

A N N E S E X T O N

vs.

# the Life the Work



**O**n May 17<sup>th</sup>, the PSA held an event at Cooper Union in New York City called “Beyond Tribute: Anne Sexton Revisited.” The participants included **Betsy Andrews**, **Eileen Myles**, **Chris Stroffolino**, **Robert Clawson**, **Marie Howe**, and **David Trinidad**. **J.D. McClatchy** moderated and introduced the evening. The speakers presented complex, troubling, and often exhilarating relationships with Anne Sexton, each one trying to claim a space from which to relate to this difficult and sometimes baffling poet. What came out most strongly that night was the difficulty each one had in separating Anne Sexton’s life from her work from her reputation, or even deciding if the desire for this separation was the proper reaction to have. There is a push and pull between almost any artist’s life and work, and a desire on the part of many readers to reconcile them, to see a coherent pattern uniting the two. What became clear that night in May was how much Anne Sexton complicates this urge, and how willing many people are to try anyway.



This Fall, *Crossroads* presents three reactions to that evening, from **David Trinidad**, who spoke at the event, and from **Lois Ames** and **Maggie Nelson**, who were in attendance. The title of this forum, “Anne Sexton: The Life vs. the Work” is meant to be challenging, to make one wonder, as Maggie Nelson does, whether “a choice can or must be made between the two.”

## Anne Sexton: An Actress in Her Own Autobiographical Play

DAVID TRINIDAD

For me, the fine line between Anne Sexton's life and work has always been a large part of her appeal. When I first read her poems in the mid-seventies (just a few months, I'd later learn, after her suicide), I immediately responded to their intimacy, their emphasis on personal experience, and to the way Sexton seemed, in service to broader though equally personal themes (death, madness, religious faith, love), to put her entire being on the line. I understood, if only instinctively, what courage that had taken. By the time I discovered Sexton, her work was widely accepted and praised (thanks, largely, to the women's movement), and was on the verge of being adopted by academia. Still, the shock waves of Sexton's daring could be felt. Much was made of her affiliation with Confessional Poetry; as a disciple of Robert Lowell, we were told, she had helped shatter the conservativeness of post-World War II verse. It has since been documented that the boldness of Sexton's work directly influenced the poems in Lowell's *Life Studies* and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*. Sexton is more vulnerable than Lowell, less allegorical than Plath. She pulls you into her kitchen, her car; places you right beside her as she's ferried away from a tryst:

. . . I have ripped my hand  
from your hand as I said I would  
.....  
and I am on the top deck now  
holding my wallet, my cigarettes  
and my car keys  
at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday  
in August of 1960.<sup>1</sup>

"Concrete examples give a verisimilitude," she said. And: "I want [readers] to feel as if they were touching me."<sup>2</sup> *That* intimate.

In the decades since Sexton's death, autobiographical poetry has become less and less fashionable; young writers are encouraged to jettison the "I," to encode personal experience in a fragmented or elliptical style. Sexton's popularity, naturally, has suffered in such a climate. It's all right to read Sexton when you're young (i.e., when

you don't know any better), but she's someone to be outgrown, like Allen Ginsberg or Charles Bukowski or (god forbid) Kahlil Gibran. Her "issues" may seem too made-for-TV-movie to some: nervous breakdown, suicide attempt, adultery, incest. And while poems like "In Celebration of My Uterus" and "Menstruation at Forty" will always make some readers squirm, it's possible that a poem like "The Abortion," written at a time when abortion wasn't even talked about, could be used as pro-life propaganda in our current culture. A scary thought.

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***Of course Sexton also said that "poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical," that one should tell almost the whole story. Poems will force you to lie, or at the very least alter facts.***

