

CHAPTER 27

Sylvia Plath's Journals

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But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something not inspired to go about its work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting. Mrs. McNab groaned; Mrs. Bast creaked.

From 'Time Passing', *To The Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf)¹

I

In October 1952, shortly before her twenty-first birthday, a maudlin Sylvia Plath makes a brief reference in her journal to above passage from Virginia Woolf's novel *To The Lighthouse*. Plath's note, placed carefully inside Woolfian parentheses, reads as a proleptic epigraph for what she fears might be her own fate, a life curtailed by domestic drudgery:

So much working, reading, thinking, living to do. A lifetime is not long enough. Nor youth to old age long enough. Immortality and permanence be damned. Sure I want them, but they are

nonexistent, and won't matter when I rot underground. All I want to say is: I made the best of a mediocre job. It was a good fight while it lasted. And so life goes on. (Mrs McNab: "There was a force working.") (*J* 149)

Mrs. McNab is Plath's literary shorthand for what she fears will be her future self. At the same time, Woolf's groaning charwoman represents an unruly and unconscious life force that Plath associates with literary creation; and so she tucks Mrs. McNab at the bottom of her entry as a reminder of that working force she wishes to harness. Her journal, she implies, will help bring about her own version of Mrs. McNab.

For the purpose of this chapter, I'd like to take Plath's reference to Mrs. McNab and her 'working force' as a metaphor for what Plath hopes to achieve within her journal. Limiting my discussion mainly to the intense period of Plath's late teenage years and early adulthood, from November 1949 to the winter of 1952, the first three years of her college career, I will trace Plath's emerging relationship to her journal persona and creed.

But let me first explain Mrs. McNab in her original context. Within the life of Woolf's novel, Mrs. McNab is charwoman to the Ramsay family who, following on from the death of Mrs. Ramsay --- the novel's emotional centre -- - is sent to restore the neglected holiday home in the Isle of Skye to proper use. Mrs. McNab is a restorer of order; she carries with her a 'leering' and 'lurching' energy, a crude form of physical life that gets done the difficult job of clearing out a home abandoned to grief. As such, she is an effective metaphor for the emotional and creative spring cleaning Plath carries out inside her journals.

But what do we know of Mrs. McNab? According to her snobby narrator, she is a lower class woman who generates a drunken sort of visceral energy. McNab drinks because her life has been hard – she has lost children – and in her role as hired help, she is also Woolf's unconsciously feeling, perpetual mourner. And yet, Mrs. McNab's real life matters little; in the novel's scheme of things, she is pure symbol, the living embodiment of what Woolf calls 'Time Passing' with all of its unacknowledged and wasted moments of being. At the same time, Mrs. McNab is restorative; she is an essential life force and reformer of spaces – rooms - wrecked by grief.

It is this sort of invigorating, unconscious energy that Plath looks to in her journal. Depression or a desultory mood is the enemy of creative inspiration. And so Mrs. McNab's point of arrival is timely: she appears in the middle of a series of very depressed journal entries. For some months, Plath has been considering the span of her 'lifetime', from youth to old age, and what she might achieve. Her verdict is not all positive. Just before she summons Mrs. McNab, Plath is reflecting upon the inadequacy of a single mortal life: 'A lifetime is not long enough' (*J* 149).

Aged twenty and a sophomore at the elite, all-female Smith College, Plath is in acute existential crisis. She is contemplating her past and her future with ferocious, critical intensity. But in the world of her journal, this is regular business. Her journal exists to uphold one recurring thought structure, one primal drama. It is the same metaphysical crisis that Hamlet faces: whether or not he can bear the world in all of its compromised forms. Plath loops around and around a similar theoretical question; she picks at the same wound. Can she go on living knowing, as she does, that her choices are limited by an unimaginative culture?

We see this in her habit of hovering over herself in the conditional mood; 'what if' is her preferred mode of thinking.

