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## Transpersonal Confessions: Redefining the “Feminine” Self in Anne Sexton’s Poetry

Not surprisingly, the ambivalence of the patriarchal portrayals of womanhood, still prevalent in the mainstream American culture of the 1960s and 1970s, must have been felt most acutely by American women poets. As Maxine Kumin puts it in her foreword to the posthumous collection of Anne Sexton’s poems:

The earlier world view of the poet as “the masculine chief of state in charge of dispensing universal spiritual truths” (Diane Middlebrook, *The World Into Words*) has eroded since World War II, as have earlier notions about the existence of universal truths themselves. Freed by that cataclysm from their clichéd roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom, women began to write openly out of their own experiences. Before there was a Women’s Movement, the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Swenson, Plath, Rich, and Sexton. (1999: xxxiii)

Thus, Sexton’s implicit socio-political commitments may be seen as a product of her revolutionary times. Jane McCabe writes:

Anne Sexton was not and never claimed to be a feminist. Although many feminist critics have tried to claim her, they have had to turn a deaf ear to some of her best poetry to do so. So much of Sexton’s flirtatious parading, her glamorous posing, her sexual exhibitionism – understandable and forgivable – is clearly unacceptable to a feminist’s sense of the sources of her own value. But, like so much poetry by contemporary women, Sexton’s poems about personal experience often point to larger issues; although she does not necessarily offer any solutions, many of her poems isolate and describe the difficulties of being a woman in our society. And this is of course a subject of primary interest to any feminist. (1978: 216–217)

Indeed, one could even argue that a radical redefinition of “femininity”<sup>1</sup> constituted an important part of Sexton’s poetic project. The poignant lyric “Self in

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<sup>1</sup> As Jane McCabe explains: “[Suzanne Juhasz] makes a distinction between ‘feminine’ and feminist poetry (the quotation marks are hers). The first kind includes writing in which the poet’s female identity is clear, poetry in which ‘the feminine experience contributes more directly to the

1958,” from *Live or Die* (1966), in which the poet refers to herself as a “plaster doll” living in a “doll’s house,” or “Her Kind,” from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), whose speaker claims to be a “possessed witch,” are certainly cases in point. “The Farmer’s Wife,” in turn, also from the 1960 volume, is a particularly arresting instance of Sexton’s implicit rather than explicit critique of androcentric (i.e. male-centered) culture. In Adrienne Rich’s words, Sexton “was not in any conscious or self-defined sense a feminist, but she did some things ahead of the rebirth of the feminist movement” (1986: 121).

One cannot overemphasize such appraisals, moderate as they are. For although there has been a widespread agreement among critics that the poems in *Transformations* (1971) mark a decisive shift from the flamboyantly confessional lyrics of the 1960s to what Estella Lauter has labeled the “transpersonal” perspective, it remains a bone of critical contention how confessional (or autobiographical, or even exhibitionist to some) the preceding works are. I, for one, would side with those critics who, like Joanna Gill and Karen Alkalay-Gut,<sup>2</sup> argue that the intensely confessional tone of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), *Live or Die* (1966), and *Love Poems* (1969) was for their author not only a psychological necessity, but, first and foremost, a communicative strategy aimed at an implicit critique of the “feminine” ideal as conceived by the patriarchal culture of her time.<sup>3</sup> The critique was not an end in itself, nor was it grounded in some short-term political agenda. Rather, I would argue, it seems that Sexton’s primary creative urge was mythopoeic, with woman placed at the spiritual center of a belief system vaguely reminiscent of one held by archaic matriarchal societies.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the transpersonal perspective had always been there (however implicitly), long before the publication of *Transformations*.

That might be one way of explaining the pervasive blending of the quotidian and the metaphysical in such poems as, for instance, “Housewife” from *All My Pretty Ones*:

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themes and the forms’ of the poems. In feminist poetry, however, the poet realizes and analyzes the political implications of being both female and a poet. According to Juhasz, Sexton, along with Sylvia Plath and Denise Levertov, falls into the first category.” (1978: 220)

<sup>2</sup> Alkalay-Gut writes: “through the use of popular culture Anne Sexton attempts a revolution, a reconception of herself as well as the contemporary concepts of art and identity.”

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the article I adopt the standard feminist distinction between “female/male” – a biological given, and “feminine/masculine” – a cultural construct.

<sup>4</sup> The following quote from Maxine Kumin illustrates how the metaphysical and the political aspects of Anne Sexton’s poetic project reinforced each other: “She began to speak of herself as Ms. Dog, an appellation that is ironic in two contexts. We were both increasingly aware of the Women’s Movement. To shuck the earlier designations of Miss and Mrs. was only a token signal of where we stood, but a signal nonetheless. Dog, of course, is God in reverse. The fact that the word worked both ways delighted Sexton much as her favorite palindrome, ‘rats live on no evil star,’ did. There was a wonderful impudence in naming herself a kind of liberated female deity, one who is ‘out fighting the dollars.’” (1999: xxx).

