey) had been told that he had four previous convictions.

Elia, a single man, was said to have been continuously in this country since June 1959.

Wife Sent To Prison, Warrant For Husband

Fig. 6 *St Pancras Chronicle*, Feb 1963

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Memorial texts are, therefore, transposed from the historic time of their actual production into the subverted linearity of the suicide's posthumous existence, becoming interrelated "chapters in a mythology".[13] The related notion of mythical time can, effectively, be used in the illustration of this process. As opposed to the strict diachronic organisation of events and related production of memorial texts, "mythic time" stands for a synchronic arrangement of past, present and future on the same plan.[14] Suicide, however, does not accept the prevalence of one mode over another. Mirroring the detachment and dialogue between living and posthumous personae, the subverted temporality of the deceased's posthumous existence is promotes a juxtaposition of synchrony and diachrony, thus maintaining the fundamental link with the origin of the enunciation while nullifying historic linearity.

Thus, the temporality of suicide juxtaposes the denial of termination with a sense of a halt, a paralysis. The deconstructive dialogue between living and posthumous personae functions as a "death mask" that always presents the suicide as a displaced image. In other words, however volatile, the posthumous persona is simultaneously perpetual, as the displaced voice of the dead enunciator interlaces past, present and future in a posthumous existence. A memorial text conjures the deceased while systematically immolating his/her living image. Consequently, the death witnessed by the audience comprehends the suicide's entire existence, now turned posthumous. The metonymic relationship between each individual memorial text and the space in which it is inscribed is closely associated with the effects of posthumous temporality. The report published by the *St. Pancras Chronicle*, for instance, contains key elements pertaining to "Plath's mythology", namely the interrelation of her death with writing and the figure of Ted Hughes. Questions related to Hughes will be further discussed later in a close analysis of the "suicide effect" on his role in Plath's posthumous existence.

The aspects of death and rebirth associated with the textual conjuration of the suicide result greatly from the echoing and intertwining of voices, like the seeping of the deceased's words through the coroner's report of Virginia Woolf's death.[15] Effectively, in this case, the existence of suicide letters produces a posthumous echo of her own words into repeated reproductions in a variety of memorial texts. In Plath's *The Bell Jar*, such an echoing involves the possibility of an interchange of roles between the living and the dead, subject and object.[16] The novel creates a dialogue between not only her suicide attempt and her fictional counterpart, but also between the textual reconstructions by the press in each case. While in hospital, Esther Greenwood sees the newspaper clippings of her failed overdose, which a fellow suicide had collected. The upper case headlines, separated in bold letters from the main text, echo the Wellesley newspapers

headlines: "SCHOLARSHIP GIRL MISSING. MOTHER WORRIED", "SLEEPING PILLS FEARED MISSING WITH GIRL", "GIRL FOUND ALIVE!"[17]

Parallel to the intertextual mirroring of memorial texts—i.e. the newspapers reports from the Wellesley local press and their fictional counterpart— the novel triggers a shuttling between Plath and Esther Greenwood, whilst they continuously slip in and out of enchained roles as killer-victim/the dead (enunciator) and witness/the living. In the act of writing, Plath performs both roles as the living and the dead, as she becomes a witness of her own "first death", disclosing it to an absent audience. Unfolding into a posthumous future, marked by the actual physical disappearance of the subject of writing, such a duality of roles has a splintering effect on the figure of the author in its constant shuttling between the living (subject of writing, witness) and the dead (dead enunciator, represented object). Hence, the image of the body found in the kitchen on 11 February 1963 contains juggling fragments of different roles and facets. Similarly, as though enclosed between mirror walls, Plath's death on 11 February 1963 reflects and is reflected into series of deferred deaths, including third parties' testimonies as well as her "first suicide" in 1953 and Esther Greenwood's failed overdose.

In this context, the dissemination of "personal observation" among an increasingly anonymous audience is directly related to an intertextual cycle of death and rebirth: through the intertwining of voices, the text *invokes* the suicide-author, reinforcing her absence while conjuring between the lines a tantalising *quasi*-presence—an "apparition". In his theory of "hauntology", Derrida suggests that the (non-)existence of a "ghost" presupposes a process of "paradoxical *incorporation*", through which it receives a "body" that is, nonetheless, "more abstract than ever"— i.e. "an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition".[18] Unidentifiable and non-localisable, Derrida's spectre can "haunt all places at the same time", making one feel looked at but incapable of seeing anything.[19] Similarly, suicide involves a process of deferred incorporation through successive apparitions in the dialogue between the living and the dead. Hence, the "body" the suicide-author is endowed with is constituted by a wreath of memorial texts whose (de)composition encompasses the continuous hide-and-seek of its own incompleteness. Throughout the test-case analysis, Plath's haunting trail across the internal and external contours of a variety of memorial texts will present marks of the pervading quality of her posthumous voice—i.e. the "spectral rumour" of her *quasi*-presence. [20]

The conjuration of the suicide-author in its most tangible form is often performed by memorial texts that explicitly focus the event of death and its most immediate circumstances and surroundings. After all, in order fully to perceive the

disquieting ambivalence of the killer-victim, the audience requires a re-enactment, a simulacrum of the warm corpse. Thus, textual conjuration and the multiplication of witnesses have a mutual relation of cause and effect that impels the suicide into constant displacement—i.e. the deferral of a presence, a recognisable, yet indiscernible, "apparition". In the case of photographic descriptions, especially when produced by so-called "anonymous witnesses", the intertextual element is rather explicit, since the illusion of revelation depends on existent reconstructions.

The "haunting process", or posthumous reverberation, evidently continues across the interrelated voices of belated witnesses, whose degree of "personal observation" is as varied and multi-faceted as their memorial texts. Hence, like a "death mask" that freezes the moment of death while being paradoxically in constant transformation, the image of Plath's body "lying on the floor of the kitchen with her head resting on the oven", displayed in the sub-heading of the *St. Pancras Chronicle*, re-emerges in the words of other witnesses, particularly those detached from any direct relationship with the suicide-to-be. The following sequence of extracts, quoted from selected biographical sources, illustrates the echoing and appropriation of one of Plath's death masks:[21]

> When she knocked on Sylvia's door there was no answer and the smell of the gas was overpowering. The builders forced the lock and found Sylvia sprawled in the kitchen. She was still warm. She had left a note saying, 'Please call Dr___', and giving the number. But it was too late.[22]

> The smell of gas was unmistakable. Forcing open the door to the kitchen, they found Sylvia sprawled on the floor, her head on a little folded cloth in the oven. All gas taps were full on.[23]

> Outside the upstairs flat's door, they could both smell the unmistakable odor of gas. When Langridge [*a builder*] broke down the door, they rushed in, forced their way into the kitchen, and found Sylvia sprawled out on the tile floor, her head still in the oven.[24]

In fact, the "echo" here produced by repetition can be demonstrated acoustically if the extracts are read aloud and consecutively. The reverberation of similar sounds presents the materiality of the trail left by intertextual relations between the testimonies of different witnesses. The effect produced is the creation of a certain leitmotif that resonates through memorial texts in the search for revelation and disclosure. At times, it is indeed possible to perceive and identify the repetition of

some expressions of impact, as illustrated by the words marked in bold typeface in the previous extracts. Nevertheless, the pattern created is, once more, that of differentiated repetition. After all, not only does the process of reverberation presuppose an interrelation between elements, but it also implies the persistence of individual singularity that marks their deferral. In other words, the intertextual dialogue between memorial texts occurs through an unsurpassable interval of difference responsible for a constant veering in the signification process in spite/on account of the illusory uniformity. As a result, both the lost origin and the reverberated voice are transformed as each memorial text (de)composes the posthumous persona by offering an original repetition of a body in transformation. Like variations of the same theme, the extracts offer highly sensorial portraits of the scene of death, perceived by the distorted lens unique to each belated witness. Alexander, for instance, is the most visual of all; through the smell of gas, one is led into the kitchen by the rushing movement of the builder and nurse, finding a body "sprawled out on the tiled floor". Stevenson, on the other hand, emphasises the smell of gas before and after finding the body and Alvarez enhances the synaesthesic aspect while proceeding into his argument against the deliberation of Plath's death.

The interrelation of these "death masks" can also be described with reference to the Tzvetan Todorov's concept of "embedding"—i.e. the device through which a story is enclosed within another without raising the question of origins, as one narrative refers to another in a series of reflections. [25] Applied to the unfolding of tales of death, the notion of "embedding" offers a rather visual description of textual interpenetration: the voices that reverberate are deferred as part of another voice, emerging as both a lack and a supplement. For suicide-authors like Plath, the bonds between death and writing are revealed in simultaneously yet antagonistic ways. On the one hand, the end of the text points to the end of life, both in the "last words" of the suicide and in biographical accounts by third parties. On the other hand, the repetition of the death throes maintains the deceased in constant transformation, as though somewhat animated. Thus, the deferral of the voice of the dead and its interlacing with memorial texts by the audience ensure the continuous haunting and conjuration of the suicide throughout his/her posthumous existence.

While a detailed analysis of individual memorial texts does not concern this study, it is important, however, to recognise the ways in which differences as well as similarities operate in the deconstruction of the posthumous persona. In this context, the role of belated witnesses as "decomposers" is performed through a continuous movement of appropriation and re-appropriation of voices by both the

living and the dead. Hence, any attempt return to the same results in an unceasing transformation and interrelation of memorial texts, rearranged repeatedly as disconnected yet indissoluble pieces of a kaleidoscope. This process is particularly notable in memorial texts by belated witnesses, in which the incorporation of the voice of the other corresponds to the re-creation of another microcosmic "death scene", as part of the continuous decomposition of the deceased.

Out of the cauldron of memorial texts by third parties, Trevor Thomas's *Last Encounters* stands out due to its value as an actual testimony. [26] Professor Thomas, who lived in the ground floor flat at 23 Fitzroy Rd, was the last person to see Plath alive. In other words, he was *almost* an eyewitness in the strict sense of the word. Published privately, *Last Encounters* can be accessed for research at the Smith College archives, but was never actually released to the general public. The impact of Thomas's voice is marked precisely by its dissemination through witnesses who were not physically present at the scene, being, therefore, best heard embedded in the "renewed revelations" resulting from the appropriation process. Similarly, the reading of *Last Encounters* supplements this process, by the re-incorporation of Thomas's own voice through the dialogue established with the textual body.

The question of appropriation also pertains to the peculiarities of Thomas's testimony as an apparently detached witness and a first-person narrator who had no particular admiration for Plath or Hughes, having, in fact, "every good reason to be more than annoyed with Mr and Mrs Hughes".[27] Throughout his memoir, one finds a coexistence of a sense of impartiality, expressed by an almost official tone, and the expression of highly personal views on the events and those involved. As a result, the construction of a "reality effect" in his account revolves around detailed testimonies based on personal observation combined with an emphasis on apparently parenthetical factual information. From such a combination emerges a parallel plot, a space in which the author strives to make himself the protagonist of a story whose very narration is an act of appropriation. "It's my story," he stated in a interview with Janet Malcolm, "I was the one who had to put up with it, and nearly go to Heaven on it."[28]

Effectively, throughout the text, one finds a conflicting tendency to divert the focus from the suicide account towards "his story", expressed in a variety of artifices. In this context, the disproportionate attention to apparently parenthetical detail is often combined with the manipulation of the hierarchy of the narrated events. While, for instance, the author devotes the first three pages to his discontentment about losing the maisonette, hardly a paragraph is dedicated to the suicide inquest, which is, in fact, relegated to a subordinate position in relation with a detailed account of his confrontation with Hughes. In this context, upon

mentioning the inquest for the first time, Thomas states, "In view of his [Hughes] accusing me of locking the door I contacted the inquest authorities".[29]

The way Thomas narrates the confrontation with Hughes is worth of note, due to the rapid change of focus from one person to another. The passage begins with the prevalence of Hughes as the main speaker. His aggressive and accusatory tone, exacerbated by the use of direct speech, is syncopated by brief expressions in indirect speech of his interlocutor's reactions and replies. Subsequently, a sudden change of roles shifts the emphasis to Thomas, who, therefore, takes over the accusatory tone and the monopoly of direct speech:

> "I didn't lock it, it's self-locking and she may well have locked it herself [...]. It's nothing to do with me," and I turned on him fiercely, "I'm not the caretaker so don't try to park the blame on me, Mr Hughes. If you had been here maybe it would not have happened. I know for I spoke to her last night."[30]

Evidently, this passage is solely about Thomas and Hughes. Although Plath's suicide is, undoubtedly, the cause and subject of their argument, without which it could not have taken place, she is clearly secondary to the passage. Thomas's re-enactment of the confrontation with Hughes focuses on the agency and immediacy of the discourse of the living as an instrument of domination. Thus, while he takes over the use of direct speech from Hughes, Thomas silences Plath by giving her the anti-role of the dead, who can only be addressed as an object, an absence limited to the otherness of the third person.

In *Last Encounters,* the author's preoccupation with his own image underlies a recurrent aspect of the relationship between the living and the dead, which Derrida describes as a form of "infidelity", a tendency to speak "narcissistically" about the deceased in order draw attention to oneself.[31] Nevertheless, one must note that Thomas inevitably fails to become a key figure in the suicide account, despite being the last person to speak to Plath. Effectively, in the wider context, the relevance of his identity is rather secondary. As someone who just "happened to be there", Trevor Thomas is largely an incidental witness, "pushed" into the death scene the same way he unconsciously inhaled the seeping gas during his sleep.

Given its "first hand" aspect, *Last Encounters* is undoubtedly a powerful memorial text, which successfully puts the expiring suicide before the reader's eyes. Thomas, however, remains as an "anonymous" witness, since the influence of his testimony depends precisely on its appropriation by others. The following extracts, from the last chapter of *Sylvia Plath* by Linda Wagner-Martin, are notably

expressive of the intertextual processes of reverberation and appropriation among the belated audience. On the one hand, Wagner-Martin brings Thomas's voice to the text, re-enacting the enunciation of his testimony through the use of citations in direct speech:

> As Professor Thomas recalled the scene, "I said, 'You aren't really well, are you?... Let me call the doctor.' She said no again and that she was having a wonderful dream, a marvellous vision. I urged her to go upstairs out of the cold. Twenty minutes later I looked again and she had gone. I could not sleep and I heard her walking to and fro on the wood floor..."[32]

On the other hand, the following—and final—paragraphs immediately efface the importance of any personal aspects regarding Thomas's personality or life. In *Last Encounters*, as in many memorial texts, the deceased speaks louder than the author or the reading audience. After all, the audience is not interested in Plath's downstairs neighbour or how big his flat was for his children.

Like other biographers, Wagner-Martin makes full use of the tantalising effect of the suicide's *quasi*-presence in the words of belated witnesses. Thus, she allows the witness to speak as a form of appropriation, using other testimonies to reinforce the veracity of *her* recreated account. In this context, the last chapter ends with the echo of voices appropriated from other memorial texts, intertwined to words laid Wagner-Martin, as the main witness:

> Early on the morning of February 11, 1963, Sylvia Plath knelt beside the open oven in the second-floor kitchen of her Primrose Hill flat and turned on the gas. She had left cups of milk beside the children's beds. She had put tape around the doors and had shoved towels under them to protect the children from escaping fumes. She had taken a quantity of sleeping pills, and had left a note, asking that her doctor was called. The nurse who was to arrive early came around 9.00 am. Sylvia was dead. The police were called, as was Dr. Horder. At 10.00 am, Katherine Frankfort arrived to babysit. Ted came soon after.
>
> On Feb 15 an inquest was held. The following day, the death of Sylvia Plath Hughes was ruled a suicide.[33]

At this final stage, the intention is clearly no longer to prove the reliability of the account by the inclusion of the words of other witnesses as evidence. On the contrary, the illusory sense of realism is produced by the careful construction of a

highly fictionalised narrative in which Wagner-Martin takes over the role of "eyewitness". In a series of short sentences, she creates a cinematic effect that follows Plath through the performance of the actual act of death, from the preparations to the formal attestation of her death as a suicide.

Every memorial text is *par excellence* a space where death is re-enacted and the absent consequently unfold into a *quasi*-presence. The exaggeration characteristic of the Plath case causes a re-doubling of the audience's "narcissistic" desire for disclosure into a hysterical display of the dead, earlier described as a form of "desecration". Although the disquietude surrounding the killer-victim cannot be obliterated, memorial texts such as Wagner-Martin's engage in collective rituals of mourning that aim at appropriating both the corpus and the "corpse" of the author as part of the public domain. Hence, frenzied by exposure, the audience is stripped of any form of self-recrimination, like the profound sense of guilt expressed by Derrida for "publishing her [his mother's] end, in exhibiting her last breaths".[34] Conversely, the more physically detached the witness is from the actual death, the more imperative is the belief in the legitimacy of textual re-enactments as a vehicle of dissemination of the "unique" personal observation of an eyewitness. Wagner-Martin, for instance, transforms herself, through fictionalisation, into an omniscient eyewitness while dispossessing untraceable voices and testimonies, making them her own. Therefore, the antagonistic combination of "fact" and "fiction" serves as a form of compensating the impossibility to provide a "first-hand account".

In effect, like theatricality, fictionalisation is an inherent aspect of suicide. Firstly, the distortions associated with representation are further problematised by the absence of the object—e.g. the irretrievable act, one's deferred image as a deceased, the unfinished posthumous persona. For the audience, the object is always an absent referent, materialised as a *quasi*-presence in the memorial text, fictionalised by the very process of retrospection. Secondly, being directly related to the concept of suicide as a performance in progress, the proliferation of verisimilar realities equally presupposes the subversion of notions of uniqueness and truth. For most "anonymous" witnesses like biographers, the main implication of reiteration is the possibility to recreate reality, thus endowing their text with the power of revelation and the singularity of their voices. In order to function as such, memorial texts must provide a certain sense of "disclosure", regardless of how groundbreaking the information actually is. As observed in the Plath case, widely known tales of death can often take form of revelation due to precisely the recreation of realities.

Rather than the actual veracity of a testimony, the question at stake is the *effect* of such an irretrievable truth, made paradoxically reversible and fictionalised by the search for disclosure. Hence, by conjuring the killer-victim through the interval of representation, all memorial texts invariably attest the truthfulness of their content, claiming the quality of a first hand account by an eyewitness. Nonetheless, while the development of an aura of fantasy allows the movement of disclosure to be constantly renewed, it would be as preposterous to consider the complete fictionalisation of suicide as it would be to envisage a total replacement of the living persona by its posthumous counterpart. The fantasia Sylvia Plath has become is her history deferred into multiple stories, hence inseparable from the reality associated with her living image as a suicide-to-be. Fictionalisation is, in other words, another mechanism of seduction into the deferred "death scene", which denies the illusion it creates—lest Plath became Esther Greenwood, a fictional suicide.

Furthermore, one must note that the recreation and renewal of revelations do not obliterate the impact of a witness' direct interaction with the suicide-to-be as a contributing factor for the validation of his/her testimony. As discussed in Chapter Two, A. Alvarez makes ample use of the potentialities of his personal experience with Plath, adding an extreme realism to his testimony, hence described by Hughes as a "detailed, point-by-point death of a public sacrifice".[35] In his autobiography, published nearly thirty years after *The Savage God*, Alvarez reinstates his status as an eminent "eyewitness" who was an active part of the "death scene" in the deceased's final months:

> I left knowing I had let her down unforgivably. I told myself it was Ted's responsibility and Ted was my friend. But that wasn't the whole story. I wasn't up to her despair and it scared me. My own suicide attempt was two years behind me and I didn't want to go that way again [...].

> Sylvia had another reason for visiting me, although I didn't mention it in *The Savage God* because the break-up of the Hughes's marriage was incidental to what I was writing about [...] She needed someone to listen to her poems but, even more, she needed someone to live with and take care of her.[36]

Speaking of Plath in his autobiography, Alvarez is, like Thomas, using the deceased to draw attention to himself as a protagonist. He systematically implicates himself as an active figure, whose proximity with the suicide-to-be endowed him with the power to conceal as well as reveal the "truth".

Alvarez thus poses himself as a high profile witness with access to undisclosed information and, even more importantly, a sense of responsibility that implicates him not simply as a witness, but one of the protagonists of the suicide plot. Moreover, added to his presentation as a high profile witness, Alvarez's emphatic note on his own suicide attempt aims at intensifying the degree of intimacy and proximity with the deceased. However, unlike Sexton's "The Barfly Ought to Sing", Alvarez's references to his death talks with Plath fail to convey a dialogue of killer-victims, an "encounter of suicides".[37] Despite presenting himself as a privileged witness, Alvarez remains as an ambiguous figure excluded from the select group of individuals closely related to the "corpse", here described as "eyewitnesses". Instead, like Trevor Thomas, and other incidental witnesses and acquaintances, Alvarez belongs to the category of those who had some actual interaction with the suicide-to-be, but who also act as part of the "anonymous audience", whose main intent is to expose the "body" and disclose the unseen.

Thus, being beset by contradiction, the search for truth and disclosure results in the interweaving of reinvented realities, promoting the deconstruction of the deceased. In this context, the renewal of revelations and the proliferation of "first hand" accounts are paradoxically sustained by the persistence of a hierarchy that segregates the "anonymous" witnesses from those who remain closer to the deceased, thus having a more extensive knowledge of the unseen. Alvarez's transit between these two categories is illustrative of the struggle for access and proximity to the universe of the dead, pertaining to all "anonymous" witnesses in different degrees. Despite being constantly transgressed and defied, the hierarchical system can be neither ignored nor removed. However, its parameters and divisions are as volatile and non-hermetic as the determinant notion of "proximity", and related concepts such as "death scene" and "eyewitness".

