

UNCOVERING THE FEMALE VOICE IN ANNE SEXTON

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concealed narrative voice of Sexton in a selection of her poetry, concentrating mainly on the works "All My Pretty Ones," "Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward," and "The Abortion." The impulse of Sexton's voice in these poems in particular counters the cultural spacings provided for and the inherited female traits of (not) figuring the female voice. Sexton's poetry seeks a redefinition of the written text in order for that text to accommodate the real narratives of the American female. Although not primarily a biographical study, this paper acknowledges Sexton's adoption of drinking habits associated with males, in particular her father, her adaptation of female structures and strictures of silence, initially from her mother, and also works within but also against the reductionist labelling of the US's Middle Generation Poets as "confessional."

Busy, with an idea for a code, I write
signals hurrying from left to right,
or right to left, by obscure routes,
for my own reasons

"An Obsessive Combination of Ontological
Inscape, Trickery and Love."

In this rarely examined early poem, Sexton maps out the territory which her writings would investigate and importantly signals to her audience her particular method of inquiry. Sexton's poems function as codes which the reader must decipher in order to uncover the personal voice that she is concealing beneath the surface of her texts.

Biographical readings of Sexton, and of the other Middle Generation poets from the United States (Plath, Berryman, Jarrell, Lowell) have dominated critical studies in this area. With relation to Anne Sexton, the approach is a tempting one. Her poetic career began as a suggested method of personal therapy, a way of reconstructing her apparently disintegrating life. Moreover, large swathes of the poetry deal with intensely personal subjects: her relationships with her parents, with her lovers, her children, and her therapists. Yet, purely biographic readings are reductionist in their scope and, in the case of Sexton, latch onto the personal signals of the surface text without attempting to decipher her codes in order to gain access to the narratives that are withheld from view but which Sexton clearly intends to be unearthed.

In *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), Sexton's first collection, she makes explicit a series of points which should be central to readings of her work. In "Said the Poet to the Analyst" she remarks how "My business is words"¹ but goes on to state "I/admit nothing" (12). Sexton's insistence on concealment and her continual references to lying throughout her poetry alert the reader to the instability of the surface text as she presents it. Many of the characters who inhabit the Sexton poetic world are exactly that, characters; they are not all aspects of herself. In an interview with Patricia Marx she makes this point with reference to "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" from her first collection: "You can even lie (one can confess and lie forever) as I did in the poem of the illegitimate child that the girl had to give up. It hadn't happened to me. It wasn't true, yet it was indeed the truth."² Although Sexton is admitting that she is not discussing narratives which are revelatory of any personal truth, her writing is involved with the analysis of universal female truths. The poem in question has as its textual centre the opposition between male and female texts, and how the former invariably dominate the later. Sexton refers to how this anonymous girl's "case history/stays blank" due to her silence in response to the questions of (presumably male) doctors:

The doctors are enamel. They want to know
the facts. They guess about the man who left me,
some pendulum soul, going the way men go
and leave you full of child. But our case history
stays blank. All I did was let you grow.
Now we are here for all the ward to see.
They thought that I was strange, although
I never spoke a word. I burst empty
of you, letting you learn how the air is so.
The doctors chart the riddle they ask of me
and I turn my head away. I do not know. (24)

Sexton dislocates this particular female voice from male textualisations of it. The history of this girl is not made available to the male doctors in the particular institution in which she has been placed. Although she is institutionalised, her own story is not. However, as a result, a text is written anyway about this patient. Her silence ensures the writing of a wholly male text about her. It is to counter this that Sexton provides textual space for this female, accounting for her silences and her thought

processes. Sexton's poem operates, therefore, as a female counter to the male versions of history. It opens a channel to the female subtext which is constrained by the male text which has been written over it.

Moreover, the girl's hiding of the identity of the child's father, "My voice alarms/ my throat. 'Name of father-none'" (25), signals an intention to construct a new identity without recourse to traditional and patriarchal systems of naming. Like Sexton, the girl is involved in a system of concealment and lying: "I am a shelter of lies." The female counter to the male-dominated world outside is one which adopts this dual approach. Consequently, the 'true' female narrative is occluded by female systems of silence, lying and concealment and by male forms of textual domination.

