

“Joy – deeper still than grief can be”: Reading Plath Reading

by Gwendolyn Haevens

1.

‘All human happiness and misery,’ says Aristotle, ‘take the form of action.’ We know better. We believe that happiness and misery exist in the secret life, which each of us leads privately and to which (in his characters) the novelist has access. And by the “secret life” we “mean the life for which there is no external evidence,” not, as is vulgarly supposed, that which is revealed by a chance word or a sigh.

(Sylvia Plath’s notation in double quotations marks in E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* 80)

At the entrance to the *Autumn Inn* in Northampton, Massachusetts, the shuttle driver theatrically deadlifts lifts my small suitcase up to his waist. He stares at me, mouth fixed in a toothy smile. Then he opens his grip and lets my suitcase hit the pavement. He climbs back into the van, slams the heavy door, and pulls away with the last of his passengers from the early morning run from the Hartford airport. I’d left my apartment in Berkeley, California on a warm, lime flower evening, and boarded the red-eye in San Francisco. Now I’m standing outside a hotel on a crisp, bright New England morning in October, bewildered by the immediate change of season, by the shuttle driver’s actions.

Being a Canadian visiting scholar in the US is like this at times. You think you’re playing the same game of football—you’re wearing similar uniforms and cradling an almost identical ball under your arm—only to find the playing field disappear from beneath you 10 metres before the touch down. Nervous about tipping in the US, I had prepaid my shuttle fare and jumped at the opportunity to include the “recommended driver’s tip”—so that I wouldn’t have the awkwardness of handing over limp paper bills when we reached my hotel. Had the driver not gotten the message? Did he expect second tip? What kept me from explaining? A small pile of dry leaves at the base of a tall maple begins to shake. A squirrel, brown acorn in mouth, pokes his head out watching me, waiting. A shiver runs through my chest. I turn away and roll my dented suitcase into the hotel lobby.

For that is the point we are still considering; the “difference between people in life and people in books.” (Plath’s underline, Forster 60)

2.

PLATH, Journal Entry, January 10th, 1959:

If I could once see how to write a story, a novel, to get something of my feeling over, I would not despair. If writing is not an outlet, what is. (462)

NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, PLATH’S underlining in quotations marks:

Creating—that is, the great salvation from suffering, and life’s alleviation. But for the creator to appear, suffering itself is needed, and much transformation.

“Yea, much bitter dying must there be in your life, ye creators!” (92)

“With my tears go into thine isolation, my brother. I love him who seeketh to create beyond himself, and thus succumbeth.” (68)

PLATH, written sideline notation in NIETZSCHE (68):

“can I succumb? I doubt it. Perhaps.”

It’s the fall of 2011. I’m in Northampton to carry out research at the *Mortimer Rare Book Room* at Smith College—to study the Plath papers for the author’s theories of the novel form. The doctoral dissertation I’m writing focuses on the dangers of therapeutic narration—the dangers of thinking of the self as a character, one’s life as a story, and the assumption that one will be cured through narrative form. In her journal, during the spring of 1959, Plath documented an emotional rollercoaster driven by her intense psychoanalytic therapy sessions with Dr. Beuscher, by her distress each month that she didn’t become pregnant, and, notably, by her inability to write prose. I’ve noticed that there are times when these three fundamental anxieties become conflated. In Plath’s journal entry on the 20th of March she writes of “a nadir of sorts” (474). “Cramps” she writes,

Pregnant I thought. Not, such luck. After a long 40 day period of hope, the old blood cramps and spilt fertility. [...] Then dopey, and the cramps

all day. I am getting nowhere with [Dr. Beuscher] [...] What good does talking about my father do? It may be a minor catharsis that lasts a day or two but I don't get insight talking to myself. What insight am I trying to get to free what? If my emotional twists are at the bottom of misery, how can I get to know what they are and what to do with them? She can't make me write, or if I do write, write well. (474)

Nine days later, although Plath writes that she has "40 unattackable poems" with "verve and life-joy" (477), she bemoans "the old brooding stasis of prose" and describes herself as "paralyzed" (475) when faced with writing it (476). Again, in April, she connects prose writing with psychological healing:

I am still blocked about prose. A novel still scares me. Have been reading 'Passage to India' for the first time and admiring the miraculous flow and ease of it. To have the time to show the placing of a red card on a black, the change of daylight and the geography of certain hills: the blessings of the novelists [sic] wide untidy landscape art. It would be a certain therapy. (477)

Susan Van Dyne has emphasized that Plath's habits of self-representation imply that she "regarded her life as if it were a text she could invent and rewrite" (5). I've noted that in both her private journals and her published writing, Plath shows an awareness of the power of narrative to affect the interpretation of a life. She suggests in her journal that her writing might be a "substitute for [herself]"—but that it is "much more" too: "a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience" (448). I've noticed Plath storying herself in a way that was assumed to be therapeutic in the postwar era. But story form, unlike selves, requires the careful orchestration of its ending to convey a final meaning back on the text.

NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, PLATH's STAR and underlining:

"(STAR)...the worst enemy thou canst meet, wilt thou thyself always be"
(67)

"Of all that is written, I love only what a person hath written with his blood." (39)

PLATH, Journal Entry, February 28th, 1959:

Try to get into a story. Forget self and give blood to creation. (473)

3.

The Mortimer Rare Book Room looks like the set of a small, liberal arts college film. The walls of the rectangular room are lined in dark wooden bookcases, their shelves filled with books behind glass doors. The shiny tables and chairs, the card catalogues, the frame around the internal glass office—everything is made of this same medium dark wood. The room has weight and the green felt floors seem made to cushion it—to catch the precious books that might fall, and the pencils rolling off tabletops—to keep the chairs from screeching across the floor. But the room has light too, from the windows interspersed with bookcases across the long walls, and the flying saucer-shaped lamps that hang at even intervals from the ceiling. It smells of warm paper, but not musty.

I think I am alone until Barbara Blumenthal comes out of the back to greet me. She looks at my ID and checks me in. She tells me there is just one other Plath scholar at the archive this week, a nice young scholar named Maeve from Ireland. Karen Kukil, the Associate Curator of Special Collections, is teaching this morning. She's prepared a cart for my first morning. Via email, I asked to see drafts of the novel and books from Plath's library, such as her copy of E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*. I want to see her copy of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* too, curious of how it might be relevant to her philosophy of life and work.

I can take one file folder or book at a time over to a table to study, Barbara tells me. There are several transparent book holders on the tables and beside these, a number of slim, dark velour worms repose. "Page weights," Barbara explains when she catches me staring at them. I needn't wear cotton gloves for anything but observing original photos; I may take photos without a flash for personal use. I may write notes on a computer or with a pencil.

I begin with a file of original drafts of Plath's novel planning. I am alone now and I settle into the quiet, my heart beating. The first file I pull out holds a pink piece of thin Smith College Memorandum paper. It is rough planning for *The Bell Jar*, written in a girlish, curling pen style. Her ink, her hand. She sat above it, pen busy across its blankness, tallying pages, ordering events into chapters. I don't believe in ghosts, but I've conjured her, unwittingly.

Soon, I'm paging eagerly through her copy of *Aspects of the Novel*. Plath underlines, but she also pens lines vertically down the straight edge of the text. Then there are the small, inky stars. Sometimes there are also notes, written either horizontally or, if longer, vertically up the text. Occasionally, Plath folds down the corner of the page too. I wonder what degree of emphasis she intends with each of

these different methods of notation. When she uses several at the same time (underline, sideline, star!), it seems clear that she strongly relates to, or wants to remember the lines. And when she makes notes, she enters into communication with the text. The sections of Forster's book about plot and character are marked up.

We shall all agree that "the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect..." (27)

Let us define a plot. We have defined "a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence." A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. (81-82)

"If it is in a story we say 'and then?' If it is in a plot we ask 'why?'" That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. (...) But a plot demands intelligence and memory also. "Curiosity is one of the lowest of the human faculties. (...) Intelligence first." (83)

... the plot, instead of finding human beings more or less cut to its requirements, as they are in the "drama, finds them enormous, shadowy and intractable, and three-quarters hidden like an iceberg." (81-82)

"The hidden life is, by definition, hidden." The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of "action." And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source... (45)

PLATH, Journal Entry, December 28th, 1958:

How to recognize a story? There is so much experience but the real outcome tyrannizes over it... (452)

Turn, with a kind of relief, to the business of learning a craft. I am reading Frank O'Connor's stories [...] with a kind of growing awareness of what he is doing technically. I will imitate until I can feel I'm using what he can teach. His stories are so 'constructed:' not a whit unused: a narrative flow. That is what I most need and miss. I write a sort of imagey static prose... (453)

Barbara is now standing before me, a light jacket over her shoulders. The Rare book room closes for the lunch hour. I'm disorientated, but she seems familiar with this look from visitors. I've been deep in different places, spaces and minds in the last three hours.

Exiting the Neilson Library, I unfold a toasted raisin bagel from the napkin I'd stealthily wrapped around it that morning at the breakfast buffet. I wander down the winding paved pathways on the Smith campus. Subdued yellow and orange maple leaves tip the branches of the otherwise green trees—some have already fallen onto the lawns where the young women are relaxing between classes, and onto the pathway I walk on. I see the message "BE HERE NOW" stenciled in white paint at my feet.

