

Keeping its Feet: The Drama of "Nick and the Candlestick"—for the Fifth Anniversary of *Plath Profiles*

Seph Rodney

It has been about ten years since I participated in the making of a video for the "Favorite Poem Project."¹ In that video I relate my love and respect for Sylvia Plath's work in general, and focus specifically on her poem "Nick and the Candlestick" (Rodney). During this past decade, I have not thought a great deal about Plath and her work, aside from reading some time ago of the suicide of her son. (His death struck me as too literary a postscript: clearly he is not a character in a novel or poem, but the circumstances have written him as one.) Mostly, I have been taken with my own work, that is, a radio show, *The Thread*, I developed with friends in London, and my doctoral research on the social practice of visiting art museums and how it has been affected by the rise of consumerism and the self-authored individual.

Still, on a few occasions, someone I do not know locates me on Facebook or another social network site and befriends me because I am the person in the video. That someone usually tells me that the story I offer about Plath's poem resonates strongly with him or her. I am glad for that, and grateful that my not-so-sophisticated understanding of the work and telling of its effect on me is meaningful to some. A few weeks ago, someone did just that—contacted me out of the blue. She told me that a journal concerned with Plath was seeking submissions. She reminded me of the poem and what I had said about it then, so I looked at it again and thought about what it might mean to me now.

In deciding to revisit "Nick and the Candlestick," I thought I would wrestle with a niggling thought about Plath's poetry that has long baffled me. On my first exposure to Plath's writing, I fell in love with her work, the powerful, strident voice that hauled its metaphors and sense like a team of wild-eyed horses dragging a wooden chariot and rider behind them, careening around corners, barely keeping both wheels on rational ground. Because of this initial encounter with Plath, I began reading more poetry, searching out readings and talks. At one such

¹ This project consists of sound and video recordings of a variety of people across the U.S. reciting and talking about their favorite poems. This enterprise was initiated by the then Poet Laureate, Robert Pinsky, and largely managed by Maggie Dietz. It is a beautiful and moving account of how poetry resonates deeply with readers in unpredictable ways.

talk—this one at Poet's House in New York City—I heard Eavan Boland speak. Boland is an Irish-born poet who has written several books and is a professor of English at Stanford University.² Boland read her own work and talked about a few other poets, among them Sylvia Plath. It was then the niggling problem was introduced to me.

Hearing a well-known poet discuss other poets was and is fascinating to me—as is the prospect of listening to well-respected speech writers, actors, or visual artists talk about others who are members of their tribe by way of shared craft. They are themselves technicians, and thus uniquely positioned to provide an inside view, to explain how someone takes the nuts, bolts and sundry parts to make an engine of perpetual motion. At the least, they are usually able to explain what the sundry parts are, and how they are cunningly assembled. The examination of these details of form and technique, approach and style make, for me, the poetic work richer. Eavan Boland was insightfully analytical that evening at Poet's House when she read her work, spoke about it, and turned to discuss the work of other poets. I believe someone in the audience asked Boland about her response to being compared to other poets such as Sylvia Plath. What Boland said in response that stunned me was that she did not think that Plath was a "good poet" because Plath, in her estimation, did not pay enough attention to the relationship between line length and drama.

Her critique mystified me. It intrigues me more now since it seems to promise ways to understand "Nick and the Candlestick" more deeply. Coming to understand it may even be a way to understand how Plath's final poetry collection, *Ariel*, first drew me in. I started writing this investigation to answer the question for myself, and to use the following as a way to think more thoroughly *through* "Nick and the Candlestick." By examining the relation between its line breaks and the sense of agitated turmoil in the poem—what I assumed to comprise its drama—I thought I would be able to see how the poem holds together for me as it veers around "waxy stalactites" and hurtles through a "vice of knives" to arrive at a cave "hung . . . with roses" (Plath, *Ariel* 47-48)

