Consorting with Angels: Anne Sexton and the Art of Confession

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tructuralist and poststructuralist rethinking of the relationship between author, text and reader presents an interesting problem when it comes to the idea of confessional poetry. The lyric poem's particularly resonant history in setting up a fixed dyadic relationship between self and other acts as an especially receptive and intimate stage for the dramatization of such an enterprise as the search for 'truth'. And yet how can we read the confessional 'properly' in an age when the 'author is dead'? For unlike autobiography, which purports to document factual and emotional truth, and which embeds its 'I' within a narrative, confessional poetry hovers in a kind of no man's land between documentary experience on the one hand, and fiction on the other, establishing itself as a mode which ostensibly unites the borders of the relationship between the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who is spoken about. Yet as James Merrill has pointed out: 'Confessional poetry... is a literary convention like any other, the problem is to make it sound as if it were true.' If autobiography can be read as a narrative which fashions a truth about the history of the self, then surely we must read the confessional poem as an aesthetic of truth, the terms of its own nature determined exactly by its very authenticity—an authenticity
which paradoxically is as subject to ‘tinkerings’, as Lowell called them, as of any other piece of creative writing.

My preoccupation here is with three aspects of the confession and its importance to lyric poetry written by women, particularly in relation to the work of the North American poet Anne Sexton. First, authenticity and related issues of truth are particularly charged in a reading of women’s texts when an authenticity of suffering becomes entangled with the quest for an establishment of a female writing ‘identity’. Second, the borders between private and public, between male and female, between that which can and cannot be said, and the place where the two intersect are interesting because, although the experience of the confessional poem is of an intensely personal, extreme and often transgressive nature, part of its aesthetic must also consist of some kind of sympathetic union that disturbs the usual boundaries between poet and reader. The poem allows what the reader is forbidden: it puts into words the unspeakable, the unsayable. Third, I am interested in the relationship Sexton has with the confessional genre, and the way she relates to the confessional model as constructed largely by male poets, particularly the poet Robert Lowell, who tutored Sexton at a formative point in her career.

Intimately related to these issues is Sexton’s role as a feminist, or protofeminist, poet. Sexton’s mental illness and its expression via her poetry offers a difficult model of femininity, both for the reader and for the woman poet who writes after her. Diane Middlebrooke’s important and controversial biography of Sexton has shown, through its use of the tapes made of her psychoanalytic sessions—from which some of the poems (those she referred to as her transference poems) draw—how close some of the links are between poem and therapeutic material. To what degree, then, is it reasonable to ask whether Sexton’s private experience of suffering is one which is understandable or recognizable in the wider realm?

In her introduction to The Complete Poems, Maxine Kumin suggests that women readers did in fact identify with the extremity of Sexton’s experience2, and that it was this graphic exposé of female experience that left male reviewers uncomfortable or outraged:

The facts of Anne Sexton’s troubled and chaotic life are well known: no other American poet in our time has cried aloud publicly so many private details. While the frankness of these revelations attracted many readers, especially women, who identified strongly with the female aspect of the poems, a number of poets and critics—for the most part, although not exclusively male—took offence. For Louis Simpson, writing in Harper’s Magazine, ‘Menstruation at Forty’ was ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back.’ And years before he wrote his best-selling novel, Deliverance, which centres on a graphic scene of homosexual rape, James Dickey, writing in The New York Times Book Review, excoriated

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the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*, saying ‘It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience . . .’ In a terse eulogy Robert Lowell declared, with considerable ambivalence it would seem, ‘For a book or two, she grew more powerful. Then writing was too easy or too hard for her. She became meager and exaggerated. Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them into quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author.’

