Two Perspectives on Anne Sexton
I. “A Special Language”

NANCY YANES HOFFMAN

ANNE SEXTON AND I were born in the same year in Newton, Massachusetts. We went to school together. We both wrote poetry. I have always identified with the lonely accents of her poems as with her sense of Boston as Place. When she writes of painting the golden dome of the State House black during World War II, I, too, remember all that the blackened dome symbolized to New Englanders. Writing of women growing older but not wiser, she speaks of choices made and choices lost, as she attempts to find detachment and discipline in the poetic rendering of personal experience. So it was with a sense of irreparable loss that I read the last two volumes of her poetry, The Awful Rowing toward God and 45 Mercy Street. The poet’s voice speaks posthumously to us in poems which are her last will and testament. They represent her desperate search for the will to live and the testament of her despair, which found final utterance and silence in her garage in Weston, Massachusetts, on October 4, 1974.

Writing in the confessional mode of Robert Lowell and her friend Sylvia Plath, with whom she often discussed suicide’s blandishments before Plath, too, chose oblivion rather than the pain of life, Sexton’s Awful Rowing toward God is a journey on uncharted seas. Rowing is a metaphor for the effort and striving of her life and art to remain living, a struggle against that yearning for death. She equates the small skiff on the dangerous seas with her body in life, and she wills herself to persevere in the painful, physical labor of driving that body forward day to day, year to year—rowing. She is going it alone, not depending on anyone—husband, lovers, psychiatrists, children, all of whom let her down (as she ravaged them with her depressions, her unquenchable thirst for reassurance, her attempts at suicide, for “suicides have a special language./ Like carpenters they want to know which tools./ They never
ask why build.”) She is depending upon the self, and that too, at the last, lets her down. The first poem, "Rowing," traces her birth and childhood, her growing older, but not growing up, to that time when many of us find or lose ourselves, "now, in my middle age, about nineteen in the head I'd say." The final poem, "The Rowing Endeth," cries out: "I'm mooring my rowboat at the dock of the island called God/ . . . 'It's okay,' I say to myself, with blisters that broke and healed/broke and healed—saving themselves over and over."

What Sexton was searching for was not only transformation of her self, but transcendence, both obsessions which arose out of the conviction of her own worthlessness. Her desire was to be joined to another in love. Each time that love was disappointed, she was left with her own insufficient resources—left, finally, rowing toward God, that ultimate transcendence of self which seemed to be the only love of which she could be certain because it was love imagined. But love imagined sustains only so long as the imagination works and reality does not impinge too agonizingly: when vision becomes nightmare, love imagined turns to devils and demons that beset one in "the dark night of the soul, where it is always three o'clock in the morning." For her, "there was life/with its cruel houses/and people who seldom touched—though touch is all." Life fails when sexuality fails, when the consolation, the release, and escape with and into another fails; art fails, when the imagination no longer can be willed to work.

In Love Poems, she writes in "That Day":

This is the desk I sit at
and this is the desk where I love you too much
and this is the typewriter that sits before me
where yesterday only your body sat before me
with its shoulders gathered in like a Greek chorus,
with its tongue quite openly like a cat lapping milk,
with its tongue—both of us coiled in its slippery life.
That was yesterday, that day . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Then I knew you in your dream and prayed of our time
that I would be pierced and you would take root in me
and that I might bring forth your born, might bear
the you or the ghost of you in my little household.
Yesterday I did not want to be borrowed
but this is the typewriter that sits before me
and love is where yesterday is at.
"That Day" begins with the sing-song nursery rhyme rhythms of "This is the House That Jack Built," suggesting the lost innocence, the wanting to move out beyond the house, the desk, and the equally urgent desire to be passive, to be taken care of in this house. In an interview in *Writers at Work*, the Paris Review Interviews, Fourth Series, Sexton says she had "a leaky ego." She had to return from a European traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, "because I need my husband and my therapist and my children to tell me who I am." The reflection in their eyes makes her know she is there, know she belongs to them. Yet she resents their intrusions on the only life she knows is hers, hers alone: her poetry. Sexton explains in the Paris Interview that "Eighteen Days without You," the last poem in *Love Poems*, originally was "Twenty-One Days without You," but her husband complained so, because she had shut him out of her creative life, that she cut the sequence: "he had cut into the inspiration; he demanded my presence back again, into his life, and," she adds ambiguously and ambivalently, "I couldn't take that much from him."