To be clear, the following thoughts are not meant to argue in defense of Plath. She hardly needs defending. Her reputation is by all indications unharmed by Boland's criticism. Also, I am not disposed to mount a defense of her work in terms of close scholarly reading and

² The Poetry Foundation calls her one of the foremost female voices in Irish literature. Boland is also the director of Stanford's Creative Writing program.

analysis. In addition, Plath has many robust and tenacious examiners of her work who could organize a more definitive response (and perhaps already have). Neither will this essay be a line-by-line analysis of the poem. A plodding examination to "prove" the worth of each line break choice would not be interesting to me. Instead, I want to look at what Boland defined as a weakness in Plath's poetry to see whether, in this poem, it shows up as such. Then, leaning on the work of other scholars, I want to find out just what the relation of drama and line length does to a poem.

For help in making sense of this, I looked to two sources. The first one I found through making a rudimentary internet search on Google for "the relation between line length and drama in poetry." Most of the results returned had to do with making the distinction between drama and poetry as genres of writing, but only one article in the first three pages given by the search engine offered a somewhat helpful definition of this relation *within* poetry.

Shaunna Privratsky suggests in her article "Profitable Poetry" that "the length of each line contributes to the drama and tension." She continues: "A short line speeds the tempo but may lose feeling or meaning. Longer lines tell more, but can lose momentum. Settle on a comfortable medium." Privratsky suggests that meaning or an explication of the speaker's feelings exists in inverse proportion to the speed of the line. Already I am skeptical. I do not believe, having read Robert Creeley and William Carlos Williams, that longer lines necessarily add more meaning.³ Secondly, this explanation raises more questions for me than it answers. I am not clear on what the relationship of speed is to momentum. Why is a driving tempo, as opposed to a plodding and contemplative one a good thing? Is the poem to be considered as a visual object or a thing to be read by the voice? What is to be achieved by finding a comfortable medium, and for whom (the speaker, or the reader) should this comfort be provided, and what is risked in denying this comfort?

For a fuller explanation of these issues, I looked to Stephen Dobyns' latest book on writing poetry: *Next Word Better Word: The Craft of Writing Poetry* (2011). This book compliments Dobyns' previous book, *Best Words, Best Order*. *Next Word*, looks to analyze poetry as a craft, and is (according to Dobyns) a more methodical version of his previous book.

³ Robert Creeley (1926–2005) was an American poet associated with the Black Mountain poets. He taught at the State University of New York in Buffalo, and at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) was a poet and writer of stories, plays, and novels, (but best known for his verse) and was associated with the Imagist movement in American poetry. Williams was also a practicing pediatrician.

Next Word is a contemporary and detailed study, which was very well received, so it attracted my attention when I sought a reliable research source. However, the most compelling reason for my relying on it is that it has an entire chapter, "Line Breaks," devoted to the subject. In this chapter, Dobyns brings to light notions of the author's credibility, the nature of enjambment, the poem as both visual and auditory object, drama as a function of the reader's anticipation, and the relation of content to form. Thus in both its scope and its specificity, Dobyns' book promised to answer the questions raised by Boland, and to help me more thoroughly understand the issues raised by Privratsky.

On first scanning *Next Word*, the first thing that I discovered was that I had never read "Nick and the Candlestick" as it was written, that is, as its line breaks indicate pauses should be taken. I have always read it as I heard it in my head, pausing where the sense of the poem seemed to call for it, rather than at its line breaks. How I read "Nick and the Candlestick," Dobyns' book suggests, reveals a tension between the poem as a visual and aural experience and the poem as a series of grammatically related statements recognizable as sentences. This tension, as well as other sorts of tension which appear, can be understood as the result of Plath's crafted attempts to build and shape the reader's anticipation. For example, in one of the last stanzas of the poem she writes "Let the stars" (*Ariel* 48). Not until the next line do I discover "Plummet to their dark address" (48). For a brief moment I am left wondering what the stars must be allowed to do.

