

## Diana Hume George on: Anne Sexton's Career

Anne Sexton's poetry tells stories that are immensely significant to mid-twentieth-century artistic and psychic life. Sexton understood her culture's malaise through her own, and her skill enabled her to deploy metaphorical structures at once synthetic and analytic. In other words, she assimilated the superficially opposing but deeply similar ways of thinking represented by poetry and psychoanalysis. Sexton explored the myths by and through which our culture lives and dies: the archetypal relationships among mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, gods and humans, men and women. She perceived, and consistently patterned in the images of her art, the paradoxes deeply rooted in human behavior and motivation. Her poetry presents multiplicity and simplicity, duality and unity, the sacred and the profane, in ways that insist on their similarities--even, at times, their identity. In less abstract terms, Sexton made explicit the intimacy of forces persistently treated as opposites by the society she lived in.

I appreciate the intention of statements made since her death that caution readers against becoming enamored of Sexton's illness and that encourage concentration on the celebratory aspects of her poetry. But another cautionary note is perhaps in order: that readers not ignore the expression of poetic and personal anguish for which the celebration is counterpart and foil. "The soul is, I think, a human being who speaks with the pressure of death at his head," Sexton wrote in a 1963 letter. Her poems articulate some of the deepest dilemmas of her contemporaries about their--our--most basic fears and wishes. Although Sexton's canon reaches for the unities of human experience, she did not abandon duality, even dichotomy. Poets must transcend us in some ways to be counted great of mind, but they must also be of us. Her poems vibrate in that energetic, passionate area between everlasting certainty and everlasting doubt. When she perceived the sameness of everything, it was against the background of the difference; when she perceived the difference, it was in reference to the sameness--just as metaphor, the imaging of connectedness, always implies a prior discontinuity.

Sexton flashed a sparkling, multiple light on human faces from the beginning of her writing career until the month of her death. For seventeen years she spoke in a direct, intimate way of people she loved. Her concentration on human relationships produced sharp, masterful portraits of people who were worth keeping alive, or worth resurrecting. That they were often "all her pretty ones" creates part of her poetry's poignancy. Her personal relationship to many of those who people the world of her poems amplifies the resounding creation of whole, complicated characters whose compelling presence is perhaps more deeply artful for having been lived. If many of Sexton's people had not so lived, her skill and art would have been solely responsible for breathing the life into them. As it was, she most often worked from the life and perhaps must share her credit with those who died before her and those who have outlived her: her mother, her father, her daughters, her husband, her lovers, her aunt, her grandfather, and her remarkable friends. I am glad there was or is an Eleanor Boylan, whatever name she bears.

When Sexton tells her dead father that she will bend down her strange face to his and forgive him, she is speaking of what we all need to do: to bend down our faces to our fathers, living or

dead, and forgive them. When she calls her mother her mocking mirror, her overthrown love, her first image, she speaks for all of us of woman born and first nurtured against "her plump and fruity skin." When she becomes the child of "elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight," she is the child in all of us, recapturing those moments when "love grew rings around me." When she says to her daughter, "Everything in your body that is new is telling the truth," she may be transcribing what she said to her daughter; she is also expressing for the collective mothers of her readership what we all want to be saying to our daughters, what we sometimes have not the courage or the attentiveness to say. The mother of "life is not in my hands" tells a terrible truth, but she is also the mother of "Darling, stand still at your door, sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone. . . ." This is a mother who tells the truth, one who gives you "the images I know."

In her lively, lonely telling of her truth, in her giving of the images she knew, Sexton looked for "uncomplicated hymns/but love has none." So the daughter who has loved and watched her mother closely enough to see "that blaze within the pilgrim woman" will also confess that this most important death does not equip her with grief. The friend who watches Eleanor Boylan talking with God, "as close as the ceiling," will warn her to speak quickly, "before death uses you up." The great aunt who climbed Mount San Salvatore, that "yankee girl, the iron interior of her sweet body," will one day careen into the streets and stop passersby "to mumble your guilty love while your ears die."