This issue of embarrassment is an interesting one—Lowell, for example, makes extensive use of the quotation, Berryman adopts a persona—and highlights one of the crucial differences between Sexton’s work and the work of her male confessing contemporaries. For the male poet the act of confession may be figured as a transgression against a preconceived notion of the masculine as controlled, ordered and rational. For the woman poet, however, the transgression works on a double model. On the one hand it offers a liberation from stereotypical representations of women (the Angel in the House, the paragon of sexual and domestic virtue) while on the other hand it may actually reinforce patriarchal anxieties about women’s fury and madness, desire and dirtiness, and reinscribe them in the ostensible service of liberation. Without in any way negating or trivializing the anguish or difficulties of the male confessional, or the powerfulness of the poetry, it seems fair to say that the male confessional is radical precisely because it can be seen to be exploring new territories of the male psyche; it breaks down patriarchal notions of masculinity while at the same time offering an extremity of experience as a testimony of suffering that equates with prophecy and ‘strength’, and yet may also be disclaimed. The male confessional speaks as representative of the suffering of his time and his nation. His pain is seen to be of both personal and global relevance. If this confessing poet is Robert Lowell, a poet whose family is part of the political ruling class, the implications are perhaps even more extreme; the fact that Lowell served as a figurehead for the so-called Confessional group also supports this conjecture.

The woman who confesses is, however, frequently read as testifying only to her own anguish and her own ‘weakness’; she is simply revealing the awfulness of femininity which was ‘known’ to be there all along, and which, in the most simplistic terms, has led to her oppression in the first place. In speaking what she believes to be a personal truth she is making a spectacle of herself, throwing an already precarious subjectivity into a heightened state of prominence and vulnerability. And it is here we see the exact nature of the problem: for if the woman poet does remain silent, if the awfulness of her confessional truth is such that it will serve only to oppress her further, she is left where she started, and cannot speak at all. Alternatively, she can speak a version of the self which also confirms a certain kind of femininity—that of beauty, passivity, orderliness and self-control—but which nevertheless fails to ‘tell it like it is’.

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Furthermore Sexton’s departure from the more straightforwardly autobiographical poems of her early work—poems such as ‘You, Doctor Martin’ (CP, 3–4) or ‘Said the Poet to Her Analyst’ (CP, 12–13)—are an attempt to circumlocute the difficulties of writing the purely personal as a woman. Her use of the angel acts as a cypher for the confessional, which still allows her a voice of anguish and suffering, but adds to it a dimension of androgyny which removes it from being a direct expression of her female self. The angel is both her and not her, the good self and the bad self, the human and the transcendent. From writing to a ‘you’ who listens—the male figure of authority, the teacher, the psychiatrist, the doctor or even the lover—Sexton shifts her muse from the external, her necessary other, to an internal muse who dramatizes her dilemma, and who offers an imago which allows her to speak both to and about herself. Thus she presents a self which is both real and unreal, honest yet mystical, both male and female, me and not me.

The representation of femininity is a concern raised by the poet Elizabeth Bishop in a letter to Lowell in 1960 in which she describes Sexton as having a bit too much romanticism and what I think of as the ‘our beautiful old silver’ school of female writing, which is really boasting about how ‘nice’ we were. V. Woolf, E. Bowen, R. West, etc.—they are all full of it. They have to make quite sure that their reader is not going to misplace them socially, first, and that nervousness interferes constantly with what they think they’d like to say. I wrote a story at Vassar that was too much admired by Miss Rose Peebles, my teacher, who was very proud of being an old-school Southern lady—and suddenly this fact about women’s writing dawned on me, and has haunted me ever since.⁴

Bishop’s comment, perhaps testimony at least as much to her aesthetics of reserve as to her gender, and which, given when it was written, can only refer to Sexton’s first collection To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), seems a curious one to make about a poet who would later be notorious for breaking a variety of social taboos. The construction of an approved female self is one which clearly causes Bishop herself some anxiety. Rereading To Bedlam and Part Way Back, which came out of Sexton’s experiences of two mental breakdowns, and her hospitalization and attempted suicide in 1956, it is easy to detect the nervousness that Bishop identifies. In this first collection Sexton interestingly also offers a defence of her use of the confessional mode in ‘For John, Who begs Me Not to Enquire Further’. She writes:

I tapped my own head;
it was a glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl.

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At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.
And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
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.
Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there (CP, 34–5).