In *Next Word*, Dobyns states that the two main reasons for line breaks are *rhythm* and *meaning* (91-93). He also adds that a third reason is the visual effect, that is, the way the poem appears on the page. The visual component is important here because it may contribute to a sense of anticipation for the reader. According to *Next Word*, poets use all three components—rhythm, meaning, and the visual aspect—of the poem to keep my interest as a reader. Anticipation is key. If the author gives me only expected and obvious connections, I may become bored and find something else to read. The poet can use the rhythm as a tether to keep me tied to their poem, and in metered verse, this strategy is particularly evident. However this strategy is not so simply utilized. It operates along a continuum. A piece of writing that is unremittingly sing-song can bore a reader; too much lack of rhythm may deny the reader a handhold, especially if the meaning is slippery. The way I tend to read, I enjoy changes in rhythm as long as I can hear

the music of it, and I am more likely to stay with a poem that varies rhythm even if it is loyal to a rhyme. Poems that are rigorously metered often feel tedious for me. The most obvious examples are limericks: "There once was a lady from Kent . . .", and so on.

Another kind of tether is the sense I, as a reader, make of what the speaker says. Again, meaning is also a continuum: shifts that are too wildly unexpected make a reader frustrated and confused. (I suspect this is why I never grew to like John Berryman, or W.S. Merwin, though they both are very much revered by some poets I respect.)⁴

At times anticipation is a byproduct of the tension between the rhythm of the poem in its sentence form, as a series of related ideas, and its rhythm broken into lines. Dobyns explains this as "the relation between the metrical frame of the line and the syntactic frame of the sentence" (219). This relation Dobyns calls "counterpoint," though he qualifies his assertion of its existence in poetry by defining its usage as descriptive rather than analytical, since the term originates in music and presumes the ability to "hear" two different things occurring at the same time (96, 219). Anticipation is also conjured through enjambment, the continuation of a thought from one line to the next. According to Dobyns, enjambment ratchets up tension, while the line that ends with a fully articulated thought, the end-stopped line, allows the reader to rest (93). As Plath may do with her rhythms, she plays the reader between tension and rest, or between heightened, questioning engagement, and comforting, acceptance of the familiar. More than creating tension, enjambment also adds color to a poem. Dobyns claims that the enjambed line "with its artificial pause . . . functions to create emphasis and nuance" (101). In "Nick and the Candlestick," the first enjambment happens in the first stanza, second line, where Plath writes "Waxy stalactites / Drip and thicken, tears" (*Ariel* 47). Here, for me, the last line of the stanza is a more jarring enjambment than the previous line, primarily because I am not sure initially whether "tears" is being used as a verb or a noun. To read through this first stanza alone as a series of sentences, or according to the rhythm of line breaks, are two different experiences.

I tend to read through most of this poem as though I am reading sentences, such as:

And the fish, the fish—
Christ! they are panes of ice,

⁴ John Berryman (1914–1972) is an American poet, and is associated with the Confessional school of poetry. He studied with Robert Lowell and is best known for his collection *The Dream Songs*. William Stanley Merwin (1927–) is an American poet who has won many prizes and accolades, including being named the U.S. Poet Laureate in 2010. He now lives and works in Hawaii.

A vice of knives,
 A piranha
 Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes. . . . (47)

After being let loose by the line "Those holy Joes" (47), I read sentences all the way to the line "O love, how did you get here?" (47). Here is one of the places where both the rhythm and momentum, the punctuation and line breaks come together to, as Dobyns says, "create something far larger" (93). This larger thing here is a mood, a sense of emotional location. This line always stops me cold. It breaks all that built-up momentum like a knot in a rope. The first time I read it this query struck me as one of the more profound and heartfelt questions a parent can ask a child, or an artist can ask of the thing she produced. It still does. So I linger on it, often saying it out loud to myself.

