

# PURLOINED PORTRAITS

"Flying is a woman's gesture - flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding when desired, narrow passage-ways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense....what woman hasn't flown/stolen?"

Helene Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa, in *New French Feminisms, An Anthology*, Edited and with Introduction by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, The Harvester Press, London, 1981, p. 258. Translation from the French by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen.

*Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery  
14 March - 6 April, 1986*

## The Hannah Cullwick Archive & Feminist Theory

Between 1853 and 1874 Hannah Cullwick, an English domestic servant, kept a diary and had photographs taken of herself.<sup>1</sup> The photographs, or "likenesses" as they were called, were shown or given to her friends and acquaintances, occasionally exhibited in photographic studio windows, collected in her album, or given to Arthur Munby, her sweetheart throughout that time. The diaries on the other hand, were kept a secret from her peers, but were read by Arthur Munby.

There is but one representation which precedes Hannah Cullwick's courtship with Arthur Munby, an ambrotype of 1853; both the diaries and the photographs for the most part were produced during their secretive, (because cross class) romance, and cease shortly after the beginning of the almost equally secret marriage. In 1898 Arthur Munby compiled and edited Hannah Cullwick's diaries and photographs, and his own photographs, books and writings, and donated the collection to Trinity College in 1910 on the condition that it be left unopened for forty years.

The 19th century witnessed several marriages between upper class men and working class women. Elizabeth Siddall, Emma Hill, Jane Burden, Annie Miller and Betsy Wade were all introduced by their upper class partners into bourgeois social relations with varying degrees of re-education and training to be a lady.<sup>2</sup> Hannah Cullwick rejected this transition even after marriage, preferring to be called Hannah and not her 'new name', continuing as Arthur Munby's servant, calling the interest she received from her savings account wages, and increasingly refusing to dress up and pass for a lady. In these and in other ways - how she dressed, the employment she sought, the neighborhoods she worked in and the people she worked for — Hannah Cullwick preserved her station in life against various 'threats' of upward social mobility, whether through marriage or self improvement.

The photographs of Hannah Cullwick represent a bewildering array of guises, disguises and identities for her. She is photographed as a peasant, a lady, a respectable servant, a man, a chimney sweep/slave, a repentant Magdalene, a parlourmaid (above her own station in life) a scullery maid, a maid of all work, in Sunday best and in her soiled work clothes. The photographs were taken at a time when photography had not been evenly and rigidly established as an accurate analogue of reality, as realism. That status was consolidated later. In many ways, these photographs can be understood as fantasy. They escape the social restrictions that Hannah Cullwick would have been subject to in both thought and behavior. Escaping those restrictions would have involved transforming her class and gender related behavior, accent, dress, and build. The photographs invent identities for her that her diaries consistently distance and disallow - ladyhood and parlourmaid for example. Fantasy may also be relevant to the photographs which represent the kind of domestic labour in which Hannah Cullwick was employed. Those photographs rupture the politics of visibility and representation of the bourgeois household. They represent domestic labour and servants at a time when household dirt, servants and their work were to be invisible.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps in part these representations of domestic labour could be made and could rupture the politics of visibility in the household, because they were not yet enmeshed in a discourse on truth and representation.

The photographs also qualify as fantasy on other levels, one of which is that of reading them. Those picture identities oscillate; the reader is unable to identify the truth of any one picture, but is held in a position of equivocation between representations which seem equally convincing. As a group the photographs lack the closure of the diaries, that pinning down of meaning which places the reader in a position of mastery over knowledge. This is not to underestimate the complexity of the diaries which represent negotiations and resistances as well as privileging basic significations: Hannah Cullwick, domestic servant, industrious and determined to keep her place in an intricately graded social hierarchy which is under

threat from a cross class romance; from an appropriation of the bourgeois practice of diary writing; and from the new possibilities for social mobility opened up by the achievement of ladyhood through behavior rather than birth. The Diaries are fascinating. Unfortunately space precludes their detailed analysis here; however, they are easily available, having been edited and introduced by Elizabeth Stanley and published by Virago Press in 1984.<sup>4</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

The current interest in Hannah Cullwick's diaries and photographs is itself something of a social phenomenon. The second wave of the women's movement is about two decades old. Its early and persisting images of women as strong and independent have been given historical validation by the writing of histories which construct women as strong and independent personalities. Thus Hannah Cullwick's resistance — to marriage, to bourgeois manners and customs, and to the politics of visibility in the household — becomes an object of enquiry, as if our own resistance depended on hers. As well, her working class identity is crucial to the women's movement which has at times sought to recognize class differences and to undermine the bourgeois part of its own class history. Working class women have generally been deprived of the means of representing themselves, making this archive a rare and precious opportunity.

