

An Axe for the Frozen Sea

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Anne Sexton. **No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose**, edited by Steven E. Colburn. *Poets on Poetry Series*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985, 206 pages.

The Poets on Poetry series collects various prose pieces — essays, interviews, articles, or reviews — which express directly or indirectly the poetics of selected contemporary American poets. They are, essentially, source books, whose pages may contain carefully thought-out manifestoes, reminiscences, or incidental epigrammatic insights which illuminate the poet's mind and work. *No Evil Star* treats of Anne Sexton, but this volume differs importantly from others in the series. Still-living poets are their own editors, culling their miscellaneous writings for appropriate selections, but Anne Sexton, who died in 1974, must be represented by the choices of an editor.

This editor, Steven E. Colburn, does not obtrude beyond the acknowledgements and half-a-dozen cross-referencing footnotes. However, this unobtrusiveness verges on the obstructive. The various pieces are undated; a brief biography or even a chronology would be useful to the reader seeking to place the opinions in some context. As it is, the reader has no resource but the headnotes which in some cases accompanied the original publication of the piece. These, of course, are limited, and repetitive. The more positive interpretation of this lack of editorial interference is that it is an attempt to let the poet speak for herself.

And she does. The first fifth of the book contains Sexton's own prose, mostly memoir. The

rest of the volume consists of transcripts of interviews arranged in chronological order. Sexton spoke with a wide range of interviewers, from the telephone conference with students at, among others, Tougaloo Southern Christian College, to the interviewer from *Boston Magazine* who was at least as interested in Sexton's husband and daughters ("What is your husband's profession?" "What is his attitude to your poetry?") as in the poet. This variety leaves the impression not only that Sexton was generous, but also, unfortunately, that the editor was desperate to fill his quota of pages. That need may also account for the less than strenuous editing which has left in a number of repetitive passages.

The book opens, properly, with one of Sexton's poems, "An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery, and Love". The grandiose title misrepresents the poem itself, and thus testifies clearly to the poet's ironic attitude to its subject, the making of poetry:

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; tak-
ing a word like "writes" down tiers of tries
until its secret rites make sense; or until,
suddenly, RATS can amazingly and funnily
become STAR and right to left that
small star is mine, for my own liking, to
stare its five lucky pins inside out, to store

forever kindly, as if it were a star I touched
and a miracle I really wrote.

But this complexity of attitude, the amazement, the fun, and the miracle are not as apparent in the rest of the book as are the more prosaic matters of workshopping, worksheets, technique, and form. This attitude is most apparent in the first interview, a telephone conference between Sexton and college students, a talk moderated by Harry Moore. The interview begins with Sexton's tracing of the creation of her poem "All My Pretty Ones," a process which she calls "drag-[ing] a poem into existence." (p.42) She describes her worksheets, her false starts, her recurring images, and her various attempted rhyme schemes:

What I did was roll the blank sheet into my typewriter and sit there and look at it. Here it goes.

Somehow, God knows why, you died
last week

Then I go down two spaces.

Somehow, God knows how,
I'm the only parent now.

On the June morning they put
my two young parents

That's no good. I go down three spaces.

God knows, it's queer enough
to have them gone

I don't like that. I go down five spaces.

Father, the worst is over,
the boozy rich man that you were

Well, I kind of like that but it isn't right yet.
Down two spaces.

My mother's ashes waited
patiently at the crematory
for the ground to melt

I give up and I roll that page out. I never pick up a lot of those things again. (pp. 43-44)

She is fastidious not to venture upon the subject or the emotion of the poem about which she is speaking; she makes only one brief reference to that part of her life to which the poem refers, and then only to show its effect of a matter of word choice. ("At this point I've gotten a copy of my father's will and I have a little legal thing here. I start out "Whereas father" which I must have gotten right from the will." (p.45). It is as if she seeks to push the words on the page away from her, to disassociate the poem from the poet, to decoy attention from herself to her words. In describing a passage which did not make it into the final version, a passage ending "And to be left.../ that's the difficult thing," she comments "Well, you notice how I go off. I get very prosy and far too angry. I'm still talking to myself, which is what you do when you write a poem I'm afraid." (p.45) Later, she admits, (laughing, we are told,) that her poetry is "very personal": "I write very personal poems but I hope that they will become the central theme to someone else's private life. This is a very personal poem, of course; I bring in all these intimate details. But I hope that I give it a rather authentic stamp; that's always my hope. It's hard to defend writing this way when you can't write any other way, you see."