All these strategies Plath employs are ways for building and holding our anticipation as readers. As Dobyns has it: "The poet keeps our interest by using a multitude of surprises in form and content" (92). Still, this is not all the poem must do. The speaker of the poem must also be believable.

Dobyns speaks about enjambment as being "rhythmically credible" (91). This is to suggest that the break from one line to the next has to be comprehensible within the overall rhythm of the poem. Differences in thought and feeling indicated by changes in the rhythm must be justified in terms of the meaning. In a similar fashion, abrupt changes in content, surprises that have no corollary in the reader's experience of poetry or of the rest of the world can make a reader doubt the writer (91). Such doubt can turn us away from the poem. In his chapter "Counterpoint," Dobyns further clarifies that a reader's experience of literature as well as poetry relies on the author being able to make the story convincing. As a reader, I must be able to imaginatively test the world and the relations created within the poem or fiction piece; I test it against the systems of cause and effect I know to operate in my own reality. Even if the world of the poem is surreal or impossible, if I have imaginative access to it, if I have seen it in dreams, heard about it in folktales, I can participate (230). If I can feel the emotional resonances and match them to my own feelings, I can live in the poem, trusting the author long enough to stay with the piece the whole way through.

Thus *Next Word* indicates that there are three aspects of the poem that lend credibility to,

or subtract it from the author. Two have already been discussed in the above: rhythm and meaning. I have also hinted at a third aspect.

This third component I want to call the *convincing spirit* of the poem. Readers, Dobyns claims, can tell the difference between poems that have what he calls a "false energy" and those that are animated by a compelling question or need (91). Such questions and needs, articulated with force, can tie me emotionally to a poem. James Wright is a poet whose poems are entrancing, but sometimes I cannot quite keep track of the narrative.⁵ I sometimes lose the plot. Nevertheless, I believe him. I trust his voice, always posing what seem to be for him serious questions, always reaching for something just out of reach of his sensible apprehension. Though at times the situation or feeling he attempts to articulate falls into mysticism, I stay with his work. His poem "The Lights in the Hallway" is a good example of what I mean:

The lights in the hallway
 Have been out a long time.
 I clasp her;
 Terrified by the roundness of the earth
 And its apples and the voluptuous rings
 Of poplar trees, the secret Africas,
 The children they give us. . . . (165)

The lyric ends with the lines: "How do I know what color her hair is? I float among / Lonely animals, longing / For the red spider who is God" (165). What makes this poem succeed for me is that longing in the speaker. He is frightened and fascinated by a woman who mirrors the contours and capabilities of the fertile world, and he is perhaps more frightened by his own fumbling attempts to create intimacy with her. But it is his desire for her that creates the occasion for this vivid imagining. It is also the tether that pulls me through the entire poem. On the other hand a poem may feel empty, pretentious, an exercise in rhetorical pyrotechnics. I have written several like this and hesitate to bore the reader with examples. Suffice it to say that though I could start a poem provocatively, for example these lines from a poem of mine called "Agitprop": "They took my mouth away/ made my right hand/ a cloud." Though certain powerful images would strike me, and I could start a poem with them, I had trouble sustaining the energy to make the action in the poem continually compelling.

⁵ James Wright (1927–1980) is an American poet from the Midwest who is heavily anthologized. Each year a great many poets and writers gather at the James Wright Poetry Festival in Martins Ferry, Ohio, his birthplace .

