Reading the Paratexts of Plath's Unabridged *Journals*
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I often find myself resorting to the "paratexts" of Plath's unabridged Journals as a way of describing their textual superabundance and the pleasure I have taken in reading and teaching from them. Paratexts, in Gerard Genette's terms, are literary and printerly conventions such as prefaces and forewords, indexes and notes, illustrations, dust jacket materials and cover blurbs that mediate between the world of publishing and the world of the reader. Examining the text of Plath's journals through the body of its paratexts is one way of tracking shifts in Plath's reception and of discovering new contexts for what she once termed her "litany of dreams, directives, and imperatives" (McCullough ix). As "thresholds of interpretation," neither wholly outside nor wholly inside the texts proper, paratexts of Plath's journals become, at best, epistemological tools for splaying open the cultural subtexts and the shifting, ambiguous "I" at the center of the journal's performances of writing. For me, what Tracy Brain called the "patchiness" of the journals—the fact that they amass so many different kinds of writing and so many sides of Plath—gives them their distinctive character ("Plath's Letters" 144). With each new printing and edition, Plath's journals have undergone a "rewriting"; the "paratexts" of each subsequent edition give us opportunities to characterize textual variants and (sometimes) to demonstrate how boundaries of writing and culture are crossed over time.

On the tenth anniversary of the publication of Plath's unabridged *Journals*, it should also be noted that the situation of Plath's journals remains textually, archivally, and bibliographically complex. The existence of several editions of Plath's journals simultaneously in print complicates the question of fully defining the purpose of each. Although it now suffers markedly by comparison to the 2000 version, the 1982 "docked" text, *Journals of Sylvia Plath* edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, remains valuable as an artifact of an earlier era in the evolution of Plath's archive, an era in which the narrative of a final "leap" and "flood of incandescent energy" dominated Plath discourse ("Editorial Notes" 357). Since I often teach Plath and Woolf together, in the journey around my roomful of books, I measure the distance

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between the 1982 and the 2000 editions of Plath's journals by its nearest parallel, Leonard Woolf's 1953 edition of Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* and its subsequent iterations.² Woolf's *A Writer's Diary*, too, has a cramped focus by contemporary standards; yet since no student plows through the entire five volumes of Woolf's diaries, it is often still a pedagogical default text. As "her husband," the designation Hughes assigned to himself as custodian of the Plath Estate, Hughes was not alone in being the target of much criticism for the selective excisions on Plath's *Journals*. According to one recent biography, Leonard Woolf was so distraught by adverse reviews *A Writer's Diary* received – accusations of "withholding" and "selling his wife's tragedy for gold" – that he was hospitalized for a brief time for a virulent attack of eczema.³ In Woolf's case, as in Plath's, a second generation's desire for a fuller record ultimately prevailed.

Leaving aside the much-discussed questions about "lost" or "destroyed" journals, Plath's unabridged journal writing has not garnered the reputation for generic stability that accrues to the five volumes of Woolf's "unabridged" diaries. In his introduction to the first volume of Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie's *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Quentin Bell declared (perhaps hyperbolically) a "literary masterpiece," the "last of Virginia Woolf's major works to be offered to the public" (xii). Of course, this would not prove to be the case—there was more of Woolf, just as impressions of Plath's oeuvre swell with each decade—most recently, for example, with Luke Ferreter's archivally based study of her short fiction.⁴ In Plath's case, the striking difference between the prefaces of the 1982 and 2000 editions of Plath's journals is noted in the passing of the relatively secure world of literary hierarchies implied by the language of Hughes's 1982 "Foreword." Introducing Plath's journal to the public with the insistence that they are different in kind from her stories, poems, essays, and letters," Hughes's "Foreword" to the 1982 edition assumed a burden of proof; "different in kind" finally rests on declaring journals another kind of document, a record of her "warring selves" (xii). In the 2000 edition, Karen V. Kukil's unobtrusive preface shifts the terms to historical fidelity, to the goal of a "complete and historically accurate text" (ix).⁵ Plath's 1950-1962 journals are described as an "adult" record, although they rest on what we know was a foundation of handwriting, doodling and hand

