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“The house / of herself”

Reading Place and Space in the Poetry of Anne Sexton

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The work of confessional poet, Anne Sexton, the writer primarily known for her apparent transgression of the limits of personal privacy, has only belatedly been understood as having wider preoccupations and a deeper significance than her own troubled psyche. Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* has situated her writing in relation to the contradictory impulses of the Cold War years; Philip McGowan's *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry* has read it in a midcentury literary context, my own *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* has offered a new reading of Sexton and of the confessional movement in terms of the insights of Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers, while Gillian White's *Lyric Shame* has presented a provocative re-reading of Sexton's place within the larger field of postwar poetics. What has not yet been proposed—although what is tacitly suggested by some of the studies above—is a critical analysis of Sexton's poetry that situates it spatially.

My original intention for the present essay was to examine Sexton's writing in terms of its negotiation and reworking of history. This remains, as will become clear, one part of my argument. But as my thinking about this project has developed, it soon became apparent—both for theoretical reasons and because of the imperatives of the poems themselves—that to think about history in isolation would be inadequate. In order to understand

Sexton's poetic engagement with the past, it is also necessary and fruitful, to consider her writing in relation to place and space.¹

My argument in this respect is informed by the body of theoretical work that has emerged over the past several decades in the field of cultural geography. Cultural geography explores the relationships between space and time, the topographical and the temporal, and the ways in which each of these shapes and mediates the other. As important, it recognizes that subjectivity itself is constituted, understood, and played out in relation to both of these dimensions. Cultural geography is concerned, in Edward Soja's terms, with "the inherent spatiality of human life" (1). For Sara Blair, "spatiality" is best defined as the "affective and social experience of space" (544). This "spatial turn," as Soja terms it, prompts us to recognize "the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical, *and the spatial*, their inseparability and often problematic interdependence" (14). Doreen Massey develops the point, arguing that "The social spaces through which we live do not only consist of physical things: of bricks and mortar, streets and bridges, mountains and sea-shore, and of what we make of these things. They consist also of those less tangible spaces we construct out of social interaction. The intimate social relations of the kitchen and the interaction from there to the backyard and the living room" (49). Such insights are particularly helpful in understanding the social experience of gender and evaluating the extent to which it is constituted in relation both to historical *and* to geographical circumstances. As we will see, this is an insight that underpins many of my readings of Sexton's work in the chapter that follows.

Central to these debates is an understanding that a geographical critique—that is, one that attends to the spatial dimensions of existence—is as important as an understanding of historical context to our reading of literary and cultural texts. The equivalence of these fields of enquiry is crucial. It is not that cultural geography has replaced history, but rather that cultural geography is able to complement, supplement, develop or critique historicist analysis, enabling both to better comprehend the temporal, spatial, material, social, and discursive conditions of subjectivity and, specifically in Sexton's case, its poetic representation.² Such methodologies demand, in Soja's terms, that we "shift the 'rhythm' of dialectical thinking from a temporal to a more spatial mode, from a linear or diachronic sequencing to the configurative simultaneities, the synchronies" (21). Poetry—as a form that operates simultaneously in time and in space—is particularly amenable to

being viewed through this critical lens. The aim of this chapter is to find out what happens to our understanding of Sexton's work when we move away from a biographical, psychoanalytic, or poststructuralist reading, or even a purely historicist reading, and begin to think in this radically new way.

Sexton's poetry is rich with specific places (the suburban kitchen, the asylum or "summer hotel," the beach house) and with abstract spaces (the forest, the hall of mirrors, the stage set). And both, as I will argue, are inextricably associated with the retrospective gaze—a search back through time, a dredging of past memories, or the scrutiny of the "hauled up / notebooks" of life, in the words of "45 Mercy Street" (CP 484). In this chapter, I will address poems that explicitly yoke space and time, that locate experience and the memory of it in specific places, and, conversely, that use place and space as an index of particular temporal moments and thus as a productive route (I use the word advisedly) to understanding.

Sexton's first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) is replete with topographical metaphors.³ Numerous poems open with an explicit depiction of place. For example, the "nest of your real death" in the 1958 poem "Elizabeth Gone" (CP 8); the emphatic "Here, in front of the summer hotel" of "The Kite" (11); the opening line, "Oh down at the tavern" of "Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall" (18); the kitchen window and suburban street of "What's That" (25); the claustrophobic automobile interior in "The Road Back" (30); the "thin classroom," "window sill," and "plain chairs" that provide the setting for "Elegy in the Classroom" (32), and the "locked screens," "faded curtains," and "window sills" of the "best ward at Bedlam" in "Lullaby" (29) that is also, of course, the setting for "You, Doctor Martin," "Ringing the Bells," and numerous other poems in the collection. All make explicit use of particular places in order not only to set the scene but also to invoke aspects of experience and subjectivity. "Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall" itself emerged from a particular time and a specific place; Sexton derived a parable about isolation and identification from the convergence of the two. As she recalls in unpublished lecture notes (prepared for a series of talks she delivered at Colgate University in 1972 while holding the Crawshaw Chair in Literature): "I was sitting in a tavern in Antioch, Ohio. I was there for a writers' conference back in 1959. All the poets and teachers and prose writers were sitting around a table singing songs and drinking beer. We were very gay. We were very merry. Suddenly I felt I was an observer[. . .] I looked up and there was a portrait

staring at me of the woman who originally owned the house[. . .] At that moment I entered her life. I applied the mask of her face. I looked out from the wall and with her tongue I spoke these words” (1).

