

Christina Britzolakis: On "Lady Lazarus"

Although Plath's 'confessional' tropes are often seen in terms of a Romantic parable of victimization, whether of the sensitive poetic individual crushed by a brutally rationalized society, or of feminist protest against a monolithic patriarchal oppressor, her self-reflexivity tends to turn confession into a parody gesture or a premiss for theatrical performance. The central instance of the 'confessional' in her writing is usually taken to be 'Lady Lazarus'. M. L. Rosenthal uses the poem to validate the generic category: 'Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' and Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' are true examples of 'confessional' poetry because they put the speaker himself at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological shame and vulnerability an embodiment of his civilization.' The confessional reading of the poem is usually underpinned by the recourse to biography, which correlates the speaker's cultivation of the 'art of dying' with Plath's suicidal career. Although Plath is indeed, at one level, mythologizing her personal history, the motif of suicide in 'Lady Lazarus' operates less as self-revelation than as a theatrical tour de force, a music-hall routine.

With 'Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus' is probably the single text in the Plath canon which has attracted most disapproval on the grounds of a manipulative, sensationalist, or irresponsible style. Helen Vendler, for example, writes that 'Style (as something consistent) is meaningless, but styles (as dizzying provisional scepticism) are all . . . Poems like 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' are in one sense demonically intelligent, in their wanton play with concepts, myths and language, and in another, and more important, sense, not intelligent at all, in that they wilfully refuse, for the sake of a cacophony of styles (a tantrum of style), the steady, centripetal effect of thought. Instead, they display a wild dispersal, a centrifugal spin to further and further reaches of outrage.' Here, the element of 'wilful' pastiche in 'Lady Lazarus' is measured against a normative ideal of aesthetic detachment. Yet the poem's ironic use of prostitution as the figure of a particular kind of theatricalized self-consciousness?of the poet as, in Plath's phrase, 'Roget's trollop, parading words and tossing off bravado for an audience' (JP 214)?calls for a reading which takes seriously what the poem does with, and to, literary history.

Like 'Lesbos', 'Lady Lazarus' is a dramatic monologue which echoes and parodies 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. The title alludes, of course, not only to the biblical story of Lazarus but also to Prufrock's lines: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, | Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'. Like Eliot, Plath uses clothing as a metaphor for rhetoric: the 'veil' or 'garment' of style. By contrast with Eliot's tentative hesitations, obliquities, and evasions of direct statement, however, Plath's poem professes to 'tell all'. Lady Lazarus deploys a patently alienated and manufactured language, in which the shock tactic, the easy effect, reign supreme. Her rhetoric is one of direct statement ('I have done it again'), of brutal Americanisms ('trash', 'shoves', 'the big strip tease', 'I do it so it feels like hell', 'knocks me out'), of glib categorical assertions and dismissals ('Dying is an art, like everything else'), and blatant internal rhymes ('grave cave', 'turn and burn'). As Richard Blessing remarks, both 'Lady Lazarus' and 'The Applicant' are poems that parody advertising techniques while simultaneously advertising themselves. The poet who reveals her suffering plays to an audience, or 'peanut-crunching crowd'; her miraculous rebirths are governed by the logic of the commodity. Prufrock is verbally overdressed but feels emotionally naked and exposed, representing himself as crucified before the gaze of the vulgar mass. Lady Lazarus, on the

other hand, incarnates the 'holy prostitution of the soul' which Baudelaire found in the experience of being part of a crowd; emotional nakedness is itself revealed as a masquerade. The 'strip-tease' artist is a parodic, feminized version of the symbolist poet sacrificed to an uncomprehending mass audience. For Baudelaire, as Walter Benjamin argues, the prostitute serves as an allegory of the fate of aesthetic experience in modernity, of its 'prostitution' to mass culture. The prostitute deprives femininity of its aura, its religious and cultic presence; the woman's body becomes a commodity, made up of dead and petrified fragments, while her beauty becomes a matter of cosmetic disguise (make-up and fashion). Baudelaire's prostitute sells the appearance of femininity. But she also offers a degraded and hallucinated memory of fulfilment, an intoxicating or narcotic substitute for the idealized maternal body. For the melancholic, spleen-ridden psyche, which obsessively dwells on the broken pieces of the past, she is therefore a privileged object of meditation. She represents the loss of that blissful unity with nature and God which was traditionally anchored in a female figure. Instead, Benjamin argues, the prostitute, like commodity fetishism, harnesses the 'sex-appeal of the inorganic', which binds the living body to the realm of death.

