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The Woman Elizabeth Ann Seton: 1804-1812

BY
MARY ANN DONOVAN, S.C.

To open exploration of Elizabeth Ann Seton, the woman, Sister Marilyn Thie began at the wide end of the hourglass, with the common experience of women in Elizabeth's day. I move to the center of the hourglass and begin with Elizabeth herself. The movement flows from her experience of widowhood and an aspect of her experience of mothering and so leads out toward the broader experience of many women. The focus is the years 1804-1812. These are the years in which Elizabeth converted to Roman Catholicism, made her way in New York City as the widowed mother of five children, moved to Baltimore, and founded a religious community. Unfortunately the outlines of the individual, Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, have already been blurred by the hagiography associated with Mother Seton, saint and foundress. To bring Elizabeth, the woman, into sharper relief I examine two key relationships: the one with her beloved Antonio Filicchi, and the one with her cherished daughter, Annina. Sooner or later everyone must deal with the consequences of her own loves, and Elizabeth Ann Seton, with her warmly affectionate nature, had perhaps more occasion than most to experience such consequences.

1. Time of mourning, time of conversion: January, 1804-April, 1807.

Elizabeth's husband William died in Pisa on 27 December 1803, after a marriage of almost ten years.¹ In the three years immediately preceding this period, Elizabeth lost her position in society. In the three months immediately preceding this period, having temporarily left her country, most of her family, and her religious support system, she lost her husband. The problem she was faced with was the reconstellation of identity. She will find her new identity in religious

¹They married in New York, 25 January 1794.

conversion. It is therefore most significant that the time of mourning and time of conversion coincide.

The steps of the process of reconstellation are these: (1) initial grief, the raw experience, into which is inserted Antonio's presence; (2) devastation/desolation; (3) interior shift, opening to reconstellation of identity; (4) consolidation. Access to the events in which this process can be traced as Elizabeth works out her new identity is through her writings, the key ones being her correspondence with Antonio Filicchi.

One person dominates Elizabeth's account of the months in Italy following William Seton's death: Antonio Filicchi. Antonio, the younger of the two Filicchi brothers and husband of Amabilia, traveled back to America with the widowed Elizabeth, played a key role in her conversion, and remained a significant presence to the end of Elizabeth's life. It was he who first taught her to make the sign of the cross, and their sometimes tender, occasionally passionate, never genital, always affectionate relationship affords lively entrée to Elizabeth, the woman.

Initial Grief

The first letter Antonio sent her soon after her husband's death is prophetic. He wrote, "Your dear Wm was the early friend of my youth: You are now come in his room. Your soul is even dearer to Antonio, and will be so forever."² He continues, as she will later remind him, "I shall call for you; I must meet you in Paradise."³

By April 1804 he is rereading "all over ten times" a note of hers and responding to it. "For the purpose of obtaining one of your letters in the week, I would cheerfully scribble all the 24 hours of the day: but

²Antonio Filicchi to Elizabeth Ann Seton, 9 January 1804, in Archives of Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Letters of Antonio Filicchi, Box 43; hereinafter cited as MSJ 43; Antonio Filicchi is designated by AF; Elizabeth Ann Seton is designated by EAS.

³Ibid. In letters from 1805 EAS refers three times to this passage. First, 15 April 1805: "Thought flies on to the approaching time when I shall see you no more, and hear once or twice only in twelve months—Nature cannot stop at the Recollection, and the desiring soul flies even beyond to the sweet garden of paradise where you first promised to call for your dear Sister, and where she shall enjoy your beloved society forever" (*Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville [New York: 1987], 173). And again, 11 October 1805: "You remember the first letter you ever wrote me you said your soul would call for me in Paradise, and now I declare I believe St Peter would let me pass as soon as you tho' I am at the eleventh hour, and perhaps listen to my entreaty not to shut the gate till Antonio enters" (*ibid.*, 188). And yet again, 25 October 1805: "must not think of the pleasure of your Society for where dear friend shall I again enjoy it—Where you first called for it, in Paradise, I believe" (*ibid.*, 190). Emphases in originals.

till I shall have the blessing of enjoying your personal company, having the reality, I shall not care much about the shadow."⁴ Without question he was attracted to her.

Devastation/Desolation

Their journey to America was a voyage of almost seven weeks (20 April-4 June 1804). Because of her still recent bereavement, Elizabeth would have been both vulnerable to and needy of human affection. The only likely indication of the unfolding relationship during this period is in a passage from the Italian journal kept for Rebecca Seton. It is extensive, and deserves to be quoted in full:

When a soul whose only hope is in God, whose concern and desires are so limited that it would forsake all human beings, and account the dearest ties of life as foolishness compared with his love—when this soul sincerely desirous of serving and obeying him, is beset by the lowest passions of human nature, and from tears and prayers of earnest penitence can, by apparently the most trivial incitements, pass to the most humiliating compliances to sin—apparently, for until the effects are experienced it would be incredible that the commonest affections and unintentional actions should produce a confusion and disturbance in the mind that is exalted to the love of God, and destroy every impression but momentary gratification—this can only be the work of the enemy of our souls—our souls that have so often prayed to him for grace and mercy, and while lamenting our errors and trying to gain mutual strength, have solemnly declared that we would embrace our cross, follow our leader, and valiantly oppose the enemy of our salvation. Most dear Antonio, a thousand times endeared to me by the struggles of your soul, our Lord is with us—once more the mark is [the sign of the cross].⁵

The text indicates a struggle in which both Elizabeth and Antonio were involved: "lamenting *our* errors," "*mutual* strength," "*we* would

⁴AF to EAS, 6 April 1804, MSJ 43.

