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'The Bland Granta': Sylvia Plath at Cambridge

Sylvia Plath was three years my senior. The fact, however, that she was a Fulbright scholar and had already taken a first degree at Smith College made us contemporaries, albeit distant ones, during her two year period at Cambridge. She arrived, to read English at Newnham, late in September, 1955, a month before her twenty-third birthday. She left, with an upper second class degree, in the summer of 1957, having married the poet Ted Hughes—'a large, hulking, healthy Adam . . . with a voice like the thunder of God'¹—one year before. The enthusiasm of her arrival—she told her mother in October, 1955 that Cambridge was 'the most beautiful spot in the world'—is in marked contrast to the relief of her departure: 'Both of us', she wrote in June, 1957, 'are delighted to leave the mean, mealy-mouthed literary world of England!'

The difference between these two statements need not be pressed too far, nor was the course from one attitude to the other a direct one. If there is anything more striking in *Letters Home* than Sylvia Plath's intense ambition as a writer, it is her combination of exuberance and volatility; she seems constantly to have been forming and dissolving enthusiasms, revaluing people and her own poems, the latest usually being seen as the best. But there is no doubt that her Cambridge years were important ones, during which changes, or shifts in emphasis, did take place; it is significant that nearly a third of *Letters Home*, which covers the years 1950 to 1963, is concerned with this two year period. During it she wrote some twenty-five poems; and if only about ten of them survived her changing canons of self-criticism to appear in *The Colossus* in 1960, and two of these ('Black Rook in Rainy Weather' and 'Two Sisters of Persephone') were omitted by her from the 40-poem version of that volume which Knopf brought out in the United States in 1962, almost all are of interest, either intrinsically or

in terms of the influences they reveal. First volumes are of necessity limited in size and tend to favour more recent work, and it is to be hoped that the discarded poems, many of them scattered in magazines and others interspersed in *Letters Home*, will reappear when Sylvia Plath's 'overdue' Complete Poems is published.² Until such time as the whole shape of her literary career is revealed by the reissue of the pre-*Colossus* poems and the appearance of Lois Ames's official biography (due for completion as long ago as 1975), a personal view of Sylvia Plath's Cambridge years, based partly on memory and partly on the hindsight afforded by available documents, may serve some useful purpose.

For a writer who had already achieved variously-prestigious publication in such American glossies as *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen* and *Harpers*, Sylvia Plath's initial encounters with Cambridge undergraduate magazines were not encouraging. On the one hand she reacted to them with a would-be professional's superiority: from the first she saw she concluded that 'poetry is fast fading from galloping consumption'. But, on the other, she was not herself immediately welcomed as the antidote. On November 19, 1955 she left with the editor of the 'big' magazine—*Granta*, presumably—a few stories and poems; but it was not until almost a year later that a short story ('The Day Mr. Prescott Died') appeared in it, and not until March, 1957 that any of her poems did. Her first acceptance, in November, 1955, was of two poems by one of the 'little magazines'; by elimination I take this to have been *Chequer*, though I have not been able to trace the poems.³ But whichever they were, she recorded 'lousy reviews' of them in February, 1956, and her comment suggests that her confrontation with Cambridge literary life was no simple matter of the 'great world' and the parish pump, but a clash of more nearly equal opposites—smooth accomplishment versus halting 'sincerity'. She complained of 'clever critics' that:

They abhor polished wit and neat forms, which, of course, is exactly what I propose to write, and when they criticize something for being "quaintly artful" or "merely amusing", it is all I can do (sic) to shout, "That's all I meant it to be".

