



Sylvia Plath on Charing Cross Road

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After Sylvia Plath arrived in London *en route* to Cambridge University in 1955, she recounted to her mother that she had perused the book stores on Charing Cross Road.¹ The volumes that Plath purchased during her visits to London reflect her developing creative and critical interests while she was living in England from 1955 to 1957 and from late 1959 to 1963. Each of the volumes in Plath's library sheds light on her reading strategies and the texts with which she may have been familiar. One indication of Plath's meticulousness as a reader and book owner is that she inscribed her name and location in her books in addition to leaving inside her volumes the labels from the stores where she purchased them. In her books and journals, Plath illustrated the particularity of her engagement with her literary and cultural surroundings. Forty-five years after Plath's arrival in London, the British publication of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000) was the first in a series of events that altered my relationship to literature, modernism, and intellectual history.²

During Plath's visits to London as a Fulbright Scholar at Newnham College in 1955, she purchased four small books that reflect her long term interests in modern and contemporary literature in addition to her more recent exploration of drama. In the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, for instance, remains Plath's copy of E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), which she inscribed, "Sylvia Plath London—1955."³ While Plath was at Newnham College, Forster was a fellow at King's College, Cambridge. After studying Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as an undergraduate at Smith, Plath noted Forster's references to Woolf in

¹ Letter housed in the Lilly Library, Indiana University. Christopher S. Harter, Reference Associate sent passages in an email of May 28, 2003. The abridged September 25, 1955 letter is in *Letters Home* (181-3). I would like to acknowledge the Everett Helm Fellowship, which made possible research in the Lilly Library and The Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University. I also thank Peter K. Steinberg, Anita Helle, Brian M. Reed, David Trinidad, Dianne Hunter, and Dr. Terry Kidner for their feedback.

² The Faber and Faber (UK) edition is entitled, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, while the Random House, Anchor Books (US) edition is entitled, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*.

³ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; London: Edward Arnold & Co, 1953). Library of Sylvia Plath. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. See also Peter K. Steinberg's catalogue of Sylvia Plath's library: <<http://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary>> Accessed 3 September, 2010. Regarding Plath's prose see also Luke Ferreter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2010).

her copy of *Aspects of the Novel*.⁴ In London, Plath also purchased a *Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* (1954) paperback. Reading her copy, Plath also turned down the corner of Theodore Roethke's poem, "The Shape of the Fire."⁵ Her *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* (1948) still contains a label from the Foyles bookstore on Charing Cross Road. In that volume, Plath underlined W. B. Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli."⁶ Perhaps on a visit to London later in the same year, she also found at Foyles a copy of Christopher Fry's *An Experience of Critics: The Approach to Dramatic Criticism* (1952).⁷ At Cambridge, Plath was studying for a Tripos exam in tragedy that included modern drama and she acted in an Amateur Dramatics performance of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (LH 199).⁸

In the mid-fifties and early sixties, Plath's London book purchases represented directions that she investigated as a poet and independent reader. She recorded, for instance, in a small datebook, that on October 13, 1956 she purchased a Tarot book--Basil Ivan Rakoczi's *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* (1954)--and spent time in the Charing Cross Road shops.⁹ Plath later inscribed her hardcover copy of Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* (1960) with the date, November 9, 1962. Seven years after first visiting Charing Cross Road, it is likely that she selected this black hardcover on a return visit to Foyles.¹⁰

I was walking on Tottenham Court Road towards Charing Cross Road on the day that the British edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* was published. The windows of each bookstore displayed Faber and Faber's green posters of Plath before the bookcase in the Eltisley Avenue

⁴ Forster, 22.

⁵ Geoffrey Moore, ed., *The Penguin Book of American Verse* (London: Penguin, 1954).

Plath inscribed, "Sylvia Plath London – 1955." Library of Sylvia Plath. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith.