The writing of women's history has changed remarkably since the beginning of that second wave. Where there was once a certainty about history and the writing of history, an unquestioned empiricism, and an eagerness to discover more and more women of the past, there are now many questions, and unsettling ones. Part of this is due to a women's movement discovery, fueled in part by the theoretical texts of marxism, semiotics and psychoanalysis. As Juliet Mitchell succinctly writes:

Feminism discovered women as a distinct social group - a group whose identity was as women. But there is another side to that description, there is the point where femininity disappears, where it is nothing other — neither more nor less — than the various places where it is constructed. In a very different idiom, and speaking to very different questions...Lacan...has some echoes of my interest in Althusser in 'Women: The Longest Revolution'. There women were nothing other than the different social and economic structures in which they were created; there was no essential category: 'women'. Lacan's work sets up that realisation at the very heart of the question of the construction of femininity.<sup>5</sup>

How to write the history of women, if the unity 'women' is theoretically dissolving and dispersing, or at least thrown into question, at the same time that necessity calls for our collective resistance? Scepticism about history, about how to write history, and about what can be read from historical texts has been generated from the theoretical texts of marxism (the new left), semiotics, and psychoanalysis, as Juliet Mitchell indicates. As all this is far too complex even to attempt to take on here, I refer you, dear reader, to *Language and Materialism*, a book renowned for its thorough and challenging explication of those developments.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is one point in particular that must be considered in relation to the archive of Hannah Cullwick. Recent debates on authorship challenge the notion of the author as the singular source or origin of the text. These debates point to the way in which texts are supplemented or complemented with a fiction, 'the personality of the author,' which closes the gaps, absents the absences, deletes the questions, and basically, limits the endlessly unstable meanings of a text. The productivity of language - the way that meanings are not secured to texts but slide under under them in the process of reading, is foreclosed by the assumption of the author/subject as a consistent character, recognisable in the text and projected



# PURLOINED



# PORTRAITS

I did so, & waited in the drawing room, & when the lady came in I got up & curtsied to her. She sat down, & she said, 'There's one thing Mr — will not allow & that is staying out after church time on Sundays, & we cannot give you any stated time on weekdays.' I said, 'I must give it up then, ma'am.' She said, 'Why?' 'Because, ma'am, I don't like being compelled to go to church, & to feel I dare not stop out if I wanted to nor never one evening in the week.' I was turning away to go, but she told me to wait & think it over - I said, 'No, ma'am, I must give it up, thank you,' & I made a curtsy & come away. When I got outside & in the park I actually jump'd for joy & felt as if I was let out o' prison. The feeling is dreadful - that being stuck in a drawing room & having a fussy fine lady talking to you. I'd leifer work for £8 a year with comfort - only I don't feel satisfied wi' that 'cause you canna lay by for a rainy day out of it. (p. 74)

*Saturday [28 July]* Lighted the fire. Brush'd the grates. Clean'd the hall & steps & flags on my knees. Swept & dusted the rooms. Got breakfast up. Made the beds & emptied the slops. Cleaned & wash'd up & clean'd the plate. Clean'd the stairs & the pantry on my knees. Clean'd the knives & got dinner. Clean'd 3 pairs of boots. Clean'd away after dinner & began the preserving about 1/2 past 3 & kept on till 11, leaving off only to get the supper & have my tea. Left the kitchen dirty & went to bed very tired & dirty. (p. 109)

*Saturday 3 August* I clean'd the table & teaspoons. Wash'd up made the beds & got the 'tatoes ready. In the afternoon I clean'd me & went for my pictures. They was done, 7 of 'em. One standing up with the pikel over my shoulder as if going to work, drest in my cotton frock tuck'd up over my blue striped petticoat, thick lace-up boots, & peasant's bonnet, with a red kerchief tied loose round my neck. Next, one at work in the field at the hay. And one as if tired & come in from work, sitting on a low seat, the pikel resting on my leg & my empty basket & bottle on the floor by my side, my old-fashion'd cap & a letter I'd had from M. on the kitchen table. The 4th was sitting at a table my arms resting, & legs & feet carelessly cross'd under the table. The 5th was another sitting with the pikel, & what M. thinks a very good 'un, & has order'd a big one to be made from it, to cost ten shillings. The other two was just one side face & one full, to see which was best. (p. 230, 231)

I made the toast early so as my face shouldn't look red nor that I shd have things to do at the last minute, for after all, sitting down & pouring out tea for two gentlemen seem'd a great deal for me to do. Still, I felt that nothing could be done without self-possession, & which I've found out is the great difference 'twixt a lady & a servant, & which I must own too is scarcely possible for a thorough servant to *have* except in her own kitchen. And even there she must be what I call a presumptuous one except with the servants under her, 'cause it shows that she forgets the kitchen is *not* her own. Yet I pity the servants who always remember it, no one can tell her feelings who *does* remember that & forgets that she's working & earning all her wages. I went out to service too soon, before I really understood the meaning of it.