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⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from the UK edition.
illustrating together, close to the creative wellsprings, from an early age. Just as Woolf's "complete" diaries have now been supplemented by Mitchell Leaska's *The Early Journals of Virginia Woolf: 1897-1909*, perhaps we will one day have an edition of Plath's journals that includes the earlier, pictorially-rich juvenile diaries.\(^6\)

In characterizing Woolf's diaries as "a masterpiece," a "literary achievement equal to, although very different from, works such as *The Waves* or *To the Lighthouse," but with "some of the same beauty of writing, but also an immediacy," Quentin Bell's "Introduction" to the first volume of the diaries laid full claim to the terrain of the aesthetic and immediately swept under it the question of the work's truthfulness: "Woolf did not have a good reputation for truthfulness" (xii). With Plath's journals, questions of ethos and the status of representation of her "journals" cling to the materials despite best efforts. Given Karen Kukil's meticulous description of physical texts, now there is no doubt what the "assortment of notebooks and bunches of loose sheets" amounts to (Hughes xiii).\(^7\) Some fragments, such as a few lines from "Point Shirley," are mere light skeins; others are textually-dense, absorptive self-reflections and some of the most beautiful passages of landscape description Plath ever wrote. Plath's almost fierce dedication to particularity, and her near-empirical habits of observation are striking; a sense that the world of "things of this world" could be blasted open through the act of language to yield an irruptive essence (the "husk of time," Woolf said; the split "watermelon," Plath wrote) is the closest thing to spirituality Plath's journals give us). Some critics have been uncertain about what the writing gives us, if indeed it "documents" anything at all: as Tracy Brain has argued, there are too many gaps between the varied folds of writing and the "experience" of a writer to claim a documentary "truth" for such acts (143). In 2003, Diane Middlebrook set a new standard for representing the journals by analogy to the practices of the "ballerina at the barre" a self-guided practice of rehearsal that guides and ramifies in extended performance (80). More recently, Jo Gill follows historiography of Michel Foucault's "technologies of the self," calling attention to the distinctively American tradition of self-examination and excoriation to be found in the pages of Plath’s reflections.\(^8\) Marsha Bryant finds a precursor to the unabridged *Journals* in 50s-style throwback to the French model of the *journal intime*, a woman's autobiographical genre

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\(^7\) "[A]n assortment of notebooks and bunches of loose sheets" is Hughes's description of the body of Plath's journals, "Foreword," *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982), xiii.

distinguishable both from the American tradition of self-examination and from the British tradition by its chronicling of self-uncertainty through intimate details of marriage and motherhood.  

Finally, while the minor differences in the British and American texts are well-documented, the design and production values of the 2000 Faber & Faber and Random House/Anchor publications suggest two rather different kinds of "books" and reading pleasures. The ivy-green edition of my 2001 paperback Faber & Faber edition, with its heavy paper stock, has all the heft of a door-stop; the full framing of a midnight-blue color-washed photograph on the cover, cropped and blown up from a smaller black-and-white photograph distills several iconographic images of Plath (the single-stemmed flower, the youthful portrait) and lends greater formality to the casual snapshot of several figures at Quadigras dance, from which it is cropped (illustration 11 inside the edition). The U.S. bible-size edition, with its black-and-white cover and all-cap banner "FIRST AMERICAN PUBLICATION" in brown lettering stamped on the cover has the same photograph on a different scale, but set into a different cover design, size, weight of paper. It evokes, for me, the look and feel of an underground classic from an era well-known for its censorship battles. Aside from the minor textual differences, the "unabridged" title of the U.S. edition both tantalizes and misleads ("unabridged" suggesting the possibility of full presence of the text to the reader), in ways that the Faber & Faber edition, with its bibliographically straightforward inscription, The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962, does not.
Plath's Unabridged Journals at the New Yorker – "What in the Author's Diaries Did Her Mother Not Want Us to Read?"

