

MARIA CARMELA COCO DAVANI

Anne Sexton:
The Scene of the Disordered Senses

Transgression

Training in poetry therapy seems to be the starting point of Anne Sexton's poetic practice. In a letter to W. D. Snodgrass (1959), she wrote: "I just have the most difficult time forcing myself to write about what I won't work on in therapy." ¹ However, it would be too simplistic to reduce Sexton's poetry to an auxiliary psychoanalytic transcription, even though, under some aspects, her poetry extends the method of psychoanalytic transcription. Writing did help her reconstruct a fragmented personality, but her search for a personal form shifted the direction of her poetry toward complex and unexplored paths. It can be argued, therefore, that in several ways Anne Sexton uses literary communication as a transgression of norms and conventions.

She violates socio-cultural norms by imposing a code of transgression on some of the ideals and values that dominate her society and tend to control the individual. On the other hand, she abuses the literary norm—at least within the poetic tradition—by extending the methods of psychotherapy and confession into poetic communication. These are methods which differ from almost all other types of communication due to their essentially private nature. It does not seem inappropriate, therefore, to speak of an extension of such procedures inasmuch as they are directed towards the analysis of mental conflicts and physical aspects of the poetic subject.

Thus Sexton's poetry works against the norm because she dares to shift its content from one type of communication to another. The

same applies to the treatment she imposes on fairy tales (*Transformations*, 1971), the Gospels (*The Jesus Papers*, 1972), the Bible and the Psalms (*The Death Notebooks*, 1974). Exploring some of the modalities employed in this shifting will be rewarding, though problematic.

The Sodality

The poetry seminars run by John Holmes (1957) and by Robert Lowell (1958) were occasions for Anne Sexton to become intrigued by the techniques of writing and to contract life-long relationships.

Maxine Kumin was to become Anne's inseparable friend for the seventeen years to come. Robert Lowell would elicit an ambiguous feeling of attraction and refusal as teacher and competitor. W. D. Snodgrass, with his "bushy mustache" and "oafish face," would turn out to be the faithful friend, victim and refuge of her epistolary explosions. Sylvia Plath was to be the friend with whom to talk about the magic of suicide, and George Starbuck the witness of the sweet ladies' Boston sodality. All of them contributed to shaping the seedbed in which to compare, quash or create their poetic utterance. In the background, Whitman, Schwartz and Roethke were some of the hidden—or not so hidden—voices that would influence the adjustment of their models.

"Confessional" was the definition coined by M. L. Rosenthal in reviewing Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). The label was extended to this group and to some other poets who used strategies that broke through into "the personal," causing the private to become public. However, we cannot speak of a movement or a school, and apparently there were no collective manifestoes. At most, we can speak of a discursive community which adopted what S. H. Schmidt would call "a model of reality through common consent."² What the "Confessionals" seem to share in constructing their world is a centripetal view centered on "I-ness," even when disguised under epic and narrative forms. Robert Phillips suggests an "opposition to, or reaction from the Eliotic aesthetic, which influenced several generations of poets" with its centrifugal tendency to "escape from personality."³

The Trap of the Label

Most of the "Confessional Poets" felt trapped by the label and refused it; even some critics seemed doubtful of its fitness. Anne Sexton, with ill-suffered acceptance, wrote as late as 1970,

At one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, but *mea culpa*. Now I say that I'm the only confessional poet. No matter how hard you work at it, your own voice shows through.⁴

In these words she grants "the Private" the authority of a poetic mode. As Maxine Kumin puts it in the introduction to *The Complete Poems*, "The stuff of Anne's life, mercilessly dissected, is here in the poems. Of all confessional poets, none had quite Sexton's courage to make a clean breast of it."⁵

Confessional poetry enriches its paradigm of epistemic modalities with trends and values which are also typical of modern poetry in general, though some individual variants should be taken into account. One might include the tendency to impose personal autonomy by breaking conventions or solving literary problems, lack of aims and objects in planning, skepticism in religion, loss of role, ambiguity and contradiction in meaning. It would be interesting, therefore, to examine in more detail some solutions offered by Sexton's poetry in the configuration of concepts, relations, processes and values.

