

Introduction:
'Purdah' and the enigma of representation

Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain

In a sentence excised from her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood, confesses to the unreliability of representation, even when it appears to arise from first-hand testimony: 'I never told anybody my life story, though, or if I did, I made up a whopper.'¹ Esther warns against any easy acceptance of truthfulness.² It is a caution that readers of all kinds of supposed representations of Plath would do well to heed.

Representing Sylvia Plath re-evaluates Plath's body of work, adding to a growing movement in Plath studies that is suspicious of an older but still lingering school of Plath criticism that sees her as a 'confessional' writer.³ The topics and contributors to this volume have been selected to reflect a range of new developments in Plath Studies. All explore Plath's own paradoxical notions of self-presentation. The essays share an interest in what Plath's many poetic speakers hide, veil, and leave out, as well as what they say directly.

It is in the light of Plath's awareness of the slippery nature of any representation that we turn to 'Purdah', for it is a poem that puts this problem at its centre. 'Purdah' is dated 29 October 1962, the day that Plath finished 'Lady Lazarus'. Both poems are written in three-line tercets and can be seen as dramatic monologues. Reading them together is a useful way of revealing the multiplicity of archetypes always present in Plath's representation of any single female figure.

Christina Britzolakis notes that the poems share 'the apocalyptic-destructive power of other iconic female apparitions in Plath's work: the Clytemnestra figure in "Purdah", the red-haired avenging demon of "Lady Lazarus"'.⁴ If we push Britzolakis's point further, we see that Lady Lazarus's final and absolute declaration, 'And I eat men like air',⁵ is not simply a defiant statement of her dangerousness and power. It also suggests dependence. To eat anything 'like air' is to require it for sustenance, for survival. Without air, or men, the speaker could not breathe,

and therefore could not live. The syntax of this final line means that the speaker does not just liken men to air, but also likens herself to it. This is the last of a series of images of her loss of bodily form, and is delivered at the moment when she supposedly regains that form by being reborn. 'Purdah' operates through a similar paradox. Tim Kendall characterizes the poem as 'a stage-managed performance which both incriminates and exonerates Plath's persona'.⁶ Along these lines, what Jo Gill describes as the speaker's 'resounding "shriek" of identity' is only possible because that identity is 'wrested from oppression'.⁷

'Lady Lazarus' has been much discussed by critics. Steven Gould Axelrod is especially helpful: 'The trope of the striptease emerges in the poem as a metapoetic element, a self-reflexive comment on the poetics of exhibitionism that are so fundamental to these poems, grounded as they are on Cold War concerns about privacy and exposure, in the interplay between body, gender, celebrity, and power.'⁸ The narrator of this 'multi-allusive'⁹ poem, to use Robin Peel's description, provides a show of confident yet ultimately misleading confession. Nothing is truly told. Though Lady Lazarus hastens to insist that she is real, the assertion is only rhetoric. An excised stanza emphasizes the poet's sense that her readers, and Lady Lazarus's audience, will, quite correctly, doubt what they observe. Coming after the question, 'Do I terrify? –'¹⁰ are the cancelled lines, 'Yes yes Herr Professor | It is I | Can you deny',¹¹ before the published version resumes: 'The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?'¹² Despite the verbiage of named body parts, we cannot help but doubt and 'deny' what we see, and Plath means us to do exactly that.

Invisibility and absence lure Plath's readers to peer more, and more closely, only to find that, however hard they look, they see only what the speaker of 'Purdah' calls 'shifting clarities'.¹³ Our reading of 'Purdah' is made in the wake of Veronica Forrest-Thomson's sense of its 'poetic artifice'¹⁴ and self-consciousness about the constructed nature of representation. It is also indebted to critics such as Alan Sinfield and Marjorie Perloff, who draw our attention to the poem's plotting of female identity and its exploration of sexual politics within violent and oppressive male power structures.¹⁵ With the trope of the veil at the heart of its narrative, 'Purdah' is a ceremonial initiation into Plath's theatre of ambivalence about display and concealment, and for this reason provides a useful focus for the intellectual and aesthetic concerns of this book.

The speaker secures her defences by means of an explicit commentary on the complexity of self-representation, coupled with teasing gestures towards her audience. She tells us, '... I smile, cross-legged | enigmatical'.

