

Anne Sexton: the Poet and Death

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“Only poetry, I have told you, permits interpretation. That is why I no longer succeed, in my technique, in making it hold. I am not enough of a poet,” Jacques Lacan declared in his *Séminaire* in 1977, thus posing the question of an other signifier that would allow “people who come to speak to us in psychoanalysis” not to “swallow everything up in the dullest of kinships,” but to try instead to orient themselves toward kinship with the poet.¹

Anne Sexton was authorized to be a poet by the trans-ferential relationship that linked her to her therapist, Dr. Martin Orne. She began to write poems at the beginning of her therapy in the mid-fifties. She had previously been hospitalized for a suicide attempt. In an interview evoking this passage of a woman from the inside, “victim of the *American Dream*,” as she puts it, toward the poet, she says: “The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself [. . .] it was a kind of a rebirth at twenty-nine.”²

Anne Sexton has been described as the “high priestess” or the “Mother” of confessional poetry. She very rarely accepted this qualification, herself preferring the term “personal,” thus secretly engaging in a debate with T.S. Eliot’s *impersonal theory of poetry*.³ As she explains: “My poetry is very personal (*laughing*). I don’t think I write public poems. I write very personal poems . . .” And also: “I have written personal poetry often on the theme of madness.”⁴

A biography of Anne Sexton by Diane Middlebrook was published in 1991 in the United States.⁵ It created a scandal because D. Middlebrook used as material the three hundred tapes of sessions Dr. Orne kept in his possession; Anne Sexton’s daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, the executor of her estate, authorized it. In an article by Éric Laurent and published in *La Lettre mensuelle* of *L’École de la Cause freudienne*, these tapes were given the same status as Gide’s notes addressed to his psychobiographer.⁶ The tapes provoked a passionate discussion among psychiatrists, but also among poets, some of whom

argued for the code of ethics regarding secrecy and the protection of patients, and others for Anne Sexton's supposed wish to make herself useful and to make her personal suffering public.⁷

The Voice of Poetry

A. Sexton had had a tormented, troubled, and in certain respects even chaotic life. Martin Orne treated her for eight years. Her therapy was interrupted when she left Boston for Philadelphia. He gave her the diagnosis of hysteria. However, she hallucinated and had major dissociative troubles. The recordings were made to treat her "memory troubles." Without doubt, A.S. was a difficult patient. At first, her psychiatrist advised her to take notes on what was said in the sessions. He very quickly encouraged her to write poetry. Having crossed paths with a talented musician during her hospitalization, she had thought Dr. Orne specialized in the treatment of creative people. As she confided in a 1962 interview, one evening she was listening to a lecture by a Harvard professor on the sonnet. When Prof. Richards explained that it was a fourteen-line structure with a particular type of rhymes and rhythms, she wrote down the formula: "I thought, well I could do that. So I went downstairs and wrote one. Interestingly, I called up my mother to read it to her—she suggested a better image, for one thing. I wrote one another day, and I took them to my doctor [...] He said they were wonderful." This was all she needed to hear. "I kept writing and writing and giving them all to him—just from the transference; I kept writing because he was approving."⁸ At first her poetry is addressed to her mother, from whom her first long separation at the age of ten was accompanied by the appearance of a symptom, a severe constipation, which necessitated hospitalization.

Her poetry is then addressed to her therapist who knew how to encourage it. We learn from her biography that Anne Sexton was, at times, tormented by a "'tiny voice' in her head 'shouting from far away.'" She attributed this voice to her Great Aunt, Nana, who was her "beloved 'twin'"¹⁰ when she was a child. Nana died shortly before Anne Sexton's first suicide attempt when she was fifteen years old and at a time when she had seen Nana manifest [*décompenser*] her psychosis while