It was at about this point that she first met Christopher Levenson, editor of the most consciously serious of the Cambridge magazines, *Delta*. Levenson, reading English at Downing College under F.R. Leavis, was perhaps the most interesting undergraduate poet then writing, whose work combined contemporary 'relevance' (an

awareness of the problems of post-war Europe gained from working in Dutch flood-relief camps and a German home for refugee children) and pithy, if sometimes sociologically-modish, use of significant detail. He was, in effect, an Auden/Spender of the Cold War, and his poems seemed haunted by natural disaster, political uncertainty, and personal disillusion: one registered as typical this phrase from 'Autobahn':—'refugees/Carry their future in one attaché case.' Like his editorial predecessor Philip Hobsbaum, Levenson kept *Delta* to a policy, austere, even niggling, but often justified by results, which preferred verbal 'enactment' and some degree of social 'commitment' to vague, 'self-indulgent' emotional gesture. From Levenson, whom she viewed nevertheless with mixed feelings,⁴ Sylvia Plath learned 'a certain social and public view', and she spoke of sending 'more sociological poems' to *Delta* when she had some ready. Such a poem was the strenuous 'Channel Crossing', which she sent her mother in March, 1956: it is an uncharacteristically overblown rendering of personal experience in irrelevantly grandiose terms, well, though unintentionally, described by its phrase 'we strike a stance/Most mock-heroic'. More pastiche than poem, it contains 'a refugee . . . wincing/Under the strict mask of his agony', while storm and seasickness are aggrandised into these quasi-Levensonian generalizations:

Meek and proud both fall; stark violence
Lays all walls waste; private estates are torn,
Ransacked to the public eye.

In fact, only one of her poems ever appeared in *Delta*, and it was not this one but, curiously enough, 'Winter Words', published in the Summer, 1956 issue. I say curiously because it was both too lightweight for *Delta's* usual tastes, and surely repudiated in advance by a remark Sylvia Plath made to her mother in March, 1956: 'I am most scornful of the small preciousness of much of my past work'. 'Winter Words' was one of her exercises in the manner of Emily Dickinson written in America early in 1955. It was reduced for *Delta*, with no loss, from 14 stanzas to 10, three of which appeared in reverse order from that in the original poem. A single stanza originally number seven, but in *Delta* number four gives enough of a taste of its mincing cleverness:

Chipmunks enter
stripes of black
in the winter
almanac.

Whether I myself inadvertently fueled Sylvia Plath's complaints about 'clever criticism'—hardly to be avoided by 'Winter Words'—I rather doubt. But on the one occasion I met her, I think in Spring, 1956, at one of the regular gatherings of young poets who read and discussed their work in Christopher Levenson's rooms, I did express myself, mildly, in some such terms as she quotes. For years I remembered the poem she read as being a villanelle (not at all of the Empsonian tone which young English poets were then unwisely trying to impersonate), one of whose refrains ran: 'The bells ring out in lunatic thirteens.' The poem I thought at the time artificial, the concept of its refrain uncongenial and forced (I am tempted, now, to call it prophetic). Sylvia Plath was not, I think, very pleased by my rather humourless reaction. What is interesting now is to discover, on checking, that she was not joining in on equal terms, since the poem had already been published; to realize, also, that she was unwilling—or too modest—to reveal this in an attempt to squelch criticism. The poem was in fact 'Doomsday', which had appeared in *Harpers* as early as May, 1954; my memory had only partly garbled its second refrain, which says something for its strikingness, at any rate:

The idiot bird leaps out and drunken leans
 Atop the broken universal clock;
 The hour is crowed in lunatic thirteens.

The two refrains themselves had been transferred, in the manner of early Auden, almost bodily from an even earlier 'Sonnet', dating from late in 1951, in which they formed the final couplet. But for all its necessary ingenuities of rhyme ('havoc-split ravines', 'smithereens', 'God's monkey-wrench has blasted all machines') her villanelle was no more than a set piece on an external 'subject', a habit of 'creative writing' which was to recur in 'Ella Mason and her Eleven Cats' (she called this an 'assignment'⁵), and even started off, in the style of Wallace Stevens, her fine haunting late poem 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.