Not surprisingly, being equally overexposed, the implications of hierarchic divisions have been greatly magnified. Despite the impreciseness of such divisions, the typically Manichean responses to Plath's suicide were, from an early stage, translated into a deep antagonism opposing those in search of disclosure to the select group of "eyewitness", who, remaining "close to the corpse", conceal and guard it, being also capable of hoarding secrets of/about the dead. Exercised by the former, the aggressive force of this conflict derives from the transgression of hierarchical limits, based on an unshakable belief in the right for free access to the entire "body" and "death scene". Thus, as the search for exposure was apparently legitimated by thriving witnesses, a reverse process led to the previously discussed image of Ted Hughes as an "invader", a "desecrator", accused, throughout most of

his life, of suppressing vital material and working against the right of free speech of scholars.[38]

Moreover, the very establishment of a hierarchical system within the audience and the resulting emergence of contrary forces of transgression and protection of such boundaries constitute an effect of the ambivalence of suicide, particularly emanations of the deceased's deferred agency as a *quasi*-presence in memorial texts. Belated witnesses have been here described as the "translators" and "decomposers" of the dead.[39] However, their struggle to unveil and appropriate the "body" of the deceased must be seen with a certain reservation, lest one erroneously assume that the process of appropriation would simply involve the total nullification of the latent presence/agency of the dead through its transformation into something else entirely. Belated witnesses do serve as a bridge between the living and the dead, functioning as carriers and decomposers of the voice of the deceased. However, trapped in such interstitial spaces, they remain excluded from the realm of death, thus failing to act supremely by restoring the lost unity of the deceased. Hence, the *quasi*-presence of the suicide does not depend on individual memorial texts in order to exist. On the contrary, the posthumous voice is, in fact, a prerogative to the existence of belated witnesses.

A "spectre", for Derrida, is a *revenant*, an apparition that is, at once, visible and invisible, leaving one with the haunting feeling of being observed: "this thing looks at me and concerns me and asks me to respond or to be responsible."[40] The interest of the concept of "spectrality" lies in the double character of the spectre and its haunting place, namely *life-death*. Similarly, the killer-victim emerges from/into memorial texts as *phainesthai*, an apparition carrying the transit between darkness and light. Therefore, brought to sight in the words of belated others, Plath is both the absence that cannot respond and the restless *quasi*-presence that observes and calls its audience. In the latter case, the posthumous dialogue is marked by the expression of the deceased's residual agency as a counter-movement of appropriation towards the belated audience. For the majority of witnesses, such "apparitions" constitute an invitation to enter the over-exposed "death scene" exposed in search of further rearranged and fictionalised pieces of evidence. However, for those standing dangerously close to the deceased, the need to guard the "body" from exposure and desecration is often combined with a desperate attempt to protect themselves from the impact of such "apparitions".

There are evidently neither limits nor an end to the exposure of the deceased. Besides, the more evident the division is, the greater the memorial forum becomes, thus fuelling the effects of the suicide's posthumous agency. A rather "hysterical" example of this process is given by the notorious conflict

between Plath's literary estate and biographers, which reached a climax by the late eighties with the release of a series of controversial publications, such as Wagner-Martin's biography. In March 1988, *The Independent* published a letter by Anne Stevenson, in which some of the recurring issues of the time are blatantly exposed, notably:

> It is difficult for Ted Hughes as executor and Olwyn Hughes in that they were closely associated with an author who, before her suicide, poured out many letters of passionate hatred. [...]
>
> My role as authorised biographer has been difficult because I have tried to respect both Plath and the witnesses, and to make objective judgements. Olwyn Hughes, who has earned her part of the royalties for my biography (these are *not* to go to the estate, but to her personally), has been agent, witness, researcher, and critic throughout, invaluable in producing material. [...] *Bitter Fame* (the tile suggested by Olwyn Hughes) is the best I can do, both to the poet (who, at her best, is marvellous) and those who suffer seemingly endlessly from the tragedy of her suicide.[41]

Beneath the surface of the—equally overexposed—"battle field" in which Stevenson's claims are inserted, one finds the rustle of the deceased's deferred agency in constant friction with the limits of life and death. Even though, in her letter to the editor, Stevenson focuses primarily on the living, each sentence is marked by a certain translucence that lets through Plath's "spectral gaze", unveiling the delayed, yet coercive, effect of her *quasi*-presence. Hence, behind the fight for the control over the suicide-author's "remains", all witnesses—including Stevenson, in her role of "authorised biographer"—have their roles and statuses dictated by the supposedly silent dead woman. One may, therefore, perceive a certain mirror-effect between the stratification of the audience and the intensity and particularities of posthumous interactions involving the deceased and specific groups of belated witnesses, here described as the "eyewitnesses". Naturally, the closer one is to the deceased, the greater are the personal implications of the latter's posthumous agency. Consequently, while, to the "anonymous" audience, Plath's aura of abjection functions as a mesmerising call into the world of the dead, to most "eyewitnesses", the sepulchral agency subjacent to such a *quasi*-presence assumes—rather literally—the form of "haunting".

Among the *Bitter Fame* papers held at Smith College, a copy of Stevenson's letter to *The Independent* has a handwritten note by Olwyn Hughes on the margin: "Peter [Davidson] Tried to ring you today. This all amazingly distressing."[42] The

note and the published letter integrate the space in which biographers and the estate, here represented by Stevenson and Olwyn Hughes, collide. The *Bitter Fame* archives constitute a collection of such battle scenes, many of which materialised in Olwyn Hughes's profuse annotations throughout the manuscript. Deeply embedded into Plath's "death scene", these papers reify the weaving of a memorial text through the echoing of stories of their own. Parallel to the interference of the estate, expressed in the—not so—veiled criticism in Stevenson's letter, one finds different layers of conflict, often highly charged with personal implications.

The particular interest the Stevenson-Hughes antagonism poses to the understanding of the variable effects of posthumous interaction lies in the latter's preoccupation with reputation and self-preservation, combined with the common struggle to control the "remains" of the suicide-author. Included in the corrections requested by Olwyn Hughes, the following note, also addressed to Peter Davidson, concerns Stevenson's "Author Note":

(change to) "Ms. Hughes has contributed to parts of the text, including the analyses of individual poems, and I wish in particular to acknowledge (*thank her for???*) her contribution with respect to..." etc (i.e. omit "liberally" which is true but will be liberally misread, and change "have to" to "wish" as being marginally more gracious. I must insist you do this. At present anything at all can be read into this wording and it is best restricted. I notice she manages this statement without a word of thanks. But can't expect miracles, can we?
VERY IMPORTANT
Anne may have written this note, but I have to live with it. It must be changed.[43]

Expressed explicitly throughout the text, Hughes's profound concern with her "after-death" image is condensed to its maximum impact in the appended lines. The postscript, added by hand, stands out of the typed note, reiterating its various functions: an entreaty, an order, a warning, a complaint, a threat. In addition, it represents a forceful assertion of the differences between the "anonymous" audience and the so-called eyewitness, by turning the strict opposition of roles into an indisputable consequence: "it must be changed."

Subjacent to the unmasked animosity between Olwyn Hughes and Anne Stevenson, one therefore finds the resonance of the contentious roles of witnesses, bound together by their belated interaction with the deceased, however personal or impersonal. Hughes's postscript conveys remarkably such an irreconcilable

coexistence by forming a key counterpoint with the opposition of "to write" and "to live". Associated with the addressee and the addresser respectively, "to write" (Stevenson) and "to live" (Hughes) here constitute paradigms of difference, joined in the adversative limits of "but". As such differences unfold, the conflicting coexistence of such paradigms highlights the delayed effect of suicide through memorial texts not only on the deceased's posthumous persona, but also on the role of given witnesses in the recreated "ultimate" truth.

Olwyn Hughes's postscript emphasises the impact of one's involvement with the suicide-to-be as a determinant of such roles. Having no free-access to the "corpse", biographers, such as Stevenson, need to "look over the shoulders" of "eyewitnesses", remaining segregated and, therefore, "anonymous". Nonetheless, while deterring the passage of "exhumers" and "suicide detectives", the barrier posed by "eyewitnesses" makes such intruders relatively immune to the "haunting" effects of the dialogue with the suicide. In other words, such a detachment allows witnesses like Stevenson to recreate the death scene whilst being able to step further back in order to assure impartiality and the utmost effort to "to respect both Plath and the witnesses, and to make objective judgements."[44] Undoubtedly, anyone responsible for writing about the dead is also liable to face legal action from living individuals implicated in the text. However, unlike those who stand dangerously close to the "corpse", they are protected from the effects of the deceased's *quasi*-presence in their own text—in other words, they simply "write" it while some have to "live" with it.

In Olwyn Hughes's correspondence and notes, one finds an inversion of the oppressive role of the estate as a deterrent to biographical research. The most evident dichotomy is undoubtedly her conflict with Anne Stevenson, based on an ultimate concern to protect herself and other so-called survivors, in particular Ted Hughes. In a letter, written in September 1989, Olwyn Hughes wrote:

> You clearly have no concept of how this Plath stuff just poisons his and Carol's days. [...] If you have anything of importance about this book to communicate to Ted, please do it through me. [...]
>
> Can we give all this a rest now, close this book in the true sense and put an end to this eternal "dialogue" (mine helpful, with you; yours, paranoid and slanderous with god knows how many people).[45]

Effectively, in this letter, Olwyn asks for a written statement from Stevenson, guaranteeing that she will stop slandering her. However, although, being the author, Stevenson exercises and personifies the threat posed by the

biography, she cannot be regarded as the only or the main source of danger. In both Hughes's postscript and in the previous quotation, one finds the attribution of an "incantatory" aspect to the memorial text. Animated and half-humanised, the text is in itself a threat to those who, being part of the death plot, are also exposed to desecration and fragmentation.

The memorial text is, therefore, inhabited by destructiveness and danger, which are not limited to the loud confrontations between individuals such as Olwyn Hughes and Anne Stevenson. One must "close the book in the true sense," lest (the) suicide is uncovered and chaos is released into the "limbo" of "eyewitnesses". However, displaced between Stevenson and the text, such a coercive danger can be neither precisely located nor apprehended. Hence, the expression "to close the book" acquires a ritualistic value as a means to stop the oozing out of "poisons" as to deter their mutation and diffusion. Writing thus reaffirms its "status" as a "dangerous activity".[46] Like Pandora's box, the memorial text withholds unseen forces of destruction that cannot be controlled once released to the audience's eyes. Thus, for those belonging to the suicide scenario, the printed word bears a risk of dissolution of the integrity of their images as living "characters" of the recreated suicide plot.

Olwyn Hughes's entreaty to "close the book in the real sense" is a fascinating expression of the "infectious" nature of the biography, including related, yet unpublished, material. Besides, the addition of the adverbial locution "in the real sense" paradoxically affirms the subversion of literal meaning, as it suggests an attempt to transform an unlimited fragmentation of the textual body into a tangible object, bound the materiality of its pages and cover. Thus, the injection of words—"poisons"—into the space of death presupposes the self-destructive juxtaposition of opposing movements, namely, textual productivity as a process of "conjuration", and the "closing of the book in its real sense" as an act of "exorcism."

The terms "conjuration" and "exorcism", herein (re-)appropriated from Derrida's theory of "hauntology", convey effectively the "impossible" simultaneity at stake. For Derrida, conjuration is "the appeal that causes to come forth *with the voice*," to "*answer for the dead, to respond to the dead*."[47] As a thread interwoven to the textual body, the memorial text reverberates with a polyphonic chorus of testimonies, of repeated sacrifices and unfinished resurrections. Consequently, in its attempt at reconstruction, memorial writing triggers the process of conjuration, inviting the audience and the deceased to participate in the transformation of words and letters into metonymic scenes of death.

Conjuration and exorcism are here understood as effects of the dual movement of contamination between life and death, triggered by the search for disclosure. For those who "simply write", conjuration involves not only an evocation, but also an illegitimate incursion into an irretrievable space. Therefore, it implies, at once, a transgression of the limits imposed by the status of "anonymity" and a re-affirmation of detachment from the "body" they try to unveil. By publishing memorial texts under their names, "anonymous" witnesses willingly assume the role of "carriers" of dangers, here associated with "freedom of speech", that is, their right to disclose the unseen. Nonetheless, while remaining immune to the effects of conjuration, such individuals have their powers of transgression restricted by their very statuses as copyrights owners, since the benefits of property, as noted by Foucault, are exchanged for the authors' liability to punishment.[48]

In any case, the dissemination of danger emanates from the effects of such interventions in the textual body, rather than in individuals. After all, "anonymous" witnesses are inevitably overcome by their own testimonies. Paradoxically, however, the reaction of those doomed to "live" with the textual body is characterised by a constant process of "personification" of such dangers, in an attempt to trace them back to an "absolute" origin. Nonetheless, suicide displaces all names and titles, turning them into transitory masks in the deconstruction of the posthumous persona. Consequently, parallel to the (de)personalisation of "anonymous" witnesses, the rearrangement of the textual body fractures the fragile limits surrounding "eyewitnesses," maximising their exposure to an infectiousness that cannot be traced or deterred.

In the *Bitter Fame* controversies, Anne Stevenson oscillates in her detached condition as an "authorised biographer" who is, nonetheless, continuously dispossessed of authorial control and responsibility. Besides the intense intertextual dialogue with other testimonies, suicide stresses the haunting presence of the deceased, speaking posthumously through the text as a "co-author" in deferral. In this context, despite being explicitly directed to Stevenson, Olwyn Hughes's plea to "close the book in the true sense" targets the personification of danger while addressing the invisible threat haunting the text, namely Plath's *quasi*-presence. Thus, being repeatedly detached from the "body" they try to render present, witnesses such as Stevenson find, at once, protection and deindividualisation in the limits of their anonymity.

Moreover, the posthumous agency of the suicide-author points to a further contradiction. On the one hand, as discussed in Chapter Three, along with the effacement of the physical body, death strips the suicide-author of all legal rights,

naturally including the control over the manipulation and publication of his/her own writings or of any material about him/her. In other words, being essentially a deferred interlocutor, the suicide-author may speak in/through the living, but not directly *to* the living. Unlike the living, on the other hand, neither can their posthumous voice be silenced, nor it can be contained. Being multifaceted and untraceable, it oozes recreated tales of death through the words of testimonies by belated witnesses. Therefore, as part of the movement of self-destructiveness, the processes of haunting and conjuration are intertwined to the dialogue between the corpus and corpse, proposed earlier.

Like its physical counterpart, the corpse, the corpus is infectious and dangerous—a body of abjection that haunts the world of the living, tainting life with death.[49] As opposed to the anonymous sections of the belated audience, "eyewitnesses" are part of the "death scene," being, therefore, exposed to the animosity of the living as well as to the multiple and intangible expressions of the deceased's "post-ego." From primitive rituals to contemporary attitudes, the notion of "after-death" self-destructiveness is a recurrent theme, often associated with the view of the deceased as a perpetrator of death and destruction. In *Clues to Suicide*, for instance, Charles Wahl affirms that, by dying, the killer-victim "kills not one person but many," thus committing "not only suicide but vicarious matricide, patricide, sororcide, fratricide, and even homicide".[50] Consequently, the conception of self-inflicted murder," in fact, presupposes a displacement of the "self" onto the "other," namely the so-called survivors. Nonetheless, given the ambivalent nature of the killer-victim, the attribution of fixed roles inevitably triggers the deviation of its own immutability, hence the inadequacy of the term "mass-murderer" as an absolute synonym of killer-victim. Plath is neither Judas nor Lucretia. Instead, she is better described as an anti-hero, a martyr possessed by a violence that is "hot as death-blood".[51]

Similarly, "eyewitnesses" lose the apparent solidity of their identities, being broken by conflicting roles triggered by suicide. On the one hand, as agents of action, they are torn between antagonistic, yet inter-dependent, roles of "intruders" and "guardians." On the other hand, as the objects of action, they become targets of violation, whose boundaries are transgressed by both the living and the dead. It is worth noting that "eyewitnesses" certainly do not speak in unison, having, instead, their voices joined in counterpoint according to the roles assumed and their rearrangement in a given context. In the following example, the juxtaposition of active and passive roles emphasises the hierarchical opposition established by Aurelia Plath's "status" as the mother of the deceased and the detachment of

Elizabeth Hardwick's as the "anonymous" witnesses. In her notes about Hardwick's "On Sylvia Plath," she writes:

> She knew absolutely <u>nothing</u> of a girl who for the first 20 [sic] years of her life filled others around her with love and joy. The breakdown after Mlle led to electric shock therapy, poorly [administrated]—this split her into "<u>the</u> <u>double</u>"—I regret the inclusion of this blind, heartless essay—certainly as <u>cruel</u> as the human being she denounces.[52]

Aurelia Plath's repudiation of Hardwick's article has further implications other than those implicit in her evident intention to protect the image of her late daughter. Firstly, one finds a clear link between Aurelia Plath's intent to protect the deceased against slander and an image of herself as a holder of the "real truth." An image that is, in fact, determinant of the very nature of "eyewitnesses." Thus, in order to prevent such a distortion of "reality," she speaks out for the deceased, defying Hardwick with her own—"unquestionable"—truth. Secondly, the emphasis on the emergence of a "double" is a remarkable—and rather disturbing—illustration of the splitting and re-doubling of the subject into a killer-victim. As the basis of her argument against Hardwick, the notion of the "double" places Plath's "first death" as the absolute borderline between life and "posthumous life," the girl and the suicide- to-be, the killer-victim. The idea reoccurs in Aurelia Plath's notes, as she presents Plath's self-destructiveness as a result of the dialogue between opposing sides, in which "the shadow of her brilliant flame destroyed her."[53]

Given Aurelia Plath's direct relation with the deceased, she is evidently exposed to the "murderous aspect" of suicide. By simply conjuring the "double" in writing, she becomes a victim of "collateral killings," veered from the suicide to her "eyewitnesses." Besides, considering Plath's well-known resentment towards her mother, Wahl's conception of the term "matricide" is here supplemented by the particularities of the case. Coupled with the ghost of the "Daddy" as the suicide's parent, Aurelia Plath has death inscribed in her name like a life-long companion. Besides announcing her own disappearance, the name "Plath" also speaks "in memory of" Sylvia and Otto Plath, functioning as their "epitaph," which Aurelia carries around the world of the living.[54] The living decomposition of "eyewitnesses" thus unveils their curse and greatest contradiction: they, too, are victims of themselves, as they become the greatest "carriers" of the "danger" they try to stop and elude.

The greatest victim of collateral killings, however, did not bear the word "Plath" in his signature. Instead, Ted Hughes combined his name with Sylvia

Plath's, hence inscribing himself in her "epitaph." While their posthumous dialogue will be later discussed in further detail, attention is now drawn to the interaction, during his lifetime, between his "post-suicide persona" and the "anonymous" audience, in particular the persistent accusations of intrusion and desecration. In this context, a noteworthy illustration of the transgression of unsurpassable limits can be found on the front cover of Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*. Focusing on the biographical debate in Plath, the discussion provided is curiously impelled by a fundamental self-contradiction: by addressing the controversies surrounding the discourse about the dead, it systematically demonstrates the persisting "eloquence" of the suicide through an audience of which Malcolm is part.

Such a "(p)rattle of death" is materialised visually on the front cover of the book,[55] where a reproduction of "The Lovers," by René Magritte, acts as a prologue and invitation to the text, hence opening up a metonymic gateway to the space of Plath's suicide.[56] The picture, however, has its own language of death, combined with embedded stories about the apparent suicide of Magritte's mother, found in a river with her nightgown around her head. Inscribed in Plath's textual body, such "pre-narrated tales" are incorporated and re-composed into the "death scene," leading to further problematising. The painting integrates the "death scene," supplementing it with its own language of self-destructiveness. Underneath the shrouds, the anonymous faces acquire a name and an image. Visible only down to their shoulders, the couple seems disturbingly detached from their bodies and identities, totally concealed, except for their sex, suggested by their clothes. Their stifling kiss, through the smothering shrouds, disquiets the eye, threatening the peaceful solidity of supreme oppositions: intimacy/isolation, identity/anonymity, seen/unseen, *inter alia*. Consequently, aesthetic disquietude no longer suffices, as defamiliarisation becomes a form of instigating the eye to lift the veils, demolishing the claustrophobic blindness conveyed.

Oscillating is the interface between secrecy and disclosure, the image of the shrouds can also be effectively used as a metaphor of the frontiers within the "death scene," namely barriers through which relationships are established between the living and the dead or within the audience. Echoing Derrida's concept of "hymen", such frontiers comprehend interstitial spaces of undecidability between the living and the dead as well as "ordinary" and "exclusive" witnesses. In this context, as a frontier placed between the lovers, the disquieting shrouds tear them apart—from one another and the outer world—while paradoxically making them a monad. Moreover, seen through "impenetrable passages", Magritte's lovers are repeatedly "forfeited" of the anonymity and silence they convey, becoming icons of a particular suicide and her "eyewitness". Framed by titles and names, they wear

and display the opening and closing of such semi-permeable frontiers. Exposed over their covered heads, the names of the estranged figures seem to make up a "composite word" united and separated an "unsurpassable conjunction": "Ted Hughes *and* Sylvia Plath".