At the charity school I was taught to curtsy to the ladies & gentlemen & it seem'd to come natural to me to think them *entirely* over the lower class & as if it was our place to bow & bet at their bidding, & I've never got out o' that feeling somehow. I must leave it to others to judge whether I am the better or worse for it. But I've run away from last Sunday to my school days, & my thoughts have fled through 36 years of my life since in these few moments - how quick is thought! (p. 282)

Well, she said how Mrs Shepherd borrow'd an opera cloak for her - she's got one for herself & a black velvet skirt, what she wears to go into the theatres. And Ellen wore her black silk frock, white gloves, & her hair was done up with a bow of ribbon somehow, & they left their bonnets in the cloakroom. Then Ellen said they was shown up an elegant staircase with flowers each side of it, & to a row of chairs, so fine, & when they sat down it was like a down pillow they sank down so. She said to herself, 'Can it be myself that's here?' And she felt so comfortable that she wanted the acting to have no end, & yet uncomfortable too, for she was afraid to turn or speak for fear of the rest seeing she was a servant.

Then how disgusted she felt next day at finding herself among the black lead brushes, & thought o' the difference between her work & being there among grand folks & scent & having the music & seeing the play & that, till it rather made her dislike her lot. But I said, 'Ah Ellen - the music's nice, & the easy chair is nice, but for being among the grand folks or drest up like 'em & all that I'd fifty times rather be all black among the grate cleaning. And which is the most lasting o' the two, & which is the solidest & real pleasure?' But Ellen seem'd to rather like being a lady - if her hands wasn't so red she said, & if sh'd plenty o' money.

We sat sewing after prayers & at 11 Ellen went away to go to bed. Her Missis was out, & she took the last chance afore Miss B. came home for good. I felt sleepy & tired so I went to bed. (p. 156)

Wash'd my hands & put a clean apron on & my sleeves down. Fill'd the shelves with plates & put straight in the larder. Got the orders from Miss M. & the things out o' the storeroom. Every little thing I've to ax for & I *canna* always remember at the time what I may want to use, & so it's inconvenient - besides I think it shows so little trust & treating a servant like a child, so I don't like the plan. Two ladies came to lunch - I got it ready & our dinner. Wash'd up after. Scrubb'd the tables & fill'd the coalboxes again. (p. 158)

*Sunday [29 July]* Got up early & clean'd the kitchen. Dusted upstairs & got the cloth laid for breakfast. The little Alisgons came yesterday & they had breakfast with us because the Master & Missis wasn't up. Clean'd 2 pairs of boots. Swept the birdroom & clean'd the cupboard out. Made the beds & I clean'd & wash'd up the breakfast things. Got our dinner & cleaned away. Got the parlour dinner by 4. Clean'd away & clean'd myself. Took care of the children & put them to bed. Took up coffee. Pack'd the hamper to send to Mary.<sup>10</sup> Shut the shutters & lighted up. Wash'd the plate & to bed early. (p. 109).

(by meta-texts and by the reader) between and beyond the inconsistent and fragmented utterances or statements making up the text. In the case of Hannah Cullwick especially, who had only 3 years training in literacy at her Charity School, the fragmentation and abbreviation of the statements of the diary render difficult the construction of an author character. The "I's" of the diary coalesce in the space of the reader to construct 'Hannah Cullwick'.

Since she is knowable only through these representations, the sense of her as a historical person is an effect of reading, but to a readership accustomed to a certain coherent narrative personality, Hannah Cullwick remains disjointed. That coherent narrative personality, that we have come to expect in diaries, is in fact a product of the 19th century - diaries became a publishable or public form of the personal during that time, often producing, via certain literary conventions, a socially respectable and self-reflective author. This is not the diary of Hannah Cullwick; her diary registers the appropriation of a bourgeois practice, a practice above her station, in its secrecy, and in the conventions of writing that it cannot fulfill. The text is in some ways resistant to the production of that self-reflective author — the writing is limited not only by the 3 years of Charity School education, but also by the seemingly endless repetition of lists of domestic duties which make the author as self reflective subject, disappear in drudgery of a rather mechanical sort. Intriguingly, the 'I' which announced Hannah Cullwick in the diaries written in her own hand, is most often a lower case 'i'. This convention of writing, irregular as it is in the diaries, was 'corrected' in their recent publication. That correction reveals its crucial role in the construction of a confident author/character; a construction obstructed by the lower case "i".