I wonder if art divorced from normal and conventional living is as vital as art combined with living: in a word, would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial expression which increases with this depth of unsatisfied emotion . . . or would I achieve a fuller expression in art as well as in the creation of children? Am I strong enough to do both well? (*J* 55-56)

But the conclusions to these contingent thoughts are not always encouraging. Such questions bring more crises, which in turn, produce more stalemating questions. Either she must do something sensational, she concludes, or she might as well give in to the throes of despondency and depression. If she continues to live, how will she manage to harness the overwhelming possibilities of her creative life? How will she avoid the domestic fate of a Mrs. McNab and still generate the life force she associates with her literary foremother, Virginia Woolf, and Woolf's artist-representative, Lily Briscoe?

Plath regards her journal as a space for generating a creative will-to-power that will allow her to transcend more enervating forms of life. Her diary's special commission is to interrupt daily life with its restricting errands and exigencies. Just as Mrs. McNab enters into the Ramsay home to 'tear[ing] the veil of silence', so Plath's journal will pull her away from the undignified business of 'limitations'. Limitations are those cultural restrictions – marriage, children – she associates with the death of the creative life.

All such limitations must be swept away.

And there it is: when asked what role I will plan to fill, I say “What do you mean role? I plan not to step into a part on marrying - but to go on living as an intelligent mature being, growing and learning as I always have. No shift, no radical change in life habits.” (*J* 105 [underlining is Plath’s])

Her journal, then, will creatively disrupt and override the negative effects of an oppressive cultural conformity. This, in essence, is Plath’s journal creed: a belief system as ambitious as the one she holds for life.

And yet, as Woolf cruelly reminds us, Mrs. McNab’s lurching work is not dignified or solemn. Plath’s journalling follows a similar sort of clumsy pattern as she veers towards and then away from her ideal self. But unlike Mrs. McNab, young Plath *does* turn (as I will show) to the solemn language of ritual and religion in an effort to summon a higher creative power. Plath longs to make sense of the rush of feeling and frustration that arises when she considers matters of life over death. Her journal habit allows her to dwell, as Emily Dickinson put it, in imaginative possibility:² to prepare for a bolder and better life ahead; to play at God with all the grandiloquent rhetoric of her journalling ancestors.

II

Diaries and journals generate particular habits of self-address and self-understanding. How you speak to yourself inside your journal sets the tone

for the way in which you understand yourself in the world. Journals build ego, says Plath's fellow diarist and contemporary, Susan Sontag, in an entry entitled 'On Keeping a Journal', written on 31 December, 1957, when Sontag was 24. But the budding ego of the journal-writer is quite another self, a distinct alter-ego:

In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself. The journal is a vehicle for my sense of selfhood. It represents me emotionally and spiritually independent. There (alas) it does not simply record my actual, daily life but rather – in many cases – offers an alternative to it.³

Sontag remains clear-eyed about the role of the diary in her own life; she realises that any diary writing forces an absurd split between the life led within the diary – a life often grossly distorted, exaggerated and sulky in the face of the world – and the more gracious and forgiving person living without: 'There is often a contradiction between the meaning of our actions towards a person and what we say we feel towards that person in a journal', she confesses.⁴

A journal, in other words, encourages the hypocrite in us. It frees us from the necessities of daily life where we regularly swallow our words, bite our tongues, and generally try to behave ourselves. Self-censorship is a large part of being socially acceptable. The diary, on the other hand, allows us to indulge the weaker parts of our ego; and so it is that the diary persona is often poorly socialised, rude, veering like an adolescent between overly sincere and insincere poses.

For the young Sylvia Plath, her younger journals, or diaries as she calls them, are an essential part of her ego development and journal credo. In the weeks following on from her seventeenth birthday, Plath recommits to her diary religion. Her diary, she theatrically declares, will help her contain the experience of ‘rapture’; it will relieve some of the overwhelming sensations that come with being seventeen.