The oscillation between fusion and separation is a fundamental aspect of suicide underlying all relationships, notably the erratic dynamics of living and posthumous personae. The closer one is from the "body", the greater is the destabilizing tension between the opposing forces. As though separated from the deceased by just a "shroud" or a "three-letter conjunction", Ted Hughes had, more than his sister or anyone else, ingested the pomegranate seeds that granted him access to the underworld while leaving him exposed to the effects of conjuration and haunting. In fact, he lived too close to Plath to be accepted by the remaining audience without any suspicion, hence his portrait as an "invader" who, despite having legal rights, "unlawfully" manipulated the deceased's (textual) remains.[57]

On a symbolic level, the hostility against Hughes's access to the "body" is mirrored by the significance of the combination of their names. In other words, the addition of "Hughes" in Plath's married name signified a violation, an intrusion, as opposed to her maiden name, inherited from her father. In the late eighties, the end of a decade marked by controversy and the related proliferation of memorial texts, such a symbolism motivated so-called Plath advocates to violate her grave repeatedly, scraping her married name off the headstone. This was certainly not an act of desecration against the suicide. Rather, it can be described as an inverted form of exorcism, aiming at the banishment of a living intruder from the "body" of the deceased, hence transforming the agent of desecration into an object of (living) desecration: [58] The "obscenity" posed by the inclusion of the deceased's maiden and married name on the gravestone is thus founded on a direct correlation with Plath and Hughes, which, functioning as presence and corporeality, renders their coexistence unacceptable to the desecrators. Funerary artefacts are, effectively, supra-cultural signifiers of death and/or the deceased. A common practice in Early Modern Europe was, for instance, to hang effigies of suicides on the gallows as a form of posthumous humiliation and punishment in the absence of a corpse.[59] In a peculiar inversion of roles, the violation of Plath's grave relates to similar metonymic processes, which, by literally scraping Hughes's name off the surface of the headstone, performs ritualistically not only the expulsion of the "intruder," but, above all, the separation of an "impossible double".

Fig. 7 Plath's grave and headstone in 2004

Following the desecration and temporary removal of Plath's headstone, the metonymic fascination of the incident prompted the dissemination of collective rituals of mourning within the "anonymous" audience. In April 1989, a series of letters published in *The Guardian* launched a discussion on the lawfulness of Hughes's custody of Plath's grave and literary legacy.[60] Hughes's response to his critics was a long letter, entitled "The place where Sylvia Plath should rest in peace."[61] Hughes starts by jocosely asking, "May I say a word or two about the letter (April 7) from M. Parnaby and Wingfield?" Subsequently, the letter offers a vocal and comprehensive defence, including a detailed explanation of various reasons regarding Plath's gravesite, from the engraving of her name, cited below, to the temporary removal of the headstone. Hughes's first words are,

> Here is what I know about it. If I had followed the custom, the gravestone would have borne the name Sylvia Hughes, which was her legal name, the name of her children's mother. [...] I took into my head to insert the Plath after Sylvia because I knew well enough in 1963 what she had brought off in that name, and I wished to honour it. That was the beginning and the end of my thoughts about the name. [...][62]

On the surface, Hughes's explanation of his choice of the names engraved on the headstones seems simple and clear. Suicide, however, blurs all clarity, rendering

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the simplicity of the above explanation unacceptable to an audience to which, as Hughes notes in his letter, "the Fantasia about Sylvia Plath is more needed than the facts." Effectively, the antagonism between Hughes and his persecutors is paradoxically based on a process of equivalence between "fact" and "fiction" that offers the seductiveness of "Plath's Fantasia" as an illusory replacement for the irretrievable "truth." Consequently, the name "Sylvia Plath Hughes" does not simply identify the grave for practical purposes, following traditional procedures normally left unquestioned. The inclusion of the deceased's name on the gravesite establishes a powerful link between the vanishing corporeality and the world of the living, posing, in its engraved letters, the presence of an individual that no longer is. Thus, Plath's violated headstone displayed not only a signifier of her "body," but also the unwanted presence of Hughes, materialised in the intruding letters composing her married name.

Was Hughes being treated, as Janet Malcolm's suggests, "as if he was dead"?[63] I would say no, for, unlike the dead, he was made vulnerable by the rights associated with his living condition. However, as Malcolm rightfully affirms, even during his lifetime, Hughes was indeed "no longer *quite* mortal", having being tied to the suicide's "body", at once, as an intruder and an inhabitant of the underworld.[64] In this context, Hughes's maximised exposure to living desecration constituted a cursed legacy to those around him, in particular his children, who had also inherited the stigma of suicide from their mother. Hughes's correspondence with the critic and friend Keith Sagar, archived at the British Library, is punctuated by references to the effects of biographical speculation. In a letter dated 17 March 1975, for instance, Hughes comments on David Holbrook, stating, from the start, that "everything about that man is so sad and unnecessary." He continues, addressing an occasion when Holbrook was to give a lecture on Sylvia Plath in Exeter:

> [...] I wrote a very brief note—saying I trusted he would be as discreet as possible since he was in [crossed out] the territory of many friends and acquaintances of her children. I received back a four or five page letter— more like an essay—analysing her language and imagery in a way you would have expected of some pornographer or exhibitionist voyeur. The impression of the whole thing was of a gibbering, spluttering half-frenzy. I didn't answer, and in fact he never turned for the lecture. All his audience did.[65]

On the same subject, a year before, Hughes discusses the damaging effects of biographical speculation, noting that Frieda and Nicholas were "beginning to realise

that to some degree they are creatures in a peculiar museum—which anonymity could have saved them from."[66] Safe from the escaping gas in 1963, they could not, in other words, remain immune from the legacy of collateral killings.

In this context, Hughes's attempt to protect himself and his children by putting a halt to every dialogue or conjuration inevitably antagonised the very process of veiling and unveiling suicide.[67] Refusing conjuration, Hughes equally tried to "chisel himself off" the suicide plot, as seen in the public eye. During the preparation of *Bitter Fame*, for example, Hughes, unlike his sister, maintained the greatest possible distance from Stevenson's "space of conjuration." In fact, his participation is essentially indirect, protected by an intermediate acting on his behalf. Even in his list of excisions, Hughes lurks in between the letters, being represented as a third party from the heading—"CHANGES REQUESTED BY TED HUGHES."

Thus, over this period, silence would be broken mostly as a means of silencing the living and exorcising the dead. With an official tone, words about suicide were assigned a specific function—detach, clarify, deny, repute, *et al*. The following extracts refer to *Bitter Fame*, sent to Peter Davidson in 1988 and to *The Independent* in 1989 respectively:

(to be quoted in full)
Close though I was to Sylvia Plath throughout the crucial years, the bulk of what was happening to her then, of what she did and what she was, remains to me, matter of conjecture. For others, too, obviously it is not easy to separate the objective dimension of what could be observed from their natural response of conjecture and interpretation.
Without adding to Anne Stevenson's accumulated material, except for a few details about Cape Cod and our drive around the States, I have read through the typescript of this, simply to check and if necessary correct the limited number of facts that my own experience covers. Beyond that, I have taken no further part. And from anything beyond that, I dissociate myself.[68]

Sir: By lifting words of mine about Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* out of context (he quotes only half a sentence, letter 29 November), Ronald Hayman changes their implication somewhat. The whole sentence reads: I do not approve of the book and disassociate myself from any responsibility for the opinions or conclusions contained in it; just as I dissociate myself from the distorting and often damaging fantasies contained in the thousand of publications and endless teaching, lecturing and debating about her by

those who never knew her at all or, in some cases, met her only for a few hours or minutes. [...]

My own point of view is inevitably more subjectively coloured. But my general position is clear. As administrator of the legacy of Ariel, I have to permit publication of whatever contributes to a fuller appreciation of the author. As Sylvia Plath's former husband and the father to her children, I can only wish it were otherwise.[69]

Like "those who never knew her at all," Hughes tries to impose his own version of past and present "reality." His discourse, however, functions as a shield manipulated in an attempt to protect himself and those around him from the distorting effects of "damaging fantasies." Likewise, his silence aims at silence the prattle of "anonymous" witnesses. Paradoxically, by doing so, he fuels the "endless debating" about him and the deceased, spreading the "dangers" therein contained. Suicide had, therefore, triggered an unceasing process of fragmentation, which, lurking through the fantasia of the anonymous as well as his gaps of silence, would entangle him further and further into Plath's "body," before and beyond his own death. After all, total dissociation is as unattainable as total disclosure. For those belonging as a *quasi*-detached part of the suicide-author, her "body," like death, is a magnet.

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[1] J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. V (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

[2] The discrepancy between the "truth" by the "unseen" is here deliberately constructed so to convey the existence of an interval of discontinuity as opposed to identity. Contrary to the irretrievable "truth", the "unseen" relates to the posthumous fantasy of suicide—a disengaging mosaic of various "intervals" and "truths". It is worth also noting that, used in this context, the word "anonymous" refers to individuals who, despite not having had any personal contact with the deceased, are part of the audience, either as truly anonymous witnesses or as "exhumers" who actively attempt to reveal the unseen.

[3] The notion of "dominant" is here based on Roman Jakobson's definition as a focal element in the hierarchy of artistic procedures, as proposed by him at a conference at the University of Masaryk, in 1935. For further details, refer to Roman Jakobson, "La Dominante" in *Huit Questions de Poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1977) 77-85.

[4] Cf. Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 214.

[5] Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicides: Mad Crimes and Sad Stories* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988) 39.

[6] Gates 40.

[7] "Search Ends: Find Girl in Cellar", Newspaper clipping, dated 1953. Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[8] "Search Ends", Newspaper clipping.

[9] "Search Ends", Newspaper clipping.

[10] Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems,* Ted Hughes, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1992) 245-47. *The Collected Poems* by Plath will henceforth be referred as *CP* (1992).

[11] "Tragic Death of Young Authoress", *St Pancras Chronicle*, 22 Feb 1963. Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College. Please note that all references to Ted Hughes as a living witness refer to his role in relation to the dead wife during his life-time.

[12] "Tragic Death of Young Authoress", *St. Pancras Chronicle.*

[13] In "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems", Ted Hughes describes Plath's poems as "chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear—even if the origins of it and the *dramatis personae*, are at bottom enigmatic." The article is published in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, Charles Newman ed. (London: Faber, 1970).

[14] Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return. Or, Cosmos and History (New York: Princeton, 1991) 89.

[15] See Chapter Two for details.

[16] Other issues concerning *The Bell Jar* will be dealt later in this chapter, when approaching the question of fictionalisation of suicide.

[17] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Bantam, 1971) 162-63.

[18] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf, Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) 126.

[19] Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 135-36.

[20] According to Derrida, the "spectral rumour" "resonates" and "invades everything" (*Specters of Marx*, 135). For further details on the question of the trespassing of internal and external textual contours—the "intra" and the "hors" text—by the figure of the suicide-author, see Chapter Three.

[21] The notion of "death mask", here proposed, must not be associated solely with the image of the actual corpse, following the self-inflected act of death. While

the concept of a suicide's posthumous persona does imply plurality and fragmentation, the Plath case emphasises even further such a plurality with the insistence of repeated deaths, and consequently, disclosed suicide scenarios, notably her unconscious body found in the cellar in 1953.

[22] Alfred Alvarez, "Prologue: Sylvia Plath", *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. (London: Redwood, 1971) 31.

[23] Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Penguin, 1990) 296.

[24] Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking, 1991) 331.

[25] Tzvetan Todorov, "Narrative-Men", *The Poetics of Prose,* Trans. Richard Howard, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977) 66-79. Please note that the notion of "embedment" is here used as an accessory to the analysis of the interweaving of memorial texts, with emphasis merely on some of its theoretical aspects as well its metaphorical signification.

[26] Trevor Thomas, *Sylvia Plath: Last Encounters*, 1989. The memoir was published privately in Bedford. In 1990, Trevor Thomas donated a copy to the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College.

[27] Thomas 1.

[28] Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (London: Papermac, 1995) 200.

[29] Thomas 21.

[30] Thomas 20.

[31]Cf. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Brault, Pascale-Anne and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 6-7.

[32] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987) 243.

[33] Wagner-Martin 243-44.

[34] Derrida, "Circumfession," in *Jacques Derrida*, by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 25.

[35] Malcolm 127.

[36] Alvarez, *Where Did It All Go Right?* (London: Richard Cohen, 1999) 108-09, 205-06.

[37] For a discussion on "The Barfly Ought to Sing" by Anne Sexton, see Chapter Two.

[38] Hughes, "When Research Becomes Intrusion," *The Observer* 29 Oct. 1989.

[39] See Chapter Two for details.

[40] Derrida, and Bernard Stiegler. "Spectographies," *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews,* trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity, 2002) 123.

[41] Anne Stevenson, "The Literary Estate Versus Biographer Debate," *The Independent,* 18 Mar. 1988, sec. Letters.

[42] Stevenson, "The Literary Estate Versus Biographer Debate," The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[43] Houghton Mifflin Co. Papers on *Bitter Fame*, dated March 1989, Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College. The terms in italics correspond to handwritten words, added to the typescript.

[44] Stevenson, "The Literary Estate Versus Biographer Debate"

[45] Olwyn Hughes, Letter, September 1989, Papers on *Bitter Fame*, Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[46] The notion of writing as a "dangerous activity" is further discussed on chapters two and three.

[47] Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 41, 109.

[48] Foucault, "What is an Author?", Language, Counter-Memory and Practice: Selected Essays *and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. F. Bouchard (New York: Cornel UP, 1977) 124-25. See Chapter Three for a detailed discussion on suicide and authorial theories.

[49] Cf. Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Language (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 13-4.

[50] Charles William Wahl, "Suicide as Magical Act," *Clues to Suicide,* eds. Edwin S. Shneidman and Norman L. Faberow (New York: Blakiston, 1957) 30.

[51] Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Karen Kukil, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 395. Concluding the entry in question, dated 11 June 1958, Plath here refers to such a violence as a "flash of blood stars" in her head that endowed her with the capacity to kill herself, kill another woman or wound a man.

[52] Aurelia Plath, Notes about "On Sylvia Plath," *ms.* attached to related article, Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College. Elizabeth Hardwick's "On Sylvia Plath" was originally published in the *New York Review*, 12 Aug 1971, 3-6. It was later republished in Paul Alexander's *Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper, 1985).

[53] Aurelia Plath, Biographical Jottings on Sylvia Plath, *ms.*, Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[54] The relationship between the proper name and the subject's death is dealt with extensively by Derrida. See, for instance, *The Work of Mourning*, *Memoires de Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), and *Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[55] With reference to the "rattle of death" from the opening lines of "Burning the Letters", the word play in "(p)rattle of death" aims to convey the interlacing between the voice of the deceased and the flood of testimonies by third parties, which, in the Plath case, assumes at times the form of a "prattle of death".

[56] "Les Amants," 1928.

[57] See Chapter Two for further details.

[58] Besides, Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* (1988), a number of Plath's biographies were published along the decade, including Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath* (1988), Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic* (1985), among others.

[59] As cited by Helen Silving in "Suicide and Law", the *Costit. Piemontesi* of 1670, in Italy, prescribed that the suicide's corpse—or in absence of his corpse, the effigy—would be hanged on the gallows (*Clues to Suicide*, Edwin S. Shneidman and Norman L. Farberow, eds., [New York: The Blakiston Division McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1957] 82).

[60] The issue, which questioned who "owned" the poet's grave, is addressed with special attention in works such as Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1996) and Elizabeth Bronfen's *Sylvia Plath* (Plymouth: Northcote House / British Council, 1998).

[61] Hughes, "When Research Becomes Intrusion".

[62] Hughes, "The Place Where Sylvia Plath Should Rest in Peace", *The Guardian*, Letters, 20 April 1989.

[63] Malcolm 51.

[64] Malcolm 51.

[65] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, Ted Hughes Correspondence, British Museum, 78756, vol I ff.197, 17 March 1975.

[66] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, Ted Hughes Correspondence, British Museum, 78756, vol I ff. 197, 27 May 1974.

[67] Aspects concerning the play of secrecy and revelation in Hughes's memorial texts will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

[68] Letter from Ted Hughes to Peter Davidson, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[69] Hughes, "Letter: The Author of Ariel", *The Independent*, 1 Dec 1989, sec. Editorial.

5. "The blood jet is poetry": Plath in Her Own Words

Proceeding with the analysis of the selected case study, this chapter focuses primarily on the deferral of Plath's voice through writing and its effects on the renewing death scene. Hence, at this stage, the present investigation reaches the interstitial point where attention is diverted from the "wor(l)ds of the living" to the "wor(l)ds of the dead", without, however, detaching one from another, given the indissolubility of the posthumous dialogue they encompass.

Derrida addresses the impossibility of total detachment in notions congenial with the posthumous dialogue, such as "hauntology" and the "work of mourning".[1] In the extract below, as Derrida speaks in the wake of the death of a friend, his addressing the deceased traces the haunting movement of approximation and distancing:

> [...] my first wish is to let Jean-François [Lyotard] speak, to read and cite him, him alone, standing back without, however, leaving him alone as he is left to speak, since this would amount to another way of abandoning him. A double injunction, then, contradictory and unforgiven.[2]

The wavering distance between paradigms of life and death, above described, points to a reversibility of the haunting process: by "standing back" without, however, leaving the scene, one remains at a close distance, observing the deferred discourse of the deceased. At this "double injunction", one faces the dangers of the "work of mourning"—that is, reducing "the dead to the living, the other to the same" or "sending death back to death".[3] By oscillating at such a "double injunction", Derrida aims at presenting and reconciling the dangers therein involved. For him, silence is unbearable.[4] To address the dead is a way to reverse finitude, keeping them alive "within oneself". Yet, Derrida locates in this same act a sense of "indecency", a risk of "infidelity" towards the deceased.[5] Hence, whilst speaking *to* the dead as well as *of* the dead, he grants the deceased with iterable "last words", pronounced within the limits of life (subject) and death (object).

Suicide, however, defies the possibility of reconciliation. Compared to suicides, "dead interlocutors" like Lyotard are rather "passive" and "harmless", despite also subverting the limits of life and death. In such cases, the dangers caused by "speaking of the dead in the wake of their death" permeate the posthumous dialogue, but remain somewhat latent. Conversely, suicide amplifies and exposes the "double injunction" of mourning to the surface, maintaining the

deceased not only in the wake of his/her death, but in its process. On the one hand, one finds the persistent impulse of sending "death back to death" through a reiteration of the killer-victim's non-condition as a deceased. On the other hand, the illusory reinstatement of the deceased's presence is contradictorily, yet essentially, connected to the reiteration of the loss of such a presence. Hence, the danger of sending "death back to death" produces its antagonist, namely, the threat to reduce "the dead to the living, the other to the same".[6]

The following extracts, from the 1982 edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, expose the problematic of the irresolvable dangers of mourning. Inscribed in the superlative realm of suicide, they become the ephemeral materialisation of the "double injunction" in which the voices of the living and the dead meet, clash, and collapse:

[Omission.] For I smell it [corruption]. The house stinks of it. [...] I know. I know worse for knowing all myself and he [Ted Hughes] not telling me or understanding what it is to know. [Omission.]
May 19, Monday [1958][7]

I feel her disapproval. But I feel it countries away too. [Omission.] I wish... I could be sure of what I am too. [Omission.] I wish.... I could be sure of what I am: so I could know that what feelings I have, even though some resemble hers, are really my own. Now I find it hard to distinguish between resemblance and the reality. [Omission.]

[...] WHAT IS THE MATURE THING TO DO WITH [HOSTILITY] FOR MOTHER? Does the need to express it recede with a mature awareness? [Omission.] Does all hate pass off...?
Saturday, December 27, 1958.[8]

The syncopated abruptness created by the encounter of printed and omitted words recreates the doubleness of the writing subject—a killer-victim, speaking in polyphony as living and posthumous personae. Mirroring the spectral (im)materiality of the *quasi*-presence, the veiling and unveiling of words through printed words and gaps of silence allow the deceased's voice to return, speaking through presences and absences. As previously noted, by covering up an effaced presence, the extensive omissions found in this edition of Plath's journals cause paradoxically an expansion of the possibilities of signification and consequent creation of supplementary memorial texts associated with both the living and the

dead. In this particular example, the process of posthumous editing, is here materialised into a syncopated rhythm that punctuates and pierces the text, rendering the "cutting of the work"[9] perceptible on the level of both the signified and the signifier. Such a materialisation of the editorial intervention is particularly illustrative, for it offers a visual imprint of not only the "co-authorship" of the living, but also of the posthumous opening up of spaces where the deceased's voice recreates itself. Shielded between square brackets, the notation "[Omission]" marks the alien presence of the editor, indicating the place of an absence while simultaneously transforming it into a negative presence, the trail of the deceased's *quasi*-presence. Moreover, it physically fills up the gaps it creates, materialising the omission in its linguistic sign, as though even the suicide's silence required to be somehow verbalised. Hence, as the "truth" is displaced from the printed word to its absent counterpart and vice-versa, the memorial text is rewritten into another, disseminating the suicide-author's posthumous agency.