Some women marry houses.  
 It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,  
 a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.  
 The walls are permanent and pink.  
 See how she sits on her knees all day,  
 faithfully washing herself down.  
 Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah  
 into their fleshy mothers.  
 A woman *is* her mother.  
 That's the main thing.

(1999: 77)

The poem's last four lines mark the shift into the mythopoeic mode. Were it not for them the whole text would read like a witty, pun-featuring exposure of the self-destructive housewife, who totally identifies with her social and familial status, having unwittingly internalized the patriarchal role-model imposed upon her. The pun, of course, resides in the ingenious reversal of standard syntactical logic, which nevertheless makes perfect ironic sense within the poem. Washing the house, the housewife "washes herself down", i.e., quite literally, wears herself down with arduous toil, but also – more ominously – performs an act of mindless spiritual self-effacement.

Sexton, however, in a typical manner of hers, goes one step further – beyond socio-political critique, into the realm of archetypal symbolism. Men, metaphorically breaking into their women's homes and bodies, cannot help acting the way they do, their aggression originating in archetypal love-hate relations with mothers, whom they subconsciously seek in their wives. The mother – compared to the Old Testament whale – is presented in archetypal terms, as an ominously confining and overbearing "fleshy" figure, at a more remote associative level reminiscent of a mother-goddess figure, the giver and the devourer of life. The men's aggression notwithstanding it is the female principle, represented by the mother figure, that looms large in this mythical scheme. Thus construed, however, the woman's primordial power may, paradoxically, prove the source of her spiritual undoing. If a woman, like God, becomes her ultimate point of spiritual reference and this potentially empowering change of perspective may prove self-defeating should the woman find herself operating in a culture that denies the female principle a transcendental status (needless to say, the mainstream White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture of the 1960s America was precisely that). Without a Goddess symbol as a spiritual reference point and a source of generic identity, a modern American woman, in Sexton's diagnosis, all-too-often ends up misdirecting her spiritual longings into false social identities, such as that of a perfect housewife. (Note the ironically religious connotation of the word "faithfully," suggesting that the housewife's self-destructive persistence at her chores may have a spiritual origin, however misplaced.)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Of course a critic may choose to ignore such spiritual implications and focus instead on the poem's critique of patriarchy as a system that propagates intellectually reductionist role-models for

A veiled reference to the Hindu goddess Kali, usually represented in Indian art as a Black woman with four arms, wearing a necklace of human skulls, her only clothing being a girdle made of dead men's hands, her face and breasts besmeared with blood, can be found in "Again and Again and Again" from *Love Poems*:

I have a black look I do not  
like. It is a mask I try on.  
I migrate toward it and its frog  
sits on my lips and defecates.  
It is old. It is also a pauper.  
I have tried to keep it on a diet.  
I give it no unction.

There is a good look that I wear  
like a blood clot. I have  
sewn it over my left breast.  
I have made a vocation of it.  
Lust has taken plant in it  
and I have placed you and your  
child at its milk tip.

Oh the blackness is murderous  
and the milk tip is brimming  
and each machine is working  
and I will kiss you when  
I cut up one dozen new men  
and you will die somewhat,  
again and again.

(1999: 195–196)

The poem abounds with archetypal symbolism, most of it revolving around the Kali imagery which, in turn, has its distant origins in the aforementioned mother-goddess archetype. Juxtaposing the brimming "milk tip" of the woman's breasts with the "murderous blackness" of her angry face is in keeping with the primordial concept of Mother Earth as both source and terminator of life, nurturer and devourer, the driving force behind the eternal cycle of life and death.<sup>6</sup> Sexton, however, modifies some of the archetypal connotations. For her Indian devotees,

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women. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, for instance, writes: "The poem constitutes a bitter commentary on women's search for identity. It points out how unaware of their social conditioning and their passive acceptance of culturally assigned roles women are. The poet states that 'a woman is her mother', her identification with the house/home reinforcing the imposed norm" (2003: 74). Such an interpretive angle is, of course, equally legitimate. After all, the power of Sexton's poem resides, among other things, in the ambivalence of the line "A woman *is* her mother."

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Campbell writes: "The goddess mother in whose macrocosmic womb all things were supposed to live their brief lives was absolute in her sway; and no such puny sentiment as heroism could cope, in the field of her dominion, to achieve any serious result. "She is self-willed," said Ramakrishna, "and must always have her own way." Yet for those children who submit without tumult to their mother's will, "she is full of bliss." All life, all moments, terminate in her insatiable maw; yet

Kali's blackness symbolizes her primordial, all-encompassing nature which transcends all form. As we can read in *Mahanirvana Tantra*: "Just as all colors disappear in black, so all names and forms disappear in her" (www1). The color black, then, has here ultimately positive, though daunting, connotations. In the poem, though, the speaker does not like her "black look" which she deems merely an ugly mask. She is more ambiguous about her other mask – that of "feminine" benevolence manifesting itself in the nurturing roles of wife and mother. On the one hand the poet refers to that social facade as a "good look," one that she has "made a vocation of." On the other hand, the very description of the "good look" is subtly ironic, what with the mechanistic reference to the nipples as the "milk tips." "Each machine is working," the speaker tells her lover (the ostensible addressee of the text), sardonically referring to her nursing breasts. The mechanistic metaphor implies the woman's alienation from her own body, viewed as nature's burdensome imposition on her true, though unspecified identity. Nature's status is thus rendered ambivalent. Sexton mixes mechanistic metaphors with organicist ones: the image of the "frog" of the "black look" mask is followed by the one of the "blood clot," "worn" and "sewn" like a piece of clothing.

