Review of *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*

ed. Anita Helle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).
xii + 277 pp. $24.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-472-0-6927-9.

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Plath criticism is in a very healthy state at present. For most of the last decade, we have had a monograph or a collection of essays published each year that has substantially advanced the study of Plath's work. Whilst this is sometimes due to new theoretical approaches, it is almost always a result of scholars' research in Plath's large and disparate archives. The time is absolutely right, therefore, for a collection of essays like this one, devoted specifically to the place of the archive in the study of Sylvia Plath.

The collection, divided into two parts, addresses both the literal and the extended definition of "the archive". The first part consists of four essays that deal in detail with unpublished materials at the Lilly Library, Smith College and the British Library. Tracy Brain uses manuscript drafts and Plath's submissions lists to argue for the "indeterminacy" of the Plath canon; Robin Peel examines Plath's college essays, textbooks and lecture notes; Kathleen Connors discusses Plath's visual art-works and texts contemporary with such works; and Kate Moses analyzes Plath's voice recordings. Anita Helle's essay, on the extant photographs of Plath and her family, is a fifth piece that directly discusses important archival material. Her account of her own family's relationship to these photographs (Plath's mother sent many of them to Helle's mother) is of particular interest. This section of the book comprises a significant contribution to Plath criticism, and all five of these essays are essential reading. They open up space for further work devoted specifically to archival materials, such as Plath's short stories, journalism, letters, scrapbooks and realia. A history of the archive also remains to be written.

The second part of the book extends the concept of the archive into the cultural contexts in which Plath's work was written and has been read. This is a valuable

development of the concept of the Plath archive, and the best essays in this section, such as Marsha Bryant's analysis of the discourse of domesticity and Janet Badia's account of the cultural construction of Plath readers, fully justify it.

Highlights in the first part of the book include Robin Peel's account of Plath's political thinking in the years before her final move to England. His analyses of her college essays on political subjects, of her notes on visiting speakers to Smith who addressed political issues, and of the marginalia in her college textbooks are detailed and persuasive, and he is right to conclude that Plath's political views in this period are "rapid and often paradoxical" (51). Kate Moses broaches for the first time a systematic analysis of all the available voice recordings made by Plath, and supplements her essay with a very useful bibliography of these recordings, the most complete that we have. Moses' discussion of the neglected 1962 interview with Marvin Kane, "What Made You Stay?" is especially welcome.

In the second section, Marsha Bryant's essay is a brilliant development of her earlier work on Plath and the culture of domesticity[1], illuminating Plath's work through research in the cultural archive, in this case the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Close readings of contemporary discourse on domesticity reveal new and hidden meanings of terms such as "percolate" in "Words Heard, By Accident, Over the Phone". Her analysis of adverts depicting flying housewives opens up a new perspective on "Plath's ascending speakers", like that of "Fever 103º", and even Lady Lazarus' red hair "suggests, at one level, a domestic transformation powered by miracle products like Clairol" (224). While some of the material in Janet Badia's essay, on the cultural depiction of Plath readers, has appeared already[2], the new material – analyses of Plath readers in the film *Natural Born Killers*, in the novel *Seven Moves*, and in the work of Elizabeth Wurtzel, as well as further scholarship on contemporary reviewers – more than justifies its inclusion in the volume.

[1] Marsha Bryant, "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising", *College Literature* 29:3 (2002): 17-34.
[2] Janet Badia, "'One of Those People Like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath': The Pathologized Woman Reader in Literary and Popular Culture", *Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Age to the Present*, ed. Janet Badia and Jennifer Phegley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 236-54.

There are really no weak points in this book. There are perhaps two essays, however, that do not engage as fully as the others with the concept of the archive. Sandra Gilbert's essay is extracted from her book on dying[3], and did not in that context need the archival research that it does need here. Gilbert's account of her own early readings of Plath's work, before Plath became the well-known author of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, is the section that contributes most to the concept of the cultural archive. Her own impressions of the beach about which Plath wrote "Berck-Plage" are also useful, but they would be more so if the precise relationship between the landscape that Plath saw in 1961 and that she (Gilbert) sees in 2002 were established. There are too many phrases like "much has no doubt changed…but much is surely still the same" (122) for the relationship between Plath's beach and hers to be adequately understood. Ann Keniston's essay on Plath's Holocaust poems is excellent in itself, but contributes little to our knowledge of the Plath archive. There are some very interesting footnotes on archival material, such as those on Plath's markings in her dictionary of definitions of the words "gold" and "charge", as used in "Lady Lazarus". This kind of analysis should be developed more in the essay itself, though, if it is fully to contribute to the study of the Plath archive.

This collection is essential reading for Plath scholars and students. The archive is the most important issue in Plath studies at present, and these essays both valuably theorize the concept of the archive and, most usefully, break new ground in our knowledge of the work contained in Plath's archives. The collection is as heterogeneous as the archive itself, and this is one of its strengths. Helle conceives the collection to be "an implicit invitation to dialogue" (10), and this is another of its strengths. It opens up many paths for future work in and on the wealth of material produced in Plath's breathtakingly creative life. Tracy Brain's essay concludes: "To read Plath with any real engagement – and pleasure – is to become part of an ongoing dialogue about the principles of the archive's formation, reception, and continuing evolution" (35). Perhaps the greatest strength of this collection is precisely that it invites its readers to become part of that dialogue.

[3] Sandra Gilbert, *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (New York: Norton, 2006).