Lurking between the lines, Plath's deferred voice is, in fact, infectious. It adheres to the text, dragging the "death scene" through words and silence, thus making it impossible to ignore it, regardless of individual critical approaches to the relationship life/death and writing. It is precisely such a wavering autonomy of the posthumous voice that characterises the difficulties and simplifications involved in the interaction between the living and the dead, particularly through the latter's writings. Moreover, it is important to note that the very existence and recreation of such a "fantasy" depends on the duality pertaining to both the living and the dead, namely the shuttling of active and passive roles in the posthumous dialogue. Naturally, agency is more promptly associated with the living in their attempt to conceal or expose the textual body. The suicide-author, however, being the object of such actions, emerges as the subject of delayed speech. In other words, the deceased assumes the role of the main witness, of the bearer of the deferred—yet irrefutable—"truth". Given its undying bonds with the killer-victim and the writing/death scenes, nowhere is the illusion of "truth" and "proximity" greater than in self-addressed memorial texts, that is the deceased's "actual words".[10]

A noteworthy example is given by the preface to the unabridged volume of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, in which, from the opening line, the editor pronounces Plath's posthumous autonomy as the writing subject: "Sylvia Plath speaks for herself in this unabridged edition of her journals".[11] Above all, the question at stake is the ritualistic change of roles between the living and the dead. For instance, in the prefaces to both editions of the journals, one finds that Plath's *quasi*-presence, not the actual journals, is the object thereby introduced. Remarkably, in the 1983 edition, McCullough explicitly states the need to refrain from speaking, so as "to let

it [the book] *speak for itself*.[12] As though physically giving way to the dead enunciator, McCullough uses her words to clear away from the scene of deferred enunciation. She, in other words, reacts to Plath's *quasi*-presence, acknowledging as if deterred from speaking simultaneously with the deceased. The underlying interchangeability between "book" and "Sylvia Plath, the author" is duplicated by the "power struggle" that characterises the posthumous dialogue, as the living and the dead seem to appropriate one another's words. In the cited prefaces, for instance, one finds two equally meaningful, yet contradictory, forces, from which attempts of appropriation and rituals of transition stem. As editors or representatives of the estate, the authors of each preface attest *to* their authority over the publication of the text. Therefore, on the one hand, they have the power to "allow" the deceased to speak the unspeakable, as though granting her once again the use of "direct speech". On the other hand, by acknowledging the suicide's role as an "interlocutor", the posthumous dialogue already points to the superfluity of such introductions. For, as a *quasi*-presence, Plath requires neither permission nor invitation. Her words defer not only meaning, but also death. Hence, the infectiousness of her posthumous voice: lurking between the lines, it adheres to the text, repeatedly taking over the scene of enunciation as it speaks/looks back at the reader.

A brief parallel can be suggested between the "infectiousness" of the posthumous voice and Walter Benjamin's discussion of the "aura" surrounding aesthetic experience in "On Some Motifs on Baudelaire".[13] Speaking of the inexhaustibility of the "experience of the aura", he associates it with "the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship with the inanimate or natural object and man".[14] In other words, like de Man's "epitaphic discourse" or "prosopopoeia", a process of personification endows the inanimate with a voice, a face, bringing the dead to the realm of the living. "The person we look at," Benjamin adds, "or who feel he is being looked at, looks at us in return."[15] Plath's capacity to "look back" from the text is compelling and remarkable, for her deferred gaze conjugates the haunting effect of Benjamin's aesthetic experience and Derrida's "hauntology" with the tantalising proximity of the "real person", materialised in her "actual words".[16] Seen from the perspective of the living, posthumous agency, in order to be effective, depends on the creation of sense through a paradoxical neutralisation of nonsense, that is, the subversion of life and death therein presupposed. With reference to de Man's reflections on the "deviations from reality" in autobiography, the "uncontested readability" of the author's proper name here becomes an instrument of conjuration.[17] In other words, as a vehicle of such deviations, the deceased's words are treated as a "live entity",

capable of sending itself "back to death" as well as masking the dead as the living and *vice-versa*.

Thus, for those "written" into the textual body as characters of a "death plot", self-addressed memorial texts bear a "direct threat" from a presence that no longer is. Like Pandora's box, they enclose incommensurable evils, which, being impossible to apprehend, must be deterred from release into the *hors texte* at all costs. Hence the need physically to stop their dissemination by rendering the infectious body partially or totally inaccessible, as illustrated by the notorious sealing of some of Plath's journals in 1981:

Sylvia Plath/Diary 1957-59/Sealed 2nd Sept 1981/in presence of/Ted Hughes/Not to be opened until 11 Feb 2013.

Sylvia Plath/Beutscher notes/sealed 2 Sept 1981/in presence of Ted Hughes/not to be opened during/the lifetime of Aurelia Schrober/Plath and Warren Plath, Sylvia Plath's mother and brother.[18]

Written in Hughes's hand and archived at Neilson Library, at Smith College, these short and solemn sentences perform a reversal of an invitation for the deceased to speak, that is, an "exorcism". Notably, the very notion of "sealing" implies the infectiousness of the signifier as much as of the signified. The written word is a metonymy of the deceased; it contains its voices and fragments, the uncontained death throes of the killer-victim.[19] Like the early demotic practices of staking and burying bodies of suicides at crossroads, the sealing of the journals is based on the metonymic relation between the materiality of the text and the deceased, in which the body/ies in question are fundamentally charged with residual agency. Therefore, as the volatile embodiment of the posthumous voice, the self-addressed memorial text is not simply a carrier of its dangers, but, for those participating in the "death plot", it *is* the deceased's voice, an "actual" threat affecting their "lifetime".

The more automatic and, therefore, uncontested is the equivalence between the subject and the object of writing, the more effective and "direct" posthumous agency is. One may rightfully argue that the acceptance, by author and reader alike, of the impossible coincidence between the subject and the object of writing constitutes the base of the autobiographical "contract", whether the author is a suicide or not. Should the readability of the author's proper name be contested, the illusion fails and the "contract" is broken. This is particularly explicit in the case of journals, for their very function and existence rely on the credibility of an

impossible identity coincidence, that is, in their ability to dangerously "pass for the original".[20] A suicide diary can therefore be described as a recreation of antagonistic trails of one's life and death, masked as pieces of irrefutable evidence. In other words, it is a specious reversal of fiction, or yet, "a suicidal note with a history", as noted in a suicidological approach to Plath.[21] Similarly, "the real person in her [Plath's] daily life", located by Hughes in the journals, presupposes not only the illusory identity between "the author *of* the text and the author *in* the text", but also the absolute equivalence of the killer-victim and other active and passive counterparts contained in her signature.[22]

Revolving around a full return to the life of the subject, autobiography "gives one permission" to leave such a monological reduction uncontested, however problematised the figure of the author may—or may not—be. Hence, the very combination of words such as "The Journals of Sylvia Plath" in the title pre-validates the coincidence between subject and object of writing—i.e. living and posthumous personae—as well as the equation of the deferred voice as a direct threat. Undoubtedly, death takes away the possibility of literally responding or threatening the living as an interlocutor. Nonetheless, physical disappearance, especially when self-inflicted, magnifies the importance of an uncontested recognition of the author as a "real person" in the text. Composed by multiple identical pairs, Plath's "real person" is, in fact, even "more real" and destructive, as it bears the dangers from writing, killing, and dying.

In this context, as the volatile embodiment of her voice, Plath's writing is marked by an immanent and unconstrained aggressive force, expressed in outbursts against herself and others. It is interesting to compare, for example, the cacophony created by the gushing flow of words in Plath's journals with a series of photographs reproduced in both editions. Contrasting with the unrehearsed ordinariness of family photographs, a stream of violence seems to pulsate underneath the lines like a delayed heartbeat, threatening the living with posthumous agency:

> I have a violence in me that is hot as death blood. I can kill myself or—I know it now—even kill another. I could kill a woman, or wound a man. I think I could. I gritted to control my hands, but had a flash of bloody stars in my head as I stared that sassy girl down, and a blood-longing to fly at her & tear her to bloody beating bits.[23]

The conflicting dialogue between visual and verbal codes in this particular case draws attention to questions regarding the effects of posthumous agency upon the

"other"—i.e. third parties—and "the one and/or the other", that is the splitting authorship between living and posthumous personae. Here, the contrast created between the photographs and the gritting of "flash of bloody stars" in parts of the text is illustrative of what Hughes described as Plath's "warring selves".[24] According to him, the journals were an "arena of struggle" Plath "where she strove to see herself honestly and thought the way through the unmaking and remaking of herself".[25]

Questions of "truth" and "violence" are commonly associated with Plath's writing, a combination that potentiates the immediacy and intensity of the threat posed. An extreme example is given by the "contagion effect" of suicide in literature, which extends the dangers of writing to the general public to whom certain works "may even do harm to the sensitive and responsive young person".[26] However disputable, the claim that particular texts could "do harm" to the reader is based precisely on a belief in the inexhaustibility of the acts of writing, killing, and dying interrelated in the text. In fact, in *The Bell* Jar, one finds an explicit example of "suicide contagion" through the written word. When questioned about the reasons for being at the hospital, Joan, a fellow patient of Esther's, replies: "I read about you," "Not how they found you, but everything up to that, and I put all my money together and took the first plane to New York." "I thought it would be easier to kill myself in New York."[27] Joan turns out to be the only accomplished suicide in the novel. Esther Greenwood's own "first suicide" therefore erupts as a catalyst to a multiple other—which, according to the contagion theory, could also be both author and reader.

"Silencing" the dead can never be an easy task, for the posthumous voice is inexorable as well as inexhaustible. So is its means of dissemination, namely the poetic sign, as suggested in the last verse of Plath's "Kindness": "The blood jet is poetry/There's no stopping it".[28] Whether associated with "eyewitnesses" or the anonymous audience, the notion of "infectiousness" is rooted in the deferral of actions performed at the so-called original enunciation. Therefore, bearing bonds with the "hand" that writes and kills, the self-addressed memorial text acts as the common ground between the two instances, as though the signifying process assumed an incantatory effect, which charged the dead enunciator with residual agency, animating voice and word. However, given the ambivalence intrinsic to any authorial figure, what brings the threats of the dialogue with the dead dangerously close to life in Plath? Writing about Holbrook to Keith Sagar, Hughes argues that the former approached Plath's language and imagery "in a way you would have expected of some pornographer or exhibitionist voyeur".[29] The plasticity of the terms "pornographer" and "voyeur" points to the illusion of "real time", the

"animated" aspect of the suicide: both death and killer-victim are somewhat "alive", something to be seen—hence the spectacle. Plath's language reinforces the eruption of—"actual" or textual—suicide, for it is capable of not only signifying, but also "acting". While alluding to Austin's theory, the notion of "performative", here proposed, implies necessarily its subversion into a "posthumous performance".[30] In other words, action, utterance, and enunciator are deferred, yet, perceived, on many levels, as an absolute presence.

It would be certainly erroneous to relate the idea of violence uniquely to writing, thus dissociating the poet from the suicide. Likewise, cheerful family photographs or depictions of Plath as a young mother and betrayed wife pertain to the same physical body that performed its own extinction. There is, nonetheless, an undeniable tendency towards fusion as well as dissociation in the approach to Plath's work, which can be perceived in the discourse of the living. Aurelia Plath, for instance, recurrently refers to her daughter as a double, often as a means of detaching the violent and destructive side from its polar opposite, that is, "Sylvia Plath, as we, her family, knew her":[31]

> While no one knew better than Sylvia how to celebrate life, her double, the shadow of her brilliant flame destroyed [betrayed?] her [...].[32]

The familiarity with "the double", denoted in the extracts above, is clearly associated with the emphasis of the exclusive proximity of "eyewitnesses" with the "truth" about the suicide. Moreover, from the eyewitness' perspective, the "splitting" of the killer-victim paradoxically serves as a means of rendering its resulting duality somewhat more manageable. By stressing her daughter's fissure into two antagonistic sides, Aurelia Plath detaches not simply a facet, but an entire persona supposedly isolated from other personae or the ignorant eyes of other witnesses. It is, however, equally clear that her descriptions of "the double" do not imply a complete denial or elimination of either Plath's murderous "shadow" or her "brilliant flame". Instead, Aurelia Plath's words point to the cataclysmic concordance of Plath's doubles, through which killer and victim, author and suicide preserve agency whilst paradoxically annihilating one another.

Similarly, in *The Bell Jar*, the antagonism between life and death is displayed in discrepant images of the suicide's splitting self. Hence, the fictionalised self is also a double. On the side of life, the heroine is portrayed as the beautiful scholarship girl, full of glee and indissociable from her family:

> The first clipping showed a big, blown-up picture of a girl with black-shadowed eyes and black lips spread in a grin. [...] The next clipping showed a picture of my mother and brother and me grouped together in our backyard and smiling. [...][33]

Death, however, is dark and shapeless. In fact, depersonalised, as a suicide, she is barely human:

> The last picture showed policemen lifting a long, limp blanket roll with a featureless cabbage head in the back of an ambulance.[34]

Undoubtedly, the ambivalence derived from the relationship between representation and death is not exclusive to self-addressed memorial texts. However, in Plath, what makes the illusion of her *quasi*-presence so coercive and overwhelming is its ability to pass unquestionably as real. In other words, the text instigates the audience to accept and promote the suppression of the "reality-effect" into the monological "reality" of an absence turned into presence. Hence, however absurd the equation of paradigms of life and death is, the impact of the deceased's voice renders its agency real along with the fear and the danger that may afflict eyewitnesses. The suicide, therefore, acts posthumously, being, on many levels, perceived as an agent, whose materiality—i.e. writing—bears threats beyond the apparent frontiers of the text.

Thus, the validation of its "dangers" as "reality" by the posthumous dialogue derives from a persistent reaffirmation of death that is, nonetheless, essentially linked with an exaggerated reduction of "the dead to the living, the other to the same".[35] That is, the posthumous voice compels the living to respond by reaffirming death whilst simultaneously treating the deceased as though she were a living agent. Deferred through writing, suicide-authors not only speak posthumously, but also kill and die, being hence more "present" and, consequently, more "dangerous". The following example, comprising extracts from the correspondence between Aurelia Plath and Hughes, concerns an offer by Harper and Row to publish *The Bell Jar* in the United States:

> I did not tell Ted I was writing to you. He simply said you wouldn't like it, and for him that was the end of it. Just in case he's wrong [...] I'm writing if there are bits of the novel you find too painful, perhaps phrases could be cut. Sorry to bring this up, Aurelia.[36]

It's not the <u>book</u> [sic] selling itself, it's Sylvia's suicide![37]

The immediacy and reality of fear points to what some scholars have rightfully addressed as an impulse to reintegrate the deceased to the world of the living.[38] Nevertheless, being dependent upon the reinstatement of death, such a reintegration cannot be regarded as an impossible and absurd replacement of the dead for the living. Like the suicide's body, the self-addressed memorial text becomes taboo, for it unleashes dangers pertaining to life as well as death. Plath is treated *as though* she were alive—not as a fully resurrected being, but as dead person endowed with agency.

As previously demonstrated, the restitution of the suicide-author's role as the subject of writing and a unique life history is particularly pronounced in the plethora of secondary sources focusing on the disclosure of the textual body. In an article addressing the controversies surrounding Plath's journals, for instance, Hughes's role as a posthumous editor is associated with accusations of his having taken "the term 'literary executor' quite literally" and having done "a disservice to Plath and to scholars and other interested readers" by destroying the late journal.[39] Can the dead suffer a disservice? Surely, the author's play with the connotation of the word "executor" is nothing but intentional. In fact, the entire argument depends upon the subversion and neutralisation of the duality life/death, figuring the deceased as an agent of speech, that is, as the main witness whose testimony is seen as being irrefutable. For the eyewitnesses textualised by writing, however, the irrefutability associated with the deceased's "actual words" constitutes the "direct" threat posed by the posthumous voice.

The immediacy of such a threat is clearly related to the dialogue established between object (presence/life) and representation (presence in deferral/death) by the memorial text. Consequently, bearing the deferred voice, the suicide-author is also affected by such dangers. In a letter concerning the "libel issue" in *The Bell Jar*, for instance, Plath expresses, during the actual writing process, her awareness of the effects of the "links of fiction to fact":

[...] I've gone through the book with great care and have prepared a list of links of fiction to fact, and a list of minor corrections which should alter most specific factual references.[40]

Plath's concern with the "libel issue" relates directly to Foucault's concept of penal appropriation, according to which the author is subject to punishment in exchange

for the benefits of property.[41] Hence, the "dangers" posed by the equation of the text with "factual references" precedes its publication, affecting the author at the time of writing. Effectively, in the same letter, Plath implies a coincidence between the names of the author and of the protagonist:

> Of course you're right about the name of author and heroine needing to be different. I've decided to call the heroine Esther Greenwood, so all references to her and her family should be altered accordingly [list of pages].

She proceeds by explaining the list of corrections, anticipating the possible "links of fiction to fact" and the potential dangers posed by their conflation. Notably, her preoccupation with the risk of libel is, throughout the letter, as remarkable as her persistent and sarcastic denial of its possibility. On the one hand, there is a pervading tone of mockery, which persistently contradicts and ridicules Plath's own acknowledgement of the interpenetration between fact and fiction.

> The editor Jay-Cee (there are dozens of editors in that magazine is fictitious & [sic] the only unfavorable [sic] about her is that Doreen calls her "ugly as sin". Surely no present editor who is not beautiful could sue me for this? [...]
>
> Buddy Willard is based on a/real boy—but I think I have made him indistinguishable from all the blond, blue-eyed boys who have ever gone to Yale. There are millions, and hundreds who become doctors. And who have affairs with people.

On the other hand, the risk of libel is never totally discarded. Intertwined with a vulgarisation of possible links between fictional characters and "real" people, there is an acute preoccupation with their validation.

> I do hope there are no grave grounds for libel in any of this. [...] Do tell me what the lawyer says. I don't want to get paranoid & think I can't ever say anything nasty about Mrs. Gleek, for fear thousands of Mrs. Gleeks I don't know and never knew will rise up and drive me and my babes into the woods.[42]

Although the risk of libel is invariably related to questions of ownership exclusive to the living, it is possible to suggest a parallel with the concept of "post-ego", as

defined by suicidologists.[43] In general terms, libel implies a punishment directed to both the individual who exercised the act of writing and his/her "dead" written self inserted and deferred in the text. Therefore, in the context, one's concern with the issue relates to a "posthumous" effect, triggered by the writer's death in the text. Plath, however, dies as a suicide as well as an author undone by writing. Supplemented by Plath's multiple dead selves, the so-called Death of the Author occurs in excess—inside and outside the text, as the self-inflicted act is also performed on the physical body. Furthermore, considering Plath's "first death" in 1953, such an interplay of "dead selves" emerges rather clearly both before and after her suicide ten years later. *The Bell Jar* is, in effect, a novel written posthumously, intertwining a fictional suicide and the author's dead image at her various suicides.

A fascinating illustration of such an interlacing is found with the *Bell Jar* papers at Smith College, namely a heavily annotated outline, in Plath's hand, of the chapters of *The Bell Jar*, subsequently reproduced:[44]

Fig. 8 Plan: *The Bell Jar*

Besides displaying marks of the author's thought process during the making of the novel, the document offers a mapping of a suicide, including lists of symptoms, key events, methods, *inter alia*. The unfinished, but well structured, aspect of the outline mirrors the conflicting coexistence of a striking sense of organization and contiguity coexists with the limitless entanglement in the dialogue between fictional and "real" death plots.

In the writing process, a sense of organization can be perceived not only in her known "artisan-like" approach to each poem, but also in the meticulousness after its completion.[45] She, for instance, kept meticulous lists of poems sent, along

with names of publishers/magazines, and dates of submission. Those accepted were underlined in red and included also the date of acceptance as well as the value of payment received.[46] In fact, in an interview given soon after her 30th birthday, Plath claims that "Poetry is a tyrannical discipline, in a novel I can get more of life", "get in all life's trivia in a novel. A poem has to be so compact".[47] It is, however, precisely the condensed impact of each word that marks the so-called Ariel poems. Composed "at top speed, and with her full weight",[48] Plath's late poems subvert the "tyrannical discipline" of her early work, dictated by her obsession with "intricate rhyming and metrical schemes". Plath's poetic development, as described by Hughes, retraces the movement of a sacrifice who, taking the dagger from the executor's hands, performs his/her own sacrifice—i.e. from the slow composition paced by the consultation of her dictionary and thesaurus at almost every word to incontrollable gushing of words in her last six months of life, the "blood jet" of poetry.[49]

Despite Plath's assertion regarding the freedom associated with the novel, The Bell Jar is written in hybrid ground, its focus on "trivia" condensing death as well as life. While maintaining a strong sense of linearity and casualty, the very structure of the narrative opens up the possibility of self-subversion, revealing, with particular clarity, a network of iterable lives and deaths. On the one hand, the cycle of death and rebirth is conveyed, by Plath, with basis on a rather firm linear structure of life ➔ death ➔ life (rebirth). However, the very organization of the plot and its characters points to a constant re-doubling of the protagonist and her "first suicide". The plot constitutes a trail of reversible deaths: Esther kills and dies at each failed attempt and death wish, through the deaths of others; she dies already on the very first line, under a "sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs".[50] Similarly, the other characters are constructed as either receptacles or mirrors of Esther's fragmented image(s) as a killer-victim, the "distorted lens" of the bell jar. Among Esther's doubles in the novel, Joan is particularly worthy of note, not least because she is the one who actually takes her own life. She is Esther's doppelganger, described by the latter as the "beaming double" of her "best self" as well as "the black image" of her own, "specially designed to follow and torment" her.[51] Joan's existence in the novel casts multiple reflections of Esther's trajectory towards both death and life, eventually performing a suicide that is suspended in the narrative—i.e. Esther's.

The implications of such a process of re-doubling in the Bell Jar are certainly not confined to the elements of the narrative. Even before the first line about the Rosenbergs, death repeats itself and, even before the first line, the dialogue between "fact" and "fiction" brings suicide to the scene. The cover to the 1966

Faber edition of *The Bell Jar*, for instance, materialises the compelling presence of the dead author through colourful illustrations of her as a "Smith girl". The distinction between "fact" and "fiction" is therefore blurred by the presence-in-absentia of the deceased at the material limits of the book. Like an apparition, Plath's image around the time of her own "first death" is imposed on the audience—whether it accepts it wilfully or not. For, the recognition of Plath's name and face implies inevitably the recognition of oneself as a belated witness and the validation of Plath's role as a suicide-author and the testimonial quality of the text.