they were living together. Not recognizing her, Nana shouted at her “You’re not Anne!” Sexton supposed that this tiny voice which, when she was sick, at times invited her to kill herself, took root in Nana’s rage. In one of her poems she named it *The Nana-hex*.¹¹ But on other occasions, as she wrote to her psychiatrist friend Anne Wilder in 1964, this voice was reduced simply to “a constant rhyming in [her] head.”¹² During one of her numerous hospitalizations where she sought to distance the permanent parasite that language was for her, she took to babbling with another patient who suffered from the same phenomenon: “We laugh for ten minutes at a group of rhymes . . . At night I dream in jokes,” she wrote to Wilder.¹³ Suffering and *jouissance* were thus linked and caused by what she named “language,” the source of her inspiration. “Language has nothing to do with rational thought,” she maintained. “I think that’s why I get so horribly furious and disturbed with rational thought [...] I mumble language to the trees by the pool as if they knew and am fiercely resenting anyone who doesn’t talk language [...]. Well, nevermind. I think language is beautiful. I even think insanity is beautiful (surely the root of language), except that it is painful.”¹⁴

Anne Sexton, poet, considered poetry *the art* of language. Understand here that it is a question of language inasmuch as it forecloses the subject. The words of the poem do not say the truth of the subject, instead they write it in duping it [*en le jouant*]. This is how Anne Sexton, who particularly enjoyed palindromes, formulates it in a letter to Dr. Orne: “If I write RATS and discover that rats reads STAR backwards [...] then is star untrue? [...] Of course I KNOW that words are just a counting game, I know this until the words start to arrange themselves and write something better than *I* would ever know. [...] All I am is a trick of words writing themselves.”¹⁵

Truth and *Jouissance*

Anne Sexton was often in a trance toward the end of her sessions. She was a speaking body, in keeping with the distinction made by Jacques-Alain Miller between the speaking subject and speaking body. Her psychiatrist had difficulty awakening her and so this prolonged the time of her sessions. He even

let her sleep in the consulting room. Of course, this didn't help her remember what she said. This is why he decided to tape her sessions on cassettes. Anne was then invited to listen to them, so as to note what she had said. It was in this context that the revelations took place, telling of the fondling [*attouchments*] on her father's part or Nana's ambiguous caresses. Anne Sexton herself had a great corporeal proximity with her children, and her two daughters wished to defend themselves from this.

It is remarkable that these kinds of admissions were not really revelations. They did not seem to produce in her effects of truth, hence effects on desire. They testified, instead, as also did her erotic life, to a deregulated drive not limited by castration. Only the reflection written by the poetry made the limitation possible in fixing death on the letter. She dealt with the relation to her father and her love for him in many of her poems, but it is clear that this did not suffice for her, as she made understood in an interview shortly before her death: "You can't solve problems by writing. They are still present. I've heard psychiatrists say, 'Look, you have forgiven your father. It's there in your poem.' But I haven't forgiven my father. I have only written it."¹⁶

Anne Sexton was often in this same trance state when she wrote. We discover in her biography the narration of sequences in which the trance ended after she finished a poem while coming back home after her session. The flow of words from a body disconnected from the signifier was stopped by the letter. Thus, once, after having been put out of her psychiatrist's office after diverse unexpected turns [*péripéties*], she came home in tears, with no power to stop them, until "[f]ishing in her pocket for tissues she found a slip of paper on which she had transcribed some lines from a poem by Rimbaud: 'Ma faim, Anne, Anne, / Fuis sur ton âne.' . . . 'I don't read French'," she says, "'but all of a sudden saw my name—'Anne, Anne' just hopped out of the French, my name—and the rest of the poem is about hunger'."¹⁷

"Flee on your Donkey" is the poem in which she draws on this experience. What she has in her pocket is the literal materiality of the little slip of paper; it supports no message from the Other. It does not call forth meaning [*le sens*] from the

Other, but, beyond the true and the false, it invites a treatment of the impossible separation, it sketches a fragile edge.

There where in an analysis poetic interpretation tends to empty the transference of meaning, Anne Sexton made of the transference, which she came to qualify as a swindle, the condition of her poetic enterprise. Poetry functioned here as a *sinthome*, as a reconfiguration by which one cannot say that *jouissance* takes on a meaning, not necessarily at least, but a *reengineering*¹⁸ that permitted her to pass from discomfort to satisfaction during the years that she wrote.