The poem, addressed to John Holmes who ran the creative-writing class
which she, Kumin and others attended in 1957, is an eloquent plea for the
‘complicated lie’ of the confession. Echoing Blake and obliquely engaging
with some of the images of shadowy femininity which dominate The Book of
Thel (1789), the poem also links up with the epigraph Sexton uses for the
volume, a letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe dated November 1815, which
reads:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question
that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles’s Oedipus, who,
seeing enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatig-
able enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror waits him in the
answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus
for God’s sake not to inquire further . . .

In this strange reversal of genders, Sexton positions herself as Oedipus, her
mentor as Jocasta. Writing, Sexton seems to be pointing out, is about taking
oneself to the horror of one’s own fate. But what exactly is that fate? Finding
one’s identity, in what had seemed a certain world, to be not what one had
thought? Discovering that sexual relations between men and women are not
what had been previously imagined? In her essay on abjection, Powers of
Horror, Julia Kristeva sees Oedipus as a scapegoat figure: ‘Entering an impure
city—a miasma—he turns himself into agos, defilement, in order to purify it
and to become katharmos. He is thus a purifier by the very fact of being agos.’

 Might then the confessing poet, who transgresses the borders of the spoken,
also speak for and cleanse the generation for which he or she speaks? Sexton’s
poem, however, also testifies to the recreation of something other than the
self that testifies. The ‘complicated lie’ involves the construction of another
self. It also allows for broadening the sense of suffering beyond the purely

5 See Blake’s Poetry and
Designs, ed. Mary Lynn
Johnson and John E.
Grant, New York:
Norton, 1979, plate 1,
p. 61: ‘Does the Eagle
know what is in the
pit?/Or wilt thou go
ask the Mole;/Can
wisdom be put in a
silver rod?;/Or Love in a
golden bowl.’

6 Julia Kristeva, Powers of
Horror: An Essay on
Abjection, trans. Leon
S. Roudiez, New York:
Columbia University
Press, 1982, p. 84.
personal to an exchange of experience between men and women, Oedipus and Jocasta. As ‘For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’ ends:

... Your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all...
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face.

How then does Sexton attempt to negotiate the pitfalls of representing femininity within the confessional mode? One way is by using the figure of the angel. Sexton first uses the angel in To Bedlam and Part Way Back in ‘The Waiting Head’ (CP, 31–2). Here it is the glanced image of a figure that becomes an alter ego:

Surely I remember the hooks
of her fingers curled on mine, though even now
will not admit the times I did avoid this street,
where she lived on and on like a beached fig
and forgot us anyhow;
visiting the pulp of her kiss, bending to repeat
each favor trying to comb out her mossy wig
and forcing love to last. Now she is always dead
and the leather books are mine. Today I see the head
move like some pitted angel, in that high window.

This representation of a self who is both the poet and not the poet sets the ground for later poems in which the angel acts as a figure of otherness. But perhaps Sexton’s most difficult and pivotal use of the angel is to be found in her poem ‘ Consorting with Angels’ (CP, 111–12) which appeared in 1963:

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and silks.
There were still men who sat at my table,
circled around the bowl I offered up.
The bowl was filled with purple grapes
and the flies hovered in for the scent
and even my father came with his white bone.
But I was tired of the gender of things.
Last night I had a dream
and I said to it . . .
‘You are the answer.
You will outlive my husband and my father.’
In that dream there was a city made of chains
where Joan was put to death in man’s clothes
and the nature of the angels went unexplained,
no two in the same species,
one with a nose, one with an ear in its hand,
one chewing a star and recording its own orbit,
each one like a poem obeying itself,
performing God’s functions,
a people apart.

‘You are the answer,’
I said, and entered,
lying down on the gates of the city.
Then the chains were fastened around me
and I lost my common gender and my final aspect.
Adam was on the left of me
and Eve was on the right of me,
both thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason.
We wove our arms together
and rode under the sun.
I was not a woman anymore,
not one thing or the other.