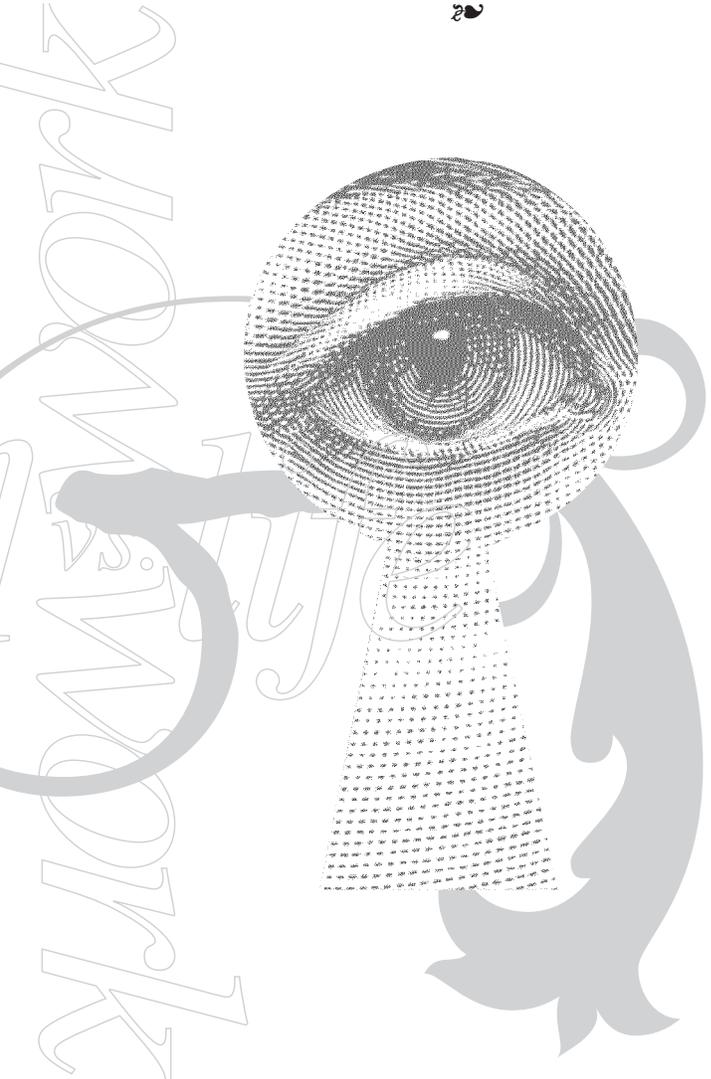
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My own struggle with Anne Sexton, for twenty years now, has not been about her subject matter (she is the one who taught me that you can write a poem about *anything*), but about the blatant deterioration of her talent. Sexton's *Complete Poems* appeared in 1981, edited by her daughter/literary executor Linda Gray Sexton. This volume includes the eight books Anne Sexton sent to press during her lifetime, as well as one hundred and thirty pages of posthumously published poems. Though fascinating as Sexton documents, the latter are shockingly sloppy and full of over-the-top, bad-trip imagery. This, coupled with the fact that the last three books she did publish (*The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks*, and *That Awful Rowing Toward God*) saw an obvious decline in quality, has made it difficult to come to grips with her complete body of work. It also didn't help that, after her death, her former mentor Robert Lowell wrote that her writing had become "meager and exaggerated." I jokingly refer to Sexton's late period as "Bad Anne." How else to reconcile such slipshod lines as "I flee. I flee. / I block my ears and eat salami" with her amazing early metaphors ("leaves . . . born in their own green blood / like the hands of mermaids") and admissions ("Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself")? It's too painful to think of her simply as a brilliant poet who got bad. And too easy, somehow, to blame it on pills, alcohol, insanity, fame. Better, I recently decided, to think of her as a genius with demons, writing to beat the clock.

<sup>1</sup>Sexton, Anne. 1962. "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound."

<sup>2</sup>Kevles, Barbara. 1975. "Interview with Anne Sexton," in *The Paris Review*.

In a high school drama class, I had the realization that although I wanted to be onstage, I did not want to play a character—I wanted to be up there as myself. Eventually poetry made it possible for me to do just that. Or perhaps I should say Sexton made it possible. “I am an actress in my own autobiographical play,” she once said about poetry readings. What wonderful permission she gave me, to write my own life! (Of course Sexton also said that “poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical,” that one should tell *almost* the whole story. Poems will force you to lie, or at the very least alter facts.) Looking back, I can see that I also must have been deeply touched by the sense of otherness in Sexton. Here was a suburban housewife confessing her strangeness, declaring herself “a possessed witch,” and finding in her failure as a Stepford wife her identity as an artist. This undoubtedly inspired me, as a young gay man, to set down my own feelings and experiences outside the norm. (It was nice, too, that Sexton told an interviewer: “Homosexuality is all right with me.”) It strikes me there must be a very real need, in our increasingly conservative culture, for the poetry of Anne Sexton. Her life waits, like Dickinson’s loaded gun or Kafka’s “ax for the frozen sea,” for those who require it.