Always in Sexton's poetry, sexuality is rejuvenating but limiting; there is a terrible war between the desires of her body ("I burn the way money burns"), as becomes and blights a Newton-Wellesley girl raised at a certain time in a certain way:

. . . And that tonight our skins, our bones, that have survived our fathers, will meet, delicate in the hold, fastened together in an intricate lock. Then one of us will shout, 'My need is more desperate!' and I will eat you slowly with kisses even though the killer in you has gotten out.

Poetic enough, but Sexton wanted more, perhaps more than flesh can manage or spirit aspire to; she had to devour her lovers "slowly with kisses" *because*, not "even though," "the killer in [them] has gotten out." For the killer in her lovers spoke to another killer, one in herself which in time she would no longer be able to contain. And if the killer in them was their inadequacy, was the killer in her also her own sense of inadequacies—as a woman? a lover? a wife? a mother? even as a poet and a human being?
In the Paris Interview she says, "women tell time by the body. They are like clocks . . . always fastened to the earth, listening for its small animal noises." Born of blood, measuring time, life, birth by blood cycles, Sexton, the woman and the artist, wants to be wife, mother, lover, poet: "I didn't want to be the killer; I wanted to be the one who gave birth, who encouraged things to grow and to flower, not the prisoner." But, like Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Sexton, the lover, always hears the beckoning, the secret temptation, of Sexton, the killer, killer of those fleshly and creative selves "borrowed" from other people, for she would love and kill them, too:

Death's sad bone; bruised, you'd say,
And yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
raging at the fruit, a pumped up moon,
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,
leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
something unsaid, the phone off the hook
and the love, whatever it was, an infection.

In 45 Mercy Street, arranged and edited by her daughter Linda after her mother's death, Sexton records the scarifying last three years of her life, but the poet's careful polishing is missing. The center of this volume, the emblem of its shattered heart, is a cycle of seventeen poems, "The Divorce Papers" (here, cut by no husband's interruption of artistic endeavor, but torn by the wrenching of a lifetime's shared history).

Shackled to a husband who has left her, she alternately hates and longs for him. She refers to him as a "Nazi," a "Panzer man," a "swastika," and to the courtroom as the "gas chamber," a prolepsis of her death by gas in the garage of her home only a few months after the divorce decree was final. Yet elsewhere in this litany of loss, Sexton remarks, "I say now,/You gave what you could"; she regrets "a love/Undergoing open heart surgery"; repeatedly, she asks, "When a life is over,/The one you were living for,/Where do you go?"

In Erica Jong's latest novel, How to Save Your Own Life, there is a digressive chapter called "The Housewife Poet," on the implications
of Anne Sexton’s life and suicide (Jong calls Sexton “Jeannie”). In it, Jong paints a portrait of Sexton at the end of her tether:

She was thin, hysterical, wired that night at the Algonquin. She had lost 25 pounds since leaving Bumby, her husband of 25 years. Both her kids were away at college. . . . She had just lost a beautiful married lover—one of those struggling, straggling poor-fessor-poets who falls in love with great lady poets, promises everything and then goes back to his wife, his dog, his tenure. Gutless.

"Men today are gutless," she said. "But who can blame them? I'm often terrified myself," and she laughed like a shower of gravel hitting a window.

When they had last met, Jong says that Sexton gave her a notebook with the Kierkegaard epigraph, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Sexton told her that the purpose of the notebook was "to understand your own life—or to save it." How much of the story is apocryphal is conjecture. Neither notebook nor Kierkegaardian quote could save Sexton's life. She wanted to live and work within those notebook covers, but she needed to love outside those manageable boundaries; the tension between the artistic lust and the fleshly lust was soon to seem insupportable.