The Ghost Author

Confessional poetry more than any other kind of poetry raises two orders of problems for the reader. One is concerned with the textual "I" and its definition, the other with the "notion of sincerity." It is, however, interesting to observe that Confessional Poetry, in general, cannot be called autobiographical in the sense of a journal-style account. This is due to the fact that in each author there is a varying degree of transposition of what we may call a code of behavior of the empirical author into a code appropriate to the formation of an autonomous textual world.

Sexton's poetry pivots around the position of the "I." The role played by "I" changes and multiplies in the text according both to the functions performed by "I" on different levels and to some poetic modalities. On the story level, for instance, "I" plays the role of protagonist; on the level of discourse, "I" becomes narrator or participant, using the *first person* to introduce the utterance directly.

Nevertheless, in Sexton's case, there has been wide debate on the problem of admitting behind the centrality of "I" the "implied author" (in Wayne C. Booth's definition), with all the speech situations camouflaging the factual events of the poet's life. Indeed, this hypothesis does not seem to be sustainable, even on a superficial reading of the text. Anne Sexton was deeply aware that the poet in the text becomes a sort of "ghost author," but she believed in the relative autonomy of the text once it had been produced. So we are inclined to agree with Seymour Chatman when he says that "the implied author establishes the norms of the text," and the real author can postulate whatever norms he likes through his implied author.⁶

But does a poet always tell the truth, and if not, how can one speak of poetic truth? Asked about this apparent contradiction in an interview, Anne Sexton answered: "To really get at the truth of something is the poem not the poet," and she added, "it might be a kind of poetic truth, and not a factual one."⁷ In other words, we can say that the empirical author is lying when s/he produces a literary text, because s/he adds to it the special trait of *fiction*.⁸

So the literary text is fictional inasmuch as it has a system of its own, it produces its textual world and, therefore, its own truth.

A Model of Poetics

An example of the textual metatheory of Sexton's poetics is to be found in "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" (CP 34-35).

The antecedent takes us back to some disagreement between Anne Sexton and her first teacher and friend John Holmes. The master had accused the student of an excess of privateness in her lines and of pursuit of individual freedom: temptations that might proceed

from a misplaced nostalgia and might be contagious. Even Maxine Kumin had been advised to beware. The poem is Anne's polemical answer in poetic form. It confirms the autonomy of the artifact and states some principles of her poetics.

The aesthetic function is determined by the notion of "Order" (CP 34. 3). Order produces meaning and it marks what is perceived imposing connotative values and cutting new shapes. When imposed on a pre-existing order, it is able to transform it. As Marcello Pagnini states, "order" establishes the norms of the poem converting it into "an original model or system."⁹

In the poem, the literary communication is developed through opposition: "I," as donor, performs the act of offering the poem and has a counterpart in "You," that refuses the present, considering it inadequate. Consequently, "You" becomes the antagonist in the aesthetic reality adopted by the Sextonian "I."

The poem is introduced through negative connotations, "Not that it was beautiful" (CP 34. 1), and through spatial limits, "in that narrow diary of my mind, / in the commonplaces of the asylum" (34.5-6). Its model, therefore, is not designed to remain within conventional canons of poetic beauty.

"My own head," as an agent of the aesthetic plan, is defined as "glass" and "inverted bowl," directing the reader towards the semes of "fragility" and "overturning."

I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie,
and fasten a new skin around it
as if I were dressing an orange
or a strange sun.

(CP 34-35. 27-32)

Yet, whatever the properties attributed to the poem, the concluding process is introduced by the modal "will," which expresses the volition of "I" to keep things as they are. Furthermore, the poem is transformed into an autonomous aesthetic model owing to the simile "like a complicated lie" which adds the special trait of "fictitiousness." In fact, it is in the productive act peculiar to poetic creativity that

something "new" and "strange," situated beyond literary truth, can be asserted.

Finally, "I," assuming the role of the poet, expresses hope in the potentiality of poetic writing and in its pragmatic function that involves both sender and receiver, "something special / for someone" (CP 35. 35-36)

Thus Sexton's poetry, whose stress is laid on the Particular and the Private, inclines towards the Interpersonal and the Collective.