Lady Lazarus is an allegorical figure, constructed from past and present images of femininity, congealed fantasies projected upon the poem's surface. She is a pastiche of the numerous deathly or demonic women of poetic tradition, such as Foe's Ligeia, who dies and is gruesomely revived through the corpse of another woman. Ligeia's function, which is to be a symbol, mediating between the poet and 'supernal beauty', can only be preserved by her death. Similarly, in Mallarmé's prose poem 'Le Phénomène Futur', the 'Woman of the Past' is scientifically preserved and displayed at a circus sideshow by the poet. For Plath, however, the woman on show, the 'female phenomenon' is a revelation of unnaturalness instead of sensuous nature, her body gruesomely refashioned into Nazi artefacts. Lady Lazarus yokes together the canonical post-Romantic, symbolist tradition which culminates in 'Prufrock', and the trash culture of True Confessions, through their common concern with the fantasizing and staging of the female body:

I rocked shut

As a seashell.

They had to call and call

And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

The densely layered intertextual ironies at work in these lines plot the labyrinthine course of what Benjamin calls 'the sex appeal of the inorganic' through literary history. They echo Ariel's song in *The Tempest*, whose talismanic status in Plath's writing I have already noted. Plath re-genders the image, substituting Lady Lazarus for the drowned corpse of the father/king. The metaphor of the seashell converts the female body into a hardened, dead and inorganic object, but at the same time nostalgically recalls the maternal fecundity of the sea. The dead woman who suffers a sea change is adorned with phallic worms turned into pearls, the 'sticky', fetishistic sublimates of male desire. In Marvell's poem of seduction, 'To His Coy Mistress', the beloved is imagined as a decaying corpse: 'Nor, in thy marble vault shall sound | My echoing song: then worms shall try | That long-preserved virginity: | And your quaint honour turn to

dust; | And into ashes all my lust.' In T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the refrain 'Those are pearls that were his eyes' is associated with the drowned Phoenician sailor, implicit victim of witch-like, neurotic, or soul-destroying female figures, such as Madame Sosostris and Cleopatra.

Lady Lazarus stages the spectacle of herself, assuming the familiar threefold guise of actress, prostitute, and mechanical woman. The myth of the eternally recurring feminine finds its fulfilment in the worship and 'martyrdom' of the film or pop star, a cult vehicle of male fantasy who induces mass hysteria and vampiric hunger for 'confessional' revelations. Lady Lazarus reminds her audience that '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.' It is as if Plath is using the Marilyn Monroe figure to travesty Poe's dictum in 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846) that 'the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world'. The proliferation of intertextual ironies also affects the concluding transformation of 'Lady Lazarus' into the phoenix-like, man-eating demon, who rises 'out of the ash' with her 'red hair'. This echoes Coleridge's description of the possessed poet in 'Kubla Kahn': 'And all should cry Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!' The woman's hair, a privileged fetish-object of male fantasy, becomes at once a badge of daemonic genius and a flag of vengeance. It is tempting to read these lines as a personal myth of rebirth, a triumphant Romantic emergence of what Lynda Bundtzen calls the female 'body of imagination'. The myth of the transcendent-demonic phoenix seems to transcend the dualism of male-created images of women, wreaking revenge on 'Herr Doktor', 'Herr God', and 'Herr Lucifer', those allegorical emblems of an oppressive masculinity. Yet Lady Lazarus's culminating assertion of power? 'I eat men like air'? undoes itself, through its suggestion of a mere conjuring trick. The attack on patriarchy is undercut by the illusionistic character of this apotheosis which purports to transform, at a stroke, a degraded and catastrophic reality. What the poem sarcastically 'confesses', through its collage of fragments of 'high' and 'low' culture, is a commodity status no longer veiled by the aura of the sacred. Lyric inwardness is 'prostituted' to the sensationalism of 'true confession'. The poet can no longer cherish the illusion of withdrawing into a pure, uncontaminated private space, whose immunity from larger historical conflicts is guaranteed by the 'auratic' woman. . . .for Plath the female body, far from serving as expiatory metaphor for the ravages of modernity, itself becomes a sign whose cultural meanings are in crisis.

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