⁵Journal, 21 April 1804, in Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 1774-1821* (New York: 1951), 80 with n. 67 citing White, *Life of Mrs Eliza A Seton* (New York: 1853), 109. About the journal of the voyage, Melville comments:

The journal Mrs. Seton kept of the voyage home is not available. In the 1902 diary of Robert Seton, now in the possession of the New York Historical Society, Seton states "I gave Madame de Barbery (Rome '66) a little book all written Mother Seton's hand. . . . My aunt Catherine (Catherine Josephine Seton) gave me the book. Mme de Barbery is dead and the book is, now, God knows where. I remember only that it had some notes of her return voyage from Leghorn to New York after her husband's death." (p. 90). Since de Barberey gives the excerpts in French, and Code's English version is a translation of her French, it has been deemed wiser to use White's version as most probably the nearest to the original (Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 322, n. 59).

embrace *our* cross," "our Lord is with *us*." The occasion of the trial is one Elizabeth judges "trivial." Yet it arouses "the lowest passions of human nature." On even a conservative reading one can conclude that something as insignificant as a passing touch, a glance, or even a conversation ignited sexual desire between these two who found one another attractive, who were already united in a close friendship, and who were thrown together in the isolation of a long voyage. Further passages, Melville shows, indicate that Elizabeth considered herself to have sinned but remained trustful of the divine mercy.⁶ One cannot say more than this about the events of the voyage from the present state of the evidence.

After their arrival Antonio remained in New York until late August, before traveling on to Boston. In her first letter during this new absence Elizabeth remarks that he had not encouraged her to write often.⁷ This reference is the first written evidence that he feels a need for distance. As for herself, she admits that each evening she watches for a letter from him. She claims this is proper to her "*female heart*," a heart deeply attached to him, fearful not to possess his affection.⁸

The Reverend John Henry Hobart, the Protestant Episcopal clergyman who had tended to Elizabeth's spiritual needs before the voyage to Italy, visited her while this letter was being written and was clearly out of patience with her.⁹ The distress of her minister could only have emphasized the desolation she felt. She had so recently (8 July) lost Rebecca Seton on whom she had been counting for strength

⁶Ibid.

⁷"Praying heartily for you made me resolve to write to my dear Brother altho,' it appeared to me that you did not encourage the idea of writing to you often" (EAS to AF, 30 August 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 143). This and the next three references, dated 2, 8, and 12 September are from the same letter. EAS frequently added to a letter over time, which accounts for the similarity of flavor between her letters and the journals she kept for individuals.

⁸"Remember you have not a *female heart*, and mine is most truly and fondly attached to you, as you have proved when I have been most contradictory and troublesome to you—fearing too much not to possess your invaluable affection—" (EAS to AF, 2 September 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 143). Emphasis in original.

⁹"Mr. H. was here yesterday for the first time since your absence and was so intirely [*sic*] out of all patience that it was in vain to *show the letter* [just received from Bp. Carroll]. . . . his visit was short and painful on both sides—God direct me for I see it is in vain to look for help from any but him—" (EAS to AF, 8 September 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 144). Emphasis in original.

in her still sharp grief for William, and Antonio was gone.¹⁰ Here the theme of abandonment surfaces, a theme originally etched into Elizabeth's personality by her own mother's premature death and driven deep by her father's frequent, lengthy absences.

When, four days after the unpleasantness with Hobart, Antonio's letter arrives, no wonder Elizabeth cries out: "I can find but one fault in your letter which is that a whole side is blank."¹¹ She closes with a pledge of her true, unceasing affection.¹²

That affection carries weight in her struggles around conversion. It is clear that she would like to please the one who increasingly is, if not her only earthly tie, certainly the adult who is closest to the concerns of her heart at this time. In mid-September she writes, "I make every endeavor to think as you wish me to, and it is only the obstinate resistance of my mind that prevents my immediately doing also as you wish me to."¹³ All the more honor to her integrity, that she can neither think nor act except in agreement with her conscience.

A few days later Elizabeth tells him she has received his letter of 15 September; without Antonio's letter (which I have not seen), it is difficult to know how to interpret her comment, "I read it over and over and smile to think that the heart of Man knows itself so little—but God knows it, and it is enough—." There is a sweetness when she continues, saying that her intervening letter of 12 September "will reassure you of the constancy of that affection on which you so justly rely—that affection my dearest Tonierlinno¹⁴ which notwithstanding all my doubts and fears, I must yet hope will be perfected in Paradise." She claims that she both fears and hopes to hear from his brother Phillip and from "your lovely Amabilia." (Perhaps a reminder? His response includes a postscript passing on his wife's greetings.) Eliza-

¹⁰Unaware of Rebecca's declining health, Elizabeth had written to her sister-in-law the previous spring, while she herself was still recovering from scarlet fever and borne down by the weight of her grief for William:

My Gods will is all—dear dear Rebecca to tell you what he has done for me thro' my bitter afflictions will require many many happy evenings, which if he has in store for us we will enjoy with thankful hearts, if not—I write only to *you*, and while I have been writing this feel so ill at my ease that I scarcely know how to go on—my whole heart, head, all are sick—but I think if I could once more be with you I should be well as ever—" (EAS to Rebecca Seton, 5 March 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 100). Emphasis in original.