⁶ Oscar Williams, ed., *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1948). Plath inscribed her copy "Sylvia Plath London – 1955." The label in the volume indicates, "Foyles Charing Cross Road London WC 2." Library of Sylvia Plath. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith.

⁷ Christopher Fry, *An Experience of Critics: The Approach to Dramatic Criticism*. (Perpetua: London, 1952). Library of Sylvia Plath. Lilly Library, Indiana University. Inscribed, "Sylvia Plath / London – 1955" Inside front cover label from Foyles Charing Cross Road London W.C.2.

⁸ See also LH 187, 196, and Peter K. Steinberg's website, "A Celebration, This Is," for a photograph of the ADC building. <<http://www.sylviaplath.info/thumbs55-57.html>> Accessed 10 October, 2010.

⁹ Cambridge pocket diary 1956 and 1957. Lilly Library, Indiana University. See also LH 277-8. Plath's copy of *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* (The Hague: L.J.C. Boucher, 1954) is housed in the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. Karen Kukil first brought it to my attention. See also Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) and Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (George Allen and Unwin Books, 1960). Library of Ted Hughes. Robert Woodruff Library, Emory University. See also *A Lover of Unreason* and *Her Husband*. Plath's copy of Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* is in the Lilly Library, Indiana University. See also Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002) and "The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath" (*Journal of Modern Literature* 27:4. Summer 2004: 59-72).



apartment she and Hughes shared in in Cambridge.¹¹ I was studying abroad in London during my junior year at Colgate University and preparing to write my senior thesis on Plath's poetry. A month earlier, I had purchased Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough's edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982). I rushed into the Borders bookstore, which was close to the Foyles where I was not aware that Plath had shopped. When I told the salesman that I already owned Plath's journals, he replied that Hughes had unsealed new journals. I later read that Karen V. Kukil had been giving a PEN lecture near Piccadilly Circus, not far from where I was attending classes and from where I had purchased the journals.¹² Unfortunately, I did not become aware of the event until after it had occurred.

I carried home to America my hardcover copy of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, which I had purchased for the discounted price of thirty pounds. I read from the hardcover copy until the American paperback edition, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, became available. While completing my senior thesis, I was accepted to the University of Massachusetts for graduate study. Before I moved to Amherst in the fall of 2001, I wrote to Karen and she offered to show me the "Sylvia Plath Collection" at Smith. On September 10, I visited the Mortimer Rare Book Room where Karen introduced me to Plath's drafts of "Lady Lazarus" (1962) and signed my British edition of the *Journals*.

While I lived in Amherst and during the summers that I returned to Northampton, I traveled the Pioneer Valley with my copy of *The Unabridged Journals* as a guide. Karen also invited me to lead scholars on tours of the sites in Plath's poems, letters, and journals, including Childs Park, Haven House, and Lawrence House.¹³ During her first year and a half at Smith, Plath lived in Haven House, which was close to William Allan Neilson Library.¹⁴ Lawrence House, where Plath moved to in 1952, was also well situated across Green Street from the

¹¹ Photograph by Olwyn Hughes, 1956. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith. See also *LH* and regarding 55 Eltisley Avenue <<http://www.sylvia-plath.info/thumbs55-57.html>> Accessed 3 August, 2010.

¹² PEN International Lecture April 8, 2000. "Reviving the Journals of Sylvia Plath," English PEN International Writers' Day. London, UK. April 8, 2000.

<www.smith.edu/library/libs/rarebook/CV2007Kukil.doc> Accessed 1 September, 2010. Part of the lecture is reproduced in this *Plath Profiles* issue.

¹³ Childs Memorial Park in Northampton inspired Plath's poems "Child's Park Stones" and "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers." She noted the park, stones, her poem "Childs Park Stones," and the incident that inspired "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers" in her journals (See *UJ* 298, 301, 393, 393-5, and 402). Plath lived in Smith's dormitories, Haven House and Lawrence House, as a student (See *UJ* 29, 157, 183, and 677).

