

**'WRITERS WHO WERE LIFE TO US': ANNE SEXTON AND THE  
FEMALE GENETIC STRAND OF AMERICAN POETRY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The following paper is part of my ongoing doctoral research where I am looking into the performative aspects of American poet, Anne Sexton's, poetry and poetry readings. While working on Sexton as a confessional poet during my MPhil, I came across various instances of her highly successful career as a poetry performer and her outrageously theatrical presentation of herself. I have sought to establish Sexton's achievement as a poet-performer as part of a larger, often ignored, rich tradition of American women poets vis-a-vis their exploration and negotiation of public spaces in a predominantly patriarchal society. Research on Sexton's poetry performances has been negligible at best, and most scholars have worked with the assumption that Sexton, like her mentor Robert Lowell, was inspired by the taboo-shattering public readings of Beat poet, Allen Ginsberg. It was not until Artemis Michailidou in the 1990s analysed how Edna Millay inspired Sexton as both poet and especially performer. To that end, I also looked into the public and performative careers of other major First Wave poets like Amy Lowell and Gertrude Stein, and how they related to or inspired later generations of American women poets like Sexton, and Adrienne Rich. However, much of feminist scholarship has ignored Sexton's feminist roots since it was never advertised by the poet herself. I believe then it is quite possible to consider Sexton as one of the missing links that connects the First Wave of Feminism, as espoused by the likes of Millay, with the Second Wave in the 1970s. Since this is a work-in-progress, the following pages may seem lacking, especially owing to the absence of Anne Bradstreet, and African American women poets. I am working on including them in my research.

“Her sense of literary tradition was uninstructed, and there is almost no indication...that she spent much time reading her predecessors,”<sup>2</sup> thus concluded critic William H. Pritchard about Anne Sexton (1928-1974), American ‘confessional’ poet. This harsh viewpoint was based on the sacrosanct concept that ‘predecessors’ were almost always grand, old, white, male poets like Eliot, Auden and Yeats.

Sexton’s liking veered towards her poetic foremothers, something she hesitated to openly acknowledge owing to the contemporary literary critical establishment’s condescending view of poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) and Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) among others. After attending Robert Lowell’s poetry workshop in 1958, Sexton dejectedly confessed: “I shall never write a really good poem. I overwrite. I am a reincarnation of Edna St. Vincent....I am learning [from Robert Lowell] what I am not. [I fear *I am*] writing as a woman writes. I wish I were a man – I would rather write the way a man writes.”<sup>3</sup>

In regard to the bad name that Millay had incurred in the late 1950s, it is astounding to learn that in the 1930s she was considered “the finest living lyric poet among women in America.”<sup>4</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, Virginia Woolf observing a distressing tendency wrote in *A Room of One’s Own*: “[T]he relic of the sense of chastity...dictated anonymity to women....Thus [female writers who assumed male pseudonyms] did homage to the convention...that publicity in women is detestable.”<sup>5</sup>

Woolf correctly attested that women writers had internalized the myth that concealing one’s identity was more desirable than seeking fame, for fame equalled immodesty. Hence, any woman who sought fame through publication and publicity was deemed as possessing questionable morals. It was as if women had to adhere to a specific ideal or ‘convention’ of what it meant to ‘be’ a poet and which, most importantly, did not take away from their ‘femininity’. But some women eventually rejected and stepped beyond that ideal and, as well-known poets, did not shy away from fame and its attendant circumstances. All the women poets who shall be discussed in the following pages achieved a sense of notoriety for their independent and tenacious character in a largely male-dominated culture. If the likes of Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Edna St Vincent Millay defied the social and literary conventions that applied to women in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anne Sexton found herself in similar circumstances right after mid-century and right before the second wave of Feminism.

Looking back at the history of American women poets, it is enlightening to find that most early 20<sup>th</sup> century figures were known for their engaging public appearances and poetry readings. Being a woman meant more scrutiny, something which these women seemed to have masterfully handled and even mocked through their public personae. The obscurity which shrouded Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) during her lifetime seemed to have fuelled the desire for fame and publicity that successive female poets often sought and received. However, what made them so interesting was their concern with and conscious choice of what Woolf calls “the health of their fame”<sup>6</sup>; an active engagement with the manner in which they were regarded by their audience. They implicitly understood that women’s writing would still be measured against the yardstick set by past and present male poets, and that greatness or even a place in an anthology was not something that would be a given for them (like it was for male poets), but things that women had to struggle and earn for themselves. Hence, they had to resort to means otherwise considered unconventional, even improper, to command the attention of others.

But a woman speaking to a largely male audience was not handed appreciation or even acceptance on a platter. History attests that women with formidable personalities like Amy

Lowell were considered “bristling”<sup>7</sup>, which is perhaps why later poets like Millay presented a more attractive persona in public appearances. Millay seemed to balance her fierce spirit as a ‘New Woman’ of the 1920s with the public persona of a delicate and feminine poet, which critics have analysed as subtly parodying and mocking acceptable standards of femininity.