The Semantic Space

The semantic space, or place of knowledge, in a text has a topography of its own that we "can survey" or "walk through mentally" in search of some kind of coherence.¹⁰ Umberto Eco speaks of "inferential walks" as a way of advancing hypotheses about our construction of a text's possible world.¹¹

In order to single out individual or collective properties linked to the protagonist and the textual environment, the reader has to rely on her/his linguistic and encyclopedic competence, which may guide her/him in filling empty spaces and forecasting some possible state of things or course of events.

Owing to the epistemic and axiological structure of the Sextonian semantic space, it is not easy to find access either to its system of knowledge or its system of values. The first hypothesis we can advance is that, from the very beginning, Sexton's textual world is built on some basic themes of human experience, such as Woman, Folly, Body, Love, Religion and Death, focusing on the position of "I" as actor and protagonist. However, the sense underlying the words and expressions chosen to describe such a portion of the world model often collides with the institutional system of meanings and values usually taken for granted by the community in which the text was produced.

If we single out such particular traits, it is possible, within certain limits, to speak of a Sextonian subcode—at least if we consider the textual world of a semantic system whose shape is determined by the new connotative meanings and by the new values attached to some key words and expressions.

In particular, the properties assigned to items related to emotive, supernatural or dreamlike states are often contradictory. It is difficult to guess their semantic direction. The polyvalence and semantic mutability of these items have a double effect: on the one hand they limit the possibility of speaking of a Sexton subcode, while on the other hand they constitute additional features of such a subcode. The fact is that in order to be admitted to Sexton's world we have to free ourselves of whatever right-minded social prejudice we may have and enter a world which sometimes we might be even tempted to refuse, but which unfortunately exists even in cultures of our time—as it has always existed, under different forms, in different times and cultures. It is the world of "Aliens," or of those who believe themselves to be such, whether for their social, physical or emotional status which diverts their way of thinking or their behavior from institutional canons.

But we also have to jettison linguistic and literary prejudices, and comply with the directions coming from a text founded on paradox, irony and the ever-changing representation of its semantic universe.

The Quest for Identification

Sexton's poetry appears to be structured along the main path of the construction (or reconstruction) of the "I" through a process of identification with other textual items such as "Witch," "Jesus," "God," etc., or with the refusal of identification, as with "Mother," "Father," etc. The quest for identification pervades the whole text.

The basic question that opens the process, "Am I still lost?" (*CP* 4. 39) is placed in the first poem of *Bedlam*. The supposed answer, "I have lost my map" (*CP* 447.25) is in the last sequence. The identification process is generally destined to fail owing to the elusiveness of the object comparison, and every failure is like a Small Death.

As an agent of the textual situation, "I" forms some outstanding links with other individuals or arguments. The most prominent of these seem to be I/Woman-Madwoman-Poet-Witch, I/Mother-Father-Daughter-Man (Husband), I/Voices-Angels-Jesus-God. The I/Death

link is almost always present in either weak or strong forms, and somehow determines the direction of the whole text.

The properties and relations of such items are not fixed once and for all. They often change, acquiring new sense on account of the words that occur in their environment or by way of analogy with the items compared.

The Mental Dissection of "I"

The mental dissection of "I" is present from the very beginning. The sequence *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) represents the starting point of Sexton's search and fixes its setting in the world of Madness, which may be considered "the topical node" of the text.¹² Bedlam is the metaphor for "madness" and for the place where the disintegrated mind should be recomposed. The psychological setting of "I" ("in and out of folly") is described through the environmental stage, and the actors that people it are skillfully graded according to the position covered.

In "You, Doctor Martin" (CP 3-4), the hierarchy of pronouns runs from "You," "They," to "I," "We." Each of these creates a scheme of progression of its own. The receiver, Doctor Martin, seems to refer to some extratextual unit, but is soon absorbed in the communicative situation, placing itself in the highest position of the pronominal isotope.

Around the topical node of "Madness," Sexton activates some "frames" which contribute to deepening her distressing knowledge of the phenomenon. In fact, as the text progresses, the topic "Madness" grows externally and internally—in terms both of the spatio-temporal elements, and of the actions of the psychopath.

