

The poetry of pain: Remembering Sylvia Plath

by David Deaton

Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems
Harper & Row, 351 pp.

If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. Is there any other way?
— Emily Dickinson

One can only wonder what Emily Dickinson would have made of the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

Curiously, neither American poet knew fame or recognition in her lifetime: one by choice, the other by premature death.

The one thing that every literate person knows about Sylvia Plath is that she, at age thirty, killed herself.

Brilliant and beautiful, the mother of two, she ended her life in 1963 as if to mock the great gifts given her. Her finest poems — poems which will live as long as literature — were published posthumously.

Thus was born the legend of Sylvia Plath. Inevitably, perhaps, her life has come to overshadow her art, and, in the numerous biographies written of her, her death vultuously overshadows her life.

In truth, Sylvia Plath had been from at least the age of twenty (when she first attempted suicide) more than half in love with easeful death. It's the great theme in much of her poetry.

When her husband deserted her, awakening all the grief and rage she felt at her father's death, Sylvia Plath could no longer resist her old demon. What gives her poetry such power and poignancy is that she knew it was coming. She would do the unthinkable — for her, the inevitable.

In the last poem she ever wrote, Plath prefigures herself:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity.

The Greek necessity Plath refers to was undoubtedly her own acknowledged Electra complex. She really *was* obsessed with her father, to a degree she knew to be pathological. At the same time, Plath gloried in her *idée fixe*, probably well aware that it would produce her greatest poem.

Anyone who dismisses poetry as a tame and bloodless thing might want to read "Daddy." Here's how she addresses her dear departed father:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no, not
Any less the black man who

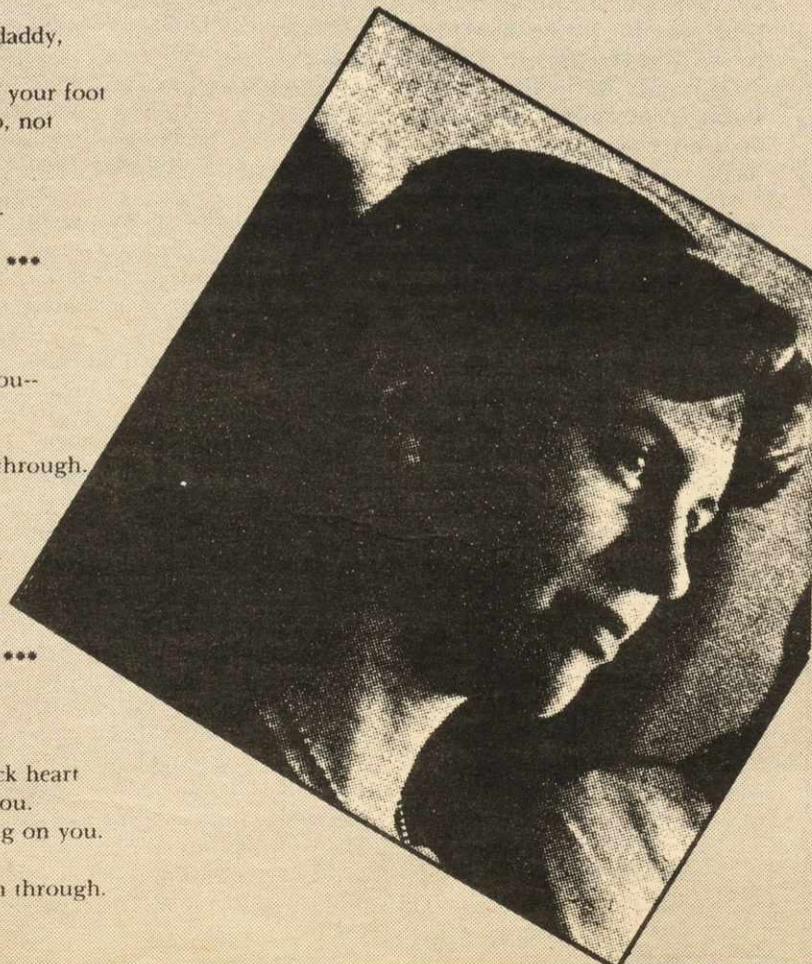
Bit my pretty red heart in two.

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You--

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.



Two years before she surrendered to the darkness, Sylvia Plath began the habit of dating her poems. Their chronological exactitude inevitably summons comparison to a countdown. As with any countdown, the tension builds.

The fifty or so poems written between the time her husband left her and the time she left life are Sylvia Plath's apotheosis as a poet. It's as if, having resolved upon her end, she was granted direct access to the torrent of her unconscious.

Here we are splashed with raw feeling, pure image, a terrible beauty. As Plath inimitably puts it:

The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.

But far from being hysterical, these final poems demonstrate consummate artistic control. They are given in a cold, clipped voice, with due attention paid to form and metre.

Driving them, however, is an anger so intense and unstoppable, it may be likened to crystals of dry ice; its very chilliness burns.

Of course, it doesn't take much perspicacity to sense the suffering behind these poems. They bear comparison to the "terrible" sonnets of another posthumously published poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. What awful sadness hides in the observation:

A gray wall now, clawed and bloody.
Is there no way out of the mind?

Still more in:

I am myself. That is not enough.

Time and again Plath identifies herself with the victims of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, not without acknowledging the discrepancy between outward advantage and inner anguish. It is a furious and forsaken little girl who writes:

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

And elsewhere:

It is a heart
This holocaust I walk in
O golden child the world will kill and eat.

And so the world has. Sylvia Plath's extraordinary poetry has been all but forgotten in the macabre controversy surrounding her life. ("Feminist Martyr or Raving Bitch? Let the Critics Decide!") Plath herself seems to have anticipated as much:

Is my life so intriguing?
Is it for this you widen your eye-rings?

The answer, unfortunately, is "yes". Sylvia Plath has become big business for the literati, especially for those with an axe to grind.

Plath's latest biographer, Anne Stevenson, has gone so far as to depict the author of *Ariel* as being little more than a raging Caliban. Stevenson even judges the poetry of Plath to be not merely hate-filled, but *hateful*. ("Only a desperate bid for life and psychic health can even begin to excuse" etc, etc.)

She is not alone in that opinion. Even as sympathetic a critic as Denis Donoghue has said, "The thrill we get from such poems is something we have no good cause to admire in ourselves."

Maybe so. But admire them we do. Has there ever been a more liberating line in all of poetry than, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through"?

What a terrible shame that, by "through", Sylvia Plath meant her life and not her patience with a life-sapping ghost.

Sylvia Plath would have been 57 today. Given the maturity of such an age, what might she be writing about now? Alas, we'll never know.

The silence that meets such a question is what alone seems inexcusable.