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This smile is enigmatical, difficult to read and mysterious; it is hazy behind her veil, and so is her whole identity. Something similar takes place in Plath's simultaneously revealing and concealing epistolary practices. As Jonathan Ellis suggests in the essay that opens this volume, her letters are more reflective of the 'you' she writes to than they are of the speaking 'I'. When 'Purdah's' speaker declares, 'I gleam like a mirror', it is as if she wishes to be reduced to a pure shiny surface that only reflects back the gaze of others. What has the tone of a starkly open self-confession turns out to be a way of hiding. But it is also a strong image of imprisonment and self-negation, evidence of her powerlessness. She is an instrument of self-reflection for others, principally her husband, whom she sardonically describes as 'Lord of the mirrors!'¹⁶

Virginia Woolf famously reminds us that 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.'¹⁷ Paradoxically, this is something of which the speaker takes advantage. Her 'visibilities', 'polishe[d]' by the 'sun', are a reflective surface that hides her interior body and its reproductive secrets. The 'trees' or 'bushy polyps'¹⁸ dragged by the moon are, in Plath's cumulative poetic imagery, associated with reproductive organs and the menstrual cycle: the bodily reality that the speaker cannot control as she controls her outward performance. In line with this version of Plath, choreographer Kate Flatt, towards the end of this volume, explores the poet's representation of the body's encounter with the world; the relationship of the body's often fluid borders and boundaries to place and space.

At the heart of 'Purdah' stands the question of who will act as subject by looking, and who will act as object and be looked upon. However much the poem turns on the traditional notion of the body of the bride as owned object, the speaker and bridegroom take both positions: subject and object. The 'silk | Screens' in the speaker's chambers and the 'Veil'¹⁹ she wears, in keeping with the system of female seclusion called 'Purdah',²⁰ are evidence to anyone who beholds her that 'I am his'. They are visual impediments that make it difficult for us to read her face, and they also obstruct her own ability to read. The problem of what she represents is not just ours, but also her own, because the instruments of any possible self-representation – her facial features – are obscured. The 'I am his' marks the act of sexual penetration that is a ritual taking possession of the woman, without which the marriage is not valid: 'It is himself he guides | In among these silk | Screens ...' The line break before 'In' provides an ambiguity. The silk screens are the curtains and veils that enclose

the married couple, and also the part of her body he has to penetrate in order to possess her. The 'concatenation of rainbows' that is her 'eye | Veil' suggests not just the mixture of colours in the fabric that we might see when we look upon her, but also the colours on the inner surface of her eyelid as she closes her eyes to receive him, itself an ambiguous image since the eyes may be closed in pleasure or in pain. Anatomically, those colours are reflections produced by the eye itself, rather than anything perceived in the outside world. Another way of reading the 'concatenation of rainbows'²¹ is that the colours of her veil's fabric affect the speaker's vision, tingeing everything she looks upon so that any authentic colour remains indecipherable.

These various possible senses give us different layers of unreliable representation while at the same time commenting upon the complexity of looking and being looked upon. This is the case in 'Lady Lazarus' too. Its 'peanut-crunching crowd'²² has a counterpart in 'Purdah', where the 'Attendants' who guard and serve the speaker breathe the same 'chandelier | Of air that all day plies | Its crystals | A million ignorants'.²³ The associative parallels between the two poems are numerous. There is 'Lady Lazarus's' 'million filaments'²⁴ and 'Purdah's' 'million ignorants'.²⁵ There is 'Lady Lazarus's' 'skin | Bright as a Nazi lampshade'²⁶ and 'Purdah's' 'chandelier | Of air'.²⁷ 'Air', as we have seen, becomes a simile for Lady Lazarus herself in the poem's last word.²⁸ By becoming air, Lady Lazarus in a sense gains entry into the curtained rooms and 'chandelier | Of air' of 'Purdah', inhabiting the latter poem well as her own. The 'million filaments' suggest not only the intense light given off by Lady Lazarus, as if she is an electric lamp, but also the filaments in the many eyes that look upon her. The optical images are another link between the two poems (recall the 'concatenation of rainbows' that affects the speaker's vision in 'Purdah').

Although many editions of the *Collected Poems* incorrectly print the word 'flies' at the end of the fifteenth stanza of 'Purdah', when Plath read the poem for her BBC recordings, and in all of her handwritten and typed drafts of the poem, she used the word 'plies'.²⁹ The one-letter slip is unfortunate, because Plath's intended word makes clear that the environment in which the poem's speaker must exist is one in which diligent performance is constantly supplied. 'Attendants! | Attendants!'³⁰ she cries. She appears not just to call for her servants so that she can issue instructions, but also in order to command the attention of her audience for the explosive show that is to come. But unlike the show that Lady Lazarus gives, and is at that poem's centre, in 'Purdah' the speaker's performance is a

four-times-repeated promise or vow or fantasy: 'I shall unloose'.³¹ Unloose has at least three senses: I shall release my furies and energies; I shall take off my clothes; I shall be newly constricted, and trapped again. The actual performance of Clytemnestra's theatrical murder of her husband (which takes place offstage in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*) is not within the scope of the poem's direct representation, but promised in its closing lines, lying in wait in the future tense. If Lady Lazarus eats men like air, the speaker of 'Purdah' is yet to do so.