The poem's last three lines, with their mention of the speaker's intent to "cut up one dozen new men," accompanied by her predicting that her lover will "die somewhat, / again and again," can be interpreted as references to human sacrifice and reincarnation, respectively, both connoting ancient fertility cults characteristic of matriarchal farming societies, for example in India.<sup>7</sup> (Incidentally, the cutting-up metaphor is an anthropologically accurate description of sacrificial rites as once performed by the mother-goddess worshippers in many parts of the world.<sup>8</sup>)

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in this frightening return there is ultimately rapture for the one who, in trust, can give himself – like the perfect king: the son and yet the bull of his cosmic mother." (1991: 179)

<sup>7</sup> Discussing the cultural message behind the archaeological remains at Mohenjo-daro, Campbell writes: "Among the ruins there is much to indicate that the phallic cults of the mother-goddess, despised by the Aryans, were a prominent feature of the civilization. Moreover, as the ethnologist Father Wilhelm Koppers has shown, there survives in India to this day a double fold of mother-goddess worship, namely 1. of the Proto-Australoid stratum, and 2. of the Neolithic, while the concept of the ultimate godhead rather as female than as male has nowhere else in the world been so elaborately developed. It is, therefore, not to be marveled that human sacrifice, which is everywhere characteristic of the worship of the Goddess, whether in the tropical or in the Neolithic sphere, should have survived in force in India, both in temples and in village groves, until suppressed by law in 1835." (1991: 160)

<sup>8</sup> Here is a classic account of one such ritual, as performed by the Dravidian villagers of India, by Sir James George Frazer: "The mode of putting [the sacrificial victim] to death varied in different places. One of the commonest modes seems to have been strangulation, or squeezing to death. The branch of a green tree was cleft several feet down the middle; the victim's neck (in other places, his chest) was inserted in the cleft, which the priest, aided by his assistants, strove with all his force to close. Then he wounded the victim slightly with his ax, whereupon the crowd rushed at the wretch and hewed the flesh from the bones, leaving the head and bowels untouched. Sometimes he was cut up alive." (qtd in Campbell 1991: 161–162)

In the modern cultural context of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America, such metaphorical declarations place Sexton's speaker among liberated "man-eaters," abhorred by the priests and pastors of all denominations, but cheered by most feminists as providing a healthy counterbalance to the androcentric figure of "lady-killer." The "cut-up" men would then, of course, stand for the broken-hearted wretches discarded by the ruthless vamp, their masculine egos torn to shreds, while the dozen deaths would represent the multiplicity of the vamp's male lovers, the particular men losing their significance as individuals and functioning as transient incarnations of a non-existent masculine ideal. (In addition, the lover's repeated act of dying could also be a metaphorical allusion to his multiple orgasms, which only intensifies the ambiguity of the poem's ending.)

All in all, it seems as if the poet was wary of her archetypal spiritual legacy. Putting on masks, viewed from an archaic religious perspective, may, after all, be considered an act of spiritual empowerment. (In ancient fertility cults the priestesses became temporary incarnations of the Goddess during rituals.) Sexton, however, deliberately foregoes, or at least problematizes, such a psychological option. Rather than rejoice in her archetypal aspect of Kali, or the primordial Mother Night, she relegates her destructive and nurturing instincts to the mechanistic, alienating realm of matter. Contextualized by such poems as "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman" ("Daylight is nobody's friend"), or "Moon Song, Woman Song" ("I am alive at night. / I am dead in the morning, / an old vessel who used up her oil, / bleak and pale boned. / No miracle. No dazzle") which accompany "Again and Again and Again" in the volume, the lyric's tone is far from triumphant or celebratory. Sexton refuses, as it were, to legitimize her womanhood in terms of matriarchal, earth-oriented spirituality.

One possible explanation of this refusal is psychological. Maxine Kumin writes:

It would be simplistic to suggest that the Oedipal theme overrides all other considerations in Sexton's work, but a good case might be made for viewing her poems in terms of their quest for a male authority figure to love and trust. Yeats once said that "one poem lights up another," and in Sexton's poetry the reader can find the poet again and again identifying herself through her relationship with the male Other, whether in the person of a lover or – in the last, hasty, and often brilliant poems in *The Awful Rowing*, which make a final effort to land on "the island called God" – in the person of the patriarchal final arbiter. (1999: xxix–xxx)

Convincing as it sounds, Kumin's diagnosis needs, in my opinion, one cultural qualification, namely that Sexton's "quest for a male authority figure" was not exactly a purely personal product of her troubled subconscious, or even a more universal, trans-cultural product of her share of the collective unconscious. Rather, at least on one level, it may have been as a psychological side-effect of the poet's having been raised in a patriarchal cultural environment. In a long run, that upbringing must have proved effectively inimical to any liberating change of spiritual paradigm on her part.