13 NOVEMBER: As of today I have decided to keep a diary again – just a place where I can write my thoughts and opinions when I have a moment. Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious, I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older. Now, now is the perfect time of my life.⁵

Between childhood and young womanhood, Plath is intoxicated by the idea of herself; for now, she wants nothing more than to hold onto that dramatic moment of pure, operatic self-emergence.

‘Now’ is the moment of her subject’s nativity. ‘Now’ is pure ‘I’ and ‘Me’: undiluted teenage egoism. Her diary, she declares, will attach her to pure selfhood: an invulnerable, meaningful self, filled to the brim with significance. ‘Now’ is the extended moment of this rapturous state of being. But as John Beer has noted, Plath’s experience of being was typically more mobile than static: mercurial, shifting and changing. Her mobile personality made her difficult to pin down. But a mobile and malleable selfhood was Plath’s mantra for real living and something she passionately pledges to as an 18 year old diarist: ‘With me, the present is forever, and forever is always shifting,

flowing, melting. This second is life.' No diarist can quite capture life in the immediate present – there is always a lag between the living and recording, -- but Plath's diary will be a holding space for the 'continuous quicksand' of living sensations (J 9). Her diary will move with her through the shifting territories of mood and lived circumstance, her mosaic of conflicting voices, always reaching for a centrifugal centre. Beer quotes Clarissa Roche at length on the fragmented constituents of Plath's 'uncompleted' self: 'Like fragments of mercury racing and quivering toward a center to settle in a self-contained mass, the myriad ramifications of her personality sought a centre.'⁶ As such her entries often read as shouting matches with her several selves; a frustrated series of pointed rhetorical questions she throws at herself like knives. What have other women done to free themselves from such terrible choices? How can she avoid the neurotic circle of her female ancestors, the suicidal Virginia Woolf? Plath's solution is to press on: to simply produce more words.⁷

In her mature poetry, this uncentred and incomplete subject is attached to verbs of disintegration and formlessness. 'Melting' is the verb Plath vividly applies in 'Lady Lazarus', who describes herself as 'The pure gold baby// That melts to a shriek' (CP 246). At the heart of this image is the painful substitution of a melting body for the sake of an emerging voice. Pure voice comes at the price of surrendering the body. We see this costly substitution throughout 'Ariel': in the 'substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances' where 'Pour' turns into a noun; or in the figure of Godiva that 'unpeel[s]'; and in the cry of the child that 'Melts' (CP 239). Plath's mature self resists substance and instead embraces an alchemical state of *prima materia* or formlessness.

It is this unformed self that leads her into such quick appropriations of other literary lives. We see this most obviously in her appropriation of Woolf's domestic life for her own literary fantasy. Nearly eight years later, in February 1957, and now a Fulbright scholar at Newnham College, Cambridge, England, Plath re-attaches herself to her literary foremother, Virginia Woolf, through her diary. Blindsided by the details of her own literary efforts, she writes over the biography of her literary foremother, revising Woolf's daily life in 1941 and drawing it into a version of her own. Consequently, her summary of Woolf's habit of breaking off from writing to cook in response to literary rejection is a deceptive synopsis of the main thrust of *A Writer's Diary*.

I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf which I bought with a battery of her novels saturday with Ted. And she works off her depression over rejections from Harper's (no less! - - - and I can hardly believe the big ones get rejected, too!) by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock & sausages.' (J 269)

Plath's summary of Woolf's daily life is misleading; her recreation of Woolf at 59 is also inaccurate. In place of the desperate and despondent Woolf she creates a blithe individual more akin to Plath's own ideal self than the historical Virginia Woolf. To be more precise, the entry Plath cites comes at the end of Woolf's life and at a very fragile moment in English history.