Doctor Martin ("You"), the prototype of the medical class, is the protagonist who exerts his influence through the automatic arms of his nurses ("They"). He is the object of contrasting feelings like love and hate. He is endowed with power like a king or God, and owns "a plastic sky" (CP 3. 23). He is as tricky as a fox, and with his "third eye" (3.26) he can inspect and dominate his subjects, "We" and "I,"

and rehearse them as "marionettes" (*CP* 41. 191).

The awkward situation of the Madwoman reaches its dramatic crisis in "Flee on Your Donkey" (*CP* 97-105), where the attempt to recompose the dissected mind fails with the loss of hope in such an enterprise: "because there was no other place / to flee to / I came back to the scene of the disordered senses" (97. 3-5). However, even "disorder is not what it was. / I have lost the trick of it! / The innocence of it!" (*CP* 103. 199-201).

The deforming screen of memory has altered the structure of past situations through a continuous sliding of meanings, and focuses on patterns which express her animosity towards people, things, states and events. The comparison between the previous configuration ("then") and the present one ("now") makes us infer the state of delusion of the subject whose world is deformed, dangling between factual and non-factual.

The Map of the Body

The dissection of "I-ness" proceeds through the physical aspects of "I" and of its disease.

"The Operation" (*CP* 56-59) pivots around the fragmentation of the body and the humiliation undergone by the subject, the antagonist-helpers still being doctors and nurses, while the patients are the passive mass. In such a context, "I" attempts the recognition of her fragmented body and makes it public. Every part of the body assumes individual traits and takes up arms against the imposition coming from outside—be it the medical class or the operation itself.

The reductive, passive and disintegrative aspects that dominate these poems are contrasted with the recomposition and magnification ("of the woman I am," *CP* 182. 12) of the poem "In Celebration of My Uterus" (*CP* 181-83). The impetus, the lists and the Whitmanesque ending "Yes" make of this poem a hymn which goes beyond the limits of its very title—and "I" becomes a symbol of "Femininity." The same technique is used for America; its contradictory and mostly negative aspects are denounced and dissected in "O Ye Tongues" (*CP* 396-413) and elsewhere, but exalted in the "Sixth Psalm" (*CP* 405-06).

The Family Link

"The Double Image" (CP 35-42) activates the family link "Father-Mother-Daughter." This poem is balanced around the elusiveness of the identification of the subject through the image of the "Portrait," "a mocking mirror" (CP 40. 168) where the "double woman ... stares / at herself" (CP 41. 179-80).

The structure of the poem is planned according to a process of accumulation of images, in the style of Snodgrass, to establish a direct relationship between "real" and "unreal." The process evolves according to components of location ("here-there") and of time ("now-then-now-after"), and reaches its conclusion where the subject projects upon her daughter's birth the function of reassembling the split "I."

In the effort to express how the self might come into being, in search of something sufficiently stable outside of itself, a never-ending chain of deferments is set up to which the subject may compare itself. But the imaginary projection remains inadequate.

It is impossible for the subject "I" to restore the union with the "Mother," because the "real" does not fit into any conceptualization. "Mother," in symbolic terms, becomes the emblem of pathology (cancer) and the constant opposer of the subject. "Mother" also represents the extension of "I"'s dissection and disease, enlarging the spectrum of faults which the subject takes upon herself and of the evil she tries to get rid of:

Only my mother grew ill.
 She turned from me, as if death were catching,
 as if death transferred,
 as if my dying had eaten inside her.

(CP 38. 88-91)

"Father," for some obscure reason, will never be recognized as an expression of a moral code. Rather, he participates in an unresolved Oedipus complex, contributing to the estrangement from the "Mother" and forbidding the access of "I" in the family triad. In "Briar Rose" (CP 290-95), at the end of *Transformations*, it is "Daddy" that changes existence into "Prison," out of which "I" persistently struggles to escape.

This poem suggests some analogies with the "Mirror Stage" of the Lacanian model in the process of self knowledge, just as "The Operation" evokes the stage of the "Dissected Body" owing to the disjunction of the various parts of the body, which seem capable of acquiring individual behavior.¹³

Although Sexton is influenced by some psychoanalytic schemes, she uses them in a very personal way, favoring poetic imagery rather than following theoretical models. Apparently, she exceeds the Oedipal triad, Father-Mother-Daughter ("I"), by introducing her daughter "Joy" and attempting a projection into the future. "Joy," the supposed effect or means of the cure, becomes a source or cause of the cure, and acquires the autonomous standard of giver rather than receiver: "I made you to find me" (CP 42. 211).