So what has this argument to do with my assessment of Boland's claim about Plath? Well, I see that drama is created in collaboration with the reader: *the drama of anticipation*. This drama is aided and created by all strategic interplays explained above: counterpoint, enjambment, emphasis, rhythm, and meaning. And with the mobilization of all these strategies by Plath, I, as a reader, need to believe that my anticipation will pay off in a recompense of meaning—something convincing. However, there is, in "Nick and the Candlestick," the drama of its event. I do not refer to the event the poem *depicts*. Once more, Stephen Dobyns in *Next Word, Better Word*, illuminates the difference: "A poem tries to enact an event instead of only referring to an event off the page. The event of the poem happens before us and has all the drama of something that needed to be said" (94-95). In "Nick and the Candlestick," the event that grabs and holds me is a mother describing a completely interior, hallucinogenic experience (an experience I do not fully understand, but nevertheless find cold and forlorn and even threatening). The speaker turns away from this interior experience and turns to address her child not yet born. She does this as if to explain to the child and to herself how this being becomes "the one / Solid the spaces lean on" (*Ariel* 48). More, it seems to me that the child's presence pulls the speaker out of that cold interiority into an awareness of another that in turn brings into being a nurturing impulse that had not existed until that turn is made.

I suspect Boland was suggesting that Plath did not have enough control over her material. Having control here would mean the rigorous deployment of all the tools that build anticipation, that determine rhythm and meaning. There are places in "Nick and the Candlestick," and other poems in *Ariel*, where I would agree that the control is less than it could be. Some lines seem to almost get going and then are cut too short to allow me to either find a clear rhythm or to easily make sense of the poem's plot: "In you, ruby. / The pain / You wake to is not yours" (48). In some the enjambment is so jarring that I hesitate to go forward. Still, the issue of control is not the most important issue to me as a reader.

Control was important to me as a poet, because as such, I never felt mastery over my material. And lest that criticism be taken as an overly neurotic response: while at a writer's retreat in Vermont, Mark Doty said very much the same thing to me.⁶ He said that I did not

⁶ Mark Doty is an American poet born in 1953. In 1995 he became the first American to win the T.S. Eliot Poetry Prize for *My Alexandria*, which also won several other awards. He lives in New York City and is a professor teaching in the writing program at Rutgers University.

seem in control of my material, which I acknowledge was a fair assessment.⁷ Power and control are key aspects for some readers and writers who are interested in the poem being a well-crafted object.

With Plath's poems in *Ariel*, she often threatened to go off the rails. I still read some of them and think to myself: "How do you pull this off?" I think of "Mary's Song," which begins with "The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat," and comes to a line likely referring to the Jewish holocaust, "The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent" (Plath, *Winter Trees* 39). The poem then ends with, "It is a heart, / This holocaust I walk in, / O Golden child the world will kill and eat" (39). The language is astonishing. This was the thrill for me, and still is. The experience of reading Plath's poems for me really is like watching a Hollywood blockbuster film in which the hero runs all out, leaps over a precipice and just scrapes an exit as she chases down a runaway cart that whisks her away from the cliff's edge. I watch these films like I read "Nick and the Candlestick," awestruck by the drama of the moment, by the loss of security and almost of rationality in the mad dash to the lyric's denouement. I do not always follow the speaker in every Plath poem, but I am taken with her rhythm and I am convinced that the poem is something the speaker *needs* to say. I trust those speakers she constructed because the stories that they tell me seem true.

What Plath may lack for Boland is the level of consistent control that would make her poetry credible. However, what I have found is that the event "Nick and the Candlestick" enacts makes it more than credible for me.

It occurs to me now that the set of metaphors I use in describing Plath's work may make the poems seem unbalanced. I make too much of the precariousness of her lyric. In positioning her work as a runaway vehicle, I accentuate the degree to which it barely clings to the rules of craft and therefore makes for an unpredictable experience. I want to affirm the tenacity of the poem. It stays on track. I think this is the dramatic success of "Nick and the Candlestick": the lyric, though its rhythms stagger at times, and my ability to rationalize it is sometimes shaken, it stays very much on its feet.

⁷ I am giving this notion short shrift here. The idea of "control" over "material" is a complicated one that requires some unpacking which I don't have space for in this essay. It may be that the entire notion approaches the utilization of one's emotional and imaginative faculties as though they were machine parts to be engaged at the author's whim. This seems mistaken.

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