Like a labyrinth of mirrors, *The Bell Jar* thus offers a metonymic representation of the process of re-doubling of Plath's posthumous persona through memorial texts. In the novel, Esther, Joan, and the figure of the author are, at once, unique and interchangeable. Moreover, they fictionalise one another as well as their respective stories of death. Joan's existence, for instance, is contiguous to Esther's and *vice-versa* to the extent that the latter wonders if she "had made Joan up" [52]—the same way, one may suggest, that Plath "made Esther (and Joan) up". Likewise, reproducing the re-creation of Plath's death on the threshold of fact and fiction, the novel encompasses a series of "embedded suicides" that reflect and refract one another—e.g. Plath's *suicides*, Esther's account and represented attempt in newspapers clippings, Joan's story and death, *inter alia*. Leaking into and out of the text, Plath's elusive doubles thread the very structure of the narrative to the reconstruction of a "suicide plot" pertaining to a wider "death scene".

Effectively, Plath's criticism commonly emphasises the recurrence of themes in her work. The intertextual possibilities are undoubtedly incommensurable. Imagery is often reversible, reappearing elsewhere with a different façade, a sense of otherness disturbed by the undeniable similarity. In *The Bell Jar*, for instance, the "blue volts" of shock treatment, feared by Esther, echo poems such as "Poem for a Birthday" and "The Hanging Man":

> Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I though my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. (The Bell Jar, Chapter Twelve) [53]

> By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
> I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet. ("The Hanging Man") [54]

Now they light me up like an electric bulb.
For weeks I can remember nothing at all. ("Poem for a Birthday")[55]

Surely, the distinctive recurrence of themes is greatly responsible for a deceptive sense of wholeness and homogeneity throughout Plath's corpus. Nevertheless, by re-emerging in diverse contexts, it inevitably brings forth the question of transgression of boundaries, namely life and death, one and the other, poetry and prose, *inter alia*.

The question of transgression is made especially visible in cases involving the so-called literary memorial texts. Like the notion of an "autobiographical novel", the concept of a "literary, memorial text" already announces, in the combination of its terms, its subversion. As an "autobiographical novel", *The Bell Jar* simultaneously establishes and breaks the reflexive circle between fiction and fact. Similarly, a "literary memorial text" calls for a clear distinction whilst rendering such a classification somewhat futile. Comprehending a space woven by suicide and author, "literary memorial texts" pertain to the suicide-author's ambivalent "body", hence no longer restrained by single categories defined by concepts of "literariness", genre, and linearity.

Such notions, however, cannot be simply disregarded, even if only so as to contest them. Indisputably, memorial texts classified as "literary" are much more problematic for the validation of the (thanato-)biographical circle corresponds to a threat to the very autonomy of the text, that is, to death without return. The superlative aspect of the Plath case paradoxically renders such a validation so overpowering that it opens up the possibility of repetition and multiplicity. Notably, the dialogue between her writings share *leit-motifs* presented rather explicitly, hence calling for, but not necessarily requiring the intervention of the audience in the establishment of relations. In the following examples, taken from both literary and non-literary sources, the theme of Lazarus echoes throughout the pieces, threading them together:

I thought bringing Lazarus back must have been the worst thing Jesus did. Lazarus would be cold and white as a pressed root after those four days in the cave. What could the world be to him, risen. A senseless hell of smiles, a furnace of sun consuming petal and leaf... / Lazarus would be sick with the death-stench of his own four-day dead limbs. He would beg to return to the cave and be left in peace. (The Bell Jar, Early draft)[56]

I feel like Lazarus: the story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek, which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, wind-blown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter-pallor. (Journals, 19 February 1956)[57]

MENTAL HOSPITAL STORIES: Lazarus theme. Come back from the dead. Kicking off thermometers. Violent ward. LAZARUS MY LOVE. (Journals, 15 June 1959)[58]

Three diverse voices, three different facets of the deceased speak from the cited extracts respectively: a fictional character in the making of an early draft, the suicide addressing her own "early death", and the author juggling with both instances, "fact" and "fiction", in the writing process. Nonetheless, the distinction between such facets is markedly blurred by the personal appropriation of the theme by the subject. In all three cases, the writer undergoes a degree of (re-)(de-)personalisation, as she personifies the theme, speaking as Lazarus herself.

In "Lady Lazarus" such a process of (re-)(de-)personalisation is the very theme of the poem, constructed by the enunciator's theatrical return from death. Throughout the verses, the enunciator is a fragmenting double, whose discourse stages a dialogue between one (life/subject) and another (death/object), living and posthumous persona, killer and victim. The interplay of killer (agency) and victim (passivity) is yet more emphasised in Plath's early draft of the poem, in which Lady Lazarus's "incendiary feathers" notably coexist with repeated allusions to the figure of (an) executioner(s):[59]

Why do they choose me! [crossed out]
What a million filaments!
And each time the executioner
Is different [crossed out]
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease!

....

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
And there's always an executioner [crossed out]

And a priest and a torturer
And a couple of horses and a wheel
To give the crowd
The extra kicks that it pays for. [crossed out]

They pay very high today
There aren't many like me
Who do it publicly. [crossed out]

Lady (Lazarus (3))

· The first time it happened, I was ten.
It was an accident.
At twenty, I really meant

to stick it out + never came back at all.
Peaceful I rocked ~~shut up~~ ~~some days~~ ~~...~~
As a seashell.

They had to call + call.
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls
Now I have two girls.

I want to see them rich ~~comfortable~~
And are they ~~already~~ them rich ~~married~~
Of proud beautiful
Of their mum's profession?, yes!

Dying // is an art like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
~~I guess I'm a natural.~~

~~How does it feel?~~
I do it 'so it feels ~~awful~~ like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
And there's always ~~...~~ an executioner

~~And a priest + a torturer~~
~~And a couple of horses + a wheel to give mercy~~
~~...~~ ~~ex + mill.~~
~~The extra kicks ... pays for.~~
~~They pay very high today // there aren't many like me~~

Fig. 9 "Lady Lazarus"—draft 1, page 3

Despite having being crossed out in the first draft, these lines are noteworthy, for they emphasise the duality of the killer-victim, not only in relation to the self-inflicted act, but, most noticeably, in relation to the living. In fact, one notes that, on the one hand, "Lady Lazarus" presents herself as being totally in charge of the

act of death from which she repeatedly comes back. After all, she famously brags "Dying/Is an art, like everything else/I do it exceptionally well."[60] In the first draft, such an "expertise" is also simultaneously presented as a "profession" and an innate talent, as Plath adds, "I guess I'm a natural" [crossed out] at the end of the verse.

On the other hand, outside the controlled realm of dying, the "theatrical/Comeback in broad day"[61] to the world of the living is somewhat artless, chaotic, being neither fully voluntary nor imposed. Excluded from the suicidal act, the "executioners" emerge as posthumous agents of death and compete for the focus of action with the newly dead/re-born. Likewise, the "peanut-crunching crowd", which "shoves in to see" the "big strip tease", adds to the highly public nature of the scene, resembling rituals of desecration once practiced on bodies of suicides. Only, in this case, the sacrifice has not ceased to die—"And like the cat I have nine times to die./This is Number Three." Unwrapping the dead—or rather, nearly dead—"hand and foot", the "big strip tease" mirrors the dialogue with the belated audience in the posthumous execution and public dissection of Plath's remains. As a *quasi*-presence, Lady Lazarus lies in the interstitial spaces of abjection: she is neither entirely resurrected, nor is she a dead woman. Instead, she walks back into life, dragging death along with her—hence the spectacle. Like the "marring mark" on Plath's cheek,[62] each part of Lady Lazarus's bodies carries the traces left by death:

....

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot,

A paperweight,
Here I come, my face a fine linen [crossed out]
My face a featureless fine
Jew linen.

....

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a night in my bed [crossed out] word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

The metonymic relationship suggested emulates the relationship between each memorial text and the textual body in its illusory entirety. Furthermore, the poem provides an illustration of the conflicting, yet complementary, dialogue between corpus and corpse. The physical body is a bearer of marks of death and decomposition; it is the object of exposure by the posthumous executors. However, it is the vehicle of the deferred voice and agency—like its counterpart, the poem. Similarly, in its materiality, the memorial text becomes a link with the act of writing and, consequently, the "original" death scene. It bears, in other words, a connection with the corpse whilst being the instrument of recreation and deferral of the posthumous voice.

As part of Plath's "theatrical return", the voices addressing the theme of Lazarus therefore have their individual limits confused, as they carry simultaneously marks of death and the unstoppable eloquence of deferred agency. Acting as a bridge between life and death, the posthumous voice is, in other words, epitaphic. It does not, however, simply "confer a mask or a face" to the voiceless and inanimate.[63] In the realm of the nearly dead, the ambiguity established by the dialogue between living and posthumous personae renders it impossible to determine in which direction the process of personification occurs. In other words, through corpus and corpse, deferred "face" and voice are endowed from the living to the inanimate dead and vive-versa, forming an undecidable interval where the *quasi*-presence is deferred and created. As a catalyst of the dialogue between the living and the dead, Plath's "theatrical return" and "big strip tease" by the belated "peanut-crunching crowd" is evidently equally unstoppable. The unceasing attention given to the "suicide" as well as the "author" continues to demand Plath's testimony for the reconstruction her own life and death. In this context, what makes Plath's role as a prime witness particularly noteworthy is the blurring of the existing distinction between "suicide" and "author" and, consequently, the overlapping between so-called literary and non-literary writings as memorial texts.

Two examples, directly related to the actual event of Plath's death, stand out among the plethora of memorial texts that, citing the deceased, "evoke" her to speak suicide "in her own words", namely the obituary, published at *The Observer*, by A. Alvarez, and the programme to the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of Plath's death.[64] The former brings the duality of the killer-victim right from its title—"A Poet's Epitaph". Before Alvarez's short note, squeezed in small print between Plath's poems, a subliminal question seems to be asked: Whose epitaph? Or rather, an epitaph by whom—by the critic or by the dead poet

herself? The rest of the obituary's composition equally spells out the ambivalence of the deceased: the poet is clearly not just a poet. Holding a baby (probably her youngest son, Nicholas) in a photograph at the top corner, Plath seems to look at her belated witnesses, guiding their eyes to the words below whilst reminding them of her (lost) status as a person.

In the commemoration programme, it is "Sylvia Plath, American Poet" that creeps in, as though uninvited, reciting poems next to prayers and hymns.[65] Here, poetry allows the deceased to take part in the commemoration of her own death, mingling the "Last Words" of the poet to the unheard last words of the suicide, twenty years later (and beyond). Similarly, in the *Observer* obituary, a space is opened up for the deceased to write her own epitaph, announcing her death "in her own (last) words". Notably, unlike later texts on Plath, Alvarez's note is extremely reticent about the nature of her death, denoting it euphemistically: "Last Monday, Sylvia Plath, the American poetess and wife of Ted Hughes *died suddenly* in London" [my emphasis]. In the wider context of Plath's death, however, suicide is impregnated in every word, especially in the poems therein reproduced—"Plath's epitaph":[66]

A POET'S EPITAPH

EDGE

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,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

THE FEARFUL

This man makes a pseudonym
And crawls behind it like a worm.

This woman on the telephone
Says she is a man, not a woman.

The mask increases, eats the worm,
Stripes for mouth and eyes and nose,

The voice of the woman hollows—
More and more like a dead one,

Worms in the glottal stops.
She hates

The thought of a baby—
Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty—

She would rather be dead than fat,
Dead and perfect, like Nefertit.

Hearing the fierce mask magnify
The silver limbo of each eye

Where the child can never swim,
Where there is only him, and him.

LAST MONDAY Sylvia Plath, the American
poetess and wife of Ted Hughes, died suddenly
in London. She was 30. She published her first
and highly accomplished book of poems, "The
Colossus," in 1960. But it was only recently that
the peculiar intensity of her genius found its
perfect expression. For the last few months she
had been writing continually, almost as though
possessed. In these last poems she was systematic-
ally probing that narrow, violent area between the
viable and the impossible, between experience
which can be transmitted into poetry and that
which is overwhelming. It represents a totally new
breakthrough in modern verse, and establishes her,
I think, as the most gifted woman poet of our time.
The following poems were all written within a few
days of her death. She leaves two small children.
The loss to literature is inestimable.

A. ALVAREZ

KINDNESS

Kindness glides about my house.
Dame Kindness, she is so nice!
The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke
In the windows, the mirrors
Are filling with smiles.

What is so real as the cry of a child?
A rabbit's cry may be wilder
But it has no soul.
Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says.
Sugar is a necessary fluid,

Its crystals a little poultice.
O kindness, kindness
Sweetly picking up pieces!
My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,
May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.

And here you come, with a cup of tea
Wreathed in steam.
The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.
You hand me two children, two roses.

CONTUSION

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.

The size of a fly,
The doom mark
Crawls down the wall.

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted.

Fig. 10 "A Poet's Epitaph", *The Observer*, Feb 1963

As Alvarez notes, the poems in question were written within few days of her death. The attention to the date of production is particularly noteworthy, for it, on the one hand, brings Plath's *quasi*-presence closer to the audience, and, on the other hand, places the latter closer to the act of writing, that is, the "original death scene". Hence, the performative impact is magnified: Plath not only announces her death, but she also performs it—like Lady Lazarus—through the printed word. The selection of poems also accentuates the performative impact. "The Fearful" does not, in fact, figure among her very final poems, being dated November 1962, whereas all the others were written within two weeks of her suicide. The lines, however, exhale death and decomposition, both past and imminent:

....

The voice of the woman hollows—
More and more like the dead one.

Worms in the glottal stops.[67]

Here one finds again the nearly dead/alive figure of Lady Lazarus as in the early draft, in which small variations emphasise further the interstitial quality of the woman's displaced image and voice:

The voice of the woman sounded
More and more like one of the dead—

Worms in the glottal stops. Decayed.
....

The face of the baby turned to blood
The woman's shadow is red, red, red. [crossed out]

Dead and perfect, and flat, flat, flat!
Dead and perfect
And flat, flat flat! [crossed out]

What joy is there in otherness?
Joy is the mirror of the eyes

Where the child can never come

Where (the) dead women feel at home.[68]

As though engaging in a process of decomposition and transmutation, imagery referring to the "dead and perfect" woman and children echo the ultimate stillness and perfection of "Edge".

Like the majority of the "Ariel poems", both "The Fearful" and "Edge" were written hastily, their early drafts and final versions dating from the same day with few changes or corrections. In the light of the interlacing of the acts of writing and killing/dying, the gushing flow in which the poems were produced can be inscribed in the death scene surrounding the suicide in her final months. Consequently, tied together in a "single burst of excitement" or the "single wave of a graph",[69] the "Ariel poems" call for the impossible reconstruction of the original enunciation/death scene, resulting in a disruptive impression of totality. They are, as Hughes puts it, "chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear—even if the origins of it and the *dramatis personae* are at bottom enigmatic".[70] A number of important issues are here highlighted. Firstly, the existence of a plot is linked to the notion of testimony, which, in this case, poetic language struggles to unveil and conceal, unceasingly pointing to the enigmatic and irretrievable. Recognisable forms of intertextuality are, therefore, sought, begging questions regarding the relationship and evolution of the poems as part of a greater unity, such as "Is "Edge" the silent apogee of Plath's work/life/death?" "Do poems like "The Fearful" prelude "Edge" or even the poet's suicide?" "Does "Edge" suggest that Plath planned to kill her children as well as herself?"[71] Secondly, Hughes's attention to the *dramatis personae* behind the text emphasises the interrelation between the acts of writing and killing/dying through the notion of performance: the "death plot" is not simply narrated; it is performed. As memorial texts, Plath's writings undoubtedly constitute a suicide plot. Its "chapters", however, remain in constant permutation and recreation in the "theatrical return" and "strip tease" of the fragmented body it comprises.

SYLVIA PLATH COLLECTION
WRITINGS POEMS
"Edge"
Item 1: Holograph, 1963 Feb 5.

Fig. 10 "Edge", item 1

In "The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"", Hughes explores both aspects further, singling out Plath's "Sheep in Fog" as a milestone in the processes of creation and self-destruction, being "unique in her work in that it belongs to both the *Ariel* poems and to as very different group".[72] According to Hughes, "Sheep in Fog" changes the positive energy still existent in "Ariel", in which one finds Plath's "battle to stay alive and create a new life" and her inclination towards the "suicidal act".[73]

Such a change marks, for him, the sudden transformation of the "furious, almost joyful defiance" of "Ariel" into "mourning".[74]

Similar elements, marking the interpenetration of the acts of writing and death, can be traced in other *Ariel* poems, seen both individually and in their relationship as a whole. Following "Ariel", for instance, "Death & Co." presents a rite of antagonistic forces, culminating with a shift from "furious defiance" to the bleakness of "mourning", which is yet emphasised by the evolution of the various manuscripts.[75] Although the first four verses remain mostly unchanged, a sudden and radical change occurs in verses five and six towards the final drafts. At first, Plath plays, alters and rearranges the lines around the same theme, faintly announcing the images of the "glitter" and the "gigolo" of the final version:

....

The other does that,
His hair long and plausible
He wants to be loved
With his yellow
Gloves homosexual simper

They have come all the way from America.
They have three tickets back.
Small bird, Small trembler,
Stay where you are!

I shall give them
My gigolo.
They are taking
The hooks of his arms, the idiots!
He sags like a sandbag, utterly flattered.
The three of them go. (Item 3, 12 November 1962)[76]

Later, on item 7, the violence of the dismemberment and emptying unfolds into the flat repetition of "lesses" of dispossession and the redoubling of the "other":

....

He sags like a sandbag, utterly flattered.
The three of them go.

Ripples like water
Blue and footless as water
Touches up his plastic
And the others
The other
Is after somebody. [crossed out]

Footless as water
Footless and boneless.
The other, other. „
(Item 7, n.d.)[77]

The final result erupts subsequently, with the replacement of gloves, arms, and hooks for dew, frost, flower, and the reiterating dead bell:

The other does that,
His hair long and plausive.
Bastard
Masturbating a glitter,
He wants to be loved.

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star.
The dead bell, dead bell.

Somebody's done for. (item 8)[78]

Death & Co.

Simper.
Blue & footless as water,
Staying & playing.
And the other, the other
~~The other~~
~~[illegible] & [illegible]~~ Still as a mirror
Shuts like a window ~~[illegible]~~ On one next to me.
They are taking the hooks
Of his arms, the idiots!
He sags like a sandbag, utterly flattered.
The three of them go.

The other does that,
His hair long and plausive.
~~He wants to be loved,~~
~~With his yellow~~
~~Gloves and homosexual~~

~~Simper.~~
~~Blue and footless as water~~ Masturbating a glitter.
~~Staying and playing~~ ~~beautifully [illegible]~~
And the other, the other
~~Still as a mirror~~
Still as a window, still as a door
~~Shuts like a window~~
~~On one next to me.~~
~~They are taking the hooks~~
~~Of his arms, the idiots!~~
~~He sags like a sandbag, utterly flattered.~~
The dead bell ~~The three of them go.~~
The dead bell.
Somebody's done for.

The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star.

Bastard
~~Blue & footless as water~~
Masturbating the glitter,
He wants to be loved.

The other does that,
His hair long and plausive.
He wants to be loved.
And the other ~~[illegible]~~
Still as a window, still as a door.
~~[illegible]~~
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star.
Then the dead bell, the dead bell.
~~The dead bell.~~
Somebody's done for.

SYLVIA PLATH COLLECTION
WRITINGS POEMS
Item 8: Holograph and typescript revised, n.d.

Fig. 11 "Death & Co.", item 8

As in "Sheep in Fog", the coldness and deadness of mourning prevail. The fury of Ariel's "lioness" is numbed: "I do not stir". A sole star, made of dew, hangs as the dead bell reverberates, announcing a "starless and fatherless heaven".[79] "'Ariel' itself is a prophecy of suicide", Hughes once wrote in a letter to Keith Sagar.[80] Inscribed as part of the killing, dying, and writing process, so are the other texts. And so is suicide a prophecy of Plath's writing.

¹ See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, eds. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Pascalle-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

² Derrida, The Work of Mourning 225.

³ Derrida, The Work of Mourning 6, 45.

⁴ Derrida, The Work of Mourning 114.

⁵ Cf. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* 36, 114.

⁶ Derrida, The Work of Mourning 45, 25.

⁷ In the three extracts above cited, the word "Omission" in square brackets is a direct transcription from the printed text, having been inscribed by the editors of the volume.

⁸ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, eds. Frances McCullough and Ted Hughes (New York: Ballantine, 1982) 280-81. Henceforth referred to as *Journals* (1982).

⁹ Frances McCullough, "Editor's Note", *Journals (1982)* xii.

¹⁰ Karen Kukil, "Preface", *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber, 2000) ix. Henceforth referred to as *Jornals* (2000).

¹¹ Kukil ix.

¹² McCullough xii. My emphasis.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs on Baudelaire", trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt (London: Fontana, 1968) 157-202.

¹⁴ Benjamin 190.

¹⁵ Benjamin 190.

¹⁶ References to the retrieval of Plath as a "real person" through her "actual words" in her journals are respectively made by Karen Kukil and Ted Hughes in their individual forewords to the 2000 and 1982 editions of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*.

¹⁷ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 68.

¹⁸ "Notes on sealing of the Journals" from the Sylvia Plath Collection description folder at Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. The volumes in question refer to the typescript of Plath's journals dated 28 Aug 1957 to 14 Oct 1958 and 12 Dec 1958–15 Nov 1959. Both were unsealed by Ted Hughes on 14 September 1998, following the publication of *Birthday Letters* in 29 January. On 28 October of the same year Hughes died.

[19] See Chapter Two for further details on practices of desecration.

[20] Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 134-35.

[21] Antoon A. Leenaars and Susanne Wenckstern, "Sylvia Plath; A Protocol Analysis of Her Last Poems", *Death* Studies 22 (1998) 617.