The speakers of 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Purdah' rhetorically align themselves with Jewish and Asian identities. Plath certainly experimented with numerous other cultural and ethnographic costumes. In her chapter on the early 1950s poem, 'Madonna of the Refrigerator',³² Kathleen Connors examines Plath's prototypes for post-war identity. Keenly committed to trying on different 'selves', Plath also sought inspiration in the idioms of women's magazines. Luke Ferretter's chapter shows how she engages with the kind of short story that these magazines would publish, recycling elements of them in her own fiction; while Lynda K. Bundzen reveals the multiple layers of psychoanalytic sources that Plath drew on in order to construct the complicated 'Daddy' narrative that runs through *Ariel*. An avid maker of collages, Plath would cut and paste cultural, historical and personal images. This encapsulates an important aspect of her poetic technique. We see this in Steven Gould Axelrod's argument that she used her work to examine the roles of victim and torturer that were reflected in contemporary materials about the Holocaust, and in Anita Helle's unveiling of the archive of photographs that Plath's writing animates and explores. We see it also in Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty's uncovering of Plath's colour-driven sensibility in her chapter on Plath's visual aesthetic, and in Sally Bayley's reading of Plath's engagement with the tradition of Romantic paintings and the sublime.

Representing Sylvia Plath tackles the intricate relationships between reader and text – the various versions of Plath we think we encounter. Plath extracted subject matter and language from her own history and culture (her German roots, her possibly Jewish immigrant ancestry, her own and others' artistic productions, her domestic life and society), but always at a carefully mediated distance. Our book reveals Plath's particular process of extraction, but shows that it is a process that inevitably caused magnification, distortion or shrinkage.

Perhaps ironically, though not surprisingly, 'Plath' herself has become a valuable cultural resource – even, like the speaker of 'Purdah', a kind of jewel³³ – for other writers and artists. Jacqueline Rose opens her book

with the words, 'Sylvia Plath haunts our culture'.³⁴ Certainly Plath's image hovers around our contemporary imagination, perpetuating various forms of myth, some of which she may have intended, and others that she could never have predicted. In the closing section of this volume, Tracy Brain looks closely at Plath 'fictionalizations' and the ethical, aesthetic and generic questions they raise. By also including pieces by three creative practitioners who reflect upon their new artistic responses to and representations of Plath, this book, in part, continues this legacy of extended representation.

Together, these three pieces seem to tell a story of 'Plath' at different stages of her development. The narrative begins with Suzie Hanna's award-winning animation, *The Girl Who Would Be God*. Drawing attention to the young Plath's experiments with cut-out doll versions of herself, Hanna's film creates the tale of a doll theatre, a contemporary *Bildungsroman* of a Disney-style becoming, in which a young woman dresses for the cultural ball and goes in search of her prince charming. Kate Flatt's *Dance to Poppy Poems* looks at another facet of creativity, inventing a more mature 'Plath' who embraces pregnancy, birth and motherhood. Stella Vine continues to feed the myth, aligning Plath's image with the often grotesque aesthetic of celebrity culture, crowning Plath a pop princess, along with Princess Diana. Vine's paintings are cynical versions of an older Plath, post-lapsarian, where everything seems determined and fixed, no longer open to change.

Ted Hughes, in his elegiac collection of poems, *Birthday Letters*, evokes Plath in many incarnations. Hughes turns Plath's palette away from the colour red and its associations with emotional violence and distress – what the speaker of 'Poppies in July' calls 'hell-flames'³⁵ – to a calm and benevolent blue. And so Hughes gently restores Plath to a private aesthetic, but at the same time Hughes, in the role of bridegroom, chooses visibility. Terry Gifford tells us that Hughes originally planned to publish the book 'anonymously', but the reversal of this decision, like the ideas in the book itself, can be seen as 'a return to the fundamental notion ... that individuals must take responsibility for their inner life'.³⁶ While it is difficult to imagine that Hughes could have succeeded in maintaining anonymity, the publishing of *Birthday Letters* under his own name can be viewed as his attempt to reclaim some aspect of Plath's representational legacy. In the last section of this volume, Lynda K. Bundtzen argues that the poems in Hughes's *Howls & Whispers* are marked by contradictory poetic strategies that both disguise and reveal the poet's emotional entanglement in Plath's story. She uncovers the layers of mythical,

religious, Shakespearean, cinematic and personal allusions through which his poems construct Plath.

