

The Courage of Not Shutting Up

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Sylvia Plath's October 2, 1962 poem "The Courage of Shutting-Up" foregrounds the hostilities to speech in her use of the idiom; "shutting up" takes more than usual courage because we are told in the opening line, the act is accomplished: "in spite of artillery!" (*Collected Poems* 209-210). Importantly, the first five drafts of the poem bear the title "The Courage of Quietness"¹ suggesting a very different form of silencing than that of "shutting up," one more representative of Plath's earlier daughter-personas. In Plath's mid-career poems, written through to the beginning of 1962, there is a changing aesthetic in the voices that build toward the declarative "I"'s in the groundbreaking *Ariel* poems. This paper will focus on the poet's growing bravado to articulate the difficult truths of the *Ariel* personas, and use "The Courage of Shutting-Up" as an example of Plath's deliberate attempt to articulate a diction that demonstrates the courage of not "shutting up."

In "The Colossus," "Electra on Azalea Path" and "The Beekeeper's Daughter," Plath's "daughter-speakers" demonstrates more cautious confrontations that maintain the father figure's power over them. The daughter-speaker shrinks herself, "Kneeling down" to set her "eye to a hole-mouth" to "meet an eye" in "The Beekeeper's Daughter" and states flatly: "My heart is under your foot"(118). In "Electra on Azalea Path" the speaker likens herself to "a doll" in her "dress of innocence" as she lays "dreaming" of the father as an "epic" alluding to Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia in the lines: "*The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath*" (116-117). The daughter-figures who evoke dead or intimidating, or dead and intimidating, father figures are always diminished in these poems by the father's larger metaphorical or mythic sizes. The daughter-speaker in "The Colossus" for example, is overwhelmed by the statue's "great lips" and "immense skull-plates," as she will "crawl" like "an ant in mourning" to attempt to "mend" and "clear" the broken pieces (129).

Obstructions to a mythic father-figure at a distance, or dead, also maintain the helpless, if not entirely passive, stances of the poems' daughter-speakers; but it is a stance Plath finds herself ill at ease with: "My main thing now is to start with real things: real emotions, and leave out the

¹Holographs and typescripts of "The Courage of Shutting-Up" are held in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, part of the "Sylvia Plath Collection" owned by the Neilson Library of Smith College; warm thanks to Karen V. Kukil for making the collection available for my research.

baby gods, the old men of the sea, the thin people ... and *get into me*," writes Plath in a February 1959 journal entry (*Journals* 471, emphasis added). Here Plath is suggesting that the more organic, more "real" encounter is also the one that will presence the self more overtly in the world. And while this is the world in which Plath's increasingly confident "I" declares itself in "A Birthday Present" as "ready for enormity," it is also a world in which her personas' vulnerability grows in proportion to their willingness to let go of the literary tropes and allusions of her earlier aesthetic (*Collected Poems* 207).

"The Courage of Quietness" then, Plath's first choice for the poem's title with its Victorian connotations of self-restraint, glosses what quietness requires of the speaker enacting this courage. The emphasis in this first choice of a title is on the accomplishment of quietness as a virtue that would befit any Victorian heroine from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet. In this context, "the shut mouth" keeps the peace of quiet, the silence is passive as opposed to one "Loaded," as it is, "with accounts of bastardies" (210). If we consider that October 1962 is the month in which Plath and Hughes have decided to separate, the time in which the crisis in their marriage began the inspired "blood jet" of creativity that produced the *Ariel* poems, then the decision to substitute "Quietness" for "Shutting-Up" demonstrates a decision to emphasize an overt, and active, violence in the speaker's decision not to speak (242).

In a January 4, 1958 journal entry, Plath writes of her desire to "Recreate life lived" (*Journals* 305). To write of "life lived" is what Plath was introduced to through Robert Lowell's work and his poetry workshop which she began attending in February 1959 at Boston University. This suggests that Plath was starting to think beyond the self-conscious speakers and all-powerful mythic fathers of earlier poems that expressed clear discrepancies between the speaking subject and the, often male, other. As noted in "The Colossus," "The Beekeeper's Daughter," and "Electra on Azalea Path," these daughter-speakers are less actors and more observers to their circumstance, a situation also emphasized by the profusion of eyes in the poems that keep the other or the "you" at a distance. The "false, Edwardian sentiments" as she describes it in "Candles" and their "hollow of shadows" plumbed in "the deeps of an eye" are what begin to give way to viscerally felt realities as Plath's domestic life begins to change (*Collected Poems* 148-149).