O daughters of Jerusalem,
the king has brought me into his chamber
I am black and I am beautiful.
I’ve been opened and undressed.
I have no arms or legs.
I’m all one skin like a fish.

This enigmatic poem sees the speaker interrogating gender constructions in relation to her own sexuality, and ultimately rejecting stereotypical masculine or feminine gender constructions in favour of a mutilated and limbless but nevertheless desiring subject. This creature with whom we are left presents difficulties: limbless, the torso is left with nothing and the bodily parts which define her difference (the breasts, the vagina) and the points of similarity (the legs, arms, hands, feet) are sacrificed in favour of a fish-like skin. The speaker is tired of the feminine masquerade, ‘the cosmetics and the silks’ as well as the mouth and breasts. (This mutilation of the body might be compared to a later poem by Lowell, ‘Seals’, in which the speaker of the
poem offers a kind of prayer that 'If we must live again, not us; we might/ go into seals'. Like the torso, the seals are virtually limbless and fishy, yet the image of the seal, though androgynous, is one which seems less ambiguously positive: 'we'd handle ourselves better:/ able to dawdle, able to torpedo,/ all at home in our three elements,/ ledge, water and heaven'.7)

Accordingly the speaker of the poem also rejects stereotypical woman's adoption of 'masculine' behaviour (as figured by Joan of Arc who is put to death in a man's clothes in the city of chains), as well as the masculine itself: the husband and the potentially abusive father with his threatening 'white bone'. Instead she identifies her gender with the angels, which in the poem seem to mark difference itself (there are 'no two in the same species'). Here the 'I' of the poem has 'lost' her 'common gender and my final aspect'; she is not a 'woman anymore/ not one thing or the other'. The poem also directly alludes to Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell:

[S]oon we saw seven houses of brick: one we enter'd; In it were a number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species, chain'd by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains: However I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong, and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devour'd, by plucking off first one limb and then another, till the body was left a helpless trunk: this after grinning & kissing it with seeming fondness, they devour'd too . . . 8

Sexton is clearly allying herself with a visionary, mystical tradition, yet one which, like Blake's interrogational and satirical approach to the writings of Swedenborg, takes a stance against texts which inscribe masculinity to the exclusion of the feminine. Blake's scenario, however, offers a much more horrific and grotesque vision than Sexton's. The trunk or torso that Sexton leaves us with is not finally devoured: what is left is an image of woman as orifice—the mouth, the vagina and the anus—orifices which ingest, engulf, expel. Yet, unlike Lowell's image in the poem 'Seals', this figure does not represent the freedom of androgyny in the sense of a merger of masculine and feminine sexual characteristics; rather it represents a vision of an all encompassing or even engorging sexuality.

The speaker of the poem defines herself in terms which link her directly to the woman speaker of the Song of Songs, depending heavily as Sexton's poem does on its intertextual reference to the Songs. Sexton's figure is clearly sexual, and clearly powerful, and is interestingly echoed by Lowell's 'Mermaid Emerging' (The Dolphin, 1973):

Mermaid, why are you another species?
'Because, you, I, everyone is unique.'
Does anyone ever make you do nothing; you're not chained.
I am a woman or I am a dolphin,
the only animal man really loves,
I spout the smarting waters of joy in your face—
rough weather fish, who cuts your nets and chains.

The interplay between Sexton and Lowell here is an interesting one, and it is important to point out here that, while Lowell is an important figure to Sexton, she is equally as important to him as a poet. What seems to connect these images, one mutilated, one transformed, the other a mythical creature which is both one thing and another, is that they seem to represent for both poets an escape from the fixity of sex roles. But although the speaker of Sexton’s poem places herself between Adam and Eve, we are ultimately left with a figure who is simultaneously and paradoxically identifying with a woman’s sexuality (at the expense of a mutilation of her human characteristics, her arms and her legs) through her identification with the speaker of the Song of Songs: a figure who is both ‘black and beautiful’, but who also denies that she is female (‘I am no more a woman than Christ was a man’). Sexton’s use of the line break is neatly juxtaposed by a final image of the woman who, Christ-like, achieves an in-between state, between the male and the female, the human and the divine, through the act of suffering. Clearly, then, ‘Consorting with Angels’ cannot be simply read as a confessional poem: its surreal, apocalyptic vision, its biblical borrowing, all serve to destabilize any sense of a straightforwardly ‘authentic’ self who is examined in the retelling of a ‘true’ event.