If little was known in 'fifties Cambridge of Sylvia Plath's previous American publication, little could have been recognized, either, of her American poetic background. The earlier poems of Robert Lowell, whose influence did not exert itself much on her work until later in the decade, particularly in the accomplished piety of 'Point Shirley', had appeared in England in 1950. But the poetry of Wallace Stevens and Richard Wilbur, far stronger presences in her work in the

Cambridge period, was not available there until 1953 and 1956 respectively, and awareness of recent American poetry was only just coming in. We know from her former room-mate at Smith, Nancy Hunter Steiner, that 'the one man in the world whom Syl most admired' at that time was Richard Wilbur,⁶ and in a letter of April, 1956 she spoke of him as one of four American poets who were both 'the best' and 'the most congenial to my style', a characteristic linkage. Much of Sylvia Plath's poetry of the mid-fifties is marked, like Wilbur's, by an unusual and often felicitous use of words, though she tends to lack his muscular elegance of rhythm. Sometimes a particular phrase echoes him; cf. her 'dulcet weather' in an elaborate poem of early 1957, 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', and 'dulcet splashes' in Wilbur's poem 'Beasts'. Sometimes a demanding rhyme-scheme, such as she adopts in 'Spinster' and 'Vanity Fair' (both published in the Oxford and Cambridge joint magazine *Gemini*, Vol. 1, Spring, 1957) recalls Wilbur's fondness for similar virtuoso effects, as in his poems 'The Terrace', 'Clearness' and 'Driftwood'. An echo of Wallace Stevens, of the phrase 'his hoos' in 'Bantams in Pine Woods', is heard in her poem 'Faun' (originally, in April, 1956, entitled 'Metamorphosis'): 'Haunched like a faun, he hooded'. And the *Colossus* poem 'Ouija', so pointedly an evocation of Stevens that it seems like a later rejection of him, is nevertheless an assemblage of the American influences still working on Sylvia Plath in her early Cambridge days:

The old god, too, writes aureate poetry
In tarnished modes, maundering among the wastes,
Fair chronicler of every foul declension.

'Maundering' echoes Stevens' 'The Plot against the Giant' ('When this yokel comes maundering, / Whetting his hacker'); 'foul declension' recalls the opening of John Crowe Ransom's 'Dead Boy': 'The little cousin is dead, by foul subtraction'. (One of Ransom's favourite words, 'bruit', occurs in two of Sylvia Plath's poems written while at Cambridge, 'Spinster' and 'The Snowman on the Moor'.) And a later phrase in 'Ouija' draws together inextricably the vocabularies of Stevens and Wilbur:

Skies once wearing a blue, divine hauteur
Ravel above us . . .

When she eventually sat Part II of the English tripos in Summer, 1957, Sylvia Plath submitted as her optional 'original composition' a

collection of 43 poems, many by then published in Cambridge or America. She chose to give this collection, after one of the poems in it, the very Stevensian title 'Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea'. But the influence on her of Stevens, and of Richard Wilbur, in many ways the poet of the younger generation most like him, was no mere matter of titles or of language, but more importantly of shared subject matter. Sylvia Plath followed them in her interest in the interrelationship of external reality and subjective imagination: to use Wordsworth's phrase, in the co-existence of 'What we half create/And what perceive'. In many of her Cambridge poems there is a see-sawing between, and sometimes a balancing of, the views that the poet creates, transforms, or at least improves 'reality' by his language, and that he uncovers what is 'really' there by an act of concentration or a happy accident.

In Wallace Stevens the two positions may be summed up by, on the one hand, his lines 'Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar'; and, on the other, by his comment that 'The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real'. In Wilbur the poet's relationship to the world, and to his art, is crystallized in his two wise and witty couplets entitled 'Epistemology':

I

Kick at the rock, Sam Johnson, break your bones:
But cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones.

II

We milk the cow of the world, and as we do
We whisper in her ear, 'You are not true'.

Inhabiting, in the earlier part of her time at Cambridge, this same general area of concern, Sylvia Plath often exhibits a sense of strain and uncertainty, visible in poems, letters and journals alike, over the respective importance of imagination and reality, subjective and objective. What she was after, as her 'Cambridge Notes' (February, 1956) make plain, were the 'moments of radiance' in life, but she was not sure whether, in her poems, she transmitted these or created them: 'I must get them down in print. Make them up in print. Be honest.'

The tremendous value she attached to imagination is indicated by this journal passage:

What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination. When the sky outside is merely pink, and the rooftops merely black . . . It is that

synthesizing spirit, that 'shaping' force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire . . . the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine. (25 February 1956.)'