There is no place to go, with or without the self. After the divorce is final, "I roam a dead house,/A frozen kitchen, a bedroom/like a gas chamber." In the last section of 45 Mercy Street, so bitterly named, "Eating the Leftovers," she is emptied of feeling, of words, of the voracious appetite which helped destroy her and her connections with others. She writes her own epitaph, the epitaph that says "enough":

Now that I have written many words
And let out so many loves, for so many,
And been altogether what I always was—
A woman of excess, of zeal and greed,
I find the effort useless.

These last poems are not Sexton's best work; marred by a loss of control, the lines are less poetry than cri de coeur. She tells "Despair,/I don't like you very well./ You don't suit my clothes or my cigarettes," and tries to wrestle with that despair. What the effort cost her we can only imagine, when she writes: "Somehow DECEASED keeps getting/ stamped in red over the word HOPE." She could not keep going. No
longer could she try. The valedictory for this book, as for Sexton’s life, is in her poem, "The Fish That Walked":

The fish replied
You must be a poet,
A lady of evil luck
desiring to be what you are not,
longing to be
what you can only visit.

Anne Sexton was a lady of evil luck—and a gifted poet—because of her longing, and in spite of it, she no longer could continue her visit to life; out of her excess, her zeal and greed, she gave it all up, cut the number of days too soon. Always too greedy, for her, there were only leftovers; the frozen kitchen led to the garage.

In "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," she compares herself to that wife and, as usual, finds herself wanting—in both senses:

Let’s face it, I have been momentary.
A luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbor . . .

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.

She is so naked and singular.
She is the sum of your self and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.

As for me, I am a watercolor.
I wash off.

Sexton is gone. Not the bright red sloop nor the poor dinghy could row her across that uncharted sea, for she had neither oars nor oarlocks; at the last, neither will nor imagination. Wanting to be climbed, she was unable to be a monument, to be solid, for she kept slipping away. Ever prickly, she could only yearn to be all harmony. Never a watercolor, wanting to be an oil, Sexton and her poetry will not wash off.
II. Another Entry in the Death Notebooks

JEFFREY L. LANT

Anne Sexton was born in 1928 into a well-to-do Newton, Massachusetts family, where she was more coddled than disciplined. Allowed to run free, the vivacious Anne Gray Harvey (as she was then known) was, in the words of her sister Blanche, "much-loved, over indulged—the center of attention." She was so accustomed to getting her own way that her friendships were seldom sharing arrangements between peers, but rather exercises in Anne's domination. "It was hard to be Anne's friend," Blanche remembers. "All of her followers were of the slavish variety."

Now to a girl much petted and admired, the conquest of little girls held limited interest. Rather, from an early age, she delighted in perfecting her ability to ensnare little boys. Thus when other schoolgirls were awkwardly attending dances demurely dressed in tulle, Anne played the femme fatale in close-fitting and provocative red satin. "Determined to be a seductress," the editors of Sexton's newly collected and published letters discovered (Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters), "she practised kissing—using her full-length mirror as a model. With an arm encircling the bedroom door, she took her own reflection into a deep and passionate embrace."

Inevitably the boys responded, and though in later years Anne, by then a somewhat more settled matron, was inclined to pooh-pooh her ability to enthrall ("the boys called me Old Bag of Bones because I was so skinny"), at the time she would have been genuinely distressed if every male eye had not followed her progress into a room.

Having angled to gain attention, however, she was cavalier and even cruel about what she did to those who responded. For instance, "One of her favorite tricks was to write passionate love letters to several different young men, and then intentionally mix up the envelopes." Using such stratagem, before her eighteenth year the exuberant Anne had managed to enter into and break off a series of understandings and engagements,
convinced that movement of any kind was more to her taste and definitely more thrilling than stability and commitment.