[22] Hughes, "Foreword", *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, (New York: Ballantine, 1982) xv [my emphasis]; De Man 72.

[23] Plath, *Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000) 395. Henceforth referred to as *Journals* (2000).

[24] Hughes, "Foreword" xv.

[25] Hughes, "Foreword" xv.

[26] David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone, 1976); Jeffrey Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 1. See Chapter Three for further discussion on the question of the "contagion effect" of suicide in literature.

[27] Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber, 1966) 211, Henceforth referred to as *BJ* (1966).

[28] Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992) 270. Henceforth referred to as *CP* (1992).

[29] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, Ted Hughes Correspondence, British Library, 7856 vol I ff. 197, 17 March 1975.

[30] John Langshaw Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, ed. J O Urmson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

[31] Aurelia Plath, "Sylvia Plath, as We, Her Family, Knew Her", *Series Talk*, 30 Oct 76. Transcription from interview held at The Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

[32] Aurelia Plath, "Biographical Jottings on Sylvia Plath", The Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. Handwritten note in ink in the margin.

[33] *BJ* (1966) 162.

[34] *BJ* (1966) 211.

[35] Derrida, The Work of Mourning 25.

[36] Olwyn Hughes, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 28 May 1968, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[37] Aurelia Plath, Handwritten notes in Olwyn Hughes's letter, 2 Jul 1968, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[38] See, for instance, Elizabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath* (Plymouth: Northcote House/British Council, 1998); Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

[39] Dee Horne, "Biography in Disguise: Sylvia Plath's Journals", *Wascana Review of Contemporary Poetry and Short Fiction* 27.1 (1992) 91.

[40] Plath, Letter dated 14 Nov. 1961, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[41] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. with an introduction by F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell UP, 1977) 124-25.

[42] Plath, Letter addressed to "James", 14 Nov 1961, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[43] See Chapter One for details.

[44] Plath, Chapter outline, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College. Manuscript outline, with draft of Chapter One on the reverse.

[45] In the introduction to *The Collected Poems* (*CP*, 1981, 13), Ted Hughes states that Plath's attitude to her verse was "artisan-like: if she couldn't get a table out of the material, she was quite happy to get a chair, or even a toy".

[46] Plath, "Poems Subject Lists", *Ts.* with *ms.* annotations. These lists of poems extend until a few months before Plath's suicide, after which Hughes complemented with some further annotations. The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College. The material comprises of lists of poems submitted for publication between 1959 and 1963. Plath's last notes date as late as 4 February 1963, one week before her suicide, after which one finds additional annotations in Hughes's hand.

[47] Plath, "Interview with Peter Orr of the British Arts Council, *Ts.* transcript with *ms.* annotations, 30 October 1962, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[48] Hughes, "Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*", *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammel (New York: Picador, 1994) 162.

[49] Cf. Hughes, "*Ariel*" 161.

[50] *BJ* (1966) 1.

[51] *BJ* (1966) 217, 231.

[52] *BJ* (1966) 231.

[53] *BJ* (1966) 151.

[54] *CP* (1992) 141.

[55] *CP* (1992) 132.

[56] Plath, "Chapter 16: Early Draft", The Bell Jar Papers, *ts.*, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[57] Plath, *Journals* (2000) 199.

[58] Plath, *Journals* (2000) 497.

[59] Plath, "Lady Lazarus", draft 1, n.d., Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[60] Plath, "Lady Lazarus", *CP* (1992) 245.

[61] Plath, "Lady Lazarus", *CP* (1992) 245-46.

[62] See footnote 57.

[63] Cf. De Man 81.

[64] Alvarez, A., "A Poet's Epitaph", *Observer Weekend Review*, 17 Feb 1963; "Commemoration: Sylvia Plath", 11 Feb 1983. Both copies supplied by The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[65] The programme includes extracts from "Last Words", "Nick and the Candlestick", and "Wintering".

[66] The following poems are reproduced in Alvarez's epitaph: "Edge", "The Fearful", "Kindness", "Contusion".

[67] *CP* (1992) 256.

[68] Plath, "The Fearful", *ms.* Draft 1, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[69] Hughes, "Roy David's Lecture on the Use of Poetic Manuscripts on Sylvia Plath's 'Sheep in Fog'", Ted Hughes Correspondence, British Library, 78758 vol III ff. 174. The text is collected in *Winter Pollen* (New York: Picador, 1994) under the title "Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog'".

[70] Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems", *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber, 1970) 187. The expression "chapters of a mythology" is also the title of Judith Kroll's *Chapters of a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1976).

[71] It is interesting to note that in the early draft of "Edge", the line "She is taking them with her" was included after "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent" and crossed out ("Edge", Item 1, Holograph, 5 Feb 1963, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College). Assia Wevill, Hughes's lover at the time of Plath's death, would commit suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in 1969, killing also their daughter Shura.

[72] Hughes, "Roy David's Lecture". Hughes points out two dates in relation to the importance of "Sheep in Fog", namely 2 December 1962 and 28 January 1963. The former outburst of poems ended abruptly on 2 December with "Sheep in Fog", after which Plath did not write any new verse for two weeks until 28 January, when she revised "Sheep in Fog" and wrote three more poems.

[73] Hughes, "Roy David's Lecture".

[74] Hughes, "Roy David's Lecture".

[75] "Death & Co." follows "Ariel" both in the published sequence of poems and in Plath's own.

[76] Plath, "Death & Co.", item 3: *ts*, revised, 12 Nov 1962, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[77] Plath, "Death & Co.", Item 7, *ts.*, n.d., The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[78] Plath, "Death & Co.", Item 8, *ms.* and *ts.*, n.d., The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[79] See "Sheep in Fog", *CP* (1992) 262.

[80] Ted Hughes Correspondence, The British Library, 7861, vol VI, ff. 170, 18 June 1998.

6. "Burning the Letters": The Plath-Hughes Dialogue

As it has been demonstrated here, Ted Hughes can, by no means, simply be regarded as a member of the audience or even as an ordinary eyewitness. Instead, during his life and after, he has been singled out as the sole inhabitant of a limbo dangerously close to the living and the dead. Being indissociable from the suicide, Ted Hughes, the Poet Laureate, repeatedly breaks up and unfolds into the killer, the victim; the seductive "panther", the adulterous "jailer", the censor and the secret holder, the heretic bard burnt with the letters of deceit and absolved with "birthday letters" written over thirty-five years of death.[1] Hughes's own split persona takes shape in his memorial texts, particularly in critical writings on Plath's work, where the voices of the "Estate executor" and the "husband" speak together, sometimes in unison, sometimes colliding against one another. One of the most striking examples of a conflict between interlacing voices is found on the first paragraph of "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals". Hughes starts with a general description of the material in a clear, objective style:

> Sylvia Plath's journals exist as an assortment of notebooks and bunches of loose sheets, and the selection just published here contains about a third of the whole bulk. Two other notebooks survived for a while after her death. They continued from where the surviving records break off in late 1959 and covered the last three years of her life.[2]

In the second part of the paragraph, however, the tone changes, as though a second voice, profoundly personal, tried to break through the surface of the text:

> The second of these books *her husband* destroyed, because *he* did not want *her* children to have to read it (in those days *he* regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The earlier one disappeared more recently (and may, presumably, still turn up).[3]

Between the first and the second part of the paragraph, attention is diverted from the actual material to its effect on eyewitnesses as a vehicle of the posthumous voice. Notably, Hughes is utterly aware of the uniqueness of his role as an eyewitness and co-protagonist. Discussing the impact of biographical speculation on him and those around him, Hughes states that Nicholas and Frieda were "beginning to realise that to some degree they are creatures in a peculiar museum—which *my*

[my italics] anonymity could have saved them from".[4] One notes that it is his anonymity—as opposed to his children's—that he refers to, hence point to his axial role in the dissemination of the suicide effect. He was, even in life, impregnated with the death of the other, as will be here demonstrated.

In this context, the conflict of voices in "Sylvia Plath and her Journals" can be understood as a result of Hughes's own self-fragmentation on account of suicide. The use of the third person when referring to himself paradoxically reinforces a sense of proximity with the death scene and consequent inner fragmentation. The conflict between antagonistic voices corresponds, in other words, to a process of self-dissociation, in which the death of the other provokes a split between "He" and "I". Hughes's representation of himself as a third person materializes in the text the separation and dialogue between one and the other(s) within his unique voice—the other being the deceased or his own detached self.

Hughes's sense of otherness and self-fragmentation is strongly grounded in the boundaries and interpenetration between his figure as an author and as a person. Discussing the deletion of some biographical details from Keith Sagar's book, he explains:

> Whatever person I've projected, in the body of my poems, will have to bear whatever ideas people have about *him*. I've freed myself fairly successfully from too great a concern about *his* fate; what does disturb me, I'm afraid, is to see him identified with me in the details of my life. A great concern of mine, over the past few years, has been to disperse in myself that sense of the *wrong audience* [Hughes's emphasis]—which is so inhibiting and so falsifying and so wearisome. [...]—all those who, without being the people for whom you write, yet have a strong idea about you and enough scraps of your hair and nails [...] I'm always telling people about myself, then always regretting it when I see myself outlined in the third person. [5]

Once again, the third person pronoun is used as a means of creating distance. A valuable insight into this mechanism of detachment can be drawn from a parallel between Hughes's statement and Jorge Luís Borges's "Borges and I", cited below:

> The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. [...] I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an

actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. [...] Little by little, I am giving over everything to him, though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things.

[...] I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. [...] Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.[6]

Here, "the other one" is "the one called Borges". He is, on the one hand, "the one things happen to", to whom everything belongs. On the other hand, he turns preferences into the "attributes of an actor", "magnifying and falsifying things". The "other one" to whom everything belongs to fails to be a subject as he becomes it, the object of its own magnifying and falsification, a representation. The "other one" is nothing but a "name", an entry in a biographical dictionary—his/its life is a biography, pure writing. Yet, he/it bears the "one" who speaks who is also "the other", as the text collapses from such a differentiation to the impossibility of determining which of them has written it.

In Hughes, the "other one"—the author, "the person I've projected"—soon becomes the object of representation of the audience. Should it be the "wrong audience", the result is negative, worrying for the "actual person" behind the text. The "other one"—"he"—is, like in Borges, objectified, his/its life reduced to biographical information. Unlike "the other one" in Borges, Hughes distinctively struggles against "giving everything over to him" through a language that markedly denotes dissociation, with expressions such as "freed myself" and "disperse in myself". In this context, Hughes's statement reinforces the objectification of "the other one", conveyed as a negative subject, stricken by utter passivity: he/it is projected by the poet and has "to bear whatever ideas people have about him". Along with such ideas, he mentions their having "enough scraps of your hair and nails". The sentence echoes the "big strip-tease" in "Lady Lazarus": "And there is a charge, a very large charge/For a word or a touch/Or a bit of blood/Or a piece of my hair or my clothes".[7] The description of the process resembles an autopsy or desecration; the passivity of the "other one" becomes a form of death. Through his writing, Hughes's "body" is also exposed, narrowing the distance between "I" and "he". Thus, his memorial writings equally become a space of self-fragmentation, a stage for the re-enactment of death where he and Plath trade places as killers and

victims, exchanging roles, words and lines under the anonymous audience's curious eye. Moreover, it is important to note that, fragmented, Hughes also trades places with himself. As the previous examples demonstrate, the third person "he" is a reversible role, to be filled by different "I's". Here, the person he doesn't want identified with himself is "the other one", the third person. As the speaking subject, he regrets seeing himself "outlined in the third person". Still, Hughes is also the third person, being displaced between "one"/I and "the other"/he as he attempts to distance his fragments of being. In the earlier example about the journals, for instance, the poet spoke while Hughes as an individual and Plath's widower was objectified, forced out of the role of subject of writing as a third person.

A key factor for the process of self-fragmentation as well as the possibility of interchange and reversibility is, without a doubt, the sense of exaggerated proximity that ties Hughes to Plath. Such a proximity is often translated into an intensely visual, reality-charged language that brings the deceased closer to the surface of the text:

> I see you there, clearer, more real
> Than in any of the years in its shadow—
> As if I saw you that once, then never again.
> The loose fall of hair—that floppy curtain
> Over your face, óver your scar. And your face
> A rubbery ball of joy
> Round the African-lipped, laughing, thickly
> Crimson-painted mouth. And your eyes
> Squeezed in your face, a crush of diamonds.
> "St Botolph's"[8]

> In her earlier poems, Sylvia Plath composed very slowly, consulting her Thesaurus and Dictionary for almost every word, putting a slow strong line of ink under each word that attracted her.
> "Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*"[9]

Consequently, as Hughes paints his unique reconstruction of the "death scene", he entangles himself further into it like a part that cannot be dissociated however much he or the audience may attempt to do so. The conflict of dissociation, causing Hughes's fragmentation into "he" and "I", is particularly noticeable in the latter example, in which the effects of self-fragmentation seep through the objective tone

of the language used, revealing the impossibility of total dissociation. From the splintering of the "I", a dialogue is instituted, emulating the interplay of the deceased's living and posthumous personae.

The danger of addressing the dead as part of the "death scene" lies in the counter dialogue with the remaining audience. For the proximity with the dead often equals a risk of being confounded with one of them and, as Janet Malcolm suggests, to be treated like one.[10] Such a possibility is profoundly problematic, for, after all, it refers to a time when Hughes was still alive—or rather, he was "too alive" to be treated like the "rightless dead". Like Persephone's pomegranate seeds, Hughes's relationship with Plath forced him not only to have access to the underworld, but also to transit back and forth to the realm of the living, where he (no longer) belonged. Hence, Hughes emerges as an "omniscient narrator". As he is haunted, he, in other words, also becomes the "haunter", perpetually observing the suicide in life and death, seeing further than any other belated witness. Likewise, the reversibility of roles applies to the binary killer/victim, leaving its marks in memorial texts. Notably, the aggressiveness of Plath's late poems is often focused not only on self-destruction, but also on the annihilation of the other. Thus, the roles of "killer" and "victim" are interchangeable, often permuting between "I" and the "other". Should the poem perform destruction, the first "killing" of the "other" naturally occurs through his/her representation in the text. There, the "other" exists as language, only to be annihilated again by language. In the draft to "The Fearful", death takes the form of reduction. The "other" is pure writing, shrinking to less than a name into meaninglessness: "White and leprous signature withered to an initial/And the initial to a little point, not even/Big enough for identification".[11]

Written a few months earlier, "Burning the letters" similarly proclaims "And here is an end to the writing". The poem is famously associated with the episode when Plath, furious with Hughes's infidelity, invaded his attic study and burned his papers, mostly letters, in the garden. The poem makes a ritual out of destruction. Words embody people, secrets, and lies—all that must be destroyed, exorcised. Icons of the "heretic", their names and handwriting are set alight in place of their bodies. The incantatory nature of the relationship victim-word is emphasised by a reading of the published version in conjunction with its early draft. The incineration of the "other", later introduced as "an end to the writing", initially stresses further the iconic link with the body of the victim: "And here is your handwriting, the spry hooks, the lies./I got tired of looking./[...] So I burned the letters and the dust puffs and the old hair."[12] With the permutation of roles, however, the killing has a bilateral effect, affecting executor as well as the victim. From the very beginning, the poet is aware of this. The work with language that performs the sacrifice is also

an instrument of protection against one's own death, which, nonetheless, foreshadows it. The letters must be burned, for they contain the "death rattle" that must be stopped. "Papers that breathe like people" are flaked up and fanned out, the "carbon birds" are beautiful, blind, and silent, but the "death rattle" resists, as climax of the destruction of the other(s) becomes an omen to the poet's own. Once an icon of the enemy, the deadliness of writing survives the flames, landing at the executor's foot: "And a name with black edges/Wilts at my foot". The line supposedly refers to a charred piece of paper, with Assia's name on it, that would have fallen by Plath's feet when burning the letters. The suggestion is more explicit in the drafts to the poem and so is the relationship with death: "The name of the girl flies out, black-edged, like a death card/And alight to my left shoe". [13] Here, the charred name is not an announcement of the person's death. Instead, it is a "death card", preluding the transformation of the killer into victim, of the executor into sacrifice. The "death rattle" finally breaks into a "red burst and a cry/That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop"; it cannot be consumed by the flames, for it is "immortal".

The relationship between (self-)sacrifice and fire is repeated elsewhere. In her notes, Aurelia Plath recounts that, having intercepted a phone call, her daughter "furiously tore apart and burned the sequel to *The Bell Jar* in a blazing bonfire she had built at the end of the cobbled courtyard". "Sylvia would say," she adds, "that the manuscript had symbolised a period of joy that now proved to have been built on false trust—the character of the hero was dead to her—this had been his funeral pyre."[14] In the light of the binary killer-victim, the significance of this episode lies in the similarities with the ritual performed by "Burning the Letters". Once again, writing embodies the sacrifice, which is, in fact, multiple, encompassing all involved in the fake "period of joy", including, above all, the executor herself. Later, in the poem suggestively entitled "Sutee", Hughes re-enacts the mass killing in Plath's self-fed funeral pyre: "You were a child-bride/On a pyre [...] And I was your husband/Performing the part of your father/In your new myth—[...] Both of us consumed/By the old child in the new birth—/Not the new babe of light but the old/Babe of dark flames and screams/That sucked the oxygen out of both of us."[15]

The convulsive rage of Plath's late poems creates the ideal environment for the eruption of killer and victim—both in relation to herself and in relation to others. It would be, however, a gross mistake to isolate them into a totally unparalleled category. The integration of Plath's body of writings into a wider scene creates, as has been here demonstrated, interrelations across periods and even genres. Hence, the same violence of journal entries leaks into literary pieces and vice-versa.

Similarly, traces of the vengeful captive in "The Jailer"—"Hung, starved, burned, hooked"[16]—are found in "Pursuit", an early poem written soon after Plath's first meeting with Hughes. In the latter, the "jailer" is a seductive and destructive "panther", an inescapable killer from which the poet attempts to flee. The claustrophobic rhythm and the irregular lines enact the pursuit; words seem to pant and escalate, toppling down towards the final lines—the end of the pursuit/escape.

> There is a panther stalks me down:
> One day I'll have my death of him.

> ....

> I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
> To quench his thirst I squander blood;
> He eats, and still his need seeks food,
> Compels a total sacrifice.

> ....

> The panther's tread is on the stairs,
> Coming up and up the stairs.[17]

Later, in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes, recalls the panther and its victim, reverberating Plath's earlier poem: "The panther? It had already dragged you/As if in its laws, across Europe./As if trailing between its legs,/Your mouth crying open, or not even crying any more." [18] Memory is atemporal. Recalled from the past, the hunting is re-enacted from poem to poem, from enunciation to enunciation. Off the pages of Plath's "Pursuit" and Hughes's "Trophies", the clamour of the killing persists: "After forty years/The whiff of that beast,/Off the dry pages,/ Lifts the hair on the back of my hands./The thrill of it". Nevertheless, predator and prey no longer have easily distinguished, trading roles as "you" and "I" take turns as killer and victim:

> [...] as I caught you lolling locked
> Its jaws into my face.

> ....

So it sprang over you. Its jungle prints
Hit your page. Plainly the blood
Was your own. With a laugh I
Took its full weight. [...]

Finally, in the last lines, prey and predator become one and the other at the same time:

As it carried me off I detached
The hairband carefully from between its teeth
And a ring from its ear, for my trophies.

The lines make clear reference to Plath's and Hughes's first meeting, at St Botolph's party in Cambridge, which Plath recounts in her diary: "then he kissed bang smash on the mouth and rip my hair band off [...] and my favorite silver earrings; hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit long and hard on the cheek, and when he came out of the room, blood was running down his face".[19] Whose blood runs down his/her bitten face? Who is the panther—the one who snatches the trophies or the one who held them in the first place? Predator and prey become one another, playing killer and victim at the same time.

Evidently, the two parts are not equal. Plath is, *par excellence*, a killer-victim, having committed suicide. Hughes is a killer-victim "in deferral"; he undergoes a process of re-doubling on account of another's self-inflicted act of death. In this context, the sense of proximity that approximates Hughes to the deceased applies to his exclusive insight into the "death scene" both before and after the suicide. Hence, in a double-bind, he is, on the one hand, the "haunter", who watches Plath across the death trail while, on the other hand, having remained the closest to who/what is regarded as "the real Plath", he also became the most haunted of all witnesses. Through his words, Plath's *quasi*-presence re-emerges, through Hughes's exclusive limbo into the wider "death scene". For instance, the plasticity and detail of "The Offers", an account of an encounter with the dead in the wake of her death, renders haunting almost as perceptible:[20]

Only two months dead
And there you were, suddenly back within reach.
I got on the Northern Line at Leicester Square
And sat down and there you were. And there
The dream started that was no dream.

I stared and you ignored me.

Your part in the dream was to ignore me.

Mine was to be invisible—helplessly

Unable to manifest myself.

Being "back within reach", the deceased is virtually tangible, masked as a dream "that was no dream". Thus, reality too becomes reversible. The one who addresses the dead, on the other hand, is the one who assumes spectral qualities, trading places with the deceased other, as he becomes devoid of form and action. In other words, "the death of the other in me" becomes "my death", subverting its absolute singularity and unfolding into collateral self-fragmentation.

Possibly nowhere is such an ambivalence more explicitly posed than in a letter written to Ann and Leo Goodman, in May 1963, in which Hughes states: "Thank you for the note about Sylvia. That's the end of my life. The rest is posthumous".[21] Hughes's words make the notion that the "suicide, when he dies, kills not one person but many" literal, hence extremely problematic.[22] It defies the "irreplaceability of absolute singularity" associated with death, that is "no one can die in my place or in the place of the other".[23] Derrida speaks of the subversion of the expression "my death" as "the death of the other, this death of the other in 'me'".[24] Yet, the Plath-Hughes case takes such a subversion of singularity even further. Here, "the death of the other" becomes, in various ways, my own death as Hughes enters his own "posthumous" existence on account of the suicide of the other. He, in other words, dies a death that is not his. His posthumous existence is a "suicide effect".