By the Book of Folly (1972) the preoccupation with angels is growing, as Sexton’s six-poem sonnet sequence, ‘Angels of the Love Affair’, reveals. Written in May and June of 1971, the title of the collection is taken from Ecclesiastes 1:17: ‘I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is a vexation of the spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.’ Again Sexton is using a biblical source as a way of criticizing patriarchal restrictions on femininity. But even as she offers a criticism of religion, she is also representing it, through the figure of the angel, as a source of solace. The epigraph to the ‘Angels of the Love Affair’ (CP, 332–6) asks: ‘angels of the love affair, do you know that other, the dark one, that other me?’ With their setting up of ‘Contraries’, rather than binary oppositions, these poems are influenced not only by Blake but by the work of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, whom Sexton met in London in 1967 and whose work she had been reading for a considerable time. With often shockingly graphic details charting mental illness, bodily disease and desperation, these are poems about the horrors of the genesis of the self. The angels of the sequence look both to Blake’s ‘I heard an Angel singing’, and, certainly in the first poem, to Neruda’s ‘Ode to Fire’. Using prayers or invocations, Sexton maintains the
binary opposition established in previous angel poems, between black and white, in a progressive exploration of the establishment of a female identity. This time, however, it is an opposition between heat and cold, and red and white: images of fire and ice, and red and white appear throughout the sequence, as blood, as rubies, as raspberries, a mouth, blizzards, sugar, a face. Both colours are represented ambiguously: if white is representative of the clean sheets of the second sonnet, it is also the blizzard of the fifth; if red is the ‘little bits of dried blood’ or the blood that ‘buzzes like a hornet’s nest’ it is also the fruit of childhood and the red mouth of the kiss. Like Blake’s use of ‘Contraries’, Sexton is clearly using opposites in order to deconstruct them in a way which is reminiscent of her deconstruction of fixed gender roles.

In the first poem of the sequence, ‘Angel of Fire and Genitals’ (CP, 332–3), the speaker of the poem asks

\[ \text{do you know slime,} \\
\text{that green mama who first forced me to sing,} \\
\text{who put me first in the latrine, that pantomime} \\
\text{of brown where I was beggar and she was king?} \]

The sonnet introduces elemental imagery, in this case fire, which is followed in the next three sonnets by earth, wind and water imagery. The ‘Angel of Fire’ might refer in particular to two angels: the seraph who placed burning coals on Isaiah’s lips to relieve him of his silence, and Uriel, whose name means ‘Fire of God’ and who is thought to be the angel who stands outside the Garden of Eden with his sword of flames. These two powerful images are suggestive of the connection between speech, and saying the right thing (Isaiah was punished for not naming his child the name that God had wanted), and sexuality (the angel was placed outside Eden once Adam and Eve, having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, had been exiled). Uniting these two images at the beginning of the sequence sets up these two relationships between speech and sexuality, and traces Sexton’s ongoing anxiety over the representation of herself as a woman who ‘speaks the poem’.

Throughout the sequence there is a repetition of the word ‘hole’, clearly here associated with feminine sexuality. Homophonically ‘hole’, which is also ‘whole’, denotes a sense both of emptiness and completeness. The angel leaves her sense of self in a position of liminality which both refutes and embraces the female sex. This sense of liminality, of dilemma and anxiety about the positioning of the self, also potentially offers a position of power. Being neither one thing nor the other, it might be said that one also creates for oneself the possibility of continual freedom; the stasis implicit in the position also offers the continual possibility of movement. Yet the first four angel sonnets end on an image of stasis or petrification ‘Mother of fire, let me stand at your devouring gate’; ‘I have known the tuck-in of a child/but inside my hair waits the might I was defiled’; ‘I stand in stone shoes as the world’s bicycle
goes by'; 'Your arms are cut and bound by bands/of wire. Your voice is out there. Your voice is strange./ There are no prayers here. There is no change.'