She changed her mind when she met Alfred Muller Sexton II at the Longwood Cricket Club in July, 1948. Although engaged at the time to another young man, the preparations for her wedding well advanced, she quickly fell in love with the toothy, athletic "Kayo" Sexton, then, in the summer following his sophomore year at Colgate, still wanting to be a doctor.

Marriage to Anne, of course (it was characteristically done after an elopement to North Carolina because she couldn't wait for a society wedding to be arranged), punched a hole in his plans: he gave up his dream of medicine and settled down to a job as sample boy in a Massachusetts woolen firm, a position found for him by Anne's father. Meanwhile, to supplement Kayo's slender weekly paycheck, Anne went to work as a salesclerk in a bookshop.

For two children of the suburban upper middle classes, it was a thin and unglamorous way of life, which promptly became thinner and even less glamorous when Kayo went into the Naval Reserves in Maryland at the time of the Korean War and more importantly when in July, 1953, their first child, Linda Gray Sexton, was born.

Linda Sexton, one of the editors of the collected letters (the other is Lois Ames, who has scored a double coup by being named Sexton's official biographer as well as Sylvia Plath's), refrains from saying that her mother was unfit, but there is plenty of material present to give us grounds for so thinking. For example, "one day, when [Sexton] found Linda neatly stuffing her own excrement into a toy truck for the second day in a row, Anne picked her up and hurled her across the room."

Like other young mothers, Anne Sexton felt the boundaries of her life shrinking: she felt old before her time and was oppressed by the injustice of it all. Given a temperament which had always been erratic, it is not surprising that her life was volatile. "Always, life with Anne was a roller coaster. Her husband and children could never be certain what direction her mood might take. Often she was loving, exuberant, exhilarating to live with, but her suicidal depressions and violent expressions of fear and rage were frightening and confusing."

She groped for some way out of the morass. "Kayo," she wrote in March, 1957, "I think I am beginning, and I do mean just beginning, to find myself—you realize that I must find my own self and be something
or someone, not necessarily in any concrete manner, but in a personal manner.” The manner she chose was poetry. And as she later wrote to fellow poet W. D. Snodgrass, “Poetry and poetry alone has saved my life.”

With characteristic eagerness she threw herself into word slinging. But with uncharacteristic discipline, she continued to stay involved after the initial enthusiasm had long evaporated. In September, 1957, she enrolled in John Holmes's poetry seminar at the Boston Center for Adult Education. A year later she persuaded Robert Lowell to give her a place in his graduate writing course at Boston University, although she had no degree and her formal education was slight. In these classes the important friendships began: at the Boston Center she first encountered Maxine Kumin, “the keeper of the gate for seventeen years.” At Boston University, Sylvia Plath. And, of course, Robert Lowell himself, the cornerstone and prime exemplar of the genre of confessional poetry which Anne Sexton was also to attempt.

Thereafter, for the next several years Anne’s life took on a structure and a purposefulness it had previously lacked. She wrote, she critiqued her own and other poets’ work, and above all, she submitted for publication to show the world she existed and, more importantly, to prove to herself that she really was a writer and not just a suburban housewife with grand illusions. Finally, in March, 1960, To Bedlam and Part Way Back was published, to be followed by a succession of other books, including Live or Die (1967), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, and Love Songs (1969), which secured the most critical acclaim.

Content to pour out in her poems her most intimate feelings about “terror, deformity, madness and torture” (which she told novelist Kurt Vonnegut were her “bag”), life generally was never more productive—or calm. In part, of course, this was because Anne began to realize that her own tormenting experiences (now bringing a substantial amount of recognition) could be turned to her own good account. She successfully wheedled for a Guggenheim Fellowship; browbeat the chairman of the Boston University English Department into making her a full professor (“Aside from the fact that I am ‘a name,’ I am a great teacher”); and inched up her lecture fee to $1,500 a performance. These victories pleased her very much indeed, no longer because they reaffirmed her sense that she was actually a poet, but because of the power they made her feel she had.
Her editors had written of this time: "As Anne plunged into the politics of literature, demonstrating that she had as fine an acumen for business as she did for poetry, she did not hesitate to use her fame or the threat of her mental instability as a lever. Once she became aware of her ability to "psych into" other people, she adroitly manipulated them to do all she asked." But as the perceptive Lord Acton once noted, power corrupts. Where Anne was once content to angle for fellowships and attain pride of place as a professor, now she wanted more and still more. She especially wanted the kind of personal domination over others which she had not had since those schoolgirl days when she had scandalized and captivated in form-fitting red satin: after twenty-four years of marriage, believing the world was full of men who wanted her, she divorced Kayo, over his unavailing protests.