To state one's own death has further consequences to be considered. Seen retrospectively, the discourse of a suicide-to-be is inherently contradictory. As previously discussed, when one writes a suicide note, for instance, one is a living person writing as a dead person. That is, the subject of writing is a double living and posthumous personae. However, despite such a fundamental ambiguity, on the surface, death dominates the enunciation. For belated witnesses, reading decodes a message pronounced from beyond the grave. Hughes's case is slightly different. For he writes as a split living and "posthumous" personae on account of the suicide of another. In spite of endowing him with traits of the dead, the defiance of the absolute singularity of death causes him to be seen, at all times, as Plath's survivor, not a dead enunciator. Consequently, in Hughes's statement, the contradiction between the signified and its enunciation is even more remarkable, pointing to what Barthes describes as "a staging of words impossible as such".[25]

For Barthes, the phrase "I am dead" bears a "taboo exploded", a "scandal" of language that opens up a space of psychosis.[26] The same can be inferred from Hughes's statement provided that the distinction between such a "space of psychosis" and "psychotic discourse" is established. The "psychotic discourse", as defined by Tzvetan Todorov, is characterised by a failure in evoking the reality of the external world, a failure of reference.[27] The expression "I am dead", implicit to Hughes's statement, is an impossible enunciation, but it is *not* an "unbelievable utterance".[28] Effectively, as Derrida notes, the possibility to say "I am dead" significantly is the very condition for a true act of language.[29] In other words, despite its intrinsic contradiction, the purely linguistic act of a "dead man" has the capability of establishing communication, that is of having an effect on the addressee who legitimates one's discourse as such. Nonetheless, being based on a contradiction, Hughes's words on his own posthumous existence do point to a discontinuity in language characteristic of the psychotic discourse. Firstly, the clash between signified and enunciation creates, underneath the referential surface of the statement, a spiral movement of signification, in which the discourse can only be justified by itself tautologically.[30] Secondly, there is, in Hughes's words, a profound sense of detachment and otherness found, in various degrees, in many of his memorial texts on Plath. In a sort of linguistic suicide, to pronounce one's posthumous existence means to promote a re-doubling of the subject, which severs the enunciating from the enunciated "I", transgressing the limits of alterity and identity. Hughes's words perform his death and self-fragmentation, but they do so as an impossibility. Should he be a killer-victim, the illusion would have been greater and the impact of the break with reality minimised. Suicide legitimates the interrelation between the acts of writing and death; it somewhat validates the performative aspect of such an interrelation.

In effect, as has been suggested, the Plath myth is essentially grounded in a "psychotic" subversion of paradigms of life and death, which accounts for notions of posthumous agency in the dialogue between the living and the dead as well as for the possibility of interchange of roles between Plath and Hughes. Notably, such a subversion is made particularly evident—although not necessarily perceived—by the "anonymous audience", whose insistent "reintegration" of Plath as an agent in the world of the living is often associated with a deepening sense of proximity of Hughes with the dead, even—or rather, especially—during his lifetime. Moreover, one finds that, whereas the psychotic discourse is marked by the absence of *deixis*,[31] the memorial discourse consistently transgresses spatial-temporal conceptions. The dialogue between the living and the dead is not situated in actual time and space. As a historically defined event, Plath's suicide can be evidently

located at a specific date, place, and time. Nevertheless, in the wider context of suicide, death becomes iterable, relating to an incommensurable and irretrievable space—i.e. the "death scene"—and to the spectral time of the deceased's living and posthumous personae. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida prescribes the necessity to speak *of* the ghost, *to* the ghost and, in all cases, *with* it.[32] The superlative quality of Plath's suicide is expressed in all forms of invocation, whether explicit or indirect, thus taking the "work of mourning" a further step beyond the limits of meaning. In other words, the amplification of the different modes of posthumous dialogue threatens to open up a "space of psychosis" where the interchangeability of paradigms of life and death may become literal. While this is an impossibility, it repeatedly acts as the catalyst of meaning in Plath, masking transgression as norm, absurdity as fully acceptable truth. In this context, the object of invocation is not absolutely inanimate or passive. Furthermore, in Hughes's particular case, since the addresser assumes traits of the addressee, death is redoubled as the former becomes a haunting as well.

At any rate, to "speak *of* the ghost" implies necessarily a distance from the invoked object, which is characteristic of the discourse of the anonymous audience, on account of its greater detachment from the "original" death scene. Effectively, it is worth noting that, as a result of the varying distance in relation to the deceased, the so-called work of mourning is exercised differently by anonymous individuals and eyewitnesses. Similarly, such a diversity in the performance of the "work of mourning" is reflected in the multiple nature of memorial texts by the living. On the one hand, the plethora of secondary texts offers an exceptional example of a ludic play of different stories and fabricated, yet ultimate, realities that composes the anonymous Plath saga. On the other hand, eyewitnesses offer—whether willingly or not—pieces of the "truth", the evidence that fuels the posthumous clamour. Should they introduce texts by the deceased, the illusion offered is even greater, as they thereby grant the remaining audience access to her "pure" voice and image, the disguised simulacrum of an iterable original.[33] Eyewitnesses, in other words, contribute to the possibility of "mourning" by the anonymous audience, offering pieces of the textual body crucial for the latter's attempt to "make remains present" by "identifying" and "localising" the dead.[34]

Blinded by what Derrida calls the "visor effect", the anonymous audience cannot identify with certainty what looks at them, haunts them.[35] Plath has a name and a definite place of birth and death, but her features are imprecise and so is/are the "truth(s)" about her. Hence, the more detached one is from the deceased, the more one tends to surrender to the fascination of the "armour", the superficial appearance, that is, the posthumous persona illusorily disconnected from its living

counterpart and vice-versa. What characterises the hyperbolic nature of Plath's suicide is precisely the coercive impact of a pre-existent textual body. Like the spectre that "looks at us even before we see it", Plath's textual body is always already prepared, as though it awaited the belated audience, anticipating its recreation.[36] Evidently, the concept of the "visor effect" is also applicable to eyewitnesses, including Hughes. To be able to see absolutely clearly through the "visor" would amount to an irremediable reduction of an absence into a presence, which would, in turn, obliterate the posthumous dialogue. Nonetheless, what also characterises the Plath case is the ordinariness of subverted realities, of an illusion that has apparently ceased to be an illusion. Thus, the closer one is from the "original" death scene, the more distinctive and personal the traces behind the "visor" seem to become. As the "co-protagonist" and the "omniscient narrator" of Plath's story, Hughes is incapable of dissociation whilst remaining the estranged belated other. Mourning here is therefore expressed from a very peculiar limbo; it has its own particular language. To speak *of* the dead, for instance, often constitutes an intentional form of detachment. While anonymous witnesses speak *of* the deceased in an attempt to engage more directly with them, Hughes does so in order to delineate and solidify the barriers between the living (the speaker) and the dead (the object spoken of).

As seen earlier in this chapter, Hughes remakes alterity by using the third person pronoun when referring to the deceased other as well as to himself. The result is an intensified sense of self-fragmentation, which seems to break through the "visor effect", bringing the speaker yet closer to the deceased. This is, in effect, the essence of Derrida's "work of mourning", a movement of interiorisation, of "apocryphal figuration", that "addresses all things with 'Lazarus, arise'" through which the one who is no longer "living *in himself*" remains living "*in us*".[37] Moved by mourning, the living inevitably "end up addressing *directly, straight on*, the one who, as we say, is no longer, is no longer living, no longer there, who will no longer respond."[38] In other words, when language fails, the act of speaking *of* the dead unfolds into a ritual of resurrection, in which the deceased is maintained "alive" in the addressee as an absent interlocutor, a haunting. The posthumous dialogue—or "work of mourning"—therefore paradoxically stems from a sheer inability to communicate, from an ultimate monologue thereby reaffirmed and transgressed. Derrida speaks of those "whom one loves and admires"; famous suicides, however, break the mournful monopoly of family and friends. Beyond the select circle of those who actually met the deceased, the anonymous audience is, after all, equally composed of belated witnesses. As discussed in Chapter Four, however distant, the author of a memorial text places him/herself in the displaced death scene. In fact,

at times, such an ease and familiarity with the scene are expressed in the text that the anonymous witness seems to become closely acquainted with the deceased, by, for instance, calling her by her first name with disturbing familiarity.[39] Moreover, it is important to remember that the deceased herself becomes a belated addressee, a witness, as she repeatedly establishes a dialogue between her living and her projected dead selves.

The peculiarity of Hughes as an "invocator" lies in the almost literal nature of the movement of interiorisation as a form of resurrection, which is, at once, expected and defamiliarising. As its very title suggests, *Birthday Letters* implies the existence of an addresser and an addressee, to whom writing is directed, not simply *about*. Such an epistolary quality complements the constant masking of the fictional dimension of the text. It is worth emphasising that, by masking, one understands a juxtaposition, rather than a superposition, of fact and fiction. Breaking through the limits of genre, *Birthday Letters* utterly subverts the traditional notion of "literariness" whilst maintaining its aesthetic function. Together with Plath's own memorial texts, it engages in the illusion of the "pure voice", a kind of an oracle capable of disclosing the irretrievable death scene. The publication of *Birthday Letters* in 1998 endowed it with the value of documentation, having been received as a key to the unravelling of the stories it comprises. Accordingly, reviews revolved upon terms of impact, emphasising the sense of ultimate revelation attached to the book:

> *Birthday Letters* is a shock. [...] He loved her and he felt for her, and the intensity of that love will no doubt come as a surprise [...].[40]

> Here, we are to believe is The Truth about Sylvia which can be summarised as: she was beautiful, brilliant, violent, crazy, doomed, I loved her, I did my best to make her happy, but she was obsessed with her dead father, and it killed her. [...] Inevitably, given the claims that these poems set the record straight, the question of truth arises.[41]

Notably, contrary to other circumstances in which Hughes lay utterly isolated in his own private limbo, there is, in this case, a certain connivance between him and the anonymous audience. As suggested by the extracts above, *Birthday Letters* somewhat absolved Hughes and allowed the audience, for the first time, to have access to his side of the story in his own words. Unlike many of his critical writings on Plath, these poems inspire credibility due to the very fact that he is not simply speaking *of* Plath, but, above all, he is speaking *to her* before the audience.

Birthday Letters materialises and displays the dialogue between Hughes and Plath and it does so by explicitly allowing the audience to look inside instead of forcibly sneaking in.

The epistolary value of the poems is not restricted to the book's title. Addresser and addressee have their names, personal and common stories adhered to them through every tissue of the text. The aura of "revelation" that surrounded the publication of *Birthday Letters* is indissociable from the notion of the "true" and "pure" voice that one finds in memorial texts by Plath. Here, however, instead of being smothered and adulterated by the proximity of the living, the voice of the deceased emerges with and through it, bringing life closer to death and vice-versa. Such a concern with a sense of closeness and intimacy is expressed in a letter from Hughes to the German translators of *Birthday Letters*:

> I wrote them [the poems] without any thought of publication, over twenty years, writing just one or two now and again. My aim was to find a language so simple, so psychologically naïve and naked, that my sense of communicating with her, directly, so to speak, could feel free and unself-conscious. [...] I did exclude quite a few that guarded themselves (most poems are highly defensive in one way or another) too effectively. My whole point was to get certain things off my chest—but in that intimate way directly to her.[42]

The significance of Hughes's unexpected openness in relation to the exclusive use of his relationship with Plath as the subject matter is indisputable. The emphasis on the "pure" and "true" voice creates a scene of contradiction that dominates the entire work. As the title of the review "Peering into the Bell Jar", previously quoted, suggests, the poems play within the public spheres of the literary and the deeply personal spheres of the dialogue it encompasses. As a belated witness, the reader has the impression of observing a universe that is as exposed as it is unapproachable.

It would, nevertheless, be naïve totally to disregard the conflict caused by the association of ideas such as "truth" and "revelation" with a literary object. Even more markedly than Plath's memorial texts, *Birthday Letters* puts into question the issue of authorial intention. Considering Wimsatt's and Beardsley's definition of intention as "what he [the author] intended", the "design or plan in the author's mind", one finds that, in this case, not only that such a "design" is "available" but also "desirable" in the process of interpretation.[43] The appeal to authorial intention is, in effect, central to the very nature of the memorial text. Without it, the

dialogue with the dead would not be established through writing. In general terms, Hughes's tantalising exposure of the work's intention does not have a restrictive impact in the production of meaning. On the contrary, as in Plath, the possibilities of meaning and defamiliarisation are multiplied by a constant displacement between the so-called textual space and the volatile categories of intention.

Hughes's words, previously cited, point to a spontaneous, direct communication with the deceased as his main intention, having the purity of the true voice as its instrument. He, however, goes beyond one's tendency, when impelled by mourning, to direct oneself directly to the one who is no longer "inaccessible to his appellation", who cannot become a vocation address or apostrophe".[44] Here, the sense of "direct communication" is dangerously taken to the limits of the literal. Naturally, such limits are broken, but not obliterated. As Derrida notes, the deceased "no longer exists except *in us, between us*. In himself, by himself, of himself, he is no more, nothing more."[45] Nevertheless, charged with posthumous agency, Plath's *quasi*-presence cannot be easily contained within the discourse of the other. *Birthday Letters* is a striking epitaph for Plath, for it speaks so naturally to the deceased that one is increasingly conscious of her presence, despite being also constantly aware of her death. Besides, unlike *Howls and Whispers*, it constitutes a very public epitaph, inexhaustibly recreated by the anonymous audience. Being less known, *Howls and Whispers* is a somewhat darker, more obscure epitaph, which, nonetheless, shares the same striking sense of intimacy and spontaneity. In "The Offers", the reversibility of roles culminates in the appropriation of the word by the deceased, ending the poem:

> [...] You came behind me
> (At my helpless moment, as I lowered
> A testing foot into the running bath)
> And spoke—peremptory, as a familiar voice
> Will startle out of a river's uproar, urgent,
> Close: "This is the last. This one. This time
> Don't fail me."[46]

The absolute vulnerability of the poet is noteworthy. Helpless, he fades into silence as the deceased takes over the power of direct speech, pronouncing the last words—an ultimatum. As in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, death is here communication; it is an "embrace" that brings together the living and the dead.[47] The killer-victim cannot exist "by herself", but nor does she require invitation to speak, as previously suggested. The illusion created by the ambivalent act of death emphasises the pre-

existence of the deceased's voice, haunting any "said real or present voice" that evokes it.[48] In this context, the poems do not simply address or evoke the dead; they call for a response and present it, enacting the posthumous dialogue in print before the audience. As a result, by speaking *of* and *to* Plath, Hughes speaks, above all, *with* her.

It is worth noting that *Birthday Letters* and *Howls and Whispers* share the deeply personal universe of the relationship between "I" (living) and "you" (dead) with *Cappriccio*, an earlier collection whose poems are believed to be addressed to Assia Wevill.[49] However instead of communication, death is here the redoubling of absences, the void left by the living and the dead. In this context, "you" fails to constitute an interlocutor. Rather than a dialogue, the poems comprise a soliloquy, in which the poet, in an empty evocation, addresses the deceased without actually attempting to establish communication. Instead, he gives answers to his own questions, which, in effect, often correspond to alternative ways of making a statement, an accusation:

> Why did you kneel down at the grave's edge
> To be identified
> Accused and convicted
> By all who held in their hands
> Pieces of the gravestone grey granite
> Proof of their innocence?
>
> You must have misheard a sentence.
> ....
> Misheard,
> Mistook, and kneeled meekly.[50]

The accusatory tone that permeates the poems reinforces the superfluity of a response from the addressee. As the third vertex of this pseudo-dialogue, Plath's silence is different. Represented as "she" rather than "you", she is also, without a doubt, an absence, which is, in fact, reinstated repeatedly by Hughes like a reminder, a *leit motif*. In the silent interplay of dead women, Plath makes herself present through her growing absence whilst Wevill's voicelessness is deepened by a sense of illegitimacy surrounding her suicide. Her death unfolds from Plath's, becoming a re-enactment, an attempt to usurp another's death scene: "Maybe they

wouldn't stone you/If you became a nun/And selflessly incinerated yourself/In the shrine of her death./Because that is what you did."[51]

The narrowing of the distance with the deceased highlights Hughes's integration into Plath's textual body not only in its wider conception, but also in its more restricted one. In other words, with *Birthday Letters*, Hughes ironically became part of the body of work he had allegedly usurped and violated. The proximity of Plath's and Hughes's acts of writing can be read in various ways. On a superficial level, one finds extensive evidence of such a proximity, whether in Plath's notorious typing of Hughes's poems for publication or in the latter's detailed knowledge of his late wife's working habits through different periods. In addition, the actual materiality of their writings often point to a physical contiguity between them. For instance, a great number of Hughes's typescripts are found at the back of Plath's drafts, creating a curious dialogue in which the intertwining of the acts of writing is materialised on the surface of the paper. Not surprisingly, at times the sense of contiguity is expressed through intertextual relations during the writing process. Effectively, a conscious and direct use of one another's writing is equally possible, if not probable, as suggested by Hughes:

> After I left her she kept a typescript of "The Earth Owl", "The Green Wolf", "New Moon in January", "Heptonstall", "Full Moon and Little Frieda" and a few little experimental improvisations and a version of Lorca that I'd made, on her desk. They were there when she died. I think she got certain things from them. Also a piece I never collected ("The Road to Easington"), to which her reply was "The Bee Meeting", mocking with a different meaning, i.e. your escape is my funeral. That's how she read it, I think, eventually, though she was excited by it when I wrote it."[52]

Hughes's suggestion of a dialogue between "The Road to Easington" and "The Bee Meeting" is noteworthy. In this particular case, there are no explicit intertextual marks between the two poems, but the mere suggestion of the use of the latter as a "reply" to the former brings from a galaxy of relational readings.

The original intention of the author is, in fact, irretrievable. It remains, however, highly desirable. In suicide, it is the catalyst of self-fragmentation, the unattainable end of all quests to reconstruct the trail of life-death. The possibility of a deliberate association between poems is therefore capable of displacing the so-called original intention, rendering it more problematic, as they form a body of memorial texts on their own. Moreover, the notion of deliberation brings the posthumous dialogue even closer to the surface of the literal. As one—consciously

or unconsciously—scavenges the text marks of the poets' dialogue, "true" voices are reinvented and reinscribed in the textual body. The question of intention in *Birthday Letters* is intriguing and fascinating, because it is characterised, like the literal, by a sheer sense of shamelessness. It opens up a space where coincidences become certainties and, consequently, illusions. Across the eighty-eight poems such coincidences—or certainties—feed the production of meaning, creating a specular interplay with a pre-existent scene. Before reading a single line, one is struck by the unmistakable reflections that irradiate from the list of contents: a total of eight poems share exactly the same title with Plath's works, besides another three with similar titles—i.e. "Hardcastle Crags", "Ouija", "Wuthering Heights", "Apprehensions", "The Rabbit Catcher", "Totem", "Brasilia", "The 59th Bear", "The Bee God", "Fever". "Night Ride on Ariel".[53] In *Howls and Whispers*, one finds no identical titles, but the specular play persists. "Minotaur 2", for instance, begins by echoing Plath's "Event": "I saw the plot unfolding and me in it,/*Where we touched like cripples*" and finishes with a killing, at the centre of the labyrinth, "Where the Minotaur, which was waiting to kill you,/Killed you".[54] In Plath, the echoed line finishes the poem and death comes in a ring:

> *The death-smell of everything.*
> *I walk with an absence*
> *I walk in a ring,*
> *A groove of faults, deep and bitter.*
>
> ....
>
> *Who love has dismembered us?*
> *The dark is melting. We touch like cripples.*[55]

It is worth noting that the change of tense from "We *touch* like cripples" to "We *touched* like cripples" adds a temporal dimension to the intertextual dialogue. "Event"—originally entitled "Quarrel"—exhales the "death-smell of everything"; it is a death process—it dismembers, darkens, and melts into a posthumous persona. "The Minotaur 2" is the "reply", an account of the killing, enclosed in the irremediable finitude of the past tense from the first to the last lines.

Given the transparency of relations, the dialogue between Plath's and Hughes's texts suggests a parallel with the image of a "palimpsest", commonly used in literary theory along with Freud's "mystic writing pad". A palimpsest,

according to the *OED*, is a "parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing" or, in extended use, simply "a multiple-layered record". Gérard Genette uses the term in his theory of "hypertextuality"—i.e. every relationship associating a text B ("hypertext") to a pre-existent text A ("hypotext"), in which, like in a palimpsest, the former is superimposed upon the latter without, however, concealing it. [56] Hence, Hughes's "Minotaur 2", for instance, would be the "hypertext" to Plath's "Event", which, in its turn, would have as its "hypotext" its earlier version "Quarrel". The transparency of the surface of writing in relation to traces of previous writings allows one to envisage the kaleidoscopic possibilities offered by relational readings. Genette describes such a dissonance between the old and the new by using Lévi-Strauss's term *bricolage*. One reservation, however, must be made when applying the theory of "hypertextuality" to the Plath-Hughes dialogue. Genette's concept of a "text at second degree" opens the possibility of establishing hierarchical relations among the texts. This is greatly due to the idea of subordination that inevitably arises from the notion of derivation. According to him, whether the hypertext cites directly its hypotext or not, the former cannot exist without the latter.[57] Such an assumption is, nevertheless, dangerous and restrictive. Although one is compelled towards relational readings among the multitude of texts comprising the textual body, the possibility of independent readings must exist. In other words, the autonomy of individual texts must be maintained so as to engage in a dialogue—as opposed to derivation or subordination—with another.