## Anne Sexton Re-Collected

LOIS AMES

The Poetry Society of America’s event of 17 May 2001, “Beyond Tribute: Anne Sexton Revisited,” was extremely poignant. I left the evening extraordinarily touched, exhilarated—and bemused, wishing I could convey to the younger poets, who had measured themselves against Anne Sexton, the woman whom I had known. The poets, each in turn, wrestled with, and attempted to bring to earth Anne Sexton—constructed in part from what they had heard, read, imagined, and elicited from the work—the woman they had needed to create in order to be poets themselves. It was an evening of personal and professional confession in the most elegant sense of the word. I was reminded of what Anne’s closest friend, the poet Maxine Kumin, had often said, “she gave as good as she got.”

Today, twenty-seven years after Anne’s death, her close friends find it impossible to come together without reminiscing in painful loss, joyful humor, and loving exasperation. How to convey to the world of poets the delightful, wonderfully funny, generous, warm, kind, psychologically astute person Anne Sexton was—and remains for us?

Can I possibly give a full-length portrait of the poet and woman I knew? She gave unstintingly to her students and to young poets in person, on the telephone, and by letter. She was generous in her friendships and demanded much from them. She loved her children deeply and inconsistently, and, sadly, they suffered so much as a consequence. She lived in a violent marriage yet tried to find nurture, love, and support within it—and outside. But when she chose to divorce, her world fell apart. I believe—unequivocally—that she was a victim of incest, sexual abuse, familial neglect, spousal abuse, and a family pattern of alcoholism and suicide. Yet she longed to be free of her demons and struggled daily in every way she knew to be well, to be strong.

Anne in life had garnered a stream of accolades and rewards for her work: publication of many books, crowded readings at high fees, a professorship at Boston University, creation of an opera produced by the Minnesota Opera Company from her book *Transformations*, performance of her poetry by a rock group, Anne Sexton and Her Kind, successful development and production of her play *Mercy*

*Street* to sold out audiences at the American Place Theatre in New York City, several honorary degrees and an honorary Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard, nomination for the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, a Ford Foundation grant, a Guggenheim, election as a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in Great Britain, a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and appointment as a Radcliffe Scholar. Not surprisingly, she also accrued equally strong criticism and whispered condemnation for flamboyance, theatrical and defiant behavior, for mental illness and attempted suicide, for her beauty and sexuality, and for speaking the unspeakable in an age of rectitude in the bastion of repression known as cold roast Boston.

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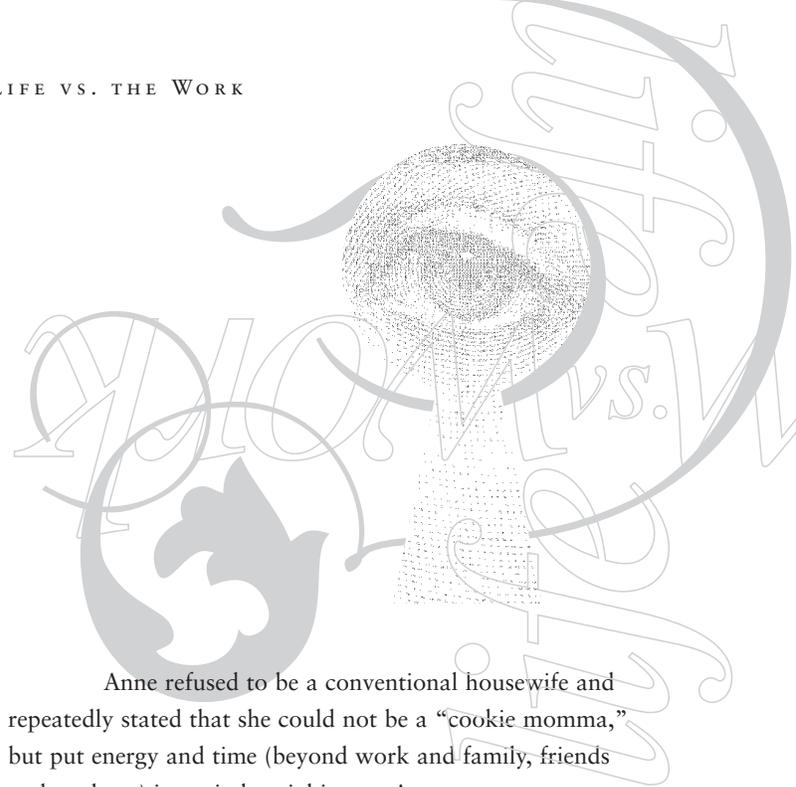
***She was one of four American Poets—and one of the few women—invited by Ted Hughes to read at the now famous convocation of poets in London at The Poetry International of 1967.***

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In death the very real value of Anne's work and life and relationships has been muddled and confused by controversy, sensational revelations, and exaggeration of the importance of the influence of her relatively brief association and sparse correspondence with Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath.