The Women's Liberation Movement has a vested interest in Hannah Cullwick, and the changing of "I" to I in the publication of the diaries is one indication of what is at stake. The women's movement, in its struggle to produce choices for women and women who can choose, has often also produced the heroic, strong, independent women, even in the midst of a poverty of archival material. I am not suggesting for a moment that Hannah Cullwick is not a Heroine - indeed she figures heroically. But I think it is important to analyse why the Heroic women is so crucial to the 1980s.

One reason for this is that patriarchal culture has been theorized as all encompassing and inescapable. Whether this is theorized as historically limited, that is, as a product of capitalism not existing in preindustrial societies or social relations, or whether it is seen as the product of the Victorian era, it is now seen as all pervasive. As I have written elsewhere, 'If white male supremacy is inflected in all aspects of our culture, there is no vantage point from which to step out side and represent women anew'.<sup>7</sup> However that formulation leaves little room for representations which contest, challenge or subvert sexism, nor does it explain the women throughout history who have escaped the consequences of sexism. The problem is not the oppositional representations, nor the individual women, though these are dependent on their historical context for effectiveness. The problem is with that formulation of patriarchy as all encompassing. Though it seems that way at times, there is obviously some space for resistance or the women's movement would never have come to existence. What is called patriarchy is inconsistent and contradictory; the gaps in the dominant culture are precisely the spaces where liberatory movements have been able to emerge to resist oppression. The early formulation of patriarchy as a monolithic oppressor led quite logically to conceptions of a 'once and for all' liberation for individual women. For many, time and experience have put that notion to rest. And the concept of the unconscious- a recalcitrant entity and yet one to which all behavior and statements can somehow be attributed-has further undermined the individually willed revolution.

Perhaps I have caricatured the concepts of patriarchy, but I do so to make a point. (Though this sketch rings true for many feminist texts.) There is much to be gained from a shift in theorising patriarchy. For instance, it becomes possible to ask what social relations and ideologies make a negotiation, resistance or escape from historically changing constraints possible. And what part of any behavior is attributable to an unpredictable unconscious? Can we know this?

In my various lectures on the Hannah Cullwick archive, I am struck by the audience determination, now predictable, to ascribe to her a personal essence and somehow explain her diaries and photographs by that personality, that essence. Clearly the concept of an individual personality as the source, origin, and explanation for such an unusual and at times distressing archive is a powerful concept, especially in the arts where the individual is celebrated and cherished (if reduced to a 'one liner' essence).

However, the concept of an individual essence which explains all, is for me what robs this text of its historically specific and intricate conditions of possibility, of its context, of its fascination, distress and puzzlement. And here, I need not look far for an example from which to demonstrate my point. The diaries and one photograph in particular - Hannah as a chimneysweep/slave - present certain problems for a well wishing reader, because of Cullwick's repeated self-representation as Arthur Munby's slave. Though she describes herself and Arthur Munby as sweethearts, there are a number of symbols of slavery - she called Munby 'Massa', wore a chain and padlock around her neck, and writes of licking his boots. With the twentieth century connotations of sadomasochism and the concern about victimisation of women, these representations are profoundly disturbing.

One women's movement historian uses these aspects to indict Arthur Munby through Hannah Cullwick. She is constructed as a victim of upperclass masculine power and of his bizarre fantasies, fantasies which have been intensified and condensed in the twentieth century text.<sup>8</sup> Hannah Cullwick's self-representation as a slave needs careful examination because of that twentieth century tendency to read it as sadomasochistic. Sexuality is not a fixed and unchanging entity in which aspects of the twentieth century can be unproblematically read off of nineteenth century representations. The question that the slave identification raises must be first of all analysed within the 'logic' of the text.