¹¹EAS to AF, 12 September 1804, *ibid.*, 144.

¹²"I repeat to you *pray for me* it will benefit us both—and when you wish to add a cordial drop of sweetness to my cup write some of the thoughts of your Soul to your dear Sister who loves you with most true and unceasing affection" (EAS to AF, *ibid.*, 145). Emphasis in original.

¹³EAS to AF, 19 September 1804, *ibid.*, 146.

¹⁴An affectionate diminutive for "Antonio."

beth ends her letter of 15 September by teasing him about his improved English, wondering if he has “found some kind Directress to supply the deficiency of her you left behind you.” (Indeed he had, as he admits in his response to her, a letter in which he also mentions he has been to confession in Boston.)¹⁵ The openhearted affection and playful teasing, both so characteristic of this woman in correspondence with those dear to her, certainly had the potential, in a man-woman relationship, to move in any of several directions, especially when one considers her widowed state, the experience the two had had on shipboard, and the immense distance separating him from his wife. How Elizabeth reconstellates her identity as a widow will determine how she continues to relate to Antonio. Religious conversion will be key.

Interior shift

The next year witnesses a profound development on Elizabeth's side of the relationship, the evidence for which is in the letters falling between the end of September 1804 and August 1805. A new note is injected already by the end of September. She remarks that when she yearned to cry out “Antonio” she “calls back the thought” and instead calls out “Jesus.”¹⁶ Any woman of faith might make that substitution when she finds her heart straying where she does not choose to go.

It is clear by mid-October that her thoughts had been dwelling on Amabilia. After asking to be remembered to his “best Beloved” in Leghorn, she writes a touching paragraph of reminiscence about her visit there, noting that “the happiest hour I can now anticipate in this world is that in which I shall hear that you are again in that dear place in the arms of the still dearer objects it contains.”¹⁷ The expression of

¹⁵“I am giving/ you rightly guessed/ some Italian lecon [*sic*], in exchange for English ones, to a very genteel, good, & pretty handsome young miss, first daughter of this Mrs. Stoughton. She is one of the new Converts to the Rom. Catholick Religion from the Presbyterian communion since 3 years. She is very anxious to form your acquaintance” (AF to EAS, 8 October 1804, MSJ 43). Slashes in original.

¹⁶“I could tell you many things my Brother but must wait for the much wished for hour when we shall be seated with our big book at the table—I could cry out now as my poor Seton used to Antonio Antonio Antonio, but call back the thought and my Soul cries out Jesus Jesus Jesus—there it finds rest, and heavenly Peace, and is hushed by that dear Sound as my little Babe is quieted by my cradle song—” (EAS to AF, 29 September 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 148. Emphasis in original). Antonio called this and the preceding letter “admirable pieces to me of the most exquisite virtue, and elegance, and as such utterly discouraging my feeble mind and style for their proper answer” (AF to EAS, 8 October 1804, MSJ). He sent both to Bishop Carroll, requesting help.

¹⁷EAS to AF, 17 October 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 151.

such sentiments evokes a heart undergoing discipline, reminding itself of dear though hard realities. The larger context remains the ongoing struggles with her faith commitment, complicated by extreme financial need.

Illness, both her servant-woman's and her own, made Elizabeth's situation even worse in late November and early December. She mentions making fires, preparing food, and nursing her sick servant, all in addition to her usual work. A close contemporary parallel might be a January weekend in northern Ontario in an unwinterized cabin with no running water and outdoor plumbing. The circumstances would be similar, except that for Elizabeth the condition was permanent and included five young children.

Meanwhile Antonio had not received any letters and wrote to complain, threatening sour looks and words.¹⁸ Despite all her difficulties Elizabeth had indeed written to Antonio and sealed the letter. A significant series of reflections led her not to send it. She relates her concerns in the response which his complaint generated, a letter fascinating for the new dimension it introduces in one revelatory passage.

Considering with my own heart, its errors, its wanderings and still added sorrows which all call to it with an irresistible force to give itself to God alone, I ask why then deliver it, or even lend it to the uncertain influences of human affections, why allow it to look for Antonio to be made happy by his attentions or disturbed by his neglects—when those moments spent in writing to or thinking of my Brother are given to my J. . . . He never disappoints me but repays every instant with hours of sweet Peace and unfailing contentment—and the tenderest interest *you* ever can bestow on me is only a stream of which he is the fountain—¹⁹

Here Elizabeth moves beyond the earlier substitution of "Jesus" for "Antonio" in the cry of her heart. She affirms that her heart, with all its ups and downs, still recognizes a call in the sorrows she is enduring, a call "to give itself to God alone." She has not spoken previously in this correspondence of such a sense of call. It leads her to reflect on why she should seek happiness in Antonio's attentions, when—as she puts it—Antonio is but the stream of which Jesus is the fountain. She is beginning to work out the implications of that call

¹⁸AF to EAS, 25 November 1804, MSJ 43.