The title poem of Sexton's next volume, *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), delves deeper into this area as Sexton uses her own poetic narrative to overwrite the ones that she has inherited from her mother. "All My Pretty Ones" is a pivotal poem in the Sexton canon for this reason. As she sifts through the photographs and mementos of her parents' lives, Sexton is faced with a decision whether to maintain the links with the biographies of her parents that she has inherited or whether to discard them in favour of structuring her own versions of her world. Although momentarily intrigued by the "boxes of pictures of people I do not know" (50) she resolves that it is not her task either to reconnect the histories of these people and to know their identities or to use her poetry to write about purely (auto)biographic details: "I'll never know what these faces are all about./I lock them into their book and throw them out." The drive of biographic approaches to read Sexton and her contemporaries as 'confessional' poets overlooks the important socially-based and historically-situated nature of their writing in favour of limiting their discussions to the poet's family and personal details. As with Robert Lowell's "Epilogue" from *Day by Day* (1977), in which Lowell signals the need to know and name the individuals in his own photographs ("We are poor passing facts,/ warned by that to give/ each figure in the photograph/ his living name")³, Sexton seeks to connect her own personal life with the historical narratives of the United States. She discards the family photographs because she is writing her own narrative, and achieves this through the intertwining of the first recorded instances of her own existence with the political and social events of the United States at that time:

This is the yellow scrapbook that you began
the year I was born; as crackling now and wrinkly
as tobacco leaves: clippings where Hoover outran
the Democrats, wiggling his dry finger at me
and Prohibition; news where the *Hindenburg* went
down and recent years where you went flush
on war.

Sexton specifically links her own birth and early years with the election of Hoover in 1928, the continuation of Prohibition that his 'dry' victory ensured, and the movements towards the second world war. The fragments of her own life that have been shored up are intricately interwoven with the cultural and political life of the United States. This is not a highly personal biography that has been set apart from physical and social realities. On the contrary, the text of Sexton's early life that she uncovers

here is one in which she is implicated in the shifts and developments of the outside world. Although in later volumes this perception of an intimate connection with the political events of the outside world would change for Sexton, her impulse to withhold her own self's most personal narratives from her texts remained central to her poetic narratives.

Sexton's linking of her birth with Hoover's victory and Prohibition is important both in understanding this poem and in decoding large sections of her later work. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution instituted a fourteen year period in which America's drinking was forced out of public view and literally underground into speak-easies and illegal drinking places. Prohibition sought to remove the drinker from the cultural and social map of the United States. With its failure and with Repeal in 1934, new methods of concealment were required centring on the ministries of Alcoholics Anonymous, an organisation dedicated to maintain the problem drinker in an unseen space of social anonymity. America's debates about the use of alcohol which had raged throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were forced off centre-stage and the continuing narratives of how to deal with this social problem were predominantly relocated in the anonymous context of closed AA meetings. Visible and socially-acceptable US society could thus make itself believe that the problem had been resolved. However, this was clearly not the case, and hidden narratives of alcohol dependence recur throughout the texts of a range of US writers at this time. In this regard, Anne Sexton was no different. Her father, a recurring figure throughout her work, was an alcohol dependent, and she herself used alcohol heavily, yet her writings in relation to herself and her father conceal explicit references to continued or even problem alcohol use. This is a learned behaviour for Sexton, within the context of America's relation to such drinking; yet it also functions as an inherited trait from her mother:

I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all she does not say
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,
she writes. (51)

The mother's text is one centred in euphemism and structured by the necessity of concealment. Sexton is clearly aware of the textual conflicts and, in producing her version of that history, writes against such inherited female traits. She opposes one female text with her own, providing for a contended textual space which the reader is then asked to decode.

On other occasions, Sexton sets up a conflict between her own versions of a particular event. A prime example of this is "The Abortion" from *All My Pretty Ones* in which she opposes the rhythmic practice of writing about such an intensely female experience within the construct of a poem with the actual reality of what has occurred. Her use of a simple, recurring ABA rhyme pattern along with the refrain "*Somebody who should have been born/ is gone*" (61; her italics) provides a poetic framing which operates to overwrite the difficulty and pain of the experience with a light and at times childish text. Indeed, the imagery she employs is reminiscent of imagery associated with children: "Up past the Blue Mountains, where/ Pennsylvania

humps on endlessly,/ wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair.” The abortionist, although “not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all,” is described in negative relation to this fairytale figure and the unreality of the whole experience is repeated on the return journey home: “The road was as flat as a sheet of tin” (62). It is not until the close of the poem that Sexton defeats the unreality of such poetic convention and rhythmic concealment and she does so by way of self-accusation:

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward...this baby that I bleed.