On Sunday March 8th, 1941, Woolf's writing is punctuated – you might say paralysed - by fear of German invasion. Her homes in London have been reduced to rubble. If you read Woolf's entries from 1941 you quickly see that, at this most desperate moment, she can respond only in stunted telegraphic

fragments. 'We live without a future' she writes hopelessly in January 26th, 1941. By March of that year she is desperately trying to secure an order of 'occupation' to daily life. Her diary writing is nothing more than a catalogue of banal fragments, a scrappy list of instructions on the basic mechanisms of survival:

I will go down with my colours flying. This I see verges on introspection; but doesn't quite fall in. Suppose I bought a ticket at the Museum: biked in daily and read history. Suppose I selected one dominant figure in every age and wrote round and about. Occupation is essential. And now with some pleasure I find that it's seven: and must cook dinner. Haddock and sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down.⁸

Plath's account of Woolf's life says more about Plath herself than it does about Virginia Woolf. Woolf is not energetically cleaning out the kitchen; she is urging herself to get some dinner on now that she has dragged herself to the end of another day. Woolf's diary entry is a bleak note from a war survivor and a pending suicide.

III

A few weeks after her Mrs. McNab entry and her twentieth birthday, Plath again tries to set down the rituals of her journal life. Her focus is still the looming past and pressing future, and her task, she tells herself, is to remember what she has lost and what she might lose again: 'Recall,

remember: please do not die again. Let there be continuity at least – a core of consistency – even if your philosophy must always be a moving dynamic dialectic’ (*J* 154).

Repeated self-recollection and self-reprimand are part of what Plath terms her ‘dynamic dialectic’. When those efforts run out, and in order to keep the story of herself moving, she must transfer her story elsewhere, towards a Christian fairytale where she imagines herself as ‘The girl who died’ and ‘was resurrected; a girl surrounded by ‘Children. Witches. Magic Symbols’ (*J* 154). Suddenly her journal takes on a shamanic urgency, the ‘rough magic’ of Shakespeare’s magus, Prospero,⁹ and part of what John Beer has recognised at Plath’s struggle to unite her ‘vegetative existence’ – the life of the body - alongside her simmering ‘intelligent consciousness’:¹⁰

Tomorrow I will curse the dawn, but there will be other, earlier nights, and the dawns will be laid out in alarms and raw bells and sirens. Now a love, a faith, an affirmation is conceived in me like an embryo. The gestation may be a while in producing, but the fertilization has come to pass (*J* 154).

Plath’s urgent ‘now’ is the dynamic force behind this new self-reckoning. ‘Now’ forcefully pushes her journal persona into the realm of spiritual mantra and spells. ‘Now’ is her vigorous effort to produce some sort of magical intervention that will rip open the present moment and inject it with more meaning. It is what Plath calls, in a January 1953 journal entry, her ‘mental magic’ (*J* 158): the creative interruption of the ordinary by way of the imagination.

In its imitation of a spellbook, Plath's journal recalls sixteen-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson's incantatory imperatives to witches and fairies as he initiates his first journal persona, grandly entitled 'The Wide World':

O ye witches assist me! Enliven or horrify some midnight
lubrication or dream . . . to supply this reservoir when other
resources fail . . . Spirits of Earth, Air, Fire, Water, wherever ye
glow, whatsoever you patronise, whoever you inspire, hallow,
hallow, this devoted paper – Dedicated & Signed Jan 25, 1820.¹¹

Emerson's journal spell is a magician's will-to-power reminiscent of Shakespeare's muscle-flexing magus, Prospero. Twenty-year-old Plath asserts the same dramatic rites to summon a new form of life that will resuscitate her flagging ego. Her entry imitates Emerson's incantatory self-creation, the tradition of the transcendental journalist playing at God.¹²

Plath borrows from Emerson's grandiose modes of self-creation and self-projection. As a student at Harvard University in 1820, Emerson writes, as Plath does, towards his future self. For this, he needs more creative space, and so he turns his journal into a grand horizon, an imaginative line between here and there, then and now. His journal will help him 'talk & write & think out'¹³ what cannot be expressed in daily life because there is so little room. Space is essential to Emerson's journal creed. His young self demands space to stretch out and be. Emerson is an ambitious young man; he would like, he thinks, to enjoy something of infinity before he dies.