¹⁹EAS to AF, begun 16 November 1804, completed 3 December 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 152. Ellipsis in the published letter. Emphasis in original.

which involves the gift of the heart to God alone and immediately sees what they are for her relationship to Antonio. However, with a rapid shift of direction quite typical of her, she then turns on him, attacking him both for his failure to write and for his extended stay in Boston.

That she continues to struggle with her affection for him is apparent. In her next letter she speaks of making "the dear sign" (that is, the sign of the cross) to help her try to be indifferent when a letter from Antonio was brought to her. She explains that she wishes "never to think of you with tenderness," but when she prays for him whom she calls her "dearest Friend" she overflows with sighs and tears of affection.²⁰

To this point there exists a relationship begun when, in the circumstances surrounding her new widowhood, Elizabeth was quite vulnerable. Its development was interwoven with her discovery of, and subsequent interest in, Catholicism. His companionship during her return journey to the United States through the immediate loss of Rebecca Seton was undoubtedly welcome. The letters following the first withdrawal of his presence suggest the deeply affectionate quality of their bond. Elizabeth finds herself drawn to restrain her affection, either by something in the quality of that affection, or by the nature of the religious call she is experiencing, or (as seems most likely) by some combination of the two factors. She is well into reconstellating her identity through religious conversion.

As to Antonio, he seems to have been something of a flirt. Near the end of January 1805, Elizabeth lets fall a telling passage. Antonio's weeks in Boston have lengthened into months. She writes, "God be merciful—I may as well tell you as I have so long thought it, I could not help imagining that some extravagance such as that which 'once bound you to your sister,' influenced your stay in Boston—do not say it was ungenerous as the source of these imaginations you must most easily discern; but your word is sufficient—"²¹ The exact nature of the "extravagance" is unclear, but obviously it is a matter of the bonds of affection. She also complains that his language has become that "of a stranger to a stranger." In her view he could not speak as he has to one he really loves. Her love for him remains strong, if she means it when she writes that his word will be enough to remove her doubt. Whether

²⁰EAS to AF, 13 December 1804, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 153-55.

²¹EAS to AF, 24 January 1805, *ibid.*, 156.

her judgment and her love are of equal quality in this case is a separate issue.

Other explanations of Antonio's long stay in Boston are possible, and earlier Elizabeth has mentioned several of them: "*multiplicity of business, laziness of temper diffidence of disposition, inconvenience in writing English with other Etcetera's [sic].*"²² A full analysis depends upon the availability of both sides of all of the correspondence from this period. However, in April 1805, when Antonio has moved on to Philadelphia, she raises again the question of his women friends. "And how are you my Brother? do you meet any *Elegant Friends* in Philadelphia, any Pupils for the Italian language, any Sirens—God preserve you—I pray that your good angel may have no cause to turn from you, and that you may be faithful to all his admonitions."²³ It is difficult not to read this April letter as speaking with the voice of experience. A similar plea will recur the following October when Antonio has traveled back to Boston. After inquiring for news of Amabilia, she will write, "also say something to me of your dear friends in Boston whether your Calendar of *Saints* is increased, if you have any new Scholars, and if the old ones improve and above all things dear Tonino if you try *earnestly* to 'be good' which is my greatest interest."²⁴ Under the teasing there is an honest concern. Her remark adds support to the suggestion that her Antonio was a flirt.

In May 1805 more than a year has gone by since William Seton's death and almost a year since Rebecca's. In March 1805 Elizabeth had professed the Catholic faith and received her first communion. Time is healing the wounds of the two deaths, the preoccupation of coping with her changed circumstances fills her days, and Antonio is constantly away from New York. A new quality marks her letters to him, not yet quite the quality of serenity but rather containedness. She has assumed her new identity. While she continues to write candidly and affectionately, incorporating her unfolding faith journey into her ongoing relationship with the man who had first taught her to sign herself with the cross, the exuberance of feeling toward him whom she had called her "dearest Tonierlinno" is tempered.

Evidence to suggest that Antonio initiated the change is in a letter she writes from New York. "Dear, dear Antonio why must I speak to

²²EAS to AF, 3 December 1804, *ibid.*, 152. Emphases in original.

²³EAS to AF, 30 April 1805, *ibid.*, 178. Emphasis in original.

²⁴EAS to AF, 11 October 1805, *ibid.*, 188. Emphases in original.

you in a manner so little conformed to the feelings of my heart—but you know *yourself* drew the line, and the kindness and sweetness of affection must be veiled—from the searcher of hearts it cannot, and it delights me to consider that he also sees its sincerity, simplicity and holiness.”²⁵ Note the passages: “so little conformed to the feelings of my heart,” “you yourself drew the line,” “affection must be veiled.” Her conclusion shows that she is confident that her affection for him is irreproachable. The passage quoted interrupts her formal explanation of a plan for the education of her sons. Antonio approves of sending them to Georgetown and outlines arrangements to transfer funds to her to pay for their needs. He explains, “I cannot, I will not be now, but your lazy Brother Cashier.” He asks her to keep him informed of her needs, pointing out that he believes he owes her more than she owes him.²⁶ He sees himself incapable of and unwilling to continue any other relationship with her than benefactor. There is a new diffidence in him, accompanying the recasting of their relationship.