Through the palimpsestic interplay of legibility and illegibility, life and death, present and representation,[58] the *quasi*-presence of the deceased therefore arises. The anonymous audience feeds on its traces, recreating them. The so-called derivation is unlimited. Eyewitnesses, however, write upon stronger, more visible, traces that interact with their own memorial inscription. Like her father, Frieda Hughes has also written upon the traces left by her mother. Her poem "Lazarus", for instance, resurrects and intertwines itself with Plath's own Lazarus:

> When prayer cannot bring you back
> From the pit of your cinders,
> From the box at the bedside,
> In which you are crumbled,
> To see what has been done
> In your name, and that your children

Are kept from your pieces[59]

Frieda Hughes is, after all, with her brother Nicholas, virtually an eyewitness in the literal sense, having been in the bedroom at the time of Plath's death—"two babes, who have turned, in their sleep,/Into orphans/Beside the corpse of their mother."[60] She is literally part of the death scene. Her name is itself a sign of death—not only her own death, as Derrida suggests, but of her mother's suicide. In other words, her name, like her writings, integrates the palimpsest of her parents' dialogue.

Another noteworthy example of relational readings—or palimpsestic readings—is offered by Plath's and Hughes's "The Rabbit Catcher".[61] The table below compares certain lines from both poems, so as to serve as guidance for the following analysis:

Plath	Hughes
(Plath's final version dates 21 May 1962).	It was May.
And the open gate stencilled PRIVATE	Finally a gateway.
I tasted the malignity of the gorse .... The paths narrowed to a hollow *The absence of shrieks* *Made a hollow in the hot day*	A gorse cliff, Brambly, oak-packed combes. We found An eyrie hollow, just under the cliff-top. It seemed perfect to me.
And the snares effaced themselves *The snares effaced themselves in the air—the loops of emptiness* *But significant—they had a significance*	And I found a snare
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt	You saw blunt fingers Clamped round a tea mug

The lines cited in the above table set a common tone, marked by identical or similar words and phrases, which echo one another from the very title. The repeated words intertwine the two poems, reinforcing the dialogue. Nevertheless, the similarities are striking, yet scarce. The conversation here established is one of discrepancies, contrasts. Protagonists of the same story, they find themselves in completely diverse scenarios. Plath starts off at the killing scene: "It was a place of force". Throughout the drafts, she writes and rewrites extensive descriptions of the place, carefully constructing the scene. Hughes, on the other hand, begins at the very start of the journey, a start he cannot retrieve, so he summons the deceased to

enlighten him: "How had it started? What/Had bared our edges? What quirky twist/Of the moon's blade had set us, so early in the day/Bleeding each other? What had I done?" The dialogue between the two poems is constructed by discrepancy: e.g. "I tasted the malignity of the gorse" (Plath), "It seemed perfect to me" (Hughes). Evoking the dead, Hughes emphasises the contradictions, alternating "you" and "I" as he remounts the clash between two different worlds: "I saw/The sanctity of a trapline desecrated/You saw blunt fingers, blood in the cuticles"; "I saw/Country poverty raising a penny/[...] You saw baby-eyed/Strangled innocents, I saw sacred/Ancient customs. You saw snare after snare".

The closure of the two poems shares a common bond—death and estrangement. Plath starts the last stanza stating: "And we, too, had a relationship—/Tight wires between us". Not addressing "you" over the entire poem, she leaves the question unanswered: who does "we" refer to? Is the silent interlocutor the killer ("him"): ""I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,/[...] How they waited him, those little deaths!/They waited like sweethearts. They excited him." Or is the relationship between the poet and "those little deaths" that eventually kill her too: "The constriction is killing me also." Hughes questions the identity of the prey: "Had you caught something in me,/Nocturnal and unknown to me? Or was it/Your doomed self, your tortured, crying/Suffocating self?" The conclusion takes one back to Plath's poem(s), which emerge like a still warm dead body, the victim to a killing, namely writing: "Those terrible, hypersensitive/Fingers of your verse closed round it and/Felt it alive. The poems, like smoking entrails,/Came soft in your hands."

If Plath's work constitutes "chapters of a mythology",[62] so do Hughes's poems evoking her and their internal dialogue. Interlacing writing with the killing and dying process, Hughes places *The Bell Jar* at the centre of Plath's "ritual" of death and rebirth, stating, however, that it was not "strong enough". Subsequently, in the same letter to Sagar, he adds: "And the Ariel poems not so triumphant ritual—Ariel itself is a prophecy to suicide. If we had got back together mid-Ariel, or even any time before she died maybe her ritual would have been confirmed."[63] It is interesting to note that, while Plath's so-called ritual is performed both in poetry and prose, Hughes's uninhibited dialogue with the deceased in writing is essentially associated with poetry. Effectively, in his critical writings on Plath, the otherness of the third person prevails and is redoubled: Hughes speaks *of* Plath, referring not only to her as a third person, but also to himself, as previously discussed. Prose is above all a safe haven from the exposure of his own "posthumous existence". The quest for objectivity and the primacy of the referent serve as instruments of protection and detachment through which the dissociated self as a third-person

attempts to speak, veiling the subjective "I" behind the text. In the same letter to Sagar, Hughes discusses his period of silence and his initial "moral reluctance to deal with the episode directly as material for artistic work":

> I despised it. In poetry, I believed, experience dealt creatively [...] obliquely, through a symbol, inadvertently. [...] but I was too close to the experience [...].I took refuge in prose [...]. Finally I cracked. [...] A thing that I too thought unthinkable—so new, so vulnerable, so unprocessed, so naïve, so self-exposing [...] And so dead against my near-inborn conviction that you never talk about yourself in this way—in poetry. [...] at least none of it is faked, innocent as it is.[64]

The exposure, however, is part of the illusion. *Birthday Letters* is the closure of Hughes's own mythology of death, silence, and revelation. Along with the unsealing of Plath's journals and the poet's death in the same year, it offers a disquieting sense of revelation obscured by the poetic sign and the unsurpassable gap of representation. Hughes's instrument of revelation and exposure is the very factor that deters the "truth" from being retrieved, multiplying it instead.

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[1] When enumerating some of Hughes's "facets", I make use of references to his *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber, 1998) and also three poems by Plath— "Pursuit", "The Jailer" and "Burning the Letters", all published in her *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1992).

[2] Hughes, "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals", *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (New York: Picador, 1995) 177.

[3] Hughes, "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals" 177. My italics.

Contrary to accusations that the vanished journals had been, in fact, destroyed by Hughes, a letter sent by him to Keith Sagar on 5 May 1998 reads as follows: "Heard rumours recently that Sylvia Plath's journals from 1959 to 1963 (end of 62) were 'seen' in the sixties. They must have existed, for sure, because I owned one covering the last couple of months—and at that point (early 63) that must have been a continuation of journals right up to it. Strange business. Trails gone cold at the moment." (Ted Hughes Correspondence, British Library, 78760, vol. v, ff. 208, 5 May 1998).

[4] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, Ted Hughes Correspondence, British Library, 78756, vol. I, ff. 197, 27 May 1974.

[5] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, British Library, 78756, vol. I, ff. 197, 26 May 1973. My italics.

[6] Jorge Luís Borges, "Borges and I", *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yatese and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964) 246-47.

[7] Plath, "Lady Lazarus", *CP (1992)* 246.

[8] Hughes, "St Botolph's", *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber, 2003) 1051. Henceforth referred to as *CP* (2003).

[9] Hughes, "Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*," *Winter Pollen* 161.

[10] Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (London: Papermac, 1995) 51.

[11] Plath, "The Fearful", *ms.*, n.d., The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[12] Plath, "Burning the Letters", *ms.*, 13 August 1962, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[13] Plath, "Burning the Letters", item 1, *ms.*, n.d., The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[14] Aurelia Plath, *Series Talk*, interview, 16 March 1963. In *Bitter Fame* (London: Penguin, 1989), Anne Stevenson mentions this episode, but questions the actual existence of such a novel, giving a number of arguments against it (251).

[15] Hughes, "Suttee", *CP* (2003) 1138-39..

[16] Plath, "The Jailer", *CP* (1992) 227.

[17] Plath, "Pursuít", *CP* (1992) 22-3.

[18] Hughes, "Trophies", *CP* (2003) 1054.

[19] Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber, 2000) 212. The entry is dated 26 February 1956.

[20] Hughes, "The Offers", *CP* (2003) 1180. The poem was first published in *Howls & Whispers* (Rockport: The Gehenna Press, 1998), which constitutes an amplification of *Birthday Letters*.

[21] Hughes, Letter to Ann and Leo Goodman, 8 May 1963, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College.

[22] Charles William Wahl, "Suicide as Magical Act", *Clues to Suicide*, eds. Edwin S. Shneidman and Norman L. Faberow (New York: The Blakiston Division, 1957) 30.

[23] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) 22.

[24] Derrida 76.

[25] Barthes, "Textual Analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar'", *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, eds. David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1988) 166.

[26] Cf. Barthes 168.

[27] Tzvetan Todorov, "O discurso psicótico", *Os gêneros do discurso* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1980) 75.

[28] Barthes 148.

[29] Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs,* trans. David B. Allison, ed. John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973) 156.

[30] Cf. Barthes 167 and Mariluci Novaes, *Os dizeres nas esquizofrenias: Uma cartola sem fundo* (São Paulo: Escuta, 1996) 82.

[31] Novaes 50.

[32] Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf, eds. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) xix.

[33] This issue has been previously discussed in Chapter Five.

[34] Cf. Derrida, Specters of Marx 9.

[35] Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 7.

[36] Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 101.

[37] Derrida, *Memoires de Paul de Man,* trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 21, 34, 37, 63.

[38] Derrida, *The Work of Mourning,* ed. Pascale-Anne Braud and Michel Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 200.

[39] See, for instance, Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987).

[40] Sarah Maguire, "An Old Fresh Grief", *The Guardian,* 22 Jan. 1998, sec. Books: p. 11.

[41] Katha Politt, "Peering into the Bell Jar", *New York Times,* Book Review, 1 Mar. 1998, p. 4; 6.

[42] Hughes, Letter to Andrea Paluch and Robert Habeck, British Library, 78761, vol. VI, ff. 170. 16 June 1988.

[43] William Kurtz Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy", *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954) 3-4.

[44] Derrida, The Work of Mourning 46.

[45] Derrida, Memoires for Paul de Man 28.

[46] Hughes, *CP* (2003) 1183. The poem "The Offers", from *Howls and Whispers,* is here cited together with other examples from *Birthday Letters,* given the close connection between the two works.

[47] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 1990) 163. I here refer to the passage following Septimus Smith's suicide, in which Clarissa says "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate [...] There was an embrace in death." The paragraph, in Plath's copy of the novel at Smith College (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), is underlined with marginal annotations.

[48] Derrida, Memoires for Paul de Man 26.

[49] The poems, collected in *CP* (2003), were originally published by Gehenna Press in 1990, under the title of *Capriccios*. In this limited edition, only fifty copies were issued, with a note that the poems therein included would "not be reprinted in the poet's lifetime".

[50] Hughes, "The Error", *CP* (2003) 796.

[51] Hughes, "The Error", *CP* (2003) 796.

[52] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, British Library, 78756, vol I, ff. 197, 18 June 1998.

[53] All works cited have been published in Plath's *Collected Poems* (1992) and Hughes's *Collected Poems* (2003), with the exception of Plath's "The 59th Bear", published in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber, 1979).

[54] Hughes, *CP* (2003) 1178. The emphasis is mine.

[55] Plath, "Event", *CP* (1992) 194. The lines in italics refer to material found in draft 3 at Smith College.

[56] Cf. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982) 13.

[57] Cf. Genette 19.

[58] Cf. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978) 226-38.

[59] Frieda Hughes, "Lazarus", *Waxworks* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2002) 88.

[60] Hughes, "Life After Death", *CP* (2003) 1161.

[61] Hughes, "The Rabbit Catcher", *CP* (2003) 1136-38; Plath "The Rabbit Catcher", *CP* (1992) 193-94; Plath, "Snares", draft 1, *ms.*, The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College. Plath's poem was initially entitled "Snares". I shall here make reference to both the published version and the drafts by Plath. Extracts from the drafts will be cited in italics.

[62] Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems", *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber, 1970) 187. See Chapter Five for further commentary on the expression.

[63] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, British Library, 78761, vol. VI, ff. 170, 18 June 1998.

[64] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, British Library, 78761, vol. VI, ff. 170, 18 June 1998.

Conclusion

In 2003, forty years after Sylvia Plath's suicide, the film *Sylvia* was released, starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Plath and Daniel Craig as Ted Hughes. Despite the production's failure to achieve great success, the film is rooted in many of the key issues pertaining not only to Plath but also to other suicide-authors, herein discussed, and hence offers an ideal scenario for the final considerations of this thesis.

The first scene is a portrait of disengagement and self-fragmentation. It could have been both a prelude and an epilogue. Paltrow emerges on the screen like an apparition: half-visible, lying motionless on her side, languid with an unearthly stare under a bluish light. Echoing Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, her first sentence—"Sometimes I dream of a tree"—is left unpronounced by her static lips, as though her voice had been disembodied. As her image remains still, life is confounded with death, creating a sharp impression of discordance. Masqueraded as Plath, Paltrow is neither dead nor alive; she is a death mask, an invitation to engage in the recreation of the deceased's posthumous persona.

The disconformity between image and sound in the first scene materialises the delay of the posthumous voice, expressing acoustically the displacement of the suicide's *quasi*-presence from living to posthumous persona. Yet, the overall impression is one of wholeness and identity. By nature, cinema reinforces the acceptance of the illusion, characteristic of suicide. Sitting in the darkness before the illuminated screen, every viewer becomes an eyewitness. More than merely a rapid sequence of images, the film offers a contradictory "real time" reconstruction of events. Protagonist of the narrowing of fiction and reality, the actor does not play the suicide—she *is* the suicide. The suppression of the interval between the object and representation, here exaggerated, is an essential mechanism through which death can be re-enacted, allowing the suicide to kill and die repeatedly in memorial texts by him/herself or by belated witnesses. The greater the audience, the more fragmentary and imposing is the illusion. For the suicide-effect is based precisely on the paradoxical creation, through self-fragmentation, of an illusory sense of wholeness. One is left with a metonymic perception of the suicide, in which the living persona is illusorily completely dissociated from its posthumous counterpart— in other words, a "death mask", a "carcass", a representation whose referent is not a person, but a mirage, a fantasia.

Seen as an individual example, *Sylvia* evidently presents characteristics that are particular to the Plath case. Neither her poetic genius nor her suicide can be

considered, in an isolated way, as the focal point of the film. In this particular case, promotional posters at the time of its release, featuring Paltrow and Craig drawn together in an imminent kiss, made its central theme blatantly clear to the public. Effectively, *Sylvia* can hardly be considered as a celebration of Plath's life and work, dwelling chiefly on paradigms of the pitiful victim. From its very title, the film conveys a dubious sense of over-familiarity and anonymity of a character that struggles to be "Plath", but constantly fades out into the semi-anonymity of a first name—"Sylvia". Hughes and Plath are portrayed as polarities brought together as a unity—hence their incapacity to be or not to be (together). To Hughes, poetry is magic, seduction—he is the "shaman", the "black marauder". Constantly eclipsed, "Sylvia" is left "basking" in her husband's "reflected glory".[1] Hughes *is* a "real poet"; "Sylvia" simply seeks to be, being subordinated to her husband and, eventually, to her own death wish.

Despite being overshadowed in the film by dramatic license, the complexity of their relationship points to major aspects of the deconstruction of the posthumous persona in suicide-authors. For what is *Sylvia* but the outer appearance of an unfinished mosaic of memorial texts? The image one sees on the screen, embodied by Gwyneth Paltrow, radiates a similar aura to Mayakovsky's body lying in estate or Woolf's famous suicide note to her husband. What one sees is the illusion, the "armour", yet such an illusion is a product of the displacement of living and posthumous personae. In other words, like a death mask, the image one perceives presents itself as the immutable profile of the deceased, the indisputable truth of his/her life and death. Nonetheless, the illusion of oneness is also the very image of self-fragmentation. In *Sylvia*, for instance, Paltrow's character merely "seeks to be" until the "Ariel poems"—which are seen as part of the killing and dying process—arise. That is, it is only by killing herself that she comes to "existence". Whereas such a statement does not, by any means, imply a reduction of an author's work to his/her suicide, it points to the very eruption of the killer-victim, hence the transformation of the writer into a suicide-author. Writing, therefore, becomes part of the killing and dying process and, consequently, a vehicle for the re-enactment of death by the posthumous voice. It is also a link between the renewed enunciation and the death scene—the *hand* that kills and writes. The most remarkable example here seen is, without a doubt, given by Esenin, who, by writing his final poem in his own blood, performed the link rather literally. Most importantly, however, the implicit dialogue between corpus and corpse, common to all cases, through which the materiality of the text reverberates the killing/dying act and creates a bond between the reader and the author's body.

To speak of "re-enactment of death" means necessarily a subversion of historic time. Again, *Sylvia* serves as an effective illustration of temporality in suicide, herein discussed. On the one hand, the actual structure of the film as a narrative emphasises the linearity of time, thus offering the sense of wholeness associated with a well organized reconstruction of events—that is, the "death plot" inserted into the original "death scene". On the other hand, suicide requires the reversibility of time. Paltrow's character is already dead before the film begins, just like any other suicide-author is already a suicide before the first page of a biography. In the first scene of the film, for instance, death is everywhere—in the half-visible face, the still features, the shadows, the disembodied voice. The unspoken soliloquy is, at once, already a death scene and an invitation to the recreation of the death plot. Like the image of the tree and the soundtrack, it acts as a "bad omen", which reminds the audience of the expected end and also performs it in advance.

The iterability of a suicide's "inaugural death scene" is, in effect, a key characteristic of memorial texts both by the deceased or his/her witnesses. As demonstrated earlier, memorial texts like Plath's or Pavese's diaries, for instance, cannot be deemed solely as autobiographical material, but also as a testimony left by the deceased as a prime witness to his/her own death. Like the first scene of the film, each entry, each line is already a death scene that simultaneously announces and advances the end. Hence, regardless of genre or notions of literariness, writings by a suicide-author acquire the value of a suicide note. In Mayakovsky, this is made explicit by the inclusion of a poem as part of the suicide note. However, the suicide-effect is essentially infectious, spreading itself to other writings. "Suicide and the suicide", writes Bengt Jangfeldt, are one of the main motifs of Mayakovsky's creative work [...]. The thought of suicide was never far from his mind."[2] By inscribing the making of the "Ariel poems" in Plath's descent—or ascension?—towards death, one endows the poems with the same sense of urgency and inevitability as one finds, for instance, in Sá-Carneiro's last letters to Fernando Pessoa. The written word performs death before and after the event. As time and space are redefined by the irretrievable death scene, the writer emerges as a dead enunciator, who re-enacts suicide before the reader. The notion of "re-enactment" also brings forth questions regarding suicide as a spectacle. By committing *sepuku*, Mishima performed publicly on/with his body the self-fragmentation that continually occurs with his image as a suicide-author. Memorial texts by the living and the dead perpetuate the spectacle, disseminating the posthumous voice and feeding the need for presence, illusion, reconstruction. Calling for the voice of the other, suicide projects and conceals possible narratives, permutating death scenes of a

film that begins at its end. For death must be re-enacted, so as to allow the audience to retrace the death trail and re-validate their roles as belated witnesses. The performance of self-destruction is, therefore, continuously renewed.

In sum, the dissemination of the posthumous voice, inherent to suicide, presupposes necessarily a subversion of the teleology on which the act of death is grounded. Preparing himself to commit suicide, the main character from Vladimir Nabakov's *The Eye* questions one's "pre-suicidal occupations":

> a man who has decided upon self-destruction is far removed from mundane affairs, and to sit down and write his will would be, at that moment, an act just as absurd as winding up one's watch, since, together with the man, the whole world is destroyed; the last letter is instantly reduced to dust and, with it, all the postmen; and like smoke, vanishes the estate bequeathed to a nonexistent progeny.[3]

Suicide, however, pertains to both the mundane and the absurd. As death becomes the beginning and the end of one's mortal coil, the suicide's entire existence becomes part of the ritual, the spectacle of self-destruction. Thus, the dialogue between living and posthumous personae can be found both in the trigger of a gun and in the written word or, even, "between the free potato chips".[4] Suicide-authors do not simply write about death, they do so with "burned-up intensity" "drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!"[5] Besides, unlike other killer-victims, their major "pre-suicidal" occupation—namely, writing—is essentially self-destructive as well: the constant self-effacement into the text they produce. Hence, when, in *Sylvia*, Hughes exclaims "You've got the subject, it's you!", the subject he refers to is a self-inflicted absence, a volatile fragmented image that kills, writes, and dies in the text. The final scene, in which the image of Hughes kissing the manuscript of *Ariel* is superimposed by an image of her dead body, materialises the conflicting dialogue of suicide-authors: corpus and corpse, living and posthumous personae.

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[1] *Sylvia*, 2003, dir. Christine Jeffs.

[2] Bengt Jangfeldt, "Preface", Love is the Heart of Everything: Correspondence Between Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik 1915-1930 (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986) 33.

[3] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Eye* (London: Penguin, 1992) 27.

[4] Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing", *The Art of Sylvia* Plath, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber, 1970) 175.

[5] Sexton 175.

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