Back at the Rare Book Room after one o'clock, I'm greeted by Karen Kukil. The trepidation I feel at meeting Associate Curator is, hands-down, one of the most pointless fits of anxiety of my life. After apologizing for not being there to greet me in the morning, she inquires if I've found everything I need on the cart she'd prepared. Is there anything else she can look out for me today?

She takes me into the back to see where the files are shelved, where Plath's thick Elmwood desk hangs on the wall. Over the course of the next few days she will indulge my curiosity, by relating her experiences of editing Plath's journals and bringing out treasure after treasure from the archive: Plath's pen drawings, her typewriter, her comically illustrated letters. One book-pressed rose petal, still bright, preserved in its own folder. I'm not prepared for Karen's generous support my research efforts, her genuine interest—or the degree to which I'll take advantage of these in the next four days by demanding more, still more documents. I will become the Cookie Monster of archival research, greedily requesting the retrieval of every crumb of interest to me. But this afternoon, my cart is still full. I turn with curiosity to Plath's copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a Christmas gift from her mother in 1949.

NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

... thus impelleth [my fervent creative will] the hammer to the stone. "Ah, ye men, within the stone slumbereth an image for me, the image of my visions! Ah, that it should slumber in the hardest, ugliest stone!" (92)

"(STAR) Man is difficult to discover, and unto himself most difficult of all" (172)

This however is my teaching: "he who wisheth one day to fly, must first learn standing and walking and running and climbing and dancing—one doth not fly into flying." (216)

I tell you: "one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star." I tell you: ye have still chaos in you. (11)

"The least thing precisely, the gentlest thing, the lightest thing, a lizard's rustling, a breath, a whisk, an eye-glance—*little* maketh up the *best* happiness. Hush!" (309)

PLATH, Journal Entry, January 10th, 1959

Where is joy. Joy in frogs, not in Idea of people looking at my frog poem. (461)

The rejection is a blow (...). Yet what joys, loves I have know. And how they are part of the world. (ibid.)

NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

"So rich is joy that it thirsteth for woe, for hell, for hate, for shame, for the lame, for the world, --for this world," Oh, ye know it indeed! (364)

4.

Elated, I look up to see the light coming into the long windows sideways. It is past 4 pm. All day I've been trailing Plath, tracking her interests, her inspiration. The mental journey has been long and I'm on California time. But my tiredness is masked by the busy heartbeat of adrenalin. I turn the page to find a book section titled "Voluntary Death." It is marked up. A conversation takes place in the margin.

NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

Many die too late, and some die too early. Yet strange soundeth the precept: 'Die at the right time!' "Die at the right time:" so teacheth Zarathustra. (75)

"The consummating death I show unto you, which becometh a stimulus and promise to the living." (...) Thus to die is best; the next best, however, is to die in battle and sacrifice a great soul. (ibid.)

In the margin, PLATH asks: "why?"

"My death, praise I unto you, the voluntary death, which cometh unto me because *I* want it."

And when shall I want it?—He that hath a goal and an heir, wanteth death at the right time for the goal and the heir.

And out of reverence for the goal and the heir, he will hang up no more withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life. (75-76)

"(STAR) And whoever wanteth to have fame, must take leave of honour betimes, and practice the difficult art of—going at the right time." (76)

By the above lines, there is a STAR. A SIDELINE. An UNDERLINE. And in the margin, PLATH writes: "August 1953."

"One must discontinue being feasted upon when one tasteth best: that is known by those who want to be long loved." (ibid.)

And in the margin, PLATH writes: "remember!"

5.

...all of us [...] yearn for permanence. (Forster 67)

Remember. Remember. The words swell, then shrink back, irrevocably imprinted in my brain. No, no, no. I feel sick. I have to run, to tell someone. This is not the scholar, eager to share a fact which supports her pet theory about the danger of narrative endings. This is a person feeling responsible, implicated, 50 years after the reaction could have meant anything.

The air is crisp again when I walk back to my hotel. By the light of the streetlamps, I see a pair of grey-haunched squirrels balancing on the fat, bowed power lines. Suddenly, nimbly, they charge at each other. They meet in the centre, chattering angrily, tails bristling into question marks.

We cannot understand each other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion. But in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading,

we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life. [...] And that is why novels [...] can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, "they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power." (Forster 62)

"Deep is its woe--, Joy—deeper still than grief can be:" Woe saith: Hence! Go! But joys all want eternity. (Nietzsche 365)

PLATH, Journal Entry, January 20th, 1959:

I feel oddly happy. To enjoy the present as if I had never lived and would tomorrow be dead, instead of 'Jam tomorrow, jam yesterday, never jam today.' The secret of peace: a devout worship of the moment. Ironically: with most people this comes naturally (...). Why am I so jealous of others. I am me, and the rain is lovely on these chimneys. (464)