The angels seem to offer an escape from this stasis, each poem offered up to the angel like a prayer. And yet it is as if this is a prayer that will never be answered. Sexton writes in the third sonnet:

Angel of flight, you soarer, you flapper, you floater,
you gull that grows out of my back in the dreams I prefer,

stay near. But give me the totem. Give me the shut eye
where I stand in stone shoes as the world's bicycle goes by (CP, 334).

And in the sixth:

... I hear my lungs fill and expel
as in an operation. But I have no one left to tell (CP, 335).

These painful and difficult poems nevertheless seem to indicate some kind of progression from the images of abjection in the earlier poems, so that the body of the complete woman in the sixth sonnet, 'Angel of Beach Houses and Picnics' (CP, 335–6), sunbathing nude at the end of the sequence, offers some semblance of hope for a return to the lean, young, healthy and politicized self:

Once I sunbathed in the buff, all brown and lean,
watching the toy sloops go by, holding court
for busloads of tourists. Once I called breakfast the sexiest
meal of the day. Once I invited arrest

at the peace march in Washington. Once I was young and bold
and left hundreds of unmatched people out in the cold.

Increasingly, as we have seen, Sexton's experimentation with the figure of the angel allows her direct access to 'the word' of other male poets, as well as to the power of divinity itself. Sexton's use of the angel, like Blake's, gives her access to powerful images from Christian iconography. The angel acts as a powerful muse which allows her to 'consort', with all the ambiguities of pleasure and collusion that that word contains. In 'The Fallen Angels' (CP, 430–1), included in 'The Awful Rowing towards God' (1975), the angel has become a metaphor for writing itself:

They come on to my clean
sheet of paper and leave a Rorschach blot.
They do not do this to be mean,
they do it to give me a sign
they want me, as Aubrey Beardsley once said,
to shove it around until something comes.
Clumsy as I am,
I do it.
For I am like them—
both saved and lost,
tumbling downward like Humpty Dumpty
off the alphabet.

In ‘Talking to Sheep’ (CP, 484–6), a poem that appeared in the posthumous collection 45 Mercy Street (1976), and which has strong echoes of ‘ Consorting with Angels’, Sexton seems to sum up her career as a confessional. It begins:

My life
has appeared unclothed in court,
detail by detail,
death-bone witness by death-bone witness,
and I was shamed at the verdict
and given a cut penny
and the entrails of a cat.
But nevertheless I went on
to the invisible priests,
confessing, confessing
through the wire of hell
and they wet upon me in that phone booth

The father’s white bone from ‘ Consorting with Angels’ has become a death-bone. The invisible priests seem to represent a disembodied male who metamorphoses into the faceless person at the end of the telephone to whom she confesses her poems. As Kumin notes, the telephone played an important part in Sexton’s writing process:

During the workshop years we began to communicate more and more frequently by telephone . . . a working method which does much to train the ear to hear line breaks, internal rhymes, intentional or unwanted musical devices, and so forth. We did this comfortably and over such an extended period of time that indeed when we met we were somewhat shy of each other’s poems as they appeared on the page (CP, xxv).

Perhaps the telephone here works as symbolic umbilicus—the curly loop which acts as life-line of communication between the two women—the poems arising out of long, intimate and faceless conversations almost as if taking place between priest and confessor: ‘Whoever God is’, explains Sexton, ‘I keep making telephone calls to him. I’m not sure that’s religion. More desperation than faith in such things.’12 Such a comment seems to set in motion the idea of the speaker and listener of the lyric. And yet we see

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Sexton again looking to a male poet in order to establish a poetic self—for her poem also appears to echo James Dickey’s ‘The Sheep Child’ (1966)—which, while still addressing her problematic relationship with confessional writing, sets up a dynamic between the author’s own (albeit heavily intertextually plundering) work and that of a male writer. Dickey (as we have heard) had been a fierce critic of Sexton’s work, and had written several searing reviews of her previous collections. The two poets met for the first time in December 1965, and formed an intense friendship which, on Dickey’s part at least, bordered on infatuation; Sexton is clearly addressing Dickey via his poem: ‘The Sheep Child’, with humour and tenderness, gives voice to the child of a union between a man and a sheep ‘this thing that’s only half/ Sheep like a woolly baby/Pickled in alcohol because/those things can’t live his eyes/ Are open but you can’t stand to look’.