'Purdah', like the poems Hughes would write to Plath herself so many years later, works by likening its heroine to multiple, shifting archetypes. The speaker is Eve to her groom's 'green Adam', and therefore holds her own potential power of seduction. Elementally, she is a woman whose reproductive body is responsive to the moon's cycles. She is 'like a mirror',³⁷ concerned only with reflecting others and hiding herself, and she is 'like the peacock', the extravagantly coloured male bird, and in this case, a potentially dangerous one. She is 'quiet' but with the potential to release 'One' 'Shattering' 'note'.³⁸ She is a 'jeweled | Doll' and she is Clytemnestra. She is her husband's 'heart' and, at least in her fantasies, his potential murderer, the 'lioness'³⁹ stalking him.

Plath makes 'Purdah's' elusive yet prominent speaker represent all of these things at once, and these stark alternatives work in opposition to each other. The poem is a meaningful alternation between different possibilities, so that the apparently submissive woman is revealed as potentially murderous. But what is not clear is how metaphorical or serious this idea is. Are the violent impulses towards the husband mere fantasies hidden by the outwardly obedient and veiled bride, or is she really planning to kill him? What disturbs in this poem, as it does in 'Lady Lazarus', is the insoluble mystery as to how we should read this multiplicity of meanings and representational identities; the impossibility of choosing between them. And this is precisely what disturbs, and fascinates, readers about Sylvia Plath herself. Like Lady Lazarus and the speaker of 'Purdah', she is so visible and yet so hidden. Ultimately, however naked and exposed they think she may be, or however much they think they 'know' her, Plath remains enigmatic.

NOTES

- 1 SPC, Box: Plath – Prose – *The Bell Jar*. Folder: Prose Works – *The Bell Jar* – Outline of Chapters.
- 2 *The Bell Jar* has a history, nonetheless, of being termed an 'autobiographical novel'. See, for example, Elisabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 112.
- 3 See, for instance, M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) and Robyn Marsack, who says of 'Lady Lazarus': 'Plath is, in Sexton's terms, "telling it true" here'. *Sylvia Plath* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), p. 74.
- 4 Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 98.
- 5 *CP*, p. 247.

- 6 Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 167.
- 7 Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 70.
- 8 Steven Gould Axelrod, 'The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', in Jo Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 84.
- 9 Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), p. 193.
- 10 *CP*, p. 244.
- 11 SPC, Ariel Poems, 'Lady Lazarus', typed copy 2 (revised). Plath oscillated between putting this stanza in and taking it out. By her undated fourth and fifth typed copies the lines were removed, but she restored them when she read the poem for her BBC recording a few days later.
- 12 *CP*, p. 244.
- 13 *CP*, p. 242.
- 14 This is the title Forrest-Thomson gives to her book, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978).
- 15 See Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-War Britain* (London: Athlone Press, 1997). See also Marjorie Perloff, 'The Two Ariels: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon', *American Poetry Review*, 13 (Nov.–Dec. 1984): 10–18.
- 16 *CP*, p. 242.
- 17 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1929), p. 35.
- 18 *CP*, p. 242.
- 19 *CP*, p. 243.
- 20 Lynda K. Bundtzen tells us, 'At the top of her manuscript for "Purdah," Plath has inscribed the dictionary definition and derivations from Hindu and Persian ("Hind. & Per."): "Purdah = veil. Curtain or screen. India. To seclude women". *The Other Ariel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), p. 83. The manuscript Bundtzen cites is in SPC, Ariel Poems, 'Purdah', first draft.
- 21 *CP*, p. 243.
- 22 *CP*, p. 245.
- 23 *CP*, p. 243.
- 24 *CP*, p. 245.
- 25 *CP*, p. 243.
- 26 *CP*, p. 244.
- 27 *CP*, p. 243.
- 28 *CP*, p. 247.
- 29 *CP* prints the word 'flies' (p. 243). The drafts of 'Purdah' in which the word 'plies' appears are in SPC, Ariel Poems, 'Purdah'.
- 30 *CP*, p. 243.
- 31 *CP*, pp. 243, 244.
- 32 'Madonna of the Refrigerator' was to become 'The Babysitters'.

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- 33 Beginning with the 'Jade' rib of Adam to which the speaker likens herself, the poem is laden with jewel imagery, including her references to her 'valuable', 'gleam[ing]', 'sun polishe[d]' (*CP*, p. 242), 'Priceless' (*CP*, p. 243) self, which she speaks of in the third person as a 'small jewelled | Doll' (*CP*, p. 244).
- 34 Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago Press, 1991), p. 1.
- 35 *CP*, p. 203.
- 36 Terry Gifford, *Ted Hughes* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 66.
- 37 *CP*, p. 242.
- 38 *CP*, p. 243.
- 39 *CP*, p. 244.