



On Sylvia Plath: A Response to Celia

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Celia's interesting note has been referred to me. I welcome debate about Sylvia Plath's work and have learned a great deal by the on-going debate in books and articles over the years. But I don't think there's much to be gained by arguing whether Plath is as talented as the four other women poets mentioned. Why focus solely on women poets as points of comparison? And why rank poets at all? Isn't poetry precisely the genre that points us away from measuring, that moves us toward more meditative states of mind? Do we rank rituals, prayers, or walks?

I must say I'm surprised to think of Plath as being "too enamored of Marilyn Monroe." Monroe appears in no Plath poem, story, or published letter that I'm aware of. But yes, Celia is technically right, there is that entry for October 4, 1959 in the *Unabridged Journals*. It begins, "Marilyn Monroe appeared to me last night in a dream as a kind of fairy godmother."¹ In the dream, Plath spoke to Monroe, "almost in tears, of how much she and Arthur Miller meant to us." As far as I know—and I'm happy to be corrected on the point—this is the only reference to Monroe in the whole Plath canon. Well, this is a dream figure who speaks, not Plath in the flesh. And she says that it is not Monroe alone who means so much but Monroe as part of a couple, paired with Arthur Miller. And this couple is not meaningful to Plath alone but to "us," presumably to Plath and Hughes as a couple. So I think that one reference in a mountain of text—with a dreamed-of Plath and her husband being moved by Monroe and Miller—does not by itself indicate that Plath was excessively enamored of Monroe.

But what if she was too enamored? Many of us have been. Norman Mailer was, and it hasn't disqualified him as a writer. Andy Warhol was, and it produced some of his best known visuals. Obviously Arthur Miller was, and it hasn't diminished his stature as a playwright. Apparently, John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy had some sort of interest, and perhaps one or the other of them might be fairly characterized as being "too enamored," but we still take them seriously. Scholars such as the late S. Paige Baty have found great cultural significance in Monroe.² I would add that Monroe's writings about life and literature are going to be published

¹ Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 513.

² S. Paige Baty. *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic*. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995).

by Farrar, Straus & Giroux this October under the title *Fragments*.³ The book will reportedly include poems, photographs, reflections on Arthur Miller, and references to works by Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and other writers. So even if Plath was a fan of Monroe, I don't see anything demeaning in that. How can we be sure that Sexton, Kizer, or Rich was not a fan? Frank O'Hara wrote a famous poem about Lana Turner, and it hasn't hurt him. Is Plath being judged here by criteria that don't apply to anyone but her?

Or is "Marilyn Monroe" a code for something else? For Plath's posthumous celebrity? For Plath being "like" Marilyn in the public awareness? For being portrayed by Gwyneth Paltrow in a film? For being known to individuals who know about no other poets? Are we to be envious of Plath on behalf of the less famous Dickinson, Sexton, Kizer, and Rich? I knew Sexton a bit, toward the end of her life, and she was bitter toward numerous people, but not toward Plath.

Okay, let's move beyond Monroe to the main point of the note. Celia asks, "Just exactly what does Plath give us, other than wonderful metaphors." Celia gives away the game here, as I suspect she knew and intended. What more can we really ask of our poets than wonderful metaphors? As Monroe Beardsley has said, literary language is "distinctly above the norm in ratio of implicit to explicit meaning."⁴ It is precisely Plath's stunning metaphors that make her a great writer.

We may not like those metaphors. Who wants to imagine a blackberry bush that is "a bush of flies"? Or birds that are "bits of burnt paper"? Or the sound of the sea that is "a din like silversmiths / Beating and beating at an intractable metal"? These unsettling images are all, of course, from "Blackberrying,"⁵ a poem milder than some yet still packing a series of punches. Once you get outside of the Plath canon there is nothing else quite like her metaphors. Their furious intensity challenges you, wrenches you, changes you. The metaphors form new synaptic paths in your brain. They're there, forever, making you the person you are now. Other poets enter you in different ways, and many of them do it in ways that seem more healthful. But Plath does it, and as strongly, I would say, as any poet who ever lived.

This point could be extended to Plath's particular kind of cultural critique. Celia asks, "Does she *really* critique America?" It's a good and difficult question. No, she doesn't critique

³ Hillel Italie. "Marilyn Monroe writings to be released this fall," *Yahoo! News*, 4/27/2010, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100427/ap_on_en_ot/us_books_marilyn_monroe. Accessed 4.30/10.

⁴ Monroe Beardsley. "The Concept of Literature." *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt*. Ed. Fran Brady, John Palmer, and Martin Price (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), 37.

⁵ Sylvia Plath. *The Collected Poems*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 168.



present-day America, and she doesn't go about her critique as though she were writing in 2010. But yes, she critiques her own time, the 1950s and early 1960s. Who was more radical as a social critic than Plath in that period? Rich in the late 1950s and early 1960s was inching toward feminism, much as Plath was doing herself. In no way was Rich closer to the goal. Sexton was probably not as far along as either Plath or Rich. Who produced a more telling critique of patriarchal marriage than Plath in "The Wishing Box"? Who explored the potential in women's voices more rigorously than Plath in "Three Women"? Who connected domesticity and torture more tightly than Plath in "The Jailer" and "Lady Lazarus"? Of course one has to be willing to think implicitly, metaphorically. Plath did not want to produce "headline poetry,"⁶ though she did indeed think of herself as a "political person."⁷

Plath told us how to read her texts: "The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America.... Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard. Not about the testaments of tortured Algerians, but about the night thoughts of a tired surgeon."⁸

Many readers and scholars think Plath failed to go far enough, failed to carry through on her social aims. But I do not agree with them. Plath opens spaces for critical thinking and feeling. That she may not occupy those spaces in precisely the way we would like her to do is not the point. William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, or Virginia Woolf may not do that either. Regardless of their personal perspectives, each of these writers writes so powerfully that the new spaces they open stay open.

So I would say, yes, I agree with Celia that Plath's texts overflow with "wonderful metaphors." The metaphors stay wonderful as many times as you read them. And I would argue that Plath really does critique America, though the critique is complex, ambivalent, sometimes short of the mark, sometimes wrong-headed, sometimes confused, and always linked to its

⁶ Sylvia Plath. "Context." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 64.

⁷ Peter Orr, "Sylvia Plath." *The Poet Speaks*. Ed. Peter Orr (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 169.

⁸ Plath, "Context" 64.

historical moment. As Eliot said, of course we know so much more than the dead writers did: "they are that which we know."⁹ Nevertheless, Plath's critiques continue to generate new thinking today, fifty years later and counting.

In this discussion, a lot may depend on one's attitude toward celebrity. Plath wasn't one in her life, but she is one now. I think that's all right. Abraham Lincoln is a celebrity among American Presidents, but he was a valuable leader nonetheless. Sometimes celebrities are celebrated for good reason. Love her or hate her, Plath is in our hearts and minds. I don't believe it's true that Plath is a "dump-delivery of a psyche." Her writing is complicated and sophisticated, filled with finely honed echoes of texts that stimulated her, as many Plath scholars have shown.¹⁰ I think it's more the case that Plath is a "dump-delivery" *to* the psyche of the reader. Once delivered, those metaphors and critiques can't be erased. That is why we rightly resent her and complain about her. She haunts and taunts us. Like her own "disquieting muses," she won't let us alone.

⁹ T. S. Eliot. "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 40.

¹⁰ See, e. g., Steven Gould Axelrod. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990); Tracy Brain. *The Other Sylvia Plath* (London: Longman, 2001).