In 'Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea' (published in *Granta*, 9 March, 1957 but accepted in 1956 by *Mademoiselle*—Sylvia Plath was frequently a poetic pluralist) the loss of imaginative power is movingly deplored:

Cold and final, the imagination
Shuts down its fabled summer house;
and
White whales are gone with the white ocean.

But to this sense of loss is related, at the end, a feeling that the external world, however disappointing, does exist:

Water will run by rule; the actual sun
Will scrupulously rise and set;
No little man lives in the exacting moon
And that is that, is that, is that.

Similarly, in its companion piece 'Resolve' there is a dignified acceptance of the ordinariness of a world on which 'no glory descends'. But often the very intensity of Sylvia Plath's fear and desire, referred to in her *Journal*, leads to a verbal striving which attempts to substitute for imagination—a striving she referred to derisively, and in the same month, as 'being Roget's trollop, parading words and tossing off bravado for an audience.' For, while prizing her own art, she also acknowledged the independence of external reality, as is suggested by her statement 'I long to permeate the matter of this world', and by a remark in a letter of January 17, 1956: 'I write best when I am happy, because I then have that saving sense of objectivity, which is humor and artistic perspective.'

Some of this objectivity and humour, together with a degree of clumsy rodomontade amounting to self-parody, is found in 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad', which complains of the inability of her 'vaunting mind' to 'impose/Its own order on what is.' Trees remain trees—'no hocus-pocus of green angels/Damasks with dazzle the threadbare eye'—and she must ruefully conclude that the imagination 'Thieves what it has' from the obstinacy of untransformed nature. Though the poem did not appear until 1957, in

the July issue of *Poetry* (Chicago), it seems likely to belong to 1956, the year of its unpublished opposite number 'On the Plethora of Dryads'.⁸ The poems form a polar pair, illustrating the extremes of recalcitrant fact and over-ornamental fancy, which fails to penetrate the surface of 'seductive/Reds, greens, blues' to the 'chaste tree' beneath. Far better than either poem is another, her last to be published in Cambridge, in *Granta* in May, 1957, but belonging essentially to her 'American' concerns of 1956, entitled 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather'.⁹ It uses the same stanza form as 'Vanity Fair' (five lines whose end sounds are repeated as rhymes in each succeeding stanza) to organize with considerable suppleness its rather prosaic utterances, which justify themselves because the poem is about her ability, now, to accept the 'desultory weather' of 'this dull, ruinous landscape' without trying to force 'design' on it. Instead she is content ('a content/Of sorts') to take what comes, and she describes her moment of radiance—the rook of her title—with a lack of over-emphasis which still manages to convey the vital importance of such moments to her:

I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality.

If this poem does belong to early in 1956—the discussion of Sylvia Plath's 'development' is made difficult by the lack, at present, of sufficiently precise knowledge of her poems' order of composition—one may feel that her settling down again to 'the long wait for the angel' at the end of it was answered, in her emotional life, by the arrival of Ted Hughes, whom she met at the end of February, at a party to launch the very short-lived Cambridge poetry magazine *Saint Botolph's Review*. She married him in June, 1956, and the effect of the relationship on her poetry was striking, overlaying the sometimes cerebral quality of her concern with reality and imagination with a stronger response to 'gut' feelings: in April, 1956 she was telling her mother that 'we write, read, talk plain and straight and produce from the fiber of our hearts and bones.'

Her personal happiness, however, was not always accompanied by humour and objectivity. There is a degree of slavishness in her de-

votion which is embarrassing, and counteracts the ecstasy with which love enables her to respond to animate nature. Of the group of poems which first record her new feelings ('Pursuit', 'Ode for Ted', 'Song' and 'Metamorphosis')¹⁰, only the last was published, under the title 'Faun'. Here is the final stanza of 'Ode for Ted':

Ringdoves roost well within his wood,
 shirr songs to suit which mood
 he saunters in; how but most glad
 could be this Adam's woman
 when all earth his words do summon
 leaps to laud such man's blood!