Other poems in *To Bedlam* spell out their locations more subtly, as in the seaside setting of “Torn Down from Glory Daily” and “The Exorcists” or the rural landscape of “The Farmer’s Wife,” or signal the alienating uncertainties associated with placelessness. In “Kind Sir: These Woods,” for example, the location, although apparently specific (on “*The Island*” [my emphasis]) is simultaneously imprecise and uncertain (CP 4). The speaker’s repeated attempts to pin down this particular place (it is on “The island,” it is in “down Maine,” it is in woodland “between Dingley Dell” and “Grandfather’s Cottage”) seem, finally, overdetermined as though to signal its elusiveness. The strangeness of the environment is rendered even more alien by images of “cold fog” that obscure what might otherwise have been a familiar landscape and by the sinister inversion of time such that, *Macbeth*-like, night seems like day and vice versa. Space here forms an apt metaphor for the speaker’s own disturbed and uncertain mindset; her figurative loss of selfhood is anticipated, stimulated, and replicated in the poem’s “strange” topography.

I have previously argued of “Kind Sir: These Woods,” that it pictures a confessional speaker in the process of seeking out conditions commensurate with self-scrutiny. I would now add that the spatial dynamics of the poem offer a further possible way of reading—one that is also applicable to several of the other poems mentioned thus far. “Kind Sir: These Woods,” like some of these others, describes the thrill—which is also the psychic risk—of dissociating oneself from and in space and time. It indicates the importance to the establishment of a stable subjectivity of a sense of one’s geographical and temporal relationships and dares to contemplate the consequences of the loss of such foundations.

Other poems from the same period expose a similar and equally troubling rootlessness, or a search for place, which is often a metaphorical journey into the past and a (usually thwarted) quest for a stable identity. “The Lost Ingredient,” for example, opens with an imagined memory of “gentle ladies” seeking a cure for their nonspecific ailments in the salt waters of Atlantic City (CP 30). Moving forward (albeit not always smoothly, hence the strange chronology of the poem’s opening words: “Almost yesterday”), the speaker records a journey “West” which is interrupted by “lost” minutes

of driving time during each stop at a specific place, culminating in a visit to the casino at Reno. As the “gentle ladies” of stanza one wait, seemingly endlessly, for a cure that never comes, so, too, the speaker travels, apparently fruitlessly, in search of reassurance about her own psychic integrity. The journey across the American landscape, like the dredging of past memories and past narratives that is characteristic of the psychotherapeutic process, proves unable to deliver the coherent subjectivity sought. Instead the speaker finds herself caught in a temporal trap, or a kind of Möbius strip of time and place, where today and yesterday, here and there become indistinguishable, leaving her in the closing stanza tantalizingly out of reach of her destination.

Several poems of this period evoke the significance of travel to, across, or between particular locations—none of which, alone, provides the secure foothold sought by the speaker in order to ground her increasingly vulnerable subjectivity. In “You, Doctor Martin,” the addressee himself straddles space and time and in so doing crosses the divide between the rational and the insane, the everyday and the exceptional. This is memorably realized as the walk from “breakfast to madness” (*CP* 3). His controlled and deliberate stroll is parodied in the next line by the speaker’s uncontrolled rush (“I speed”) to occupy the same space. The relentless immediacy of the present-tense verb forms (“You walk,” “I speed,” “We stand,”) represents a troubling cessation of time as though in this strange space temporality is suspended. Recognizable signs of family, domesticity, and home are unsettlingly inverted; home becomes a spied-on “nest,” the asylum dining room a regimented, institutionalized space where inmates eat “in rows,” the bedrooms are defamiliarized as “separate boxes.” The effect is uncanny. There is—there must be—a history here, a personal and social past that would explain the overwhelming present. But this is inferred only tentatively at the end of the poem as though it has been effaced by the immediacy of the experience of this particular place. “Once I was beautiful,” the speaker wistfully recalls in the antepenultimate line, but now “I am myself.” This self is firmly and explicitly located within the physical and metaphorical cage of the asylum, hence the closing metaphor of regimented stacks of moccasins, inert like the speaker, waiting on a “silent shelf.”

“The Double Image,” arguably Sexton’s first major poem, similarly positions its speaker in transit across and between various places and spaces. The poem opens with the speaker and her young daughter standing,