In "Her Kind" and "The Black Art," Sexton characterizes the poet as one who feels too much, thinks too much, and lives in an atmosphere of "weird abundance." In a 1966 letter she writes about the abundance that "runs wild with love as cancer." Sexton did, in some respects, connect the sources of poetic inspiration with death. Certainly the connections between extremist art and suicide as a form of poetic destiny have been destructively romanticized. My intention in raising the point is not to confirm it but to suggest something that it indicates. The limited extent to which Sexton connected art and self-destruction may have been symptomatic of her illness. I think she would have agreed: "Suicide is the opposite of the poem." That she might have felt called upon to fulfill a poetic as well as personal destiny by suicide--and I do not necessarily think she did--is better viewed as symptomatic of the cultural conditions she so clearly perceived and lived with.

Poets are among the few whom our culture still invests with a ritual function. We ask them to speak the unspeakable for us, and when they do, we are capable of effecting a violently negative transference. Critical response to Sexton's poetry seems to me to bear this out. Particularly if the poet has exposed our pain, seen into our darkest selves, we need to purge ourselves of the violating member, to punish the one who has broken boundaries and violated taboos. That Christianity depends for salvation on a sacrificial lamb whose death permits us to abrogate responsibility for the human failings we call "sin" speaks of our need to transfer guilt. Sexton's identifications with the crucified Christ sometimes have the ring of a self-aggrandizing and self-appointed martyrdom. But to whatever extent she may have been martyred, it was at the invitation, if not the insistence, of an exceptionally hungry audience.

Yet we are angry with Anne Sexton for killing herself, partly because she is the same poet who wrote with such commitment and intensity of the delight of being alive. If Sylvia Plath was always removed from her readership by the consistency of her "dead hands, dead stringencies," if she was always somehow beyond the merely human, always "the arrow, the dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive," Sexton was not always so. Before and after she was sometimes that, she was also the mother of "Little Girl," the lover of "Us," the daughter of "Oysters," the child of "Young." She spoke to us of celebration of the sun, that "excitable gift,"

of all the wicked, pure, lovely fun of being alive. Perhaps we could not tolerate knowing that this was the same woman who saw "rats in the toilet." If she was more clearly one of us, then her defection was more serious. It endangered us more deeply. She was an anomaly, a fish with wings.

Many of the qualities of Sexton's poetry so often seen as inconsistent I see as part of the vitalizing struggle to make of her art a salvation both spiritual and bodily. Much like the early Blake, Anne Sexton moved between contraries with equal force, equal conviction, and equal doubt. One can experience disappointment or frustration in the presence of such vacillation and label it a failure of nerve or will or imagination--or one can experience it, as I do, as one's own truth. To make it more concrete: if you think linearly about the building of a body of truth, then you must think only in terms of progress and regress. Anne Sexton comes to happy resolutions repeatedly in her work, from poem to poem, volume to volume. *Live or Die* is structured in just such a pleasing, simple shape: after a struggle with destruction, it ends with the affirmation of life. Yet in subsequent volumes she backslides continuously, seeming to erase her previous truths, to compromise them, or to give them up. In the early *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton first forgives her father. In later works she sometimes appears to renege on that forgiveness and to exhume the old ghost she had, we thought, laid to rest. In a literary and moral tradition presided over by *Paradise Lost* followed by *Paradise Regained*, and a theological one structured by the external resurrection of a crucified god, the linear progression of truth is denied by the return of the ghost from eternal rest.

The wish that art may carve into permanent perfection either our hope or our despair is understandable but too limiting. There is ample room in my own notion of poetry for the repeated reflections of that imperfectibility that separates humans from the gods they create. The repetition of a set of emotional and mental acts is central to Anne Sexton's poetry and represents a striving after personal and poetic catharsis that is never quite achieved, even when it is claimed. Her poetry enacts the repetition compulsion that may justly be called thanatopic from one perspective. From another, the movement that seems repetitive represents an intricate tension between contraries that is at the core of all creative process.

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