It is worth noting that the "paratext" sometimes precedes the text and its reception. This was the case with the version of Plath's journals that appeared under "Life and Letters: Journals" in the New Yorker for March 27, 2000. Months before the ink had dried on contracts for a U.S. edition, and prior to the UK release, the New Yorker presented abridged extracts from the journal and framed them under its own editorial banner, "What in the Author's Diaries Did Her Mother Not Want Us to Read?" An abstract for the article noting (as it turned out, wrongly) that the journals were planned for publication "in England only," maximizes the effect of a transatlantic journalistic coup. Beginning in 1993, when Tina Brown arranged pre-publication excerpts from Janet Malcolm's The Silent Woman (departing from the seasonal cover, Tina Brown had commissioned a special art work on Plathian themes for that edition), representing Sylvia Plath at the New Yorker was one strategy by which the New Yorker to achieve what journalistic historian John Seabrook characterized as the "nobrow"-effect—an imaginary cultural synthesis of art and commerce, neither high, low, or middle-brow in the old terms. According to Seabrook—an appraisal confirmed by other journalistic historians—Brown's "Trans-Atlantica" strategy of keeping Plath material in the foreground was a characteristic synergistic move, dragging the magazine "out of the townhouse and into the yellow tornado light of fashion, money, power,

sex, and celebrity," boosting sales while preserving high culture patina (29).14

It is the paratextual material which tells us most about how the New Yorker abridgement differs from other editions. Side by side with ads for rustic New England patio furniture and sandwiched between reviews of Shakespeare rap and commentary on the ineluctable lure of a bullish stock market, the 2000 excerpts advertise more than a fresh release of Plath's writing. Readers of the paratext are compelled to note that framing material is supplemented by a blow-up of a photograph that looks more like a pinup shot of tanned Plath and white halter top than the actual snapshot, from a day on a Cape Cod beach in 1952 (featuring Plath and her girlfriend Joan Cantor, laughing into the camera, swinging a hemp beach bag stamped with colorful elephants between their linked arms, a bag which may even have contained, on that particular occasion, a novel by Virginia Woolf). The selection of excerpts plots, in effect, Her Romances (beginning with a December 1950 entry "another blind date..."); moving on quickly to Courtship and Marriage (On April 8, "Still in bed . . . I get up in Ted's woolen bathrobe, my long practical and unlovely peach flannel nightgown, and black wool knee socks"), followed in quick succession by Romantic Disillusionment (On May 19, "I would rather know the truth of which I today had such a clear and devastating vision from his mouth than hear foul evasions . . .") to Her Ultimate Reward, Motherhood, the breathtaking birth-writing from January 17, 1962, Devon, "The day of Nicholas's birth . . . like Christmas Eve, full of rightness and promise," where the New Yorker version comes to its full stop ("Life and Letters" 104, 111, 114). The New Yorker "advance" edition can be seen as both an abridgment and an

14 Seabrook defines "nobrow" as the "exact midpoint at which culture and marketing converge, (213), but it may be argued this is only an imaginary construction. The New Yorker's pre-publication scoop of Janet Malcolm's The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes in August 23, 1993 was only one of the first "coups" of the Tina Brown era, followed by pre-publication articles and poems from Birthday Letters in "Life and Letters: Your Story, My Story" by A. Alvarez on February 2, 1998.
abatement. With its focus on "what Plath's mother did not want to hear," persistent themes that have defined the mythos of the American Electra and the mother-daughter divide, are reinstated. But the New Yorker preview, like the Humpty-Dumpty upside down sketch of two intertwined figures with which the article ends, signifies the diminishment of a monocular focus on Plath as a phoenix-from-the-ashes writer apart from Hughes: it ushered in an era in which Plath would no longer be identified with the "old" New Yorker, but with its new "nobrow" makeover.

When I teach Plath's journals, I want students to approach the unabridged Journals as a cultural artifact of considerable breadth as well as depth, and to learn to use its paratexts through quasi-ethnographic methods, challenging stock preconceptions about the exclusive class-culture literacies associated with her educational pedigrees. Starting with the index, I ask students to stitch together passages which will help them track and organize one of the journal's many thematic strands around a single theme across a series of entries; or I ask them to focus on a "slice of time" – pick a month or a year and to work backwards, cross-referencing the index for topics that come up frequently during that time period, and stitching the varied strands together in thick description of a particular period.

My "starter" list of cultural strands follows indexed topics on food, films, student life, rug-braiding, hygiene, travel, sleep and dreams, the New Yorker, and Ladies' Home Journal. The premise is that Plath found ways to nourish her creative life from many directions, and that the unabridged edition differs most from its predecessors in contextualizing what may have been a single-minded drive to fame in an intense and absorptive range of activities and perceptions. Nancy C. Mulvaney's Indexing Books describes the ideal function of an index in this quasi-ethnographic way – as a judicious guide to differentiating and distinguishing substantive from less important topics in a textual field. The unabridged Journals index does not disappoint: students are surprised that it contains easily as many entries on food as on the New Yorker, and that in her Smith and Boston years, Plath saw as many films as any contemporary undergraduate could hope to cover in a film course. One student described "sleep and dreams" this way: "She never got enough, but through her avid dream-life, she makes good use of what she got."

The "slice of time" method – comparing accounts of the same time period across the

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1982 and 2000 editions and bringing together multiple references, also leads students to consider the weight of editorial decisions. Comparing the 1982 and the 2000 versions for May 3 – June 15, 1959 (from one of the journals which was sealed when the material was purchased by Smith), there are a few discoveries to be made. In the late spring of 1959, Plath is putting finishing touches on her first book, in May titled The Devil of the Stairs ("as finished as it will ever be" – although it was not quite complete) (Unabridged Journals 492). With the satisfaction of having already sold two poems to the New Yorker that spring ("Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" and "Nocturne"), between May and June, Plath is cooking up multiple new storylines for print (including but not exclusively for the New Yorker), trying to become pregnant, planning gourmet meals, braiding rugs, and fishing (on one occasion catching as much as 15 lbs of cod in one day). Inexplicably, the 1982 Journals mix and merge material from a June 6 and May 25 entry, grafting these onto a May 20 section (no ellipses in the text signals a break, as might be expected). The result is that one of Plath's rich creative writing dreams, a dream involving several stories and a "would-be Salinger child," precedes references to the writing of one story itself ("This Earth Our Hospital").17 The unannounced grafting means one can easily misconstrue the comic tone of references to the "deeply endearing New Yorker-heading type rather like painstakingly inked hand-lettering," a dream-fantasy about her own story in print. The New Yorker was Plath's secular religion for a while ("blessed New Yorker print which I've envisioned for so long," she once wrote), but in the context of imagining herself in print, she could laugh at herself (492, 399). Thanks to the unabridged Journals, we know that her reading of mid-century periodical culture ran the gamut, including the following magazines that are not indexed in the 1982 Journals: Encounter, Esquire, Good Housekeeping, Granta, the Gramophone, Hornbook, Horse and Hound, Life, Music Quarterly, New Republic, New York Herald Tribune, New York Times, The Observer, Paese Sera (an Italian leftist Publication), Reader's Digest, Saturday Evening Post, Saturday Review of Literature, Woman's Day, True Story.18 As a result of so much

17 "Read on: my own prose: only it was the "Sweetie Pie" story, the back-yard tale, with the would-be Salinger child in it," Journals: 1950-1962, 492. Material that might be used to interpret another of the creative writing and publishing dreams appears on 481. For all unabridged passages discussed here, see pp. 480-495, May 3, 1959 – Saturday June 13."This Earth Our Hospital" was later published as "The Daughters of Blossom Street," The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962, 726.
18 This list does not include the Smith College and local New England papers to which Plath contributed occasional journalism. In the case of Granta and Gramophone, Plath followed her practice of noticing what people around her read, and projecting what characters like the might read, assigning them material from her storehouse of knowledge of contemporary periodical culture.
material cut and spliced, the 1982 edition also misses Plath's fusion of food with mood as a kind of language for registering perception – for example, when, "weary" after a long day, and a "fantastic spell of work" the previous night, on May 3, 1959 she "hungrily puts the last minutes of cooking onto breaded veal in cream, green parsley rice, and rather soggy yellow squash, and very weary" (480).

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Photographs: Plath and Elizabeth Bowen–an undercurrent of affinities

Another kind of paratextual assignment focuses on photographs as points of convergence between visual and verbal texts, and involves pairing a photograph with a letter, journal entry, or poem. The U.S./Anchor edition of Plath's journals with its additional photographs not featured in the UK edition—Plath on the QE II in addition to a few others, is preferred here. My own research on the James Coyne contact sheet of Plath and British novelist and short story writer Elizabeth Bowen at Mademoiselle (this photograph is present in both the U.S. and UK editions) leads back to the August 1953 Mademoiselle issue, and to another set of cultural crossings and convergences. The Mademoiselle issue has yet another "unsnagged" photograph of Plath, atop the St. Regis Hotel in what appears to be a butterfly-bodice evening gown. But it is the May 26 photograph of Plath with Elizabeth Bowen, from a photo-shoot of which we have a sequence of six contact-sheet prints in the unabridged Journals, that makes the case for a deep and possibly more enduring undercurrent of affinities linking Plath, Bowen, Virginia Woolf, and journal writing. Sometime in mid-1953, by or before the August Mademoiselle issue was printed, Bowen was assigned to review Leonard Woolf's edition of Woolf's A Writer's Diary for The New York Review of Books. Another photograph of Bowen from 1953 shows her in the same or similar dress-and-strand-of-pearls, in a rocking chair in an unnamed location reading a copy of James Baldwin's Go Tell It On the Mountain with a copy of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second

19 The thumbnail-size photograph appears at the bottom of p. 54, with the following caption, "On the St. Regis Roof, Anne and Sylvia and dates hold before-dinner confab" Mademoiselle, August 1953.
20 The contact sheet images (plate 8 in the Faber and Faber edition) were made from a photo-shoot which took place in Cambridge at the home of May Sarton, prior to Plath's actual internship: see also Peter K. Steinberg http://sylviaplathinfo.blogspot.com/2009/09/plath-bowen-sarton.html.
Sex.21 Leonard Woolf’s A Writer’s Diary: Being Excerpts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf appeared in the UK in 1953, and Bowen’s review of Woolf’s diary followed in a February 1954 publication in New York Times Book Review.22 In Letters Home, a June 4, 1953 letter tells us that Plath’s assignment included reading and critiquing material from one of Bowen’s lectures: among her tasks as Guest Managing Editor at Mademoiselle was to "write comments on all the stuff I read," … "just got through criticizing Elizabeth Bowen’s speech she gave the very day I talked to her – intellectually stimulating" (115).

If on the day of the interview with Bowen, Plath had regrets about her assigned guest editorial role, which included having to write letters of rejection for Mademoiselle of the very kind she had received from the New Yorker, the contact sheets don’t show it.23 Viewing the two animated figures in the photographs, we are bound to want to know what may have been as "intellectually stimulating" in their conversation. Since Plath didn’t write directly about the Bowen interview in her journals, we can look to the surrounding material of her journal for a sense of her preoccupations at the time. Was Bowen prepared from to extend the dialogue Plath had already initiated in her journals on the question of how a woman might create and love and still make money, "My Writing and My Life," as she would later put it (Unabridged Journals 208)? Later this dialogue would lead, as Plath reflected on the lives of other female and intellectuals, to speculations about "sublimation" which produces, in the wrong circumstances, a kind of neurosis. Did Woolf’s name come up, as Plath interviewed Bowen, or the recent release of the diary itself? Did their conversation touch on New Yorker publishing fever? (Bowen would have had her own tales to tell at the time.)

The Mademoiselle contact sheets taken at Sarton’s home shows two large-boned women, Bowen with her "grand-lady style" in a full skirted shirtdress, while Plath wears a contoured suit and hat and a necklace seemingly identical to Bowen’s (could this be true, or is it that a magnifying glass would help?). The two gesture animatedly, arms and hands—the conversation seems to be going well. We don’t know exactly what they talked about in those few recorded instants, but a good bet is that it had to do with the developing writer. The nearest place to look is

21 This photograph serves as the frontispiece in Maud Ellmann, Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003); see p. 22 for commentary on the photograph.
23 Anne Stevenson cites Plath’s guest managing editor duties as including writing rejection letters in Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 41.
next to the last frame of the photograph as it appeared in the *Mademoiselle* feature, accompanied by Plath's write-up. In the feature entitled "We Hitch Our Wagons" [Mlle's twenty Guest Editors find the sky's the limit when there's a star to guide the way"] Mademoiselle guest editors, including Plath, are paired with famous figures and potential mentors in their fields. Plath records what she learned from Bowen about becoming a writer, as follows:

The writer "should move about the world, in contact with people," keep away from jobs that waste creative energies, and write out of his own sensation and feeling. Her own work often grows out of her visual impressions and reaches print only after a great deal of rewriting. Miss Bowen counts "criticism and encouragement" as the two most important aids to the young writer. She says she began to write stories after she "failed to become a poet," and still prefers the form of the short story to the novel. (282)

Similar themes are sounded in notes housed at the New York Public Library for a talk Elizabeth Bowen gave at Wellesley College on 10 March 1950, and repeated in various forms for other college audiences throughout New England, entitled "The Experience of Writing." In that talk, Bowen explains that she began writing fiction at 19, while, similar to Plath's early trajectory, "under the influence" of the "wish to paint." Recalling her own development as a fiction writer, Bowen reminisces that the "short story was good for me in two ways":

1) visual 2) the poetic stress of the moment. The impression for its own sake—spotlit, isolated—only slight need for rationalization and explanation. All my short stories have departed from a visual impression to which some poetic sign is attached. (122)

Such words, so attuned to Plath's own sensibility, might have resonated with Plath in 1953. Years after the interview, Plath would be bringing these lessons about working from visual impressions and the poetic moment to her short fiction, as well as her poems; the journals are a storehouse of just those moments and impressions. By early February 1954, less than six months after her meeting with Plath, Bowen's published review of Woolf's journals registers the initial dismay that in England, it was hoped that the diary would not merely portray the writer, but the writer in the "entirety of her existence." In the contact sheet prints of the interview, Bowen is an aging queen of another literary generation, a kind of fragile bridge between Plath and Woolf. Neither could know fully what their legacies would bequeath. At the time of the interview,

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Bowen had experienced rough treatment at the *New Yorker*, although ultimately her luck would shift. The *New Yorker* published Bowen's short fiction in the 1940s, but in 1952 the magazine also published a parody of a Bowen short story by Peter De Vries (whom Plath was to later to describe as "one of the witty clever, serious, prolific ones" who "oppresses me"), a story that opens when a young lad pokes his head into a country-house library where a young woman poet is lost in reading her Tennyson, with an opening salvo, "Tennis, anyone?" (Unabridged *Journals* 275; De Vries 30). On that day in May, 1953, against the background of period parlor furnishings, bookshelves and polished tables, the camera seems to encompass a span of literary generations, even as it calls attention to distinctive archival legacies—one in which the literary past is preserved under glass, and another in which light moves across the surface, streaking the open gesture of hands, as if in a short film.

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25 Peter De Vries, "Touch and Go (with A Low Bow to Elizabeth Bowen)," *New Yorker*, January 26, 1952; in the unabridged *Journals*, Plath comments on Peter De Vries as "one of the witty clever ones" in a March, 1957 entry, p. 275. Bowen's first *New Yorker* story was "Everything's Frightfully Interesting," October 11, 1941; Brendan Gill was to comment on *The Heat of the Day* that Bowen's "vision is wider and deeper than it has ever been before" (89), *New Yorker*, February 19, 1949. Bowen, like Plath, took a wide view of the short story publishing market, submitting and placing fiction in *Woman's Day* as well as the *New Yorker*. 
Works Cited