The poem, up until this point, has been an evasion, a way of not saying what she meant to say. Sexton confronts her own poetic practice with the stark narrative facts of what an abortion means. The last five words are the true text, the correct version of what has occurred. The logical and symmetrical euphemisms of rhyme and metre seek to occlude what the female voice in Sexton really wants to say.

If, on the whole, “The Abortion” does not function as a female text (loosely defined as one which is at all times dedicated to representing the actual female experience), it does, on another level, function as a text of the female, and in particular of the female form. In describing the landscape, Sexton moves in the first line from the “puckered mouth” of the earth to the “Blue Mountains” of the second stanza and down to the “dark socket” of the third, an area, she goes on to inform us, where the grass is “as bristly and stout as chives.” Unmistakably, Sexton’s journey to Pennsylvania parallels a journey down the female body. Even as the poetic narrative appears to defeat a full and accurate understanding of this intimately female event, Sexton structures her descriptions so as to shape the poem into a female form. The surface text, which overwrites what she actually meant to say, is physically constructed to figure a woman but absent from it are emotional considerations and responses to the abortion itself. The emotion is what Sexton meant to say but has kept it concealed, both inside herself and within the poetic conventions of constructing a narrative.

To uncover Sexton’s own voice and version, she asks us to read through the texts and narratives (both said and unsaid) of other females who have bequeathed textual legacies to her. In “Crossing the Atlantic” from *Live or Die* (1966) Sexton uses the diaries of her mother and her grandmother as ways of access into previous female experience:

I have read each page of my mother’s voyage.
I have read each page of her mother’s voyage.
I have learned their words as they learned Dickens’.
I have swallowed these words like bullets. (134)

Sexton substitutes their reading and learning of a canonical male author with readings of their narratives of voyage and journey. However, it is not an easy task for Sexton. These texts of her female predecessors are difficult and threatening, “like bullets.” The mechanical and overtly masculine nature of the texts she chooses to read parallels their reading of male texts. The legacy that has been handed to Sexton is one

that she will have to rewrite before transmitting it to her own female inheritors, her daughters, as she makes clear in the later poem “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” from the same volume. Alongside Sexton’s celebration of her daughter Linda’s growth are acknowledgments of how a fully female version of the world was not open to her:

I hear
 as in a dream
 the conversation of the old wives
 speaking of *womanhood*.
 I remember that I heard nothing myself.
 I was alone.
 I waited like a target. (146)

Sexton’s isolation stemmed from the inability of her female guides to provide her with a sense and understanding of womanhood. Instead she functioned as the target for their male-ordered textual bullets. In order to save her children from a similar fate, Sexton attempts to instill in them a sense of themselves as true women, in opposition to the lying female she so regularly accuses herself of being: “What I want to say, Linda,/is that there is nothing in your body that lies./ All that is new is telling the truth” (148). By saying what she means in this instance, Sexton is seeking to reverse generations of female texts structured by conceit and overpowered by male domination.

The female texts in “Walking in Paris” from *Live or Die* are old letters written home by her grandmother which she uses to map her way around Paris: “I read your Paris letters of 1890./Each night I take them to my thin bed/and learn them as an actress learns her lines” (135). The impulse of these texts is to reunite grandmother with granddaughter, removing from the intervening period of time all male influences, whether personal, national, or global: “1940 never happened —/ the soiled uniform of the Nazi/ has been unravelled and reknit and resold” (136). Indeed, Sexton’s disavowal of male-informed history extends to her own married life:

Having come this far
 I will go farther.
 You are my history (that stealer of children)
 and I have entered you.
 I have deserted my husband and my children,
 the Negro issue, the late news and the hot baths.
 My room in Paris, no more than a cell,
 is crammed with 58lbs. of books.
 They are all that is American and forgotten.
 I read your letters instead,
 putting your words into my life.

Sexton evades the contexts of her American life in the present for the texts of her grandmother’s European adventures in the past. Her dedication to the female texts of her grandmother overwrites the narrative of her own life. Reality, for Sexton, is not to

be found in the lived present; rather, it lies in decoding the narratives of past female experience.

Live or Die is a volume which debates both of these opposites, life and death, and the middleground in between. Sexton's identity as a woman and her recurring interest in the subjects of death and suicide come under intense scrutiny throughout the collection, and two poems in particular are of importance here. Firstly "Consorting with Angels," a poem in which Sexton charts the disintegration of gender identity. "I was tired of being a woman," she opens, "tired of the spoons and the pots,/tired of my mouth and my breasts,/tired of the cosmetics and the silks" (111). The domesticity of the female existence, the daily requirement to make-up, and even the attributes of her own body, become things that Sexton seeks to escape: "I was tired of the gender of things." It is precisely this gendered nature of existence, the allotting of roles to the sexes, which she feels is entrapping her and she discovers freedom in a dream in which the regular expectations of how we look and how we are gendered are broken down:

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 made in the same species

.....