Consolidation

The recasting is not a dissolution, but it does involve a real difference and seems to take some getting used to. Near the end of August 1805, Antonio was off to Montreal, having asked her not to write and apparently committed himself not to do so either. Then, in the manner of people everywhere, he changed his mind, wrote, and asked to hear from her. Elizabeth gladly sent all her news, but the new tone is there—a slight distance, and an overt concern for his eternal welfare, couched more insistently than earlier in their correspondence. She ended, though, like the old Elizabeth, “dear dear Antonio take care of yourself think often of the many many who love and value you besides the strong endearing ties of Nature which call so loudly to you—”²⁷

The new quality on her side is rooted in the blossoming of the call she first spoke of ten months before, in December 1804. Now in the fall of 1805 Antonio is again away. She and her children are in Greenwich, her school has failed, and her health is bad. In addition, she misses the

²⁵EAS to AF, 1 May 1805, *ibid.*, 179. Emphases in original.

²⁶AF to EAS, 2 May 1806, MSJ 43.

²⁷EAS to AF, 28 August 1805 in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 183-84.

Church and the comforts of her religion. In this mood she writes to Antonio:

With all the accumulated difficulties that surround me for the present and in prospect *HE* who lives in my Heart never suffers me to forget that the seed I am now sowing in tears shall *certainly* be reaped in joy, and this certainty is so ever present with me and bears me up so lightly over the briars and thorns that I often stop in the midst of hurry and beg my dear Saviour to assure me that it is not temptation, and that he will not let my enemy persuade me there is Peace where there is no Peace—He always answers do not fear, while your Peace is in *ME* alone it cannot be false. When I was dear Setons [*sic*] wife and he lamented that I did too much, I delighted in telling him “love makes labour easy” and how much more may I delight in repeating it to *HIM* who is Father Husband Brother Friend.²⁸

What is new in her is caught here quite well: the presence of peace in trial, the concern lest that peace be temptation, the nature of the reassurance, and finally, the shift in language referring to her savior, naming him as father, husband, brother, and friend. No wonder Antonio, flirtatious though he may be, has become somewhat diffident with her.

Antonio's injunction not to write was again repeated, for she mentions it in a letter on the anniversary of her first communion. She says she cannot drink of the fountain of life without thinking of the hand that led her to it.²⁹ He must have asked her only to write about “matters of necessity.” When he sailed for home she wrote, “When I recollect the last kind look of my dear Tonino and his unwearied constant affectionate regard to his poor Sister I hope he will not be displeased at being so soon troubled with a letter from her tho' it does not contain any communication of absolute necessity—My heart has followed yours in the passage of the Atlantic and many many prayers of sincere Affection it has poured forth for your Safety.”³⁰ After writing on the anniversary of her profession of faith (14 March 1807) and then sending Easter greetings, she wrote on 10 April to let him know she has received his letter announcing his safe arrival home. In the conclusion of her letter she strikes three themes which she has developed throughout this correspondence, and which will continue present through the rest of her life: the gift of her heart to her God, her deep

²⁸EAS to AF, 2 October 1805, *ibid.*, 186. Emphases in original.

²⁹EAS to AF, 25 March 1806, *ibid.*, 190.

³⁰EAS to AF, 10 August 1806, *ibid.*, 192.

affection for her Antonio, and her hunger for an eternal reunion with Antonio. She writes:

As obedience is His favourite Service, and cannot lead me wrong, according to the old rule I look neither behind nor before but straight upwards without thinking of human calculations—this to you Antonio, who understands the sincerity of your poor little Sisters [*sic*] heart and that it *all all* belongs to God—Will you remember, and write to your own Sister as often as you can—Oh Antonio, Antonio, does the wide Ocean divide me from you—but nature trembles, and my eyes are clouded at the thought, dwelling on it a moment makes them overflow, but the struggle concludes by a fervent prayer for our eternal Reunion.³¹

Elizabeth's love for Antonio, transformed and incorporated into her own new self-understanding, will remain tender throughout her life. Antonio, in turn, will be constant in his chosen role of benefactor. The birth and maturation of that love is one fruit of her time of mourning, time of conversion.

2. "O my Anna, the child of my Soul!"³² From Widowed Mother to Mother Seton: 1807-1812.

As the experience of widowhood paralleled her conversion, giving it distinctive shape, so, too, the experience of mothering a teen-aged daughter paralleled Elizabeth's initiation as a religious foundress. Though simultaneous mothering of children and a community must have affected Elizabeth's mothering in both directions, here for reasons of space I will limit consideration to one instance of her mothering, that of her daughter Anna, without touching the concurrent community history.