Metaphysical and spiritual concerns are thus implicitly present behind the emotional verisimilitude of Sexton's poems. In "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman" she employs the archetypal imagery of binary (earth-sky and light-darkness) oppositions to lend the private drama of an erotic triangle a primordial dimension:

It's a little Walden.  
 She is private in her breathbed  
 as his body takes off and flies,  
 flies straight as an arrow.  
 But it's a bad translation.  
 Daylight is nobody's friend.  
 God comes in like a landlord  
 and flashes on his brassy lamp.  
 Now she is just so-so.  
 He puts his bones back on,  
 turning the clock back an hour.  
 She knows flesh, that skin balloon,  
 the unbound limbs, the boards,  
 the roof, the removable roof.  
 She is his selection, part time.  
 You know the story too! Look,  
 when it is over he places her,  
 like a phone, back on the hook.

(1999: 196)

Anthropologists speak of uranian (sky-oriented) and telluric (earth-oriented) religions to distinguish between the radically different spiritual paradigms of religions like Christianity or Islam on the one hand and, say, traditional Native American shamanism and Hinduism on the other. In general, cultures with sky-oriented religions tend to produce patriarchal social orders. Adopting these terms, one could argue that part of this short poem's lasting appeal resides in its implied association of man with the uranian realm of daylight and superhuman action (flight), and of woman with the telluric domain of night and receptive passivity. As an overview of most pagan religions of ancient Europe testifies, this archetypal dualism need not be necessarily detrimental to the sacred status of the female principle. Christianity in general, however, and Protestantism in particular, have elevated the male principle at the cost of its female counterpart.<sup>9</sup> The woman in Sexton's poem can be thus viewed as an unwitting victim of a paradigm shift typical of androcentric cultures. Her telluric powers, no longer construed as equal and complimentary to

<sup>9</sup> Consider the following quote from Riane Eisler's classic: "Rather than being pure spirit and both mother and father, God was now [i.e. from the 2nd century onwards] explicitly male. And, as Pope Paul VI was still to assert nearly two thousand years later, in 1977, women were barred from the priesthood 'because our Lord was a man'. At the same time, the Gnostic gospels and other texts like them, which had circulated freely in the Christian communities at the beginning of the Christian era, were denounced and destroyed as heresies by those who now called themselves the orthodox, that is, the only legitimate, church." (1988: 131–132)



the uranian ones, are reduced to carnal commodities (“She knows flesh, that skin balloon”).<sup>10</sup> In this cultural order God is not accompanied – or counterbalanced – by Goddess.

Such mythopoeic concerns – discernible, to repeat, not only in *Transformations* (1971), *The Book of Folly* (1972) or *The Awful Rowing Towards God* (1975), the collections commonly acclaimed for their religious themes, but already in the 1960s – shed different light on the much-debated relation between Anne Sexton’s life and her work. When discussing her poetry, one should always bear in mind the problematic relation between “real” self and poetic persona for it seems that, in a long run, the critical label of a confessional poet has done the author of *Love Poems* more harm than good. David Trinidad’s comment is apt here:

In the decades since Sexton’s death, autobiographical poetry has become less and less fashionable; young writers are encouraged to jettison the “I,” to encode personal experience in a fragmented or elliptical style. Sexton’s popularity, naturally, has suffered in such a climate. It’s all right to read Sexton when you’re young (i.e., when you don’t know any better), but she’s someone to be outgrown, like Allen Ginsberg or Charles Bukowski or (god forbid) Kahlil Gibran. Her “issues” may seem too made-for-TV-movie to some: nervous breakdown, suicide attempt, adultery, incest. And while poems like “In Celebration of My Uterus” and “Menstruation at Forty” will always make some readers squirm, it’s possible that a poem like “The Abortion,” written at a time when abortion wasn’t even talked about, could be used as pro-life propaganda in our current culture. A scary thought.

Admittedly, Sexton herself, as something of a brilliant performance artist at poetry readings, encouraged autobiographical interpretations of her verse. Moreover, the unparalleled emotional intensity of her lyrics does invite autobiographical readings.<sup>11</sup> She was, nevertheless, well-aware of the ambivalent dynamics between her life and her poems, the poet and the persona. In a 1965 interview she declared: “I’m hunting for the truth. It might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one, because behind everything that happens to you, there is another truth, a secret life” (Marx 1978: 34). Three years later she added:

Many of my poems are true, line by line, altering a few facts to get the story at its heart. In “The Double Image,” the poem about my mother’s death from cancer and the loss of my daughter, I don’t mention that I had another child. Each poem has its own truth. Furthermore, in that poem, I only say that I was hospitalized twice, when, in fact, I was hospitalized five times in that span