The link I/Man (Husband) recurs mostly in the *Love Poems* (1969). Love is always bound with the opposition Love/not-Love, Wish-for-Communication/Lack-of-Communication. Lovers are like "exiles" (CP 117. 25), while Marriage recurs with "cage," "knot", "prison" as in "bedded-down knot" (CP 178. 59), or "the cot we share is almost a prison" (CP 177. 35).

But, though Love is present in the most exalting and degrading moments of its life-long existence, it seems destined to be worn away like all worldly things that form a prelude to dissolution and death.

*every bed has been condemned,
not by morality or law,
but by time.*

(CP 180. 108-10)

The fragility of this bond leads to the awareness that the male-female relationship in modern Western societies is no longer linear, even when institutionally sanctioned by marriage. The relationship is complex because Woman has realized that her role is largely passive while the roles of Mother and Housewife tend to trap her in atavistic models. From this state of things derive a host of contradictions. Society can offer no solutions and rather increases the difficulty of choosing among too many objects of desire, glamorized by obsessive advertising but not easy to obtain.

Since society cannot give appropriate answers to existential problems, and tradition cannot help in solving worldly dilemmas, Sexton directs her search towards supernatural forces.

The I/Witch Link

In order to illustrate the I/Witch parallel, we can take a sample from "Her Kind":

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light;
lonely thing, twelve-fingered out of my mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

(CP 15. 1-7)

The metaphoric link pairs "I" with "Witch" and "Woman." "Witch" activates the semantic feature of "Evil, Darkness, Trickery, Madness, Discontinuity." The similes of the refrains—"A woman like that is not a woman, quite" (15. 6), "A woman like that is misunderstood" (16. 13), "A woman like that is not ashamed to die" (16. 20)—are shaded by "quite," imposing on "Woman" the mark of "Ambiguity." "I have been her kind" (15-16. 7, 14, 21) echoes the closing lines of the refrain definitely stating the "I/Woman-Witch" analogy, as if there were some "junto" or cabal between them.

"Witch" is one of Sexton's umbrella terms. Owing to its wide spectrum of possible connotations, it is used with reference to contradictory values such as Agent vs Patient, Active vs Passive, Positive vs Negative, or matching both functions as closely as possible. The Witch, at the beginning only an ominous or inexorable being, as the text progresses becomes a model to express the double aspects of the Madwoman both as a social outcast and as a Poet who can obtain bewitching effects through the art of "Nomination."

In the first instance, as in "Her Kind," the deeper semantic layers seem to activate the ancient cultural meaning of "Alien"

attributed to the Witch: a victim of some inherited power which is beyond her control and has marked her since childhood. This is a recurring theme in Sexton's poetry; its causes lie in being born female in a society centered on male values, and its effects in becoming mad and a candidate for suicide.

In the second instance, the Witch becomes an agent of the situation by overturning the state of passivity. "Power" becomes a force to be imposed and not to be suffered. The potentiality of "Nomination" is such that the words a Witch utters are traditionally believed to cure, transform or create. "The Witch's Life" (CP 423) expresses not only the longing of the poet for witchcraft but also the "Sacredness" of artistic writing: "Only my books anoint me" (423. 17).

For the poet, to be a Witch means to impose power on words, to undermine the dominant ideology with a daring metaphor, to control the unknown or to create it through definition, to have access to the forbidden, which also means to have access to God or to claim divinity, as in "I am God La de dah" (CP 386.60). A few lines later, as often happens in Sexton's verse, this sort of "godlike-ness" is ironically reversed into "Ms Dog" (CP 64) by means of a palindrome, or inversion of letters.

The I/God Link

The I/Voices-Angels-Jesus-God link seems to prolong the I/Witch link and accentuate the questioning, the invocation and the problem of identification.

In "The Double Image" (CP 35) we meet for the first time the word "God" in an address to the child:

Today, my small child, Joyce,
 love your self's self where it lives.
 There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
 why did I let you grow in another place
(CP 36. 34-36)

The lines are cast in the form of advice and let us infer how useless it may well be searching for love away from where one is and

asking questions about who, what, where and when in both existential and supernatural matters. Life's uncertainty is underlined by the words referring to the lack of definition and location of God, and to the misunderstandings the subject may run into.