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. (112)

Beyond the world of reason and in the realm of the unconscious, the gender of things is removed ("I was not a woman anymore,/ not one thing or the other") and the stereotypes of existence are deconstructed: "I'm no more a woman/ than Christ was a man." Sexton's disavowal of the physicality of how things are emanates from a dissatisfaction with the rigid male-female binaries within society. The world of reason is traditionally the world of the male and, in such systems of patriarchal ordering, the salvation myths require a male Christ. In Sexton's text she essentially becomes her own saviour, at the same time transmuting the two thieves of the Biblical crucifixion into Adam and Eve. Her positioning between the original man and the original woman in her own salvation dream permits her access to an ungendered middle position which subverts each of the traditional narratives that have been constructed through time in relation to Creation, Christianity, and History. Sexton's text transgresses against the male world of reason and its versions of patriarchy and phallogentrism; this is her original 'sin' in that she substitutes a non-gendered image of herself for the traditional Western icon of a male saviour.

In "Wanting To Die" the Sexton narrative of existence subverts not only the physical nature of that existence but also our interpretations of language itself:

But suicides have a special language.
 Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*.
 They never ask *why build*. (142)

As an individual who was fascinated with the subject of suicide and who killed herself in 1974, Sexton is signaling here that 'normal' society is not using the same language as she is, or is not using it in the same way. Suicide has its own codes, its own signals. For the individual contemplating suicide, the arguments over whether to or not have already been resolved. Indeed, this is so much the case that Sexton accepts that her own identity is now read and written as a "suicide" in this poem which was written over ten years before her death. Such an individual is already operating within a different system and with a different language: "Suicides have already betrayed the body" (143). They provide alternative narratives to those of regulated society. Ultimately, suicide brings to a close the self's ability to textualise the world, as Sexton herself realised in a 1966 article on Sylvia Plath: "Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem."⁴ The impulse to construct is reversed and ended by the movement to self-destruction. The texts remain unfinished:

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.(143)

The overpowering of gender and the slow destruction of the self find their ultimate manifestation in suicide. The concealed text of her own self which Sexton buries beneath the surface of her poetry is closed off by this final act. Suicide subverts the writing and the reading of texts, whether biographical or otherwise.⁵

Ultimately, suicide becomes a textual event; it is defined in relation to the completion of highly personal texts for Sexton: "the slash/ as simple as opening a letter/ and the warm blood breaking out like a rose" (269) is the image she uses in "Red Riding Hood" from *Transformations* (1971). The intimate nature of the event is compared to the opening of a personal letter and opposes the strict formalities of the construction of poetry. Sexton's poetic texts remain incomplete as a result of suicide. Furthermore, they await decoding. Letters, on the other hand, figure in Sexton as revelations of the self's narratives to one other person and are thus not constructed around the same principles of concealment which structure her more public texts: "I was full of letters I hadn't sent you" (86) she states in "Flight" from *All My Pretty Ones*; in this instance, she regrets her inability to maintain this particular connection by way of such intimate texts yet retains inside the volumes of her personal information. The reading public is not allowed access to this information; she merely refers to it in her surface text, leaving the content of such disclosures enclosed within her encoded narrative. She makes a similar point in "The Red Shoes" from *The Book of Folly* (1972) in which the eponymous shoes form part of a highly personal female

tradition, “Handed down like an heirloom/ but hidden like shameful letters” (316). The content of such personal belongings is necessarily kept hidden, as are the narratives of the female lives with which they are inextricably bound: “The house and the street where they belong/ are hidden and all the women, too,/ are hidden.”

The concealment of the narrative of the female becomes transfigured, in *The Death Notebooks* (1974), into the hiding of Sexton herself from the texts and contexts of the United States. In the ‘Sixth Psalm’ of “O Ye Tongues” Sexton twice remarks how she no longer functions as part of the visible American landscape: “But Anne does not see it. Anne is locked in” (405). By the ‘Eighth Psalm’ “she is lost from mankind” (408), becoming an inverse and female Whitman figure, “she is a magnitude, she is many,” a woman containing a mass of concealed narratives which she cannot impart to the outside world. This, clearly, is recognised in biographic terms with her recourse to therapists, but textually it is a problem she cannot resolve: “For I am placing fist over fist on rock and plunging into the altitude of words. The silence of words” (‘Tenth Psalm,’ 411). Rather than easing her access into the narratives of the US, words figure as a defeat of Sexton’s attempts to connect with society. She finds herself on the outside of US geography and regular social interaction without the necessary texts to guide her: “like a forsaken explorer/ I’d lost/ my map” (‘The Fury of God’s Goodbye’ from “The Furies,” 375).