<sup>10</sup> The situation brings to mind two classics of modern American verse: William Carlos Williams’s “To Elsie” and Adrienne Rich’s “Translations.” In Williams’s poem Elsie is an inarticulate, self-effacing incarnation of once potent telluric powers which must remain dormant in a culture that degrades nature and women (“as if the earth under our feet / were / an excrement of some sky”). Similarly, the woman in Rich’s poem, sleeping with another woman’s unfaithful partner and thus foreshadowing her own suffering, remains “ignorant of the fact this way of grief / is shared, unnecessary / and political.” Sexton’s poem is obviously much less explicit, though equally revealing.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. James Dickey’s comment: “Anne Sexton’s poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author’s life that one’s literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering.” (1978: 117)



of time. *But then, poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical. It is truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life.* I don't adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed. Concrete examples give a verisimilitude. I want the reader to feel, "Yes, yes, that's the way it is." I want them to feel as if they were touching me. I would alter any word, attitude, image or persona for the sake of a poem. (Kevles 1978: 22, emphasis added)

All things considered, it is probably Sexton's reference to herself as "an actress" in her own "autobiographical play"<sup>12</sup> that best renders the subtle interplay (including, perhaps, a feedback effect of sorts) between the poet's troubled life and poignant verse.

Already in her first volume Sexton showed that her understanding of the poet-speaker relation is much more sophisticated than most critics of the "confessional" mode would assume.<sup>13</sup> In "The Farmer's Wife" the speaker foregrounds her presence only in the last line, the rest of the text focusing on a nameless farmer's wife from Illinois. The final line, then, in which the speaker makes it clear that the addressee of the story she has just told is her lover, substantially modifies the import of the lyric. Now it can be read, for instance, as the poet's coded message to her lover, a roundabout, parable-style attempt to explain the contradictory feelings a woman may have about a relationship that does not live up to her intellectual, emotional and/or spiritual expectations.

It is interesting that Sexton chooses for her story's disgruntled protagonist a farmer's wife, that is, by implication, not a liberated intellectual, but a woman whose self-awareness in general and feminist consciousness in particular are more likely to be in a nascent, semi-articulate state. This is precisely what makes her inner rebellion all the more appealing – it comes from the heart, not from an acquired ideology. She simply feels that there must be more to life than the routine of marital sex, "that old pantomime of love:"

[...] there  
must be more to living  
than this brief bright bridge  
of the raucous bed or even  
the slow braille touch of him  
like a heavy god grown light,

<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, Sexton used this phrase in a narrower context, answering Barbara Kevles question whether she enjoyed giving poetry readings: "Readings take so much out of you, because they are a reliving of the experience, that is, they are happening all over again. I am an actress in my own autobiographical play." (Kevles 1978: 27)

<sup>13</sup> Here is another telling fragment from the 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles: "It's a little mad, but I believe I am many people. When I am writing a poem, I feel I am the person who should have written it. Many times I assume these guises; I attack it the way a novelist might. Sometimes I become someone else and when I do, I believe, even in moments when I'm not writing the poem, that I am that person. When I wrote about the farmer's wife, I lived in my mind in Illinois; when I had the illegitimate child, I nursed it – in my mind – and gave it back and traded life. When I gave my lover back to his wife, in my mind, I grieved and saw how ethereal and unnecessary I had been. When I was Christ, I felt like Christ." (Kevles 1978: 22–23)

that old pantomime of love  
 that she wants although  
 it leaves her still alone,  
 built back again at last,  
 mind's apart from him, living  
 her own self in her own words

(1999: 19–20)

The consistent use of enjambment supports the theme of internal conflict and suppressed rebellion. The lines are broken at apparently odd moments, as if to maintain the accentual rhythm of mostly two or three stresses per line. Consequently, the lines sound a little forced, because of their brevity and the resultant frequency of end-of-the-line pauses, thus being made to resemble the constricted, emotive speech of someone who is groping for the right words and finds it difficult to control the emotions because of the subject under discussion. Moreover, the entire lyric is in syntactical terms one long compound clause held together by the repeated use of the “and” conjunction, which makes the whole text sound like an interior monologue, that is something intrinsically more emotional and straightforward than either everyday sociolinguistic interaction or conventional poetry.

Unlike many conventional literary heroine, the woman is not just bored with her current partner and yearning for a more romantic adventure. That would amount to a mere transition from an Eve to a Lilith figure, the text still remaining within the confines of the patriarchal stereotypes of wife and hussy. Instead, she craves for something which stays deliberately un verbalized in the poem, as if Sexton wanted to imply that this farmer's wife transcends the standard preconceptions one may have about a countrywoman in an androcentric culture. Clearly then, it is the stereotypes that the poet is set on calling into question.

Sexton begins with the pleasant myth of “good country people” living in perfect harmony with the land and themselves. The opening lines offer a sardonic commentary on the allegedly idyllic character of country life:

From the hodge porridge  
 of their country lust,  
 their local life in Illinois,  
 where all their acres look  
 like a sprouting broom factory,  
 they name just ten years now  
 that she has been his habit;

(1999: 19)

The tenor of the hodge-porridge metaphor is not only the state of emotional confusion that generates “country lust,” but also the latter's plain, quotidian, workaday character (like porridge for breakfast); putting it bluntly, there is nothing potentially romantic about this kind of erratic passion. Furthermore, by having the cultivated acres look “like a sprouting broom factory” to the farmer's wife, Sexton indicates that any clichéd sentimental bond between the countrywoman and

Mother Earth is out of the question here. Deliberately un-organic, mechanistic, the imagery connotes sterility and emotional detachment on the woman's part.