The spring of 1807 witnessed not only Antonio's safe arrival in Leghorn but also the twelfth birthday of Anna Seton. The eldest child of Elizabeth and William, Anna Maria (also called Ann and sometimes Annina) was born in New York, 3 May 1795. When she died in 1812, two months before her seventeenth birthday, Elizabeth was plunged into an extraordinarily severe and prolonged grief. Her relationship with this beloved daughter is a central one in the years in which Elizabeth moves from being the widow Seton, mother of her brood of

³¹EAS to AF, 10 April 1807, *ibid.*, 197. Emphasis in original.

³²EAS to Julianna Scott, 25 January 1813, in *Letters of Mother Seton to Mrs. Julianna Scott*, ed. Joseph B. Code (New York: 1960), 225.

"five darlings" to being Mother Seton, mother of many daughters. The evolution of her relationship with Anna sheds light on the woman Elizabeth became during these pivotal years.

Access to the relationship is indirect, through letters to others and through the journals.³³ The following material is organized in four steps: (1) Elizabeth's general orientation within her motherhood; (2) Elizabeth's evolving freedom in her relationship to Anna; (3) Anna, the teenager, and her mother; (4) Elizabeth's reaction to Anna's death.

General orientation

From the birth of her eldest, Elizabeth explicitly related her love for her children to her love of God. Her approach was radical. She offered them to death in preference to their eternal loss and offered to surrender them rather than herself lose God. To an unusual degree her love for all her babies was held in tension with her love for God. Perhaps because of her own experience of childhood abandonment, an experience that had been eased in prayer,³⁴ she found it difficult to accept that one could enjoy simultaneously a loving parental relationship and the love of God. Shocking though it may seem to some, Elizabeth writes that from Anna's infancy she prayed for her child's death, "fearing so much she would live and be lost."³⁵ She was equally capable of praying that God would take all her dear ones if Elizabeth herself could not possess them and God, too.³⁶

At her core this woman showed a steel that compares favorably with heroic women like the biblical mother who encouraged seven sons to martyrdom (2 Maccabees 7), or the early Christian martyr, Perpetua. Although she was a nursing mother, Perpetua turned a deaf ear to the plea that she abandon Christianity because of her baby's need. The weight of the choice is not against the child but for God. Trust in God is central to such love; each woman—Elizabeth Seton, the

³³The published material includes very little correspondence with Anna herself, and circumstances have precluded a search of the archival material.

³⁴See "Dear Remembrances," Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 344-45.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 346, with a similar reference on p. 347. See also an extract from a letter to Julia Scott, *ibid.*, 63.

³⁶EAS to Julia Scott, 1795, quoted without further reference, *ibid.*, 63.

unnamed biblical mother, and Perpetua—trusts her child to the God who alone has claim to absolute love.³⁷

Elizabeth's evolving freedom in her relation to Anna.

Such trust has freedom as its correlative. The freedom in question is Elizabeth's ability to consider first the child's good in life-shaping decisions. Such freedom in relation to Anna evolved over time.

Once the family was reunited in New York after William's death and the struggle around Elizabeth's proposed conversion began, for some time the mother's references were largely to "my little ones" in a group. However, on three separate occasions the possibility of Julia Scott adopting Anna was considered. Julia, for whom Annina was a favorite among Elizabeth's children, seems to have proposed this for the first time in 1804, believing it would be a help to both mother and child. Elizabeth refused the well-meant offer without qualification. She wanted all her children with her and felt they would be better off without the "advantages" wealth could give. She writes:

Yours and Maria's visits to me last summer appear like a vision. Little Kit often speaks of Aunt Scott, and Anna sighs so pitifully at the mention of your name that my heart involuntarily answers her; and though fully convinced in every point of view of the value of your affectionate kindness to her, nature will sometimes prove her power and I shrink from the promise which reason and gratitude has sealed. She is a singular child and requires so many amendments in her disposition and habits that I fear she will call the whole force of your affection for me into exercise; but do not think of it. God will bless your kind intentions to a fatherless child, and however rough or unhinged my mind may be, my soul must be attached to you tenfold forever.³⁸

There is at least a hint (she "sighs pitifully at the mention of your name") that Anna may have welcomed the change. However, the mother explicitly wants her child with her ("nature proves her power and I shrink from the promise"; "do not think of it.") It is not wholly

³⁷In a somewhat different situation, the same trust appears during the Italian sojourn. Ann's scarlet fever caused postponement of their return to America. Elizabeth, grieving over her husband's recent death, and blinded by her anxiety to be reunited with her other children, wrote in her journal, "the darling tried to conceal all she could, but little guessed the whole consequence for the Doctor said the next day I must give up the voyage or the life of the child, and could you believe I was firm in choosing the latter, that is in trusting her life and my hard case to our God since there was no other Vessel for America in port" (18 February 1804, *ibid.*, 133). As it turned out, the captain refused to take them.

³⁸EAS to Julia Scott, 28 November 1804, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 119.

clear what “the promise” entailed; it may have been adoption or perhaps only a prolonged visit.³⁹ On her side, Elizabeth also mentions the attention Anna’s behavior needs. Evidently not even the events of the Italian journey have tamed her spirited daughter, at least not in the mother’s view.