Sexton’s loss of faith in the ability of words to transmit the totality of her experience and her lost co-ordination within society are closely paralleled in Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” (1977). Indeed, the similarities between Sexton’s acknowledgment of a sublimated text of the female self within her own poetic narratives and Kristeva’s bold face writing of such an inner text are striking. In her first section Kristeva refers us to “Epiphanies. Photos of what is not yet visible and which language necessarily surveys from a very high altitude, allusively. Words always too remote, too abstract to capture the subterranean swarm of seconds, insinuating themselves into unimaginable places.”⁶ Words are not able to communicate this concealed and interior self for either Sexton or Kristeva and the experience is disorienting. Each female finds herself disconnected from social and cultural systems capable of confirming their identity: Sexton as the “forsaken explorer” whilst Kristeva recognises this difficulty in “[t]he impossibility of existing without repeated legitimation (without books, maps, family)” (593).

The sense of a loss of co-ordination and belonging is central to Sexton’s methods in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975). The first poem of this collection, “Rowing,” opens with an acknowledgment of American society’s emphasis on the identity of the self as children in school learn continually to rewrite their own name. Sexton participates in this, but her imagery also points to her practice of obscuring her own narratives of herself: “Then there was school,/ the little straight rows of chairs,/ blotting my name over and over” (417). Sexton’s internal texts of her own self appear at times as blots on the landscape of her surface narratives:

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 (“The Fallen Angels,” 430).

In themselves, these markings on her pages are neither meant “to be mean” or to mean. Rather, they represent something else, and interpretation of them depends upon who is their reader.⁷ The subjective understanding of such imprints ensures the differentiation of responses to them. As blots, they do not form part of a recognised vocabulary or language and Sexton’s externality to such regulated systems of interaction and knowledge is recognised in them:

For I am like them —
 both saved and lost,
 tumbling downwards like Humpty Dumpty
 off the alphabet.

Sexton’s narratives are thus disconnected from standard forms of language, operating as subsumed texts beneath surface metaphorical markings. Instead of reading her words as accurate representations of her own biography, we are asked to decode them in order to access their hidden and symbolic import:

Do you understand?
 Can you read my hieroglyphics?
 No language is perfect.
 I only know English.
 English is not perfect. (“Is It Time?” 452-53)

To uncover the female voice of Sexton requires such subtextual readings. The hieroglyphs that constitute her poetic texts refer to meanings beneath their literal surface. For Sexton, the construction of the female voice is one accomplished through metaphor because language itself cannot achieve precisely what she wants to say. Although she declares that “I am in love with words” (464) in the poem “Words” from this same volume, she counsels the reader on how they cannot encompass the thoughts, emotions and voices of this particular American female:

Yet often they fail me.
 I have so much I want to say,
 so many images, stories, proverbs, etc.
 But the words aren’t good enough,
 the wrong ones kiss me.
 Sometimes I fly like an eagle
 But with the wings of a wren.

The parallels between Sexton and Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” are again reinforced here. For Kristeva words are “too remote, too abstract to capture the subterranean swarm;” for Sexton, “words aren’t good enough.” The unreliable nature of the written word immediately places the surface textuality of Sexton’s writing in question. Moreover, even the most cursory of readings of her work alerts us to the danger in either taking Sexton at her word or, indeed, to *be* her word. Her signposting of the unreliability of her texts begins in her early volumes and continues into her posthumously pub-

lished works. In her poem “In the Deep Museum” from *All My Pretty Ones* she tells her reader “I lied./ Yes, I lied” (64) and later in “Letter Written During a January Northeaster” from the same collection she reiterates this point: “I have invented a lie” (90); “I admit I have been lying” (91). “Flee on Your Donkey” from *Live or Die* continues such admissions: “I told you,/ I said —/ but I was lying —” (102). A final instance of this Sexton trait, of which there are numerous examples throughout her texts, is from the poem “Telephone” in *Words for Dr. Y* (1978) where she states, “The ink lies” (585). Sexton’s repeated confessions of such textual malpractice enforces the need for critical readings of her work to move away from interpretations of her poetry as being ‘confessional.’ This term in itself has become a label with which to categorise, and hence marginalise, the writings of America’s Middle Generation poets and has encouraged the critical enterprise of interpreting their texts as examples of purely solipsistic explorations of the self and its own personal world. Pam Morris highlights Sexton’s use of split identities, constructed selves, and of such textual lying in what she terms the “parodic resilience” of women writers such as Sexton and Plath in providing “the aesthetic control in their work[,] preventing any emotional excess or slide into a purely confessional discourse.”⁸