¹⁴ See also Nancy Hunter Steiner, *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1973).

campus bookstore where she was inspired to purchase a dozen books following a lecture for her modern intellectual history course in the spring of 1954.¹⁵

During the summer before I moved to Amherst, I had read in Tracy Brain's *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001) that Smith owns the Virginia Woolf novels that Plath annotated. As I made my way through Plath's manuscripts, the possibility of exploring her personal library remained. Karen taught me to collect editions comparable to those that Plath owned and to transcribe her annotations in them. Studying Plath's reading motivated my own searching in second hand bookstores, as she had on Charing Cross Road. Reading Plath's annotated books also provided an introduction to modernist history, intellectual history, and Smith history.

As I researched Plath's reading, Karen brought to my attention that Plath's teaching notes are housed in the Lilly Library at Indiana University and encouraged me to apply for their Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship.¹⁶ The teaching notes that Plath prepared as an instructor of first year English at Smith from 1957 to 1958 record midcentury critical approaches and indicate the ways that she followed the strategies of her own teachers.¹⁷ In my dissertation, *Annotating Modernism: The Reading and Teaching Strategies of Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton*, I analyzed Plath's teaching notes alongside volumes from Plath's library, housed at Smith, the Lilly Library, and Emory University. In doing so, I was able to address the intertextuality of Plath's annotations and her reading practices as a student, teacher, and poet.

While researching in the Mortimer Rare Book Room, I had the opportunity to attend Karen's presentations to classes visiting from Smith and other institutions. The role of manuscripts and rare books at Smith has also inspired my own teaching interests. In my courses, students work with print and digital facsimiles of texts in order to better understand the composition and materiality of texts in addition to the historical contexts that inform them. When possible I also incorporate examples from Plath's annotated books. Annotating T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), for instance, she inscribed the contents of the end notes beside the passages to which they refer in the body of the poem. In Plath's teaching notes, she advised that her students inscribe their copies of the poem with the contents of Eliot's notes. In remaining spaces

¹⁵ Letter from Sylvia Plath to McCurdy, April 15, 1954. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. Plath also notes Lawrence's house's proximity to the library in her journal (*UJ* 175).

¹⁶ Karen learned about Plath's teaching notes from Professor Susan Van Dyne at Smith College.

¹⁷ See also Amanda Golden, "Sylvia Plath's Teaching Syllabus: A Chronology," *Plath Profiles* 2 (August 2009): 209-220. <<http://www.iun.edu/~plath/vol2/Golden.pdf>> Accessed 4 October, 2010.



above and beside the text of the poem, Plath had also added quotations from her teacher Elizabeth Drew's study *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry*.¹⁸ Plath's annotated copy presented students with an image of midcentury critical reading of *The Waste Land*. In addition, the students noticed that Plath demonstrated reading strategies that they also practice.

As a mentor, Karen taught me the limitless possibilities of archival research. While I was at Smith, she invited me to curate an exhibition for the *Thirteenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (2003). In the weeks leading up to the conference, I had the opportunity to learn from Karen as a visual artist and Woolf scholar. After Karen assembled her exhibition, *Woolf in the World: A Pen and Press of Her Own*, I was also able to observe as visitors admired her craftsmanship and learned about the development of Woolf's career.¹⁹ As *The Unabridged Journals* enters its second decade, Karen's careful treatment of archival materials will continue to provide a model for scholars to follow.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Drew, *T.S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950). Library of Sylvia Plath. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith.

¹⁹ A version of *Woolf in the World: A Pen and Press of Her Own* is online.

< <http://www.smith.edu/library/libs/rarebook/exhibitions/penandpress/index.htm> > See also Smith's online exhibition of Leslie Stephen's photograph album.

< <http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/rarebook/exhibitions/stephen> > Both sites accessed 10 October, 2010.



Karen Kukil with *The Unabridged Journals* at Pembroke College, Cambridge University.
September 16, 2010.



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