Certainly, the questions posed to Sexton in this interview do not penetrate very far through the text to the poet the students think they glimpse lurking in the words. Sexton is humble in accepting interpretations, agreeing with student suggestions on a point of interpretation ("Yes, I think so. I think that's exactly right." p.49), or being disarming. In response to the question "Was there any special significance to

the word 'fat' [in 'I cried on your fat shoulder'] or were you just being descriptive?," she says "Well, he did have fat shoulders and I think I loved him for it. I believe I was being descriptive. I don't think it had any other meaning." When they question the life instead of the poem, Sexton's response wavers between her poem and her self:

Q. Did your opposition to your father's marriage have anything to do with his death?

S. Of course I felt that. Not rationally, but I felt it. It's not, perhaps, as implicit as I hoped, *but in the poem* I don't want him to marry and then he dies. It's kind of Oedipal or something, but it's distinctly there, my guilt....

Q. Mrs. Sexton's *poet's* guilt might be there but this question pointed to a direct relationship and I don't think that was intended, was it?

S. (silence) I'm thinking. Yes, I think a direct relationship. ... Well, somewhat. Certainly the act makes it direct anyway. (pp.54-55, emphasis added)

The ambiguity of the word "act" (the voicing of the opposition? her father's dying? the writing of the poem?) is left unresolved, for the moderator hastens to announce the next topic.

No doubt it was a constant struggle to refocus people's attention away from the poet's somewhat dramatic life toward the poems on the page; the sense of personal reticence in this interview comes across the more strongly because it follows an essay by Sexton called "The Freak Show", in which she expresses the horror of public poetry readings:

You are the freak. You are the actor, the clown, the odd ball. Some people come to see what you look like, what you have on,

what your voice sounds like. Some people secretly hope your voice will tremble (that gives an extra kick). Some people hope you will do something audacious, in other words (and I admit to my greatest fears) that you vomit in the stage or go blind, hysterically blind or actually blind. (p.33)

It is not a problem peculiar to herself, she contends, but one endemic to poetry: "Poetry is for us poets the handwriting on the tablet of the soul. It is the most private, deepest, most precious part of us. Yet somehow in this poetry biz . . . we are asked to make a show of it." (p.35) To be quite fair, it must also be pointed out that this essay is also a testament to serendipitous sisterhood — the unexpected meeting of a "token woman professor" who turns out to be an "understanding sister." (pp. 34-35)

Contributing to Sexton's unease must be the fact that so many of the interviews reprinted begin with a question about her late start as a poet, eliciting the explanation that she had begun to write after a breakdown in her late twenties: "as I was recovering I started to write, and I got more and more serious about it. . . . It was a kind of rebirth at twenty-nine." (p.70) Constantly anticipating this kind of prurient curiosity, it is not surprising to see Sexton constructing, over the course of these interviews, a public persona. This construction is most evident in the interview with Barbara Kevles, where Sexton quotes verbatim from her own essays to answer the interviewer's questions. For example, in speaking of a poetry seminar with Robert Lowell, she repeats part of a description which was published in the *Harvard Advocate*. One element of the persona she creates in that essay and presents in this and other interviews is the impression that she is barely educated:

Unused to classes of any kind, it seemed slow and uninspired to me. But I had come in through a back door and was no real judge. . . .I had never been to college and

knew so little about poetry that I felt grotesquely out of place in Robert Lowell's graduate seminar. . . . I was the only one in that room who hadn't read *Lord Weary's Castle*. (p.3)

At times, Sexton exaggerates this persona: the interview with Brigitte Weeks for *Boston Magazine* sounds as if she was annoyed by the inanity and predictability of the questions, and decided to have some fun. "I was interested to read somewhere," says the interviewer, "that you had never had a college education. Was that by choice or by circumstance?" Sexton's reply is doubly flummoxing:

Well, that's often said about me, but it isn't quite true — I did go to college for a year, to Garland. It's a junior college. I studied mostly cooking, sewing, and childcare — things like that. Then I eloped. (pp.112-113)

It is in such passages as this that the reader misses most acutely the sound of the speaker's voice: how important the pauses and the intonations must be to a real understanding of the transcribed words! In fact, more than one of the interviewers commented upon the quality of Sexton's voice and the subtleties of expression it allowed. At times, the interviews come close to performances, as Barbara Kevles noted in her introduction: "Often, her answers sounded like incantations, repetitious chants which if pared down would lose some of their implications, and so, for the most part, they are preserved in their entirety. Even when replying from written notes, she read with all the inflections and intonations of — as she describes her readings — 'an actress in her own autobiographical play'." (pp.83-84)

The persona, no matter how carefully established, is not inviolable, even in this interview, the one in which Sexton quotes her own polished prose and performs her own role. For it is in this interview that she speaks most openly of the subject round about which so many inter-

viewers have tiptoed, the relationship of poetry and madness. Discussion of the religious imagery of several poems leads to the quite matter-of-fact, but extremely self-conscious revelation that Sexton has "visions — sometimes ritualized visions — that come to me of God, of Christ, or of the Saints If you want to know the truth, the leaves talk to me every June." (p.105) It comes out in a rush, almost defiantly. The visions are "impossible to describe" and she can communicate the feeling "only through the poems, no other way. I refuse to talk about it, which is why I'm having a hard time now." (p.105) The answers which follow are simple and powerful in that simplicity.