That Sexton destabilises her texts from the outset of her poetic career surely requires that critical readings should be attuned to her calls for decoding. The very title of the poem which introduces this article, “An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love,” makes explicit Sexton’s use of concealed inner narratives, of textual deceit, and of the impulses of love (importantly a feminine term for Sexton as will be shown later) with which to construct a code capable of understanding, not purely her own self, but the very nature of being. Her need to build her own code derives from the failure and unreliability of language as it exists to explain the totality of female experience. Language is an inaccurate medium because it allows for misinterpretation and is open to multiple definitions and manipulation. Sexton turns from language because of its imperfections and the traditionally male-dominated and male-oriented nature of its construction and towards her own sign system capable of representing the female voice that she understands to be repressed within US society.

In her posthumously published collections, *45 Mercy Street* (1976) and *Words for Dr. Y* (1978), Sexton’s perception of her own life is one where she herself becomes equated with texts. She closes “45 Mercy Street” referring to “the clumsy calendar/I live in,/ my life,/ and its hauled up/ notebooks” (484). Her inner self is stored in personal diaries in which she records the events of her life and the workings of her mind. It is in these that she can provide a private textual space for the biography of the self. The necessary concealment of these texts is a learned social behaviour as she asserts in “The Big Boots of Pain:”

One learns not to blab all this
except to yourself or the typewriter keys
who tell no one until they get brave
and crawl off onto the printed page. (548)

Sexton’s typewriter is both the medium between her own self and the printed page and also the instrument she uses to encode her narratives for that printed page.

The true nature of the concealed Sexton is not for public consumption:

Oh demon within,
I am afraid and seldom put my hand up
to my mouth and stitch it up
covering you, smothering you
from the public voyeur eyes
of my typewriter keys. ("Demon," 550)

The typewriter marks the boundary between the withheld and concealed self and the public, outside world. It is both her tool for the construction of her codes and the point of access between Sexton and her reading audience. The interaction between Sexton and the outside world occurs, then, at what Sexton ensures is a contended frontier. The typewriter, a machine which holds two offices (one, serving aspects of the private, and the other, the requirements of the public), is the instrument which transmits Sexton's encoded poetry to the world. Although she may view it as "public" and "voyeur" it is she who controls the printed pages of its output. The machine therefore becomes an integral part of the cipher that Sexton creates even though she views it as being implicated within the public's urge to decipher her private world.

In the broader view, Sexton's published poetic career is bracketed by poetry which was written to or in relation with doctors and analysts. *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* opens with "You, Doctor Martin" and also includes works such as "Said the Poet to the Analyst." The first section of *Words for Dr. Y* is entitled "Letters for Dr. Y," a series of pieces written between 1960 and 1970 which Sexton deliberately withheld so that they could be published after her death.⁹ Comparisons between these two sets of texts is not only inevitable but also highly rewarding. "Letters for Dr. Y" operates as a sublimated text within the Sexton canon. Its short pieces function as parallels to the publicly released narratives that Sexton was producing at the same time and, by reading them, Sexton returns our attention back to the start of her career requiring the reappraisal of the earlier works. Furthermore, it is important to remember Sexton's own emphasis on the function of letters in her life. They provide textual space for the private writings of the individual and they open a channel of communication with only one other person. They are not the sites of stylised refigurings of the world which rely on an ordered use of metaphor and symbolism that are central to her authorial techniques of control and concealment. Moreover, *Words for Dr. Y* as a collection exists as a series of unedited poems. Sexton's death has left these as disordered moments which she had not fully encoded for general publication. Consequently, by reading her finished and public works in tandem with these more private and unfinished fragments, possible routes appear into an understanding of the Sexton code.