It seems that 'Hannah's' identification with slavery is a way of marking out the permanence of her relationship to Arthur Munby which is outside of marriage. It is also a way of demarcating as special the domestic skills she performed in Arthur Munby's household, the same skills she performed in her employment situations. She sold her labour power to her employers; in regards to Arthur Munby she was 'born for him' and entered no exchange relations — her labour was not bought but given, and she could not be dismissed from the relationship as an employer would dismiss a servant. Thus without aspiring above her station in life, that is, wanting to be his wife and a lady, 'Hannah' is able to extend into prehistory and into the future, her relationship to Arthur Munby. Furthermore, she is able to elide the conflicts of their relationship, that is the class and gender conflicts, by imagining a predestined and complementary unity, if hierarchical for themselves. Against the crude model of dominance and subordination into which this historical material is easily locked, it should be noted that it was a custom in Shropshire, where Hannah grew up, to call husbands 'master' and in this sense, 'Massa' is a diminutive term, like 'Moussiri' the form of address in later correspondence. As well, there is the absolute refusal by Hannah Cullwick to call Arthur Munby 'Sir' in public, the proper way of addressing men above her station. This refusal caused grave problems between them.

Additionally, the slave representation is special for its informality. Marriage which is presented somewhat cynically and sceptically throughout the text, is 'common' by comparison:

Before the visitors came M. show'd me á licence he'd bought - a marriage licence' for him & me, & he said, 'Doesn't this show how much I love you, & what do you say to it?' I told him I had *nothing* to say about it, but I hoped he would never be sorry for it, nor I. Tho' I seem'd so cool & said so little I really *meant* what I said. I car'd very *very* little for the licence or being married either. Indeed I've a certain dislike to either, they seem to have so little to do with our *love* & our union. *They* are things what every common sweethearts use whether they love really or not. And ours has bin for so long a *faithful, trustful* & pure love, without any outward bond, that I seem to *hate* the word marriage in *that* sense.<sup>9</sup>

The photograph of Hannah Cullwick as a chimneysweep/slave has rather sinister connotations; the toe of Munby's boot being all that remains of him after the crude cropping of the photograph to a tiny 2½ x 5 mm fragment, the chain around Hannah Cullwick's neck, her nakedness from the waist up, the blacking of her body - all these constitute a melodrama of the disturbing elements of their relationship. Yet meaning should not be invested in this photograph alone. It was part of a leather album which displayed two photographs — this and a photograph of Hannah Cullwick as a lady. Their juxtaposition, inscribes a fiction and undermines the seeming truth of either representation creating the reader's oscillation referred to above.

In a similar vein, any representation of dirt and Hannah Cullwick must be understood within the specific context of domestic work. Victorian households were far dirtier than our present standards. Domestic workers could afford none of the boundaries and aversions to dirt that more privileged segments of the population may have had. Whether others may have symbolically and physically removed dirt and disorder from their person, domestic and other workers were implicated in social relations and symbolisms of a significantly and necessarily different order.

I am not suggesting that Hannah Cullwick was not oppressed. But audiences and readers which seize on this aspect of the archive, and use it to indict Munby, do so at the risk of imprecision and at a drastic underestimation of the exploitative labour relations in which Hannah Cullwick and most domestics lived and worked. Her relationship to Arthur Munby is constructed by the diaries as a pleasant counterpart to the six day work week (a work day up to twice ours) that confined domestic servants to the bourgeois household and bourgeois surveillance.

At a time when working class women were generally denied a means of self representation, Hannah Cullwick filched moments from that endless domestic routine, moments to get her likeness taken and to write in her diary, to visit Munby and to get out of the household. She purloined her own portraits, not knowing that over a hundred years later they would have to be stolen again - this time from their obscurity in the Munby Collection and in the scholarship surrounding it.

Heather Dawkins, Exhibitions Officer  
M.A. University of Leeds.

- <sup>1</sup> See *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant*, Edited and Introduced by Liz Stanley, Virago Press Ltd., 1984.
- <sup>2</sup> See Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddall", *Art History* Vol. 7. no. 2, June 1984.
- <sup>3</sup> See Heather Dawkins, "Politics of Visibility, Domestic Labour and Representation; The Diaries and Photographs (1853-74) of Hannah Cullwick", *Parallelogramme*, Vol. 10, no. 4, April/May, 1985. Translation to French in same publication.
- <sup>4</sup> I hope my unpublished manuscript will be published in the near future.
- <sup>5</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution*, Pantheon Books, NY, 1984, p. 249.
- <sup>6</sup> Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism, Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977.
- <sup>7</sup> "Barbara Lounder", *Vanguard*, Dec. 85.
- <sup>8</sup> See Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England", in *Sex and Class in Women's History*, ed. J.L. Newton, M.P. Ryan, J.R. Walkowitz London, 1983.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant*, Virago Press, p. 252-3.

*This exhibition and the research for it was made possible by generous support from Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery and the Canada Council.*

© 1986 Heather Dawkins

ISBN 0-7703-0618-7

The Art Gallery  
Mount Saint Vincent University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 2J6