The wife's sense of estrangement from her immediate surroundings translates into emotional inarticulateness in her relationship with the husband. She finds her doubts and longings incommunicable to the man rendered in the poem as a rather uncomplicated creature. In the realm of emotions, the range of his expressive devices seems reduced to the formulaic "honey bunch let's go" to be followed by raucous noises in bed. The communicative barrier between the spouses is a recurrent tenor of the poem's metaphors. The farmer is metaphorically blind to his wife's spiritual needs (hence "the slow braille touch of him"), so while in bed with her at night, he is truly in the dark, in both senses of the phrase. The woman, in turn, remains "mind's apart from him, living / her own self in her own words." Their marital sex, habitual as it has become, provides only a fleeting sense of union, some temporary and purely physiological rapport invariably accentuating their pervading mental separateness. Afterwards he retreats into "the blowzy bag / of his usual sleep" (note another barrier-featuring metaphor), each of the spouses now lying in their "separate dreams." As Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich rightly notices, "This husband-wife relationship has no language of its own – it is merely a pantomime" (2003: 75).

Throughout the text, Sexton remains wary of falling into the trap of simplistic ideological distinctions based on predictable sets of binary oppositions. Thus the marriage bed, however "raucous" at night, constitutes nonetheless a "brief bright bridge," i.e. it connects rather than separates. The woman still wants "that old pantomime of love," however crude it may appear to her, even though its emotional aftermath only increases her sense of loneliness. It seems obvious that she is not fed up with sex or with marriage as such. What she longs for, instead, is, apparently, some new spiritual environment, one that would prove more conducive to the communication of things both sublime and subliminal. Her husband's central flaw, then, is his unwitting smugness resultant from his total lack of self-awareness. That explains why sometimes, for instance when watching him sunk in his "usual sleep" (note the sarcasm of the adjective with its implication of the man's plainness and unreflexiveness; he seems predictable even while sleeping/dreaming!), "she wishes him cripple, or poet, / or even lonely, or sometimes, / . . . dead." The one connotation that the first three states share is the heightened self-consciousness of the cripple, the poet, and the loner. The wife, then, desperately looks for *any* experience, even if it should be that of suffering, that could wrench her husband's torpid mind from the ruts of routine.

As already indicated, it is Sexton's unexpected, and poetically ingenious, insertion of the direct address to the speaker's lover in the last line that significantly enlarges the number of potential interpretations the poem invites. Now the speaker's rendition of the wife's emotional ordeal may be primarily read as "true" not in the anthropological sense, i.e. as a lyrical case study, but, among other things, as

the poet's indirect attempt to justify her taking up a lover rather than a husband in the first place and to put this existential choice in a broader cultural context. In this reading (needless to say, the poem deliberately evades any interpretive closure), the rural couple epitomizes the major vices of institutionalized matrimony: the incipient danger of routine, of becoming one's "habit," with the resultant emotional inarticulateness. As a result, Sexton's poem becomes a feminist manifesto of sorts. Its message is simple, if unsettling to the exponents of the patriarchal family: better a thoughtful lover than a thoughtless husband.

The poem invites at least two other readings. For one thing, it could be a coded warning addressed to the speaker's lover against an incipient routine in their relationship – whether sexual, intellectual, or emotional. Furthermore, the text might be a veiled reproach on the speaker's part, who may, for instance, have noticed that her lover begins to see their affair from a stereotyped perspective, his simplistic, pre-conditioned, formulaic reasoning resembling that of the poem's farmer. If one follows on this interpretive track, then "The Farmer's Wife" anticipates another poem by Anne Sexton, published nine years later, in which the speaker tries to explain to her partner how she feels about their ending relationship.

In "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife" Sexton explores the complexities of the dutiful wife and the "loose woman" stereotypes, putting herself in the position of someone forced by circumstances to enact the role of the latter. Interestingly, the speaker, though obviously not inclined towards the eponymous wife – her rival, after all – acknowledges the paradoxical nature of the wife's position, both constrained and empowering. Published in 1969, at the dawn of Women's Liberation in America, the poem features a liberated female speaker who from the start draws a sharp line between her wild, unconventional ways and those of the wife. Still, Sexton's ostensibly caustic tone progresses from marked irony to ambiguity. The opening stanzas are pretty sarcastic:

She is all there.  
 She was melted carefully down for you  
 and cast up from your childhood,  
 cast up from your one hundred favorite aggies.

She has always been there, my darling.  
 She is, in fact, exquisite.  
 Fireworks in the dull middle of February  
 and as real as a cast-iron pot.

(1999: 188)

The very first line is a potential pun, being "all there" connoting the wife's mental sanity as well as her readiness to be always "all there" for her husband (the pun's implicit suggestion is that under patriarchy these two attributes are considered inseparable in "normal" women). Possibly, the line may also imply the wife's

willingness to hide absolutely nothing from her spouse; she is "all there," then, in the sense that she has – consciously or not – reduced her own selfhood to easily comprehensible dimensions. The fact that she functions as a sum-total of her husband's puerile fantasies exposes both her submissiveness and his emotional immaturity.