The first discussion fell immediately after the return from Italy to New York and so, with respect to Elizabeth’s conversion, during the time of devastation and desolation. Julia repeated her offer in 1807. The mother responded, “You talk of taking her from me. Dearest friend, if it was difficult two⁴⁰ years ago, imagine now! Softly, softly, my heart; hereafter we may wish what we now pronounce impossible. My fate, Julia, is as uncertain as the world we are thrown upon. Patience! Look to the clouds!”⁴¹

This time Elizabeth responded with some qualification; she recognized that at some point such a move might be needful, granting her own difficult situation. It is in 1807 that she is consolidating her identity as a Catholic, she is faced with serious problems in supporting her children, and the first hints of consciousness of her own religious vocation are beginning to emerge. She sees that at some point her own situation might preclude having her daughter with her. Elizabeth herself suggests the possibility of adoption when it arises in 1809 for a third time. She asks Julia to take Anna if the girl is unhappy at Emmitsburg.⁴²

There is a clear evolution within Elizabeth herself: from needing the presence of all her children, to recognizing that her own situation could necessitate a change, to seeing that a change might be in the child’s best interest. It is this shift that represents Elizabeth’s emerging freedom in her relation with Anna.

Anna, the teenager, and her mother.

As Anna becomes physically mature in 1807 and 1808 she is also more prominent in her mother’s letters. The first sign of her budding maturity is a mention in January 1807, that Anna, then almost twelve,

³⁹But see below, what Elizabeth writes when Julia offers to take Anna in 1807.

⁴⁰Actually the first offer was in the summer of 1804, and so *three* years earlier, unless there is another, more explicit offer not included in the published material.

⁴¹EAS to Julia Scott, 8 December 1807, *ibid.*, 156.

⁴²EAS to Julia Scott, 23 March 1809, *ibid.*, 183.

"is almost as much a woman as her mother and much more discreet and considerate."⁴³ There seems to be a certain wholeness about the girl.⁴⁴ She is sympathetic without being merry.⁴⁵ Eight months later Elizabeth complains, "The greatest difficulty I have to encounter is the loveliness of my Anna. She is, indeed, a being formed to please. Patience! Must take it coolly!"⁴⁶ By early October 1807, when Anna is about twelve and a half, Elizabeth is writing to Sad that the girl, who has been ill, is growing rapidly in spirit. She comments somewhat proudly, "if my spirit could advance as fast as dear Anna's you would be astonished on your return—the oak and vine how different."⁴⁷

Anna had just turned thirteen when the family moved to Baltimore in June 1808. By then she seems to have completed physical maturation. Her mother writes to Julia in that fall, "Your Anna is my great assistance and a finer creature, both in mind and body, you could scarcely wish for. Since she is in Baltimore, the woman is so marked in her appearance and manner that indeed you would scarcely know her. Her chest is very prominent and the shoulders quite in their right place. Here she appears [*sic*] to advantage, as the girls associated with her dress in some style and she of course imperceptibly adopts their manner."⁴⁸ Every mother of a teenaged daughter will recognize the combination of pride with the suggestion of anxiety in these extracts.

By the following spring, the fourteen year old Anna had fallen in love with Charles DuPavillon, a student at Saint Mary's. Evidently her brothers, Richard and William Seton, fellow students of Charles's, had carried verses and flowers to their sister from her admirer. To accept these tokens without permission was a serious imprudence in the eyes of the broader society. Anna herself, having been quite sheltered, was probably innocent of the significance of her action. Julia wrote in defense of Anna, "I believe we expect too much from human nature if we hope *unlimited* confidence from our children, and Anna was too

⁴³EAS to Julia Scott, 12 January 1807, *ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁴"The dear children you love most promise most. Anna is a piece of harmony both in mind and in person; Kit has a most amiable disposition with very superior abilities" (EAS to Julia Scott, 10 April 1807, *ibid.*, 144).

⁴⁵"My precious, merry little Cis is gone, and I may truly say I am lost. Anna's disposition is so different. She knows how to put her cheek to mine and mix a silent tear, but to turn that tear to a smile is only the province of sweet Celia" (EAS to Julia Scott, 22 April 1807, *ibid.*, 148).

⁴⁶EAS to Julia Scott, 4 August 1807, *ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁷EAS to Eliza Sadler, 6 October 1807, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 210.

⁴⁸EAS to Julia Scott, 3 October 1808, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 171.

young and had been too little in society to be aware of the impropriety of receiving and answering a letter from a young man."⁴⁹ The situation influenced Elizabeth's decision to take her oldest daughter with her to Emmitsburg in June 1809, although only with the arrangement (noted above) that the girl could go to Julia Scott if she were unhappy in the country.

Anna evidently continued to be in touch with Charles. When mother and daughter returned to Baltimore a year later, in June 1810, at the time of Cecilia Seton's death, Elizabeth saw the need for Anna to spend time with Charles before the latter returned permanently to his own country. She left Anna in Baltimore with friends while she herself returned to Emmitsburg.