Q. But is it the fact in your life of someone you know dying that forces you into a vision?

S. No, I think it is my own madness.

Q. Are you more lucid, in the sense of understanding life, when you are mad?

S. Yes.

Q. Why do you think that's so?

S. Pure gift.

One of the questions raised in the reader's mind about this interview might have been answered by a helpful editor. It took place, we are told, in August 1968, but it did not see print, apparently, until after her death. Did it appear somewhere earlier than the acknowledged source? If not, was the interview merely overlooked? Or was it, perhaps, suppressed?

Six months before her death, Sexton took part in an informal taped discussion with her old friend and fellow writer Maxine Kuhn, and the scholars Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith. This interview is a delight. The women's movement has freed both writers to admit that what

they had been doing twenty years before had been legitimate, that their telephone workshoping while they were house bound with small children, hours on the telephone spent discussing lines and drafts and images, — that this process was not just a scrambling improvisation dictated by their need, but something wonderful that they shared. And yet how poignant is the wry tone in which they reminisce:

K. We did eventually do this wicked thing. We put in a second line, because our husbands complained that we were always on the phone.

S. We used to talk for two hours sometimes.

...

Q. Why did you feel so ashamed of this mutual support?

S. We did. We were ashamed. We had to keep ourselves separate.

K. We were both struggling for identity.

S. Also, it's a secret, we didn't want anyone to know. But I think it's time to acknowledge it. (p. 167, 173.)

Hindsight, of course, adds another dimension of poignancy to the interview. When we read Sexton's admission "I haven't been writing as much either; I've been having an upsetting time" (p. 169), it is impossible not to think of that impending suicide.

The final image we are left with, however, is that of the eternal discoverer. The last interview in the book ends with the words "I just discovered it about a month ago." (p. 206) What it is is not as important as the reassuring sense of ongoing finding out, of realizations yet to come. That sense is expressed in a memorable image earlier in the interview:

It could be the child's delight, as in building a sand castle and then having a king walk out of it. That's hyperbole, of course, but the child's delight is saying "What! I did that? I didn't know I was doing that!" Then you have this amazed feeling, perhaps I'm really doing *that!* I didn't know it at all. You have this sense of sharp surprise. (pp. 188-189)

Any book which professes to explore, or provide the materials for an exploration of, poetics, must necessarily turn again and again to the relationship between poet and poem. And it is only human nature for the reader to be as interested in the poet as person as in the poet *qua* poet. If Anne Sexton had been her own editor in this volume, would she have been more stringently selective in cutting out the personal and leaving the persona to speak of her poetry? She acknowledged that "the people who read this [interview] might never have read us" (p. 174), and she tried often to deflect interest from her self to her poems, or at least to a carefully constructed persona. This sense of multiple identity is expressed in the preface to another volume in the Poets on Poetry series. Galway Kinnell writes this *envoi* to his book *Walking Down the Stairs* (1978):

It has been interesting for me to read and work over these interviews. Now I'm tired of them. I'm tired — as the diligent reader soon will be — of hearing the one impersonating Kinnell going on at length about the one he thinks is Kinnell. Now I step out of these pages, go to a freshly cleared desk, and sit down to write poetry again, a form of expression in which there is at least the possibility of finding oneself as one is. (p. xiv)

Yet as we turn from the person to the poems, we cannot but acknowledge that there is a terrible similarity between them. Speaking of her befriending Maxine Kuhn, Sexton declares "She

had no close women friends, but I broke the barrier, because I'm a terrible breaker of barriers." (p. 176) And asked what the purpose is of poetry, she quotes Kafka: "A book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us." And that's what I want from a poem. A poem should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us." (p. 110) It is no evil star which allows her, and us, to make that breakthrough.

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Papers assessing the decade of feminist scholarship should address some or all of these questions:

What are the most important ideas, concepts, methods, frameworks and/or findings of feminist scholarship in your field during the past 10 to 15 years?

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