It is not, however, as if the speaker were capable of complete detachment from the cultural entanglements of the situation. On closer inspection, her referring to herself, in the third strophe, as a "luxury" seems not only ironic – with the irony, of course, directed against the erratic husband – but also self-ironic: she realizes that from her lover's hopelessly limited perspective she must have been an emotional commodity of sorts:

Let's face it, I have been momentary.  
A luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbor.  
My hair rising like smoke from the car window.  
Littleneck clams out of season.

(1999: 188)

The sloop, the wind-blown hair, and the restaurant clams may signify the adulterous lovers' favorite pastimes (sailing, car rides, and eating out in fancy places respectively), but also – because of the elliptic style in which "I," "luxury," and "sloop" look like items on a list – the listed objects become emblems, as it were, of a yet another luxurious good, namely the speaker herself.

In the first reading, the sloop's presence is metonymic, in the second – metaphorical, the speaker's message being: "I have been a bright red sloop in the harbor." Let us consider the implications of that message. Sailing one's own boat is to many upper-middle-class Americans obviously more than just a hobby. A conventional status symbol, a sloop of one's own connotes freedom and adventure. Whether it is the deliverance from a boring nine-to-five job or from family obligations, this kind of liberty, however, is usually available only on an impermanent basis. Sooner or later the sailor has to return to shore and turn executive again so that he can afford putting out to sea the next summer. Following the logic of the sloop metaphor, one can assume that the poem's affair may have been based on a similar paradox; the (presumably attractive) lover was to her partner a conventional symbol of temporary release from duty, an emotional "luxury," all the more cherished because not commonly available, and presupposing the contrasting experience of domestic routine. This, however, would also mean that the unfaithful husband was attracted by a staple male fantasy rather than to a particular person. Like his wife, who has been "cast" from his childhood cravings, his lover, apparently, amounted to an assortment of the adolescent fantasies of a *puer aeternus*.

The speaker seems poignantly aware of the ambivalence of her position. (It is this self-awareness that makes her attitude so much alike in its complexity to that of Theodore Roethke's speaker in "I Knew a Woman.") Operating in a culture

which, apparently, offers her only the limited choice between a Lilith and an Eve figure, or between the vamp-like adulteress and the submissive housewife, the Sexton speaker realizes that, willy-nilly, she has been playing a rather conventional part in a centuries-old patriarchal game. This must have been a painful but also a liberating conclusion; now that she fully comprehends her lover's emotional limitations and her own unwitting complicity in the patriarchal triangle of Master, Mistress and Wife, she cannot only exorcize the past (the poem's title suggests, after all, that it was the man who had decided to terminate the affair) with the royal pronouncement, "I give you back your heart. / I give you permission," but also to look at the wife and the husband from a more detached, almost objectified perspective. The result is something akin to compassion rather than condescension.

This marks a significant shift in tone because throughout the first half of the poem the speaker's attitude towards the wife is clearly ironic, at times patronizing. Thus the wife is "fireworks in the dull middle of February," that is something entertaining but harmless, unlike the speaker, whose head apparently nurses real fire, her hair "rising like smoke from the car window." The tenor of the fireworks metaphor is the concept of danger contained, of fake flame that pleases the eye but cannot burn the flesh. This is the central implication of the succeeding images of domestic harmony as well, the wife being adept at growing both the "practical" and the "tropical growth" and placing "wild flowers at the window at breakfast." This is, the poet indirectly tells us, as much wildness as the husband's limited mind could take: ersatz wilderness, tamed, domesticated and carefully apportioned.

The wife's act, however, could also be interpreted as a manifestation of suppressed artistic potential, especially in the light of the lines that follow:

She is more than that. She is your have to have,  
has grown you your practical your tropical growth.  
This is not an experiment. She is all harmony.  
She sees to oars and oarlocks for the dinghy,

has placed wild flowers at the window at breakfast,  
sat by the potter's wheel at midday,  
set forth three children under the moon,  
three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo,

done this with her legs spread out  
in the terrible months in the chapel.  
If you glance up, the children are there  
like delicate balloons resting on the ceiling.

(1999: 189)

The surrealistic association of childbearing with painting a fresco in a chapel brings to mind, again, Roethke's adaptation of theatrical terms ("turn," "counter-turn," and "stand") as potential sexual metaphors. Concomitantly, Sexton's imagery, for all its boldness, does have a firm grounding in physical reality. The "ter-

rible months in the chapel" could refer to the toil of the renaissance artist lying on his aching back for hours on the hard wooden planks of the scaffolding, just under the chapel's ceiling. Thus, like Michelangelo, whose arduous labor resulted in the drawing of "three cherubs," the dutiful wife gave birth to three little children. That, apparently, was the only venue the androcentric society had provided for her creative energies. Again, as in Roethke's poem, the speaker's patent irony is modified by the shift in tone that follows. In "I Knew a Woman" the speaker's apprenticeship with his lover, initially handled light-heartedly and self-ironically, is finally acknowledged as a modern enactment of some weighty, archaic, predominantly visceral venture with lasting spiritual consequences. Similarly, the wife's dubious feat of producing three babies while remaining an ultra-competent homemaker is towards the end of Sexton's lyric stripped of its veneer of mindless submission to culturally assigned roles. Submissive as it may have been, the wife's existential choice ends up rendered in the poem with a degree of ambivalence comparable to that bestowed upon the mistress in Roethke's lyric. Consider, for example, the strophe featuring the mother with her children:

She has also carried each one down the hall  
after supper, their heads privately bent,  
two legs protesting, person to person,  
her face flushed with a song and their little sleep.  
(1999: 189)

Sexton achieves the nearly impossible – a combination of irony and tenderness. If the babies are the housewife's works of art, then depicting their heads as "privately bent" sounds a little condescending, or sardonic, as if the speaker implied that the momentary uniqueness of the family tableau was the only mark of artistic originality available to the children's mother. Still, wry or not, the remark does acknowledge the irreducible privacy of that moment, while the image of the mother's face "flushed with a song" and her babies' "little sleep" hints at some tender mystery which – the (proto-)feminist poet apparently tells us – no amount of enlightened feminist critique can detract from.

That image seems, indeed, a turning point in the poem. The anaphoric lines that follow are, in marked contrast to the preceding ones, more incantatory in character. The transition from a discursive to a chant-like mode connotes not only the aforementioned change of tone but also an increase of emotional involvement on the speaker's part:

I give you back your heart.  
I give you permission –  
  
for the fuse inside her, throbbing  
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her  
and the burying of her wound –  
for the burying of her small red wound alive –



for the pale flickering flare under her ribs,  
 for the drunken sailor who waits in her left pulse,  
 for the mother's knee, for the stockings,  
 for the garter belt, for the call –

the curious call  
 when you will burrow in arms and breasts

and tug at the orange ribbon in her hair  
 and answer the call, the curious call.

(1999: 189–190)

The poem's catalogue is both very emotional and highly literary – literary not only because of such bold metaphors as that of the drunken sailor waiting in the wife's left pulse, but also on account of the associations with renaissance and baroque poetry it evokes (the irony is, of course, that traditional catalogues were usually employed by male poets extolling the feminine virtues of their damsels). The catalogued images, however, are so starkly emotive that any self-conscious parody of the traditional device seems out of the question here. Instead, what the speaker offers at this point is some sort of poetic exorcism, her emotional involvement clearly indicating that her rival – who is now no longer dismissable as a mere housewife, the sum-total of her husband's fantasies – must be taken seriously. More than just a flat character, an unreflexive enactor of the wife and mother roles, the rival is seen by the speaker as simply another woman, a human being in her own right, with her own longings, however secret or suppressed. In short, in the poem's second half the wife begins to loom large.

The change of scale is substantial indeed. The lover is now advised by the speaker to "climb" his wife "like a monument, step after step," as if she were a Sumerian ziggurat or a Mayan pyramid. Still, though mountain-like – with the attendant Mother Earth connotations – the wife remains potentially powerful but inarticulate, like the eponymous Elsie from William Carlos Williams's famous poem. Given the ambiguities of the wife's dormant telluric powers, the speaker's self-effacing stance at the end of the poem seems equally ambivalent: is it a self-ironic pose or a genuine act of intellectual surrender before larger cosmic forces? If it is the latter, then Sexton's message might be that all the self-awareness, the intellectual sophistication and the cosmic cool on the liberated "loose woman's" part were of little consequence when confronted with the psychological realities of love, passion, and jealousy. In other words, just as the husband in the poem has no choice but to answer "the curious call" coming from his wife, so the wife and the lover apparently have little choice but to go through the motions of their culturally assigned roles in the erotic pantomime. In this context, the speaker's decision to step aside seems, paradoxically, as much an act of surrender as of defiance.

Like with the other poems discussed so far, one senses certain ideological inconclusiveness here. As Jane McCabe has put it, "Sexton is often caught in what is a uniquely feminine trap of simultaneously celebrating herself, exploiting herself, letting herself be exploited, and apologizing for herself. This seems especially true in her poems about men" (1978: 226). It seems that the poet stops short of becoming a full-fledged feminist not so much for political as for spiritual reasons. Apparently, for a woman with such an intensely religious imagination the only valid route to feminism would have led through embracing a mother-goddess archetype. This kind of paradigm shift the author of *Love Poems*, for some reason, refused to complete. In retrospect, one might speculate that Sexton's "awful rowing" should have been towards Goddess rather than God.

In a posthumous tribute to the poet, Adrienne Rich wrote: "I think of Anne Sexton as a sister whose work tells us what we have to fight, in ourselves and in the images patriarchy has held up to us. Her poetry is a guide to the ruins, from which we learn what women have lived and what we must refuse to live any longer" (1986: 123). Lois Ames's words sum up Sexton's legacy equally well: "She was more than a suicidal poet. She was more than a confessional poet. Her work was iconoclastic. She broke ground. She plowed fields. And she scattered the seed for much that was to come."

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