Once Charles was gone, Anna received mail from him.⁵⁰ There is compassion in her mother's mentions of Anna's heartache⁵¹ and the affirmation that he might indeed return.⁵² Elizabeth manifests both sympathy for her sixteen-year old daughter and respect for the girl's decision when they learn of Charles's marriage in the spring of 1811. The mother mentioned that Anna was "perfectly settled in renouncing the world, tho' not inclined to a religious life."⁵³ The point seems to be that the girl was willing to live in the country with her mother, but did not wish to enter her mother's community. Thus it is all the more surprising that, when Anna's health declined rapidly the following fall, she moved toward what would be a deathbed profession of religious vows in the winter of 1812, when she was not quite seventeen. Close association with her mother and the sisters must have played a role in her choice.

Our interest here, though, is rather in the mother than the daughter. Careful study of the evidence for this relationship of Annina's reveals the degree to which Elizabeth respected her daughter's personal inclinations. Familiarity with the Seton story can lead one to think that Elizabeth had, from the start, encouraged her daughter toward entering the community. The evidence suggests rather deep affection, concern, and a remarkably supportive attitude toward her

⁴⁹Julia Scott to EAS, 15 March 1809, quoted Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 150. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁰EAS to Julia Scott, 20 July 1810, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 202.

⁵¹EAS to Catherine Dupleix, 4 June 1810, quoted Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 150.

⁵²EAS to Julia Scott, 23 October 1810, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 205.

⁵³EAS to Bishop Carroll, 13 May 1811, in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 272.

girl's romance. On the whole, Elizabeth provides good modeling for mothering a teenaged girl.

Elizabeth's reaction to Anna's death.

It was in early May 1811 that Elizabeth described Anna as "settled in renouncing the world, 'tho not inclined to religious life." At the beginning of December in that same year, 1811, Elizabeth wrote to Julia, "Anna, my sweet precious comfort and friend, is undergoing all the symptoms which were so fatal to our Cecilia and so many of the family."⁵⁴ Anna Seton died 12 March 1812. After Anna's death Elizabeth entered into profound desolation. One approach to interpretation of the phenomenon may be through some remarks in her notebook.⁵⁵ She writes, "Eternity always at hand! Oh Anina I look to the far, so far distant shore, the heaven of heavens—a few days more and Eternity—*now then*, all resignation love abandon. Rest in him—*the heart in sweet bitterness* Amour, aneantisement, abandon. AAA"⁵⁶

For Elizabeth every earthly love sooner or later was severed. For her love led to annihilation. Repeatedly she lost the objects of her love, either to death or to distance. So had gone mother and father, husband and sisters. So went Antonio. So now went her dearly loved oldest child. But the losses, while they were experienced as reduction to nothingness, were nevertheless not *final*. In Elizabeth's life, loss and the consequent devastating human emptiness, led to abandonment into the hands of God. So "Amour, anéantisement, abandon."

Trust in God was central to Elizabeth's love of her children, that is, she trusted them to the God who alone holds claim to absolute love. Yet such trust needed time to mature. The three instances when Anna's adoption was considered give evidence that, over time, Elizabeth herself became more free. Eventually, in life-shaping choices she could consider her daughter's good before her own. Such development is a correlative of growing trust in God. At the same time that Elizabeth was moving into her role as foundress, she supported her teenaged

⁵⁴EAS to Julia Scott, 2 December 1811, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 214.

⁵⁵The "Notes from her notebook" (Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 354) are undated; the content suggests that they are from this period immediately after Anna's death.

⁵⁶The three A's, coming from the three French words meaning respectively love, nothingness, and abandonment, refer to themes prominent in the teaching of Saint Francis de Sales. She had been introduced to the saint's life in Leghorn and continued to read and cite from his works through her later life. His influence on her spirituality is a topic for further study.

daughter in the pangs of young love and respected Anna's original choice against religious life. The girl's death devastated her mother. Through enduring it, Elizabeth came to a mature trust, founded in abandonment to God.

3. Afterword

Several points raised by this material are of continuing interest. First, it is clear that throughout the period 1809-1812 Elizabeth had two parallel preoccupations: her own vocation and the foundation of the community, and her children, especially Anna's maturation. Questions to be studied concern how these dimensions of her life interact. For example, what is the shape of Elizabeth's inner experience in her great desolation after the loss of her firstborn? How does a mother's grief function in this loss which is concurrent with the adoption of the first constitutions of her religious community? A second point of interest is the importance of the experience of widowhood not only for Elizabeth but also for two other women in the young community who will also become religious "mothers": Rose White and Margaret George. How did their experience of the widowed woman's plight shape them as religious superiors? It is clear that Elizabeth's roles as widow and mother shaped the woman who became a foundress. Equally, it may be expected that the work of foundress as well as of religious superior was dependent upon the experience of the women who embarked on these tasks. Thirdly, Elizabeth's experience (as Sister Marilyn Thie has demonstrated) will be grasped in its richness only as we come to understand the lives of women of her day, a span which corresponds roughly with the federal period in United States history.

All three areas thus offer directions for further study. All three raise issues of ongoing concern to women. Research would be aided by the publication in full of the Seton papers. Ultimately, all women will benefit from exploration of the life and spirit of this daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow, and foundress of the Sisters of Charity in North America: Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton.