Learning from Students

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"the necessity of an impulse whose goal or origin still lie beyond me."

-Olga Broumas

Teaching can be unrewarding, and can sometimes take your breath away. The best moment in my life as a teacher came in 2000, when I was astounded to receive in the mail a large package containing the Faber and Faber edition of The [unabridged] Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962, edited by Karen V. Kukil, along with a letter from Karen reminding me of her student days at Trinity, and the Woolf and Plath seminar she took in 1974. Learning about Karen's archival work and her appointment as curator of Woolf and Plath manuscripts in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, and seeing the mammoth achievement realized in this 732-page tome made me want to read it from cover to cover, and to thank the stars for arranging such a materialization.

I feel honored to have been invited to contribute to this special issue of Plath Profiles in honor of Karen Valuckas Kukil on the occasion of what would have been Sylvia Plath's 78th birthday. I have known Karen since the early 1970s, when she was an undergraduate English major at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where I started teaching fresh from graduate school in 1972, having written a psychoanalytic thesis on Elizabethan drama, which I then imagined would be the main topic of my future scholarship and teaching. Trinity had been a men's college until 1968, so the women enrolled when I arrived there were the kind of women willing to move into a previously exclusively male environment. An extraordinarily bright and committed group of female students outnumbered male students in most English courses, which were taught by men and focused on a canon of literature that included few if any women writers. When I interviewed for the Trinity job in 1971, I asked whether there were any women teaching in the English Department. Yes, came the answer, we have Dori Katz. When I arrived, I discovered that Dori Katz was a member of the Modern Languages Department, and that I was the only tenure-track woman in the Trinity English Department. Considering myself one of the boys, I had remained more or less oblivious to the second wave of feminism that was cresting around me between 1968 and 1972, so I was surprised to find out what a big deal it seemed to be
at Trinity that I am a woman. There were no Women's Studies courses taught at this college. Among undergraduate students displeased by the dearth of resources on offer to help them think about what it means to be a woman was Ms. Sara Throne (Trinity class of 1974, and now a lawyer), who had taken a hiatus from Trinity to study for a year at the University of Delaware, which had the world's first Women's Studies Program. When she returned to Trinity in 1972, the year Quentin Bell published his biography *Virginia Woolf*, Sara Throne organized a student-taught course in women's literature to be offered during the spring of 1973. She asked me to serve as its faculty sponsor. Though I had no training for this and knew very little about women's literature, Sara Throne thought that no one else would make an appropriate sponsor. She filled my ears with feminist complaints and arguments for which I had no remedy beyond accepting the opportunity, the responsibility and the work she offered. In undertaking Sara's project, I got to take her course and read the papers her students wrote for it. I was particularly impressed by how well they wrote about Virginia Woolf; and I could see what a difference it made to their level of passion and commitment that the students on their own initiative were breaking ground in the study of issues of female development and achievement. Many of them wanted to be writers. They were authorizing themselves.

When the time came that spring to draw up course offerings for the following year, I put in a description for a course titled "Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath." It said something along the lines of "this course will study the works, lives and deaths of two women writers who committed suicide."

I was worried that the course might be depressing, but students seemed elated by the very idea of such a project at Trinity. During preregistration, a deluge of people wanted to take this seminar, such that the Registrar initially enrolled more than 100; and we then had to limit "Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath" to Juniors and Seniors, and to English majors in order to get a manageable group for undertaking and presenting papers during a 13-week semester. Karen Valuckas, to our great good fortune, was in this group.

Just before the course started in the spring of 1974, I took a trip to Martinique, where, surrounded by the sound of the sea, I reread *Ariel*, Bell's biography of his aunt, and Woolf's novels to conjure some semblance of preparation for myself. The Caribbean energized my reading of *The Voyage Out*, the first book we were to analyze in the course. The title *The Voyage Out*, in its sense of the unknown and of a vast opening, announced the way I felt as the spring
semester began.

The class met once a week for 150 minutes, at night, in Trinity's Goodwin Lounge, a large living room of sorts, below ground level on the main quad, with dark bookcase paneling and many comfortable arm chairs, adding to the informality of the atmosphere, which at times felt like a party in the absence of adult supervision. For the first few weeks, we talked about what we had noticed as patterns in each of Woolf's novels and a few of Plath's *Ariel* poems, and students set about formulating proposals for term papers. After midterm, the students began to present drafts of their works-in-progress for feedback from the rest of the group. Each week, we would hear and discuss four or five twenty-minute versions of unfolding projects. Karen's presentation came near the end of the course, and she presciently spoke about interplay between the work of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.

In April, another student in this course, Susan Dansker, invited me to accompany her to Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, upstate New York to hear a public lecture by Caroline Heilbrun. When we got there, we found a huge audience for a lecture on literary suicides, including Woolf and Plath, about whom Heilbrun spoke depressively. I raised my hand at the end of her lecture to say that I thought Woolf's and Plath's works were filled with images of rebirth and that I thought their value for the women's movement was to pose the question, "How can we be reborn without really dying?" This question formulated what had been a subliminal preoccupation of my interest in these two writers.

Susan Kepnes, another student, gave me as a farewell gift upon her graduation from Trinity, in 1977, a copy of Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O*, and I somehow acquired a large poster of its title poem, which names "an impulse whose goal or origin / still lie beyond me" (23). Except for its claim to understand the impulse, this poem crystallized my participation in the Woolf and Plath course, though I would say its goal and its origin lie beyond me.

In September 1974, I was notified that a student from the Woolf and Plath course had slashed his wrists during the summer, and was now resident in the home of the Dean of Faculty. This suicidal incident discouraged me from further work on Woolf and Plath, whom I stopped reading for decades. When a selection from Plath's journals was edited and published by Frances McCullough and Ted Hughes in 1982, I bought the book in paperback, read the introductions, glanced through the rest and probably forgot to finish it. Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981), ed. Hughes, elicited a similar response, even though it won The Pulitzer Prize in 1982. When

The arrival of Karen V. Kukil's edition of Plath's unabridged journals in 2000 revived my interest in reading Woolf and Plath, giving a sense of continuity and integrity to the unfolding of my life as a teacher and a scholar. It was rejuvenating to find myself sitting up late at night glued to *Birthday Letters* with the hair on the back of my neck standing on end after the amazement of discovering the richness of Plath's responses to her everyday life in her unabridged journals. I registered for the first time the wounded power of composite authorship in Plath and Hughes as a married couple who were mutual muses.

Another set of revelations came with the show "'No Other Appetite': Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Blood Jet of Poetry" at New York's Grolier Club in 2005, a first-rate display of papers drawn from the Plath collection at Smith College and the Hughes collection at Emory University curated by Karen Kukil and Stephen Enniss. Karen generously presented me with a copy of the book that came of this Grolier event, inscribed "30.ix.05... This exhibition began over thirty years ago in your seminar on Plath and Woolf.... " Like Plath's *Journals*, the exhibition and the resulting book put on display signs of the daily, material existence of two poets who worked like demons.

Karen Kukil co-organized at Smith College the 2003 meeting of the International Virginia Woolf Society, a well-attended and inspiring gathering titled *Virginia Woolf in the Real World*. She then edited and published selected paper from this superb conference (Clemson University Digital Press, 2005). In 2008, the year I retired from teaching, Karen arranged at Smith an American version of the symposium Sally Bayley had organized at Oxford University the previous fall to celebrate Plath's 75th birthday. The next year, Karen curated for the Neilson Library "Unconquered by Flames: The Literary
Lights of Yaddo," an exhibition of Smith College talents Lola Ridge, Sylvia Plath, Constance Carrier, and Newton Arvin, emphasizing Plath's drawings, perceptions and thoughts at Yaddo during the fall of 1959. In 2010, in conjunction with the Smith College Art Museum's showing of the traveling exhibit "A Room of One's Own: The Bloomsbury Artists in American Collection," Karen Kukil mounted in Neilson Library an exhibit that included Woolf manuscripts, Hogarth Press first editions, and photographs of the Stephen family, Woolf, and her Bloomsbury associates. Like all of Karen's work, these artifacts emphasized the lived experience of writers and the material circumstances of their work.

Caroline Heilbrun gave her last interview at the 2003 Smith College conference "Virginia Woolf in the Real World," and committed suicide shortly thereafter. This depressive aftermath receives its remedy, I think, in Karen Kukil's success in changing the subject of Plath studies so that they make us see Plath the living woman who loved life, who gloried in the physical experience of giving birth, who was a social observer, a comic commentator, an embodied human being who articulated exquisite responses to life. The unabridged journals reveal Plath's "'love of clothes and fine foods--her vibrant zest for life'" (Ebbets). Karen writes, "When Plath read A Writer's Diary in 1956, she was attracted to the human Virginia Woolf, the woman who cooked 'haddock & sausage' and cleaned out her kitchen to work off a depression over rejections from Harper's (269). I believe we, too, are drawn to the human Plath in the Unabridged Journals. The woman dressed in hot blacks who slowly follows the high, spider-wheeled cart carrying Percy Key's corpse up the hill to the cemetery in North Tawton on June 29, 1962, past the 'uplifted faces of children in the primary school yard.' The woman who leaves the open grave to walk home to Court Green over the back hill and stops to gather 'immense stalks of fuchsia foxgloves in the heat' (673)" (Kukil, "True" 27). Similarly, in analyzing Plath's poem "Edge," Helen Vendler identifies "maternal and sensuous and aesthetic joy of a high order," a "poet's close-focus view that can look deep into the throats of the night flowers" (Vendler 148). What else can we ask for?
Works Cited