By mid-1962, Plath's ambition to put "real things" and "real emotions" into her poems

coincides with the crisis in her married life and the circumstances of her speakers' vulnerability in the poems written out of this period are now concrete. In June, Plath had begun to suspect her husband Ted Hughes of having an affair with Assia Wevill. "Burning the Letters" is a direct response to Hughes' affair; the speaker states: "I made a fire; being tired/Of the white fists of old / Letters and their death rattle /...I am not subtle"; this line anticipates the voice shift of the declarative "I" in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" where Plath's speakers are openly confrontational (204). The move from the "death rattle" of an aesthetics of "old Letters" and their attendant formalities, is a move toward an expression of overt hostility toward the male "You" in poems that speak "the godawful hush" of "For a Fatherless Son" and other silencings (206).

In September Plath makes the decision to leave Hughes, and by October Plath and Hughes officially separate with Plath planning to move out of their North Tawton home in Devon for a flat in London with their nine-month old son and year-and-a-half year old daughter. The poems from July 1962, beginning with "The Other" (July 2) address a direct threat, one that is now, also, female: "Open your handbag. What is that bad smell?" the speaker asks (201). "Where are you going / That you suck breath like mileage? // Sulfurous adulteries given in a dream. / Cold glass, how you insert yourself // Between myself and myself" (202). The diction here is more colloquial, no longer burdened by the myth-structuring frames of earlier poems: "You come in late, wiping your lips," is the line which opens the poem (201). In "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" (July 11), written after "The Other," Plath's language is also graphic. The speaker exclaims: "O mud, mud, how fluid!--" when she hears the words "by accident, over the phone" (202). The phone, or "The instrument," is a "bowel-pulse" and "Muck funnel" that fails to distance the speaker from the scatological proximity of words that keep "... plopping like mud" (202-203).

The five poems² Plath wrote before "The Courage of Shutting-Up" on October 2 – "Poppies in July" (July 20), "Burning the Letters" (August 13), "For a Fatherless Son" (September 16), "A Birthday Present" (September 30), and "The Detective" (October 1) – focus, to different degrees, on obstructions to acts of speech. In "Poppies in July" the speaker exclaims: "If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!" suggesting that the mouth, like a marriage, might

² There were six poems, if a first attempt at "Stings" dated August 2, 1962, is included in the count, but that poem was never considered finished. Ted Hughes published what he "extracted from a mass of corrected manuscript" (293) in the "Notes" of the *Collected Poems*. The final version of "Stings" was written October 6, 1962. (See *The Collected Poems* 293).

somehow absorb the hurt (203). In "Burning the Letters," the "carbon birds" of letters going up in flames "have nothing to say to anybody" (204). The speaker watches the "red burst and a cry / That splits from its ripped bag" (205). A cry bursts forth only after being literally burned. In "For a Fatherless Son," we are told "the godawful hush" is "an absence, presently, / Growing inside you, like a tree" a reference to silence and absence as being, also, a site of growth (205).

In these precursors to "The Courage of Shutting-Up" we witness speakers obsessed, to different degrees, with what is not said, or, as in "A Birthday Present" with what is also not seen: "What is... behind this veil" (*Collected Poems* 206). "A Birthday Present" in particular seems a direct precursor to what is hidden "behind" "the black disks" in "The Courage of Shutting-Up;" the terror of the "You" in "A Birthday Present" is a "world [that] will go up in a shriek" (209, 207). This tension in "A Birthday Present" to stay quiet or "muzzle," is what is exploded in "The Courage of Shutting-Up" when "like the muzzles of cannon" likened to the brain's "disks" we are told of "the tongue" that is "Indefatigable" (210).

"A Birthday Present" and "The Detective," the two poems written before "The Courage of Shutting-Up," describe attempts to name, or "unveil" what is being hidden from the speaker, or kept silent. In "A Birthday Present" the speaker beseeches: "Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil" (208). While in "The Detective" there's a "she" in whose garden "the lies were shaking out their moist silks" as "the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong," are "Unable to face the fingers..." which are "tamping a woman into a wall" (208). Unnamed "deceits" in the poem are "tacked up like family photographs" (208). "The Detective," like the speaker, is continuously investigating "a case of vaporization" in which "The mouth first" is "the absence reported;" the mouth finally is what is the focus of "The Courage of Shutting-Up," the mouth's ability to speak or not speak is here shown to be an embattled state (209). As Christina Britzolakis points out: All linguistic energies which sustain the pedagogical transmission of authority are also capable of overwhelming or interrupting it" (100). In the decision to replace "Quietness" with "Shutting-Up" Plath articulates the act as one of forced silencing, a silence the poem refuses to shut-up in its resolve to let "the tongue" speak "the disks of outrage" in its unquiet verse (*Collected Poems* 209).