The individual segments which constitute "Letters for Dr. Y" are untitled and are differentiated only by Sexton's exact dating of each piece. They read, therefore, as historically situated subtexts in the Sexton canon, similar to entries in a journal. The premise of the second of her "Letters to Dr. Y" dated June 6, 1960 is the conflict between Sexton's private store of chaotically arranged words and Dr. Y's repeated call for order and structure. On four occasions Sexton gives voice to Dr. Y's question "And

where is the order?” (562-63; her italics). This recurring inquiry is seeking a response from Sexton which will structure these words “that have been hoarded up,/ waiting for the pleasure act of coming out” (562). On this occasion, however, Sexton is not presenting a rigorously edited and ordered text. Instead she produces,

A disorderly display of words,
one after the other.
It's a huge gathering ball of words,
not a snowball, but an old string ball,
one from the ragbag.

Sexton's display and understanding of the use of words in the contemporaneous “Said the Poet to the Analyst” is remarkable in comparison to this knotted clump which have no meaning external to themselves. In the published poem from 1960 Sexton writes “My business is words. Words are like labels,/ or coins, or better, like swarming bees” (12). Rather than existing as an assorted jumble, Sexton explains words as signifiers, carrying meaning in the text she releases for public consumption. They operate as a currency between the poet and her audience and are important for what they are referring to and not for what they are in themselves. The image of words as “swarming bees” focuses attention on the Sexton method of employing words to construct meaning. The poem becomes the hive that the words have united to create. On their own they mean nothing, but through rigorous working and reworking come to give meaning to something other than themselves. Sexton manipulates the surface words of her texts into clusters which formulate the important metaphors concealed below.

The confusion that Sexton acknowledges in “Letters to Dr. Y” results from the inability to control the flow of words. In the private textual space of these ‘letters’ Sexton's communication of her own self is liable to be overlooked, overwritten by this flood of words. Without a sense of order, Dr. Y is unable to decode Sexton as the analyst is able to in “Said the Poet:” “But if you should say this is something it is not” (13). Dr. Y is incapable of distinguishing where the order is and thus cannot decipher this version of Sexton. It is a textual problem that she herself identifies: “And if there is a pearl among them/ she will surely get lost in the confusion” (562-63). The pearl is Sexton's female voice which is being crowded out by the mass of words around it. It has not yet been subsumed within an ordered poetic text which awaits decoding; rather, it is the one precious object for which she herself must sift through the “rag bag” to discover.

The search for the female voice in Sexton involves both poet and reader in examining systems of male-dominated and -structured language and textuality:

Words waiting, angry, masculine,
with their fists in a knot.
Words right now, alive in the head,
heavy and pressing as in a crowd.
Pushing for headroom, elbowing,
knowing their rights. (‘June 6, 1960,’ 563)

The language that society uses is a masculine one and inevitably the female voice becomes occluded by it. The social narratives of the United States with which Sexton both does and does not interact are constricting and violent. She and the female population are simultaneously dominated and constructed by them. In producing texts for this world Sexton is inevitably implicated within such male systems of writing. The words that are available to her are masculine; it is these that form the surface text, obscuring the female pearl within. Biographic interpretations of these surface narratives therefore involve themselves in male language systems and read these as evidence of Sexton's true enterprise and voice. This is not the case. The words she uses are the linguistic resource available to her and the Sexton enterprise is to manipulate them into a code with which to signal toward the female voice contained beneath.

The second poem in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, "Kind Sir: These Woods," utilises the metaphor of a child's game in which one turns around, eyes closed and then opened, discovering oneself in an 'unknown' landscape. The landscape that concerns Sexton here is the landscape of the mind, but her way of access to it is one for which the male-ordered narrative of US society does not provide space: "this inward look that society scorns" (5). Such introspection and interest in the concealed and the withheld subverts the male surface narratives that control society. Indeed, when Sexton does examine this landscape, it is a female, her own self, that she discovers there: "Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse/ than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns." This unthreatening female figure is located in an uncertain position, between salvation and suffering, both of which are identified in terms of male Christian imagery. Once again, Sexton defines the female voice as being contained within systems of male language.

It was Sexton's interest in such inward looks that brought her into conflict with her poetry workshop leader at this time, John Holmes, and for whom she wrote "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," the first poem in the second part of *To Bedlam*. Holmes' interpretations of Sexton's early work centred on what he perceived to be the autobiographical nature of her writing. In response, Sexton draws attention in the poem to the difference between her external poetic constructions and her internal self. It is her mind, however, she maps as her "narrow diary" (34) not her poetry which she presents as an "awkward bowl,/ with all its cracked stars shining/ like a complicated lie" (34-35). The Sexton text is complicated and it does lie as she repeatedly informs us. It is not in the poetic text that she tries to bring order to her own life. She has alternative regions for such self-examination as she states in "Letters to Dr. Y.:" "Why else keep a journal, if not/ to examine your own filth?" ("January 1, 1962;" 564).