She was more than a suicidal poet. She was more than a confessional poet. Her work was iconoclastic. She broke ground. She plowed fields. And she scattered the seed for much that was to come.

Anne wrote about the complications of being female at a time when the rule was that "nice girls don't talk about sex," and the women of Massachusetts were still begging their doctors for sound advice on safe birth control. Yet, she switched a flashlight into dark corners and rattled the bones in every family's closet, to write about abortion, menstruation, masturbation, heterosexual and lesbian love affairs, adultery, incest, child abuse, and addiction, in spite of taboos. Today, as these topics are matter-of-factly discussed in the school, the media, the market, and the church, one must stop to remember that Anne's courage and fortitude and poetic sensibility were at the beginning of the tidal wave.



Anne refused to be a conventional housewife and repeatedly stated that she could not be a "cookie momma," but put energy and time (beyond work and family, friends and students) into vital social issues. Anne was a strong advocate of women's rights, civil rights, and opposed the war in Vietnam. Her Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard, which she read on 11 June, 1968, a few days after Robert Kennedy was assassinated and two months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., was a vigorous anti-war poem. She signed a petition published in the *New York Times* by a group of prominent women declaring that they had had abortions and demanding the right for all American women. Although an ardent liberal, Anne was a capitalist; she believed that the love of money and what it could buy was no sin, and that everyone—women and poets included—deserved ample pay for good work. She firmly encouraged and supported everyone she knew in pursuing the same goal for themselves.

In turn, when Anne felt she had been cheated, she set about to redress those wrongs. When she came to realize that her love-affair-gone-sour had really been psychotherapeutic sexual abuse by her psychiatrist, she wanted to denounce him at his public lecture at Human Resources Institute of Boston, partly for revenge, partly to protect other women, and also to alert the psychiatric community. I dissuaded her, fearing that she would suffer calumny and that The American Psychiatric Association would not have the stamina nor the courage to pursue the case. To date, so far as I know, they have not.

She was one of four American poets—and one of the few women—invited by Ted Hughes to the now famous convocation of poets in London at The Poetry International

## A Note on Anne Sexton and Her Critical Legacy

MAGGIE NELSON

I didn't read Anne Sexton until I was in college in the early 1990s, when first-person, autobiographical, female voices were everywhere, and the rap for being "disgustingly fixated on the female body" (as a critic once said about Sexton) had shifted onto figures in other realms – Karen Finley, Anita Hill, Courtney Love, etc. Soon after reading her, I chose to write my undergraduate thesis on her and Plath; it didn't take long to become horrified at how little had been written about their work that didn't make use of a tired, simplistic, and often misogynistic mode of biographical and pseudo-psychological interpretation (i.e., "We suggest Plath was a modern Electra. Her unnatural love for her father. . . caused her subsequent hatred of all men, a hatred we shall document by examining the four collections of poems and the novel."¹). The whole gist of my thesis, then, was to focus on the action of their poetry and avoid biography entirely – I wanted to avoid the traps of pathologizing the poets, apologizing for them, venerating or trashing their contributions to literature and/or feminism, and so on.

Thus at the recent PSA tribute, as I listened to many different writers struggled to identify with or differentiate themselves from the figure of Sexton, or argue that her work does, indeed, have some literary merit (kind of a weird theme at a tribute), or simply grapple with the difficult woman they knew or imagined knowing, I felt initially depressed about how the terms of the critical scene surrounding Sexton haven't changed all that much. Even the title of this forum -- "The Life Vs. The Work" – agitates me: "versus," after all, means *against* or *as an alternative to* – as if "real life" can be pitted against poetic project, or as if a choice can or must be made between the two. The formulation is a close relative of the whole subjectivity-vs.-objectivity debate, which, needless to say, has figured women on the losing end for years. Though I personally find these terms to be pretty much exhausted, it's important to note, as Susan Sontag once did re: the form-vs.-content debate, that although most critics would deny such a split in theory, "in practice, the old antithesis lives on, virtually unassailed."<sup>2</sup>

It makes me feel better to remember something Shoshana Felman once wrote: "The critical interpretation . . .

of 1967. She gave a stunning reading of "The Double Image" sandwiched between those of Pablo Neruda and W.H. Auden, an evening in The Queen Elizabeth Hall that those who were there will never forget.