The first line of "The Courage of Shutting-Up" that reads, "The courage of the shut mouth, in spite of artillery!" remains the same in all six drafts of the poem despite the title change in draft five. This demonstrates the poem's ambition from the start to emphasize "the

courage of the shut mouth" as an oppressive *act*. Though willing to maintain a shut mouth, "in spite of artillery!" in changing the title to "Shutting-Up," Plath demonstrates that the mouth is being shut-up by a circumstance of repression. *Webster's* defines "Shutting Up" as "to *cause* (a person) to stop talking" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* 1093, my emphasis). The following lines continue a detailing of assault; the "I" – never expressed as such – is signified in the consequences to the "shut mouth," an act of courage with physical repercussions. The mouth's "pink and quiet" line is "a worm, basking" with "black disks behind it" that becomes "the disks of outrage," and then expands into "the outrage of a sky, the lined brain of it" that "ask to be heard" (*Collected Poems* 209).

If "that antique billhook, the tongue," while "Indefatigable" must "be cut out?" because "it is dangerous" then it promises to voice "Bastardies... desertions and doubleness" (210). This is a new voicing of "the disks of outrage" which Plath's previous spectator-speakers leave unspoken. While eyes keep the speaking "I" at a distance, more passive, the tongue becomes a "lined brain" that "flays [noise] from the air, once it gets going!"(209).

Part of the brilliance of the *Ariel* voice is that unabashed sense in what Hughes describes as the more "personally aggressive poems;" but more specifically it is what Veronica Leigh House has spoken of as the change in Plath's personas "from angry victim to murderous avenger" (Hughes 15, House 93).³ What is being compelled to silence threatens to explode the quiet, or the brain, which is compared to "the muzzles of cannon." The self, or speaker, is interestingly conflated with the act of courage Plath dramatizes in a series of images that include the persona of "A great surgeon" who "is quiet" because he has "seen too much death" (*Collected Poems* 210); he is compared to "a tattooist," whose needle goes "over and over the same blue grievances" (210). Thus the ultimate threat in the poem is not the loaded "muzzles" of unspoken rage, but the danger of "too much death," of a quiet that remains just that for its ritualized acceptance of "grievances" (210).

In a January 10, 1959 journal entry, Plath notes a session that she has had with Ruth Beuscher, and writes: "Talked also with RB of victorian women who fear men: men treat women as brainless chattels: have seen so many romances end in this sort of thing" (*Journals* 461).

³Veronica Leigh House discusses the movement from victim to avenger in relation to Plath's bee poems when she notes that they "illustrate her speaker's transformation from angry victim to murderous avenger, and tie the queen bee to Aeshylus' Clytemestra" (93). It is noteworthy that the bee sequence are the poems that immediately follow "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (See House 93-96).

Finally, the fear of being treated as "brainless" is also the source of courage in "the shut mouth," in "the lined brain of it" which Plath describes in terms of the tongue's physicality, its "Indefatigable, purple" that is "dangerous" (*Collected Poems* 209-210). Plath's iconic line, "I am inhabited by a cry" from "Elm" is a significant precursor, in the context of this discussion, to "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (193). The "cry" that "Nightly ...flaps out" in "Elm" terrifies the speaker as "this dark thing / That sleeps in me" takes on a tongue in "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (193). The speaker in "The Courage of Shutting-Up" asks "Must it be cut out?" it is so dangerous it might be removed, turned into "a marvelous object" like "fox heads," and "the heads of dead rabbits" (210). In other words, like hunted animals, or colonized countries, the tongue is destroyed when robbed of its essence, its ability to speak. "Brainless" like "the waste of a woman" Plath describes in a 1959 journal entry, in her "victorian"(sic) role as "maid, servant, nurse" the tongue too becomes mere artifact, something to be "Hung in the library with the engravings of Rangoon" when left speechless (210).

"But how about the eyes, the eyes, the eyes?" begins the first line of the sixth stanza of "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (210). It is the second to last stanza of the poem and reads as a plea. That distancing ability of eyes to protect, or to keep the self more safely apart from the threat of the other, is no longer viable. Since eyes have been witness to "terrible rooms. / In which a torture goes on" where "one can only watch" (210). This implicates all of Plath's previous spectator-personas in their inevitable passivity as spectators. In fact what is reflected by the eyes, and their witnessing, "is the face that lived in this mirror" which is that of "a dead man" (210). It is fascinating to read these lines in the context of what Plath's speakers have said before, and after, "The Courage of Shutting-Up." Eyes which reflected the ambitious young poet's apprenticeship to "the white fists of old / Letters" (204) now express what "silence after silence offers itself" as stated in "Parliament Hill Fields" (152): they speak the trauma of silence as a voicing of the limits of the spectator.

A quietness that "can only watch" belongs to "a country no longer heard of," and finally, simply, "An obstinate independency" that is "Insolvent" as the last line in "The Courage of Shutting-Up" reads (210). What is remarkable about this poem is that by substituting "Quietness" for "Shutting-Up" in the title, the focus is no longer on the condition of the observer, but becomes, as the poems which follow attest to, the condition of being appalled, which actively

engages the speaker who is now" a vehicle *of* the world, a tongue, a voice" (*Journals* 502, emphasis added).

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