The clotted intensity incipient in this passage, the energetic crowding of words tending to elbow aside, almost to despise, rhythmic smoothness, is a noticeable characteristic of Sylvia Plath's Cambridge poetry from this point on, recurring particularly in two love poems, 'Wreath for a Bridal' and 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower', which appeared in a group of six in *Poetry* (Chicago) in January, 1957 (her first notable acceptance since coming to Cambridge). Both poems have a touch of Dylan Thomas, a new influence; it was perhaps from him that she derived a predilection for assonances and half-rhymes, though in the first there is also a murmur of E.E. Cummings in the cows near the embraced lovers which 'utter/Low moos of approve.' The almost symbiotic closeness of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (she said that he 'is my best critic, as I am his') makes one wary of speaking of his own influence on her, but her clottedness certainly has a parallel in such lines as his description, in 'Incompatibilities' (*The Hawk in the Rain*), of desire which

Cold-chisels two selfs single as it welds hot
 Iron of their separates into one.

And two poems she published in *Poetry* (Chicago) in July, 1957, 'Sow' and 'The Snowman on the Moor' (the latter a histrionic account of the aftermath of a marital quarrel), are written in the same unusual version of terza rima (an alternation of concave and convex stanzas) as Ted Hughes employs in 'The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot'.

What one can certainly speak of, in the latter part of Sylvia Plath's time at Cambridge, is an overlapping of new voices on old, a modification of American influences by British ones (including that of Robert Graves),¹¹ an increasing directness of obsessive personal feeling, as demonstrated, for instance, in 'All the Dead Deers', finished on 7 April, 1957:

How they grip us through thin and thick,
 These barnacle dead!
 This lady here's no kin
 Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
 Blood and whistle my marrow clean
 To prove it.¹²

Together with its fierce energy, what now distinguished Sylvia Plath's poetry from that of most of her Cambridge near-contemporaries was its effort at memorable language. It seems appropriate, if accidental, that her two poems 'Spinster' and 'Vanity Fair', published in the glossy new Oxford and Cambridge magazine *Gemini* in Spring, 1957, were immediately preceded by a short piece by Stephen Spender on 'Oxford and Cambridge Poetry' which concluded with this stricture:

What seems most lacking in the poetry of the young today is verbal distinction. . . . Language 'rich and strange' is only made by word for word awareness.

Her poetry (on her new sex versus chastity theme) met both desiderata, though its dense texture, as in this stanza from 'Vanity Fair', could seem factitious, and the Thesaurus not far away:

At eye's envious corner
 Crow's-feet copy veining on stained leaf;
 Cold squint steals sky's color; while bruit
 Of bells call holy ones, her tongue
 Backtalks at the raven. . . .

Verbal 'awareness' was applied by Sylvia Plath also to others: in *Gemini's* second issue (Summer, 1957), she reviewed C.A. Trypanis's volume *The Stones of Troy* in terms of applause for the 'vehemence' of a verb, and dismissal of 'tired adjective-noun combinations'. But when publication in *Gemini* brought her at last the solicitations of *Granta* (which she had called in 1956 'the *New Yorker* of Cambridge undergraduate life'), she gave its editors, in the main, less recent and, I suspect, by then less valued poems, one of them, 'Mad Girl's Love Song', a rather mechanical, solipsistic villanelle dating from pre-Cambridge days:

I shut my eyes and all the world goes dead;
 I lift my lids and all is born again:
*I think I made you up inside my head.*¹³

It seems almost as if her recognition by Cambridge had come too late for her to care about it. A month before she left for America in June, 1957 she enunciated in a letter 'my new gospel . . . about the positive acceptance of conflict, uncertainty and pain as the soil for true knowledge and life'.¹⁴ This attitude was of a piece with the sharp shift in poetic loyalties demonstrated in her response earlier in the year to the news that Ted Hughes's first volume *The Hawk in the Rain* had won the First Publication Award of the New York Poetry Centre: she thought the book 'far superior to Richard Wilbur, who never treats the powerful central emotions and incidents of life. . . .'