In Sexton’s poem she is representing the poetic self as being as much a hybrid as Lowell’s mermaid or Dickey’s sheep, as she is a Jesus, the good shepherd, who suffers so that others may be redeemed. Yet writing as a woman involves a necessary mutilation of herself in public, and she becomes a circus freak, neither woman nor man:

... My breasts are off me.
The transvestite whispering to me,
over and over, My legs are disappearing.
My mother, her voice like water,
saying Fish are cut out of me.
My father,
his voice thrown into a cigar,
A marble of blood rolls into my heart.

My great aunt,
hers voice,
thrown into a lost child at the freaks’ circus,
I am the flame swallower
but turn me over in bed
and I am the fat lady.

The poem’s positioning of the woman poet is oddly reminiscent of the positioning of the hysterical at one of Charcot’s Tuesday gatherings at the Salpetriere in Paris, when his ‘patients’ were hypnotized and asked to perform a variety of tricks. Is this, Sexton seems to be asking, her status as performer of her work. For Sexton the role of the woman poet and the confessional is a difficult one. And yet the speaker of the poem—the woman who writes—appears to have few alternatives:

It was wise, the medical men said, wise to cry Baa and be smiling into your mongoloid hood,
while you simply tended the sheep.
Or else to sew your lips shut
and not let a word or a deadstone sneak out.

Reading Sexton clearly presents difficulties. In crying 'baa', rather than identifying with the mother or the father, the 'ma' or the 'pa', but also refusing its simple-mindedness, by becoming the black sheep, Sexton embraces the most difficult alternative. She attempts to speak the horror in which she finds herself, but also attempts 'to push around' that horror on the page in a way which may make it relevant to others, and particularly relevant to a generation of women suffering, to various degrees, the effects of patriarchy. Increasingly for Sexton the poem is not simply an expression of suffering, but an attempt to purge, to disinherit her experience. Whereas Lowell remembers, and places the self he describes within the bounds of specific time and specific history, merging the boundaries between public and private experience, and John Berryman fabulizes and dramatizes, Sexton's confessional, as her work progresses, acts as a compulsive repetition and re-enactment of suffering, which hauls trauma into the moment of writing itself. As she herself acknowledges in 'Talking to Sheep', 'I keep making statues/of my acts, carving them with my sleep.' Because of this it might be tempting to read Sexton's writing as a solely therapeutic act, a reading which indeed ties in with the direct relationship that can be drawn between her writing and her psychiatric treatment and ensuing therapy. Yet Sexton's poetic is so much more than this. Her interrogation of femininity and gender in relation to her writing, her desire to transform the horror of personal experience into wider realms—the relations between men and women, male and female, the human and the divine—is an ambitious one that prefigures and, in a sense, allows much of the poetry arising from the women's movement in the 1970s. Her poetry does not always, perhaps, offer a clearly positive feminist model, yet her bravery, her erratic power, suggests a model of confession which is about the desire and impossibility of cleansing and atonement in a secular context; it is one which works on the borders of existence, and sometimes even poetry itself. Sexton's work attempts to refigure the self as a model of power that moves her from the horror of silence to the horror of suffering at a mythic level as well as a personal one; a suffering which, in Powers of Horror, Kristeva describes as

... the place of the subject. Where it emerges, where it is differentiated from chaos. An incandescent, unbearable limit between inside and outside, ego and other. The initial, fleeting grasp: 'suffering', 'fear,' ultimate words sighting the crest where sense topples over into the senses, the 'intimate' into nerves.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Kristeva, p. 141.