As the text proceeds, Jesus and God acquire a dominant position as targets to be aimed at or as objects of comparison, but the wish to map Jesus and God in the region allotted to them is never clearly specified and, of course, never found by the searcher. Thus, their identification appears to be an impossible task—the target of a utopian aspiration or a matter for the afterlife.

The lines, whose topical node is Jesus, alternate crude hyper-realistic expressions with language registers mostly borrowed from stereotyped forms of children's literature, such as nursery rhymes or fairy tales. The individual variations are mostly due to play of words, extravagant or shocking puns, baby's lispings or illogicalities that function as variety markers. See, for instance, the following:

I am unfit
to know just who you are: hung up like a pig on exhibit,
the delicate wrists,
the beard drooling blood and vinegar;
hooked to your own weight,
jolting toward death under your nameplate.

(CP 63. 1-6)

The "Jesus Papers" in *The Book of Folly* (1972), published after *Transformations* (1971), accentuate the contrast between an infantile literary style and poignant expressions often based on analogy:

His sex was sewn onto Him like a medal
and His penis no longer arched with sorrow over Him.
He was fasting.
He was like a great house
with no people,
no plans.

(CP 338. 15-20)

The Gospels take on the forms of fairy tales and the behavior of God is often referred to in the language of a magician:

Jesus saw the multitudes were hungry
 And He said Oh Lord,
 send down a short-order cook.
 And the Lord said, Abracadabra.

(CP 340. 1-4)

There is a tendency to degrade the mystery and to reach the human nature of Jesus, removing any trace of divinity, as in "We are the same men, you and I" (CP 343. 13-14).

God's mystery also undergoes a similar demystifying treatment. However, while human attributes are emphasized in the search for analogies with "I," God seems inaccessible and needs to be constructed ex novo. "She invented God through her typewriter," wrote Maxine Kumin in *To Make a Prairie*.¹⁴ God is only a target that lies outside and beyond death. God is only a possibility that escapes any plausible description because He has never been experienced. He is even less knowable than death, whose transient wearing aspects have been shared in life, such as pain-killers, drugs, the failure of interpersonal relationships, the anguish of aloneness.

The Death Notebooks (1974) closes with "O Ye Tongues" (CP 396-413), a series of ten psalms that maintain only some external aspects of the biblical script, while differing deeply in both form and content. There are of course outstanding parallels. The most noteworthy of these are the repetition in the opening lines, the increasing rhythm, the accumulation of images, and the tendency to free verse from rhyme and from a fixed number of stresses, imitating informal or colloquial speech. There is also an escape from an all-inclusive narrative structure, limiting it to short temporal progressions or to cause-effect relationships.

Content is distorted: in the praise of God's magnitude, the lines introduced by "Let" give an original description of God, such as "Let there be a God as large as a sunlamp to laugh his heat at you" (CP 396. 1-2), or "Let there be pin holes in the sky in which God puts his little finger" (396. 13-14). To the seriousness and magnitude of David's psalms is opposed "laugh," or a childish action which introduces the comical, owing to the reduction of the phenomena usually attributed to God's behavior by tradition. The same happens when such data get

mixed with the thousand routine expressions that characterize modern life, recent history or the human body, as "Cannon towels," "Dr Scholl's foot powder," "Churchill," "Kennedy," "blitz," "scrambled eggs," "stomach," "penises," etc.

The opposite takes place, mostly in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), when we meet up with the negative attributes of God, such as Violence or Perversity, so as to collide with the blasphemous.

The biblical model has changed in a transgressive way: God no longer dominates the human world. However, humans are still the victims, not of God's fury but of a very complex machine for which humankind itself is partly responsible. Historical, social and psychological circumstances afflict body and mind. In particular, Woman feels trapped in her situation and tries to overturn the conventions established mostly from a masculine standpoint.

In "The Fish That Walked" (*CP* 428-30), the uselessness of trying to unveil God's mystery and the malediction of being a woman and a poet is better expressed and denotes the state of physical discomfort and emotive distress in the struggle to obtain a more desirable state:

And the salt of God's belly
 where I floated in a cup of darkness.
 I long for your country, fish.

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.

(*CP* 429-30. 31-39)

Death

Sexton's greatest challenge to words is to speak about Death. "I" is captured in the contradiction between escape from and tendency towards Death. Speaking about Death is "I"'s extreme attempt to objectify Nothingness and to refuse any form of constraint imposed

upon the body or mind. "I"'s dramatic progress is pushed to the limits of the fallacy of language because it is placed on the borders of comprehension: as "I" fondly asks,

Do you understand?
Can you read my hieroglyphics?
No language is perfect.
I only know English.
English is not perfect.

(*CP* 452-53. 216-20)

The whole text is full of "Small Deaths" which the subject sips in the rhythm of a ritual:

Here,
all along,
thinking I was a killer,
anointing myself daily
with my little poisons.

(*CP* 169. 70-74)

"The Abortion" (*CP* 61-62) includes an emblematic refrain that places Death even before Life: "Somebody who should have been born / is gone." Even the sequence Birth-to-Life is argued as if Death already existed before Life, or Life itself were Death, or at least a progressive Death-in-Life for which the subject itself often has major responsibility:

Yes
I try
to kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupation.
Actually I am hung up on it.

(*CP* 166. 35-39)

In "The Addict" (*CP* 165-66), the relationship I/Death becomes closer and closer: the margins between Sleep and Death are blurred, and to reach Death becomes "I"'s major project:

Sleepmonger,
 deathmonger,
 with capsules in my palms each night,
 eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
 I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
 I'm the queen of this condition.
 I'm an expert on making the trip
 and now they say I'm an addict.
 Now they ask why.
 Why!

(CP 165. 1-10)

The final "Why" sets the problem of suicide and its relationship with institutions. To become an Addict and to become Mad are forms of social deaths which the institutions tend to isolate from the rest of society. But Suicide is certainly the most fearful calamity for the institutions in power, because while Addicts and Lunatics may be partially controlled, Suicide escapes all power control.

Brandishing Death as a Hammer or invoking it as "the Death Baby" are Sexton's extreme means of challenging all forms of individual or social restriction. She uses irony to reveal contradictions and to break the illusion of freedom in our society. Using irony, she seems to echo common sense paradoxically or distortedly, charging the text with equivocal and mocking statements of surprising novelty.

"I"'s drama, obsessively explored as a ritual, becomes a modality of knowledge of the subject as a Woman, and its sacralization as a Poet.

This singing
 is a kind of dying,
 a kind of birth,
 a votive candle.

(CP 365-66. 1-4)

¹ Two works cited in the text are abbreviated and followed by page and verse numbers: *SPL*, Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. *Anne Sexton. A Self Portrait in Letters*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). *CP*, Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, foreword by Maxine Kumin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981). The Corpus used as

text of reference includes Sexton's poetic sequences published during her life: *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), *Live or Die* (1966), *Love Poems* (1969), *Transformations* (1971), *The Book of Folly* (1972), *The Death Notebooks* (1974), and *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), whose galley sheets she had proofread before committing suicide.

- ² S.J. Schmidt, *La comunicazione letteraria* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1983) 41.
- ³ R. Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973) 4.
- ⁴ *SPL* 373.
- ⁵ Maxine Kumin, "How It Was. Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton" *CP* xxiv.
- ⁶ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973) 148.
- ⁷ S.E. Colburn, *No Evil Star. Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose: Anne Sexton* (Anne Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1985) 74.
- ⁸ Teun A. van Dijk, *Peruna poetica generativa* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1976) 270.
- ⁹ Marcello Pagnini, *Pragmatica della letteratura* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1980) 42.
- ¹⁰ Robert de Beaugrande, *Text, Discourse, and Process* (London: Longman, 1980) 69.
- ¹¹ Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Milano: Bompiani, 1972) 185; *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1979) 11.
- ¹² de Beaugrande 96.
- ¹³ Jacques Lacan, "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je-telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique" (1949), *Ecrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 89-97.
- ¹⁴ Maxine Kumin, *To Make a Prairie. Essays on Poets, Poetry, and Country Living* (Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1979) 82.