She was a sturdy friend and loving teacher. She spoke to the strength and character in the people she loved and to the insight and gifts in the poets she taught. Her passionate intent was to evoke the deep clean center in each person she encountered and to hold to a maturity and clarity in every exchange. She drew sustenance from the community of poets and generously declared that we are all writing the same song.

Such was her legacy.

The ending speech I wrote for her play *Mercy Street* is the only reply to her critics and the only epitaph I can give her. The heroine of the play, Daisy (Anne's father gave her the childhood nickname as he sang to her the old song "Daisy give me your answer true."), lies dead on the stage as the priest/psychiatrist intones over her body:

Daisy, you have been brought forth  
from a stiff-necked people.  
The zeal of your house  
doth eat you up.  
O Daisy, O Daughter of Jerusalem,  
there is an enormous hunger in Zion!



<sup>1</sup>Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (NY: Doubleday, 1966) p. 15.

not only elucidates the text, but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps one of Sexton’s greatest gifts will be that of continually laying bare the intensity of this phenomenon – really putting it into overdrive. Her poems put a weird pressure on us to stake out our relation to them: you might feel compelled to say, “I’m not a woman *like that*,” as Eileen Myles did at the Tribute; others might share James Dickey’s embarrassment: “One feels tempted to drop [Sexton’s poems] furtively in the nearest ashcan, rather than to be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering.”<sup>4</sup> The point is that it’s virtually impossible to talk about Sexton’s work without becoming implicated in the problems she addresses, be they those of sexuality (i.e., the pleasures and pitfalls of heterosexuality, homosexuality, masturbation, exhibitionism, incest, etc.); psychoanalysis and the costs of “the civilizing process”; love and hate for one’s parents, children, lovers, and friends; the cruelty and seductions of fairytales and myths; the drive toward a crazed religiosity; and so on.

My disinterest in Sexton’s life was, I think, a worthwhile inversion, but ultimately it was a pose and a phase. Now I’m more inclined to say that OF COURSE we should allow ourselves to indulge in as wide a range of fantasies about and identifications with her as possible. It can be a lot of fun – albeit “cruel, sadistic, and funny” fun, as Sexton once said of *Transformations*, her re-telling of the Grimms’ fairy tales. That said, the actual details of Sexton’s suffering (or whatever we presume to know of them) still strike me as a sort of red herring. I find it more interesting to read her as “the performance artist of intimacy,” as Jacqueline Rose once put it, simply because there’s so much to learn from her about the different ways the personal can function in a poem. I don’t mean to invoke here the whole “the-truth-is-in-the-mask” idea; rather, as Sexton once explained, “I’m hunting for the truth. It might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one, because behind everything that happens to you, there is another truth, a secret life.”<sup>5</sup> Though many people, consciously or unconsciously, resist treating Sexton as an intellectual (a fact that has something to do with her high school education and early self-image as “a buried self” who only knew how to “diaper babies and make white sauce”), her incessant drive to uncover “another truth” has everything to do with the cycle described by Wittgenstein: “When you bump against

the limits of your own honesty it is as though your thoughts get into a whirlpool, an infinite regress: You can *say* what you like, it takes you no further.”<sup>6</sup> Sexton’s poetry is fixated on this language-game: she was, I think, both totally seduced by the Oedipal narrative of discovering “the awful truth,” and totally aware of the impossibility of such a venture.

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What keeps her work annoying and exciting is that she tethered this conundrum to her “rank” version of female sexuality, thus she always ended up offending someone; as Mona Van Duyn once complained, “[Sexton’s poems] have little to do with believable love, having none of love’s privacy... they have as little to do with believable sexuality as an act of intercourse performed onstage for an audience.”<sup>7</sup> But what is believable love, or believable sexuality, anyway? I think were better off letting such questions remain open.

<sup>3</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, 1980) p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> James Dickey, *Babel to Byzantium* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968), p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Sexton, *No Evil Star*, ed. Steven Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 8e.

<sup>7</sup> Mona Van Duyn, “Seven Women,” in *Poetry*, January 1967.