All Sylvia Plath's changes are summed up, with an element of mellowness which transmits nonetheless a decisive rejection, in her last poem related to her Cambridge experience, and indeed the only poem she wrote specifically *about* Cambridge: the beautiful but tendentious 'Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows', published in the *New Yorker* of 28 May 1960. It is a retrospective picture, of a place which is 'There', not 'here', and among other things it caters to transatlantic preconceptions along lines she had indicated in February, 1956: 'England can be exploited for merely being England.' The oddly tacked-on phrase in stanza one which describes 'each thumb-sized bird'—'of good colour'—is borrowed from an early poem by Ezra Pound, 'Come My Cantilations', but the mellifluous stanza two applies to her view of the Cambridge scene the manner of her favourite American poet of early 1956:

Cloudrack and owl-hollowed willows slanting over
 The bland Granta double their white and green
 World under the sheer water
 And ride that flux at anchor, upside down.
 The punter sinks his pole.
 In Byron's pool
 Cat-tails part where the tame cygnets steer.

Having evoked Richard Wilbur precisely enough by 'steer', the last word of his poem 'The Death of a Toad', Sylvia Plath dismisses the world to which she has attached him: 'It is a country on a nursery plate.' And having painted the (to her) 'bland' landscape, its (to her) 'moony' undergraduate denizens, and its Beatrix Potter-like animals, owl and water-rat, she finally subjects all of them, with an unequal mixture of regret and 'superior' insight, to a painful transformation decidedly in the manner of Ted Hughes. The romantic students are

Black-gowned, but unaware
 How in such mild air
 The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.

The vision, if true, is as partial as the one it replaces; but it was increasingly to be hers. Perhaps one may feel that those undergraduates whose perception she slights in 'Watercolour'—her choice of medium, not necessarily theirs—were not so lacking in intuition, after all, when they thought of her, 'amusingly enough', as she recorded in March, 1956, 'as a second Virginia Woolf'. It was a view which, a year later, she endorsed herself.¹⁵ And for all the power and personal directness she achieved in her last poems, gathered not by her own hand in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*, one may feel she was all too right to fear that, as she put it in her Journal, 'I shall perish if I can write about no one but myself.'¹⁶

NOTES

1. *Letters Home* (1975), Sylvia Plath to her mother, 5 October 1956.
2. This volume was indicated by Ted Hughes as in preparation, in his Postscript (pp. 19-20) to his Introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, the collection of Sylvia Plath's short stories and Journal extracts published in 1977 by Faber and Faber.
3. Copies of *Chequer* for this period are elusive; they are not held in Cambridge University Library, whose catalogue incorrectly indicates that the magazine ceased publication in 1954.
4. See her 'Cambridge Journal' (February, 1956), in *Johnny Panic* (1977), pp. 208, 220.
5. Published in *Poetry* (Chicago), Vol. 90, No. 4 (July, 1957), pp. 233-34.
6. Nancy Hunter Steiner, *A Closer Look at Ariel* (1974), p. 32. For Richard Wilbur's recollections of Sylvia Plath, see his poem 'Cottage Street, 1953' in *The Mind-Reader* (1976).
7. Sylvia Plath, 'Cambridge Journal', *Johnny Panic* (1977).
8. Published in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (1970), pp. 242-43.
9. Her journal for 20 February 1956 recorded: "Wrote one Good Poem: 'Winter Landscape with Rooks': it moves, and is athletic: a psychic landscape." Whether 'Black Rook' is related to this, or the same poem under a different title, is not clear.
10. All are in *Letters Home*.
11. See 'The Times are Tidy' in *The Colossus*; and two unreprinted poems in *Poetry* (Chicago), Sept. 1959: 'The Death of Myth-Making' and 'A Lesson in Vengeance'.
12. This theme, of the dead returning to confront the living, was dealt with in a rather different way in a story, with the same title, which Sylvia Plath published in *Gemini II*, Summer, 1957.
13. See Eileen Aird, *Sylvia Plath* (1973), p. 7.
14. Letter to her brother, Warren Plath, May, 1957.
15. 'I get courage by reading Virginia Woolf's *Writer's Diary*; I feel very akin to her.' (*Letters Home*, 25 March, 1957.)
16. Introduction to *Johnny Panic* (1977), p. 13. Ted Hughes states that she often expressed this feeling in her Journals.