The internal female voice is an uncharted phenomenon for Sexton because it belies the factuality of male systems of discourse and categorisation. The geography of the concealed female self is one which standard versions of language are unable to map. In the undated poem entitled "January 24th" from 'Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die,' the third section of *Words for Dr. Y*, Sexton begins: "I am alone here in my own mind./ There is no map/ and there is no road" (594). This individual female finds herself isolated not only because she is looking inside herself at this particular moment, but also because there are no known routes of access or indicators of direction, no textual mappings of this internal region. The next poem in the series, "February 3rd," com-

bines the workings of her mind with her rejection of the male-structured systems of social ordering: "My ideas are a curse./ They spring from a radical discontent/ with the awful order of things" (595). Consequently, she occupies an anomalous position, without purpose and external to standard systems of knowing and identification: "I'm a wound without blood, a car without gasoline" (596).

"August 17th" from this same collection echoes "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" in that the female self that Sexton conceals inside goes unrecognised in a male world of physicality. The hospital in which she finds herself is a "body zone" (603) and she employs repeated descriptions of bodies to emphasise the dichotomy between the external world of the physical self and the internal functions of the mind. Just as the anonymous girl presented a blank text to the doctors in the earlier poem, Sexton maintains herself as an unknown in this institutional space: "I am not here for the doctors/ to read like a recipe" (604). Similarly, the Sexton text is not a straightforward explanation with a known end in sight. The female voice that she constructs throughout her volumes is not on the surface of her texts. To provide space for consideration of the female voice within American society, Sexton first destabilised the male narratives and linguistic resources available to her and then encoded them in such a way that her audience would have to read beneath her lines to uncover the concealed female text below.

In this male world of textual domination and masculine language, Sexton locates a space to encode one word as feminine in 'June 6, 1960' from "Letters to Dr. Y.":

A word, a sunflower seed.
 One we would surely overlook.
 So easily lost, a dead bee.
 So vulnerable.
 She is already trampled, that one,
 having traveled so far from the heart.
 She weighs so little.
 She is so light and vulnerable.
 She is the dead bee called love.(563)

Love is the central female figure within the hive of Sexton's poetic constructions. It is the lost pearl, the hidden queen, the female voice towards which Sexton is writing in her collections. The textualisation of this voice is inevitably of a withheld and subterranean nature due to the male systems of discourse which predominate on the surface of society's narratives. In subverting such male constructs Sexton creates a new female text which she can then hand on to her own female inheritors, be they her daughters, successive generations of women writers, or indeed her female reading audience. Thus, we are able to tease out the focuses of her writing career: to construct ways of textualising feminine influences within society, to give voice to the dominated female figure in America, and to liberate the female writer from the constraints of the tight, masculine surfaces of textualisation. By reappropriating language for her own needs, Sexton displays the intimate and interdependent connection in her poetry between the writing of texts and the discourses of love: "What is love, for a woman, the same thing as writing."¹⁰

Notes

- ¹ Anne Sexton, "Said the Poet to the Analyst" from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* in Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) 12. All quotations from Sexton's poetry are taken from this edition and subsequent page references appear in parentheses within the text.
- ² Anne Sexton, in interview with Patricia Marx in Steven E. Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star: Selected Essays and Prose* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1985) 75.
- ³ Robert Lowell, "Epilogue" from *Day by Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 127.
- ⁴ Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought To Sing" in Steven E. Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star: Selected Essays and Prose* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1985) 46.
- ⁵ John Berryman makes the same point with reference to his father in Dream Song 384: "The marker slants flowerless, day's almost done,/ I stand above my father's grave with rage,/ often, often before/ I've made this awful pilgrimage to one/ who cannot visit me, who tore his page/ out." John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (1969; London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990) 406.
- ⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in Dan Latimer, ed., *Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 581. Subsequent references to this text appear in parentheses within the text.
- ⁷ Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922), a Swiss psychiatrist, devised projective personality tests which employed the consecutive presentation of various shapes and colours of ink blots on sheets of paper to a subject who was then asked to describe what s/he thought they resembled or suggested.
- ⁸ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford and Camb., Mass.: Blackwell, 1993) 155.
- ⁹ See "Editor's Note" in Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) 559.
- ¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in Dan Latimer, ed., *Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 582.

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