The End

Anne Sexton took support from her madness to write in order to keep death at bay. The threat of separation was for her always an ally in this operation of writing. Her poetry addressed to her mother, a failed writer who never believed in her daughter's talent, at the same time separated her from her. Toward the end of her life she felt her inspiration silence itself.¹⁹ When she was no longer held back by any solid transference, she decided to get a divorce, which must have deprived her of the support—in the final instance decisive—offered her by her husband who qualified her as the “masculine Nana.” The voices returned with a vengeance, inviting her to kill herself.²⁰

Anne Sexton had given her own interpretation of the suicide of Sylvia Plath to the minister of the Unitarian church who organized a ceremony in Plath's memory. She thought that in killing herself, Sylvia Plath may have found the path back to her mother's house, while when she was living she could not leave England and her husband, Ted Hughes, who was already sleeping with another woman. Anne Sexton killed herself in her garage, where they found her, her car motor running. She was forty-six years old. The carbon monoxide poisoning was surely an allusion to Sylvia Plath's suicide, which is also confirmed by the fact that to die, she enveloped herself in the red fur coat of her mother—the same one she speaks of in her long poem “The Double Image,” which deals with the ravaging relation between mother and daughter.²¹

Translated by Jack W. Stone

Endnotes

¹ J. Lacan, “*Vers un signifiant nouveau*,” text établi par Jacques-Miller, *Ornicar?*, n°17/18, p. 22-23.

² Anne Sexton, interview with Barbara Kevles, *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978) and also *NES: No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985).

³ Joanna Gill, “‘My Seeney, Mr. Eliot’: Anne Sexton and the ‘Impersonal Theory of Poetry’,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27, ½ (Fall 2003), pp. 36-56, Indiana University Press, 2004.

⁴ Harry Moore, Interview with Anne Sexton, and also, Gregory Fitz Gerald, Interview with Anne Sexton, in *NES*, *op. cit.*

⁵ Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton, a Biography*, First Vintage Books Edition, New York, November 1992.

⁶ Éric Laurent, “Une première littéraire,” *Lettre mensuelle n°105*, janvier 1992, p. 33-34.

⁷ See on this subject, among others, Martin T. Orne, “The Sexton Tapes,” *The New York Times* July 23, 1991. Editorials/Letters, “The Poet’s Art Mined the Patient’s Anguish,” *The New York Times* July 26, 1991. Samuel M. Hughes, “The Sexton Tapes,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 1991. And, finally, Maxine Kumin’s introduction to *Anne Sexton Complete Poems*, “How it Was.”

⁸ D.W. Middlebrook, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16 and 219.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹ Anne Sexton CP, “The Hex” (The Book of Folly, 1972), Mariner Books, New York 1999, p. 313: Every time I get happy/the Nana-hex comes through.”

¹² D.W. Middlebrook, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82. Anne Sexton particularly liked the palindrome “rats live on no evil star” which is also the title of one of her poems in the collection *The Death Notebooks*, 1974. But the one that enchanted her even more was *Dog/God*. She had besides begun to speak of herself as Ms. God, a doubly ironic appellation. See M. Kumin, *op. cit.*, p.XXX.

¹⁶ *NES: No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose*, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ D.W. Middlebrook, *op. cit.*, p. 175 and 179.

¹⁸ Miller, J.-A., *L’orientation lacanienne*, “*Choses de finesse en psychanalyse*,” course given in the framework of the Department of Psychoanalysis of Paris VIII, lesson of March 18, 2009, unedited.

¹⁹D. Middlebrook, *op. cit.*, p. 371. According to the testimony of her poet friend Maxine Kumin, toward the end life became hell for Anne Sexton: “On Thorazine, she gained weight, became intensely sun-sensitive, and complained that she was so overwhelmed with lassitude that she could not write. Without medication, the voices returned,” *CP*, p. xxxiii.

²⁰Anne Sexton *CP*, “The Double Image,” (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back II*, 1960), *op. cit.*, p. 40: “That October day we went/to Gloucester the red hills/
reminded me of the dry red fur/coat I played in as a child.

²¹Anne Sexton *CP*, “The Double Image” (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back II*, 1960), *op. cit.*, p. 40; “That October day we went/to Gloucester the red hills/
reminded me of the dry red fur fox/coat I played in as a child.”