Emerson's journal will bridge the gap between the visible and invisible world, between God and himself, between God and his imperious 'me':

Who is he that shall control me? Why may I not act & speak & write & think with entire freedom? What am I to the Universe, or, the Universe, what is it to me? Who hath forged the chains of wrong and right, of Opinion and Custom? And must I wear them?¹⁴

Emerson's journaling self demands unbounded imaginative and social freedom. Within the security of his journal, the journalist can devise his own rhetorical and symbolic structures. If we read this statement closely we see that, grammatically speaking, Emerson's 'I' and 'me' surround a conjured 'Universe;' in other words, the Universe is the object around which both the 'I', as speaking subject, and the 'me', as reflexive object, circulate. But 'me' has another role: it keeps the world apart. Me is the self that creates a vital barrier between the self in private (the 'I') and the wide world: 'I see the world, human, brute and inanimate nature,—I am in the midst of them, but not of them; I hear the song of the storm . . . I see cities and nations and witness passions . . . but I partake it not . . . I disclaim them all'.¹⁵

In order to vitiate the effects of 'customary opinion, Emerson suggests, the private self must fashion a second self. For Plath, this second self should exist alongside her daily self whilst holding some stake in the supernatural; a self that will live and move alongside the sexually vital, ambitious college girl tearing home on her bike: 'Tonight, biking home toward midnight, talking to myself, sense of trap, of time, rolled the stone of inertia away from the tomb' (*J* 154). Above all, Plath's journal persona offers her sight of a second life and recognizable myth of self-resurrection and reconstitution, accelerating her

'now' into Emerson's infinity through the act of being reborn, the rolling away of the stone. This divine alter ego will enter into her mature poems as the 'Godiva' (*CP* 239) who will ascend in 'Ariel' and as the 'walking miracle' (*CP* 244) of 'Lady Lazarus'.

But as with Emerson's journal persona, there are more relatives to be found. The Plath who pedals home at midnight is also a relative of the teenage Virginia Woolf's (then Virginia Stephen) journal persona, Miss Jan, who is first born on 3 January 1897, a few weeks before Woolf's fifteenth birthday. Both are divine chaperons of the everyday world. But Plath is critical of Woolf's journal aesthetic; she finds her literary foremother too 'ephemeral'. She will correct this, and in her writing life, of which her journal writing was a crucially propulsive form, she will 'speak [her] deep self' (*J* 286). The life of the creative mind will lead the life of the body. If we think back to Mrs. McNab, our working metaphor for Plath's journal credo, then Plath's deeper or deepest self is that lurching unconscious force that promises to roll away 'the stone of inertia' (*J* 154) from the entrance to her creative life.

¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 158.

² Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, no. 466.

³ Sontag, *Reborn*, 166-167.

⁴ Sontag, *Reborn*, 164-165.

⁵ Quoted in Connors, 'Living Color', 69.

⁶ Beer, *Post-Romantic Consciousness*, 157.

⁷ Bayley, *The Private Life of the Diary*, 12-13.

⁸ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 345.

⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5.1.38-55.

¹⁰ Beer, *Post-Romantic Consciousness*, 144.

¹¹ Emerson, *Selected Journals*, vol. I, 1.

¹² Plath studied and annotated the works of Emerson as a student at Smith College: https://fcaw.library.umass.edu/F/?func=direct&doc_number=010268851&doc_library=FCL01.

¹³ Emerson, *Selected Journals*, vol. I, 1-2.

¹⁴ Emerson, *Selected Journals*, vol. I, 91.

¹⁵ Emerson, *Selected Journals*, vol. I, 91.