Immediately, with the sheet anchor gone, her situation deteriorated. In September, 1973, she wrote author May Swenson, "I am three quarters of the way through a divorce and very broke and have a Christly need for some foreign land and some space to work in." Instead, what she got was an avalanche of negative reviews to her latest outpouring of emotion, *The Death Notebooks*. And she was very low indeed.

It was about this time that I happened to dine one evening next to Louise Conant, to whom, along with her husband Loring, Anne Sexton had dedicated *The Death Notebooks*. I do not remember which of us suggested that Anne Sexton be invited to come to Harvard and read in the new year, but I remember distinctly how quickly she accepted the invitation. Down though she was, however, she was not so far down that she was willing to accept an invitation from Dudley House alone (it was not nearly well enough known); but as a member of The Signet Society (not "The Harvard Literary Club," as her editors have it), an elite body which had figured among its members T. S. Eliot, Norman Mailer, and George Plimpton, I was able to effect a joint invitation which satisfied her. The measure of her desire to have it was that it was given on the understanding no fee would be paid, which is how The Signet manages to attract big-name literati and still remain solvent.

Thereafter Sexton called me with insistent regularity, ostensibly to check on the details of the reading, actually to pass the late hours of the day and early hours of the morning with another human being. At the time I wondered why. It was not until I read her collected letters that I knew how bereft of real friends she was. "She required constant
service and care, and those closest to her began to set limits in self protection. . . . She began cultivating new friends who would do all she asked, and punished those of long standing with silence.” The calls which had begun in December, 1973 (the first was the day after Christmas), quickly lost their novelty. By February 10, I was recording in my journal, “She is proving to be a great problem and is exceedingly demanding.”

Despite our midnight telephone relationship (she seldom called during the day and never when sober), she was quite capable of handling the organizational aspects of the reading, as she proved in a letter of February 25, 1974 (published in the new collection), when she took me to task for the inadequate publicity we had arranged. Terrified there would be no crowd, and thus no lift to her depressed spirits, she wanted fanfare. The students who were arranging the publicity, however, unaware of her animus, treated her as merely another in the long line of celebrities who daily trooped to Harvard, and were lackadaisical in their preparation. Sexton therefore resorted to promoting herself on the radio and in the newspapers, and the result was the overflow crowd she wanted. Her face red splotched, and tufted with hair, her black-and-white dress slit provocatively, Sexton, reeling slightly from liquor, nonetheless wowed the crowd with her act. But the critics were, as usual, unmoved. Richard Burgin wrote in the Boston Globe, “Sexton’s is a poetry of a highly intense surface without enough behind it to be fully satisfying.”

So delighted was Sexton, however, by the crowd that she consented to have lunch at Dudley House with some undergraduates interested in her work, at which affair I acted as moderator and gofer, refilling a tumbler with vodka, which she drank neat. Charmed by the reaction of the small group, high on liquor and herself, Sexton was very warm indeed to me after lunch. Characteristically she used the occasion to ask for one more commission: would I find a few men for her, aged thirty-seven ("not a decade younger")?

After that, she was gone. On October 4 of the same year, she committed suicide at her home in Weston, the Harvard high having long worn off and no others in sight. “After all,” as she once wrote of Sylvia Plath, “she had the suicide inside her. As I do. As many of us do. But, if we’re lucky, we don’t get away with it and something or someone forces us to live.”