Appearance played a crucial part in the manner in which female poets sought to reach out to the presumptuously hostile and indifferent public realm. Even the appearance of the otherwise private Emily Dickinson has received a fair share of attention from critics and scholars alike. While most critics and biographers have perceived her penchant for all-white and plain style of dressing as attesting her image as a recluse, critics like Jean Gould and Suzanne Juhasz describe it as being imbued with an implicit theatricality, underlining a deliberate and conscious choice, even a marker for what she perceived herself to be and what impression that made on others. It can also be seen as a deliberate strategy to avoid the traditional fate of women in her times, i.e. marriage and children. She must have perceived that to continue writing poems and express herself creatively, she needed to escape the domestic trap as women, during her lifetime, did not have the option to be both housewife and poet. In fact many women, decades later, most notably Sylvia Plath, struggled to balance domestic duties and creative aspiration once married and with children. So the only option left to gifted women was to give up any desire for domestic life and even romance in order to be true to their craft. While it is true that poets like Sara Teasdale, Edna Millay, Elinor Wylie (1885-1928) did have married lives, each had exceptionally supportive husbands, which was a rarity. Hence, there were poets like Marianne Moore (1887-1972) who totally shut herself from such an arrangement, and even criticized the institution in her poem ‘Marriage’ as consisting:

““of circular traditions and impostures  
 committing many spoils,”  
 requiring all *one’s criminal ingenuity*  
 to avoid!”<sup>8</sup>

Moore equals the avoidance of marriage as involving an almost ‘illicit’ and unlawful strategy on part of women, a strategy that needs to remain concealed. Hence, the deliberate and conscious imposition of an aura of mystery and enigma in the life choices made by poets like Dickinson and even Moore herself. This was necessary considering the literal ‘trap’ that creative and ambitious women walked into once married. Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) vividly illustrates the situation using the real-life experience of artists and friends Paula Becker (1876-1907) and Clara Westhoff (1878-1954). In the poem ‘Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff’, Rich imagines a pregnant Paula writing a letter to Clara about her dissatisfaction with impending domesticity and motherhood. However, Rich points out at the beginning of the poem that Paula died right after childbirth, something which painfully underscores the entire poem/letter and the immense sense of loss in her death. Right in the middle of the poem, Paula impatiently confesses:

“Which of us, Clara, hasn’t had *to take that leap*  
*out beyond our being women*  
*to save our work?* or is it to save ourselves?  
*Marriage is lonelier than solitude.*  
 Do you know: I was dreaming I had died  
 giving birth to the child.  
 I couldn’t paint or speak or even move.”<sup>9</sup>

Paula attests how for women to remain true to their imagination is like indulging in a subversive action that calls for them to exist as more than what they are in the eyes of society and personal relationships. Such was the unequal bargain that women often had to resort to in order to be both woman and artist. Rich presents Paula Becker's life and death as testimony to the risk and eventual loss that marriage and motherhood entailed for a lot of women, and perhaps also the very reason why many chose to risk being called 'eccentric' or 'reclusive' or even 'mad' in order to avoid becoming wife and mother. The physical demands of raising a family have been painstakingly illustrated in the later poetry of Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and in the way she managed to write them. Other than the physical toll that women faced in domestic life, Rich also attests the mental pressures faced by creative women, much like the 'words' of Paula Becker. In the seminal piece of writing 'When We Dead Awaken', Rich writes:

"Now, to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires *a holding-back, a putting-aside of...imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism.* [T]o be a female human being trying to fulfil traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination."<sup>10</sup>

For Emily Dickinson, the solitude and confinement of her room was desirable to that accompanying marriage. Referred to as "my partially cracked poetess at Amherst"<sup>11</sup> by her mentor Thomas W. Higginson, Dickinson's white wardrobe eventually added to the mystery and enigma surrounding her public persona as celibate, lovelorn, eccentric recluse. When in fact she corresponded frequently with a large group of people and shouldered domestic responsibilities while also making enough time "to cherish solitude" and "to read and write – and think."<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Rich in her essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" (1975) sums up the poet's spinsterhood quite simply:

"Emily Dickinson did not marry. And her nonmarrying was neither a pathological retreat...nor probably even a conscious decision; it was a fact in her life as in her contemporary Christina Rossetti's; *both women had more primary needs.*"<sup>13</sup>

What scores of critics had spent books theorizing and researching on, Rich bluntly put to rest by stating that like any other poet Dickinson sought fulfilment through her art, and being a woman did not in any way mean that hankering after domesticity was her one true goal. In fact, Rich's statement that Dickinson's *primary need* was simply "[t]he writing of poetry"<sup>14</sup> makes most of the poet's former critics appear superfluous and sexist in their unwarranted search for Dickinson's lovers. Rich also makes a subversive point by claiming that marriage and children were not the only life options for creative women. Critic Jean Gould in her assessment of Dickinson has remarked that even when romance and marriage were possibilities, "the poet in her would not let the woman triumph."<sup>15</sup> This may seem problematic since it implies a deliberate repression of the poet's femininity. However it needs to be understood that for most of human history, femininity remained synonymous with domesticity, for which poets like Dickinson and Moore had to 'present' themselves in a manner as to be acceptable by the male-dominated world of poetry. This leaves the question of women who wished to be both poets and mothers/wives unresolved.

On her part, Rich acutely felt this dilemma when at the age of 29, with three small children and a husband, being true to her art made her feel “guilt toward the people closest to me, and guilty toward my own being.”<sup>16</sup> Like Dickinson, Rich desired “more than anything, the one thing of which there was never enough: time to think, time to write.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that female poets separated by more than half a century faced similar unfavourable conditions reveals a curious malaise in society and most importantly in the institution of marriage. While Dickinson ‘presented’ herself to the world as a withdrawn personality and never married, more than sixty years later the likes of Rich and Plath found out the hard way that even with a college degree, a published book of poetry, and clearly being at least equal in talent to their respective husbands, the traditional duties of cooking, cleaning, caretaking and rearing of children squarely fell upon their shoulders. The condition of marital life was such that it was indifferent to the special needs of gifted women and having time and space to imagine and create was always a struggle. It is indeed not a co-incidence that poets like Plath, Rich, and even Sexton would reach the same conclusions about themselves and echo similar thoughts as women that their fore-mother Dickinson had arrived at in a different century. When Plath realized in October, 1962 that-

“I  
 Have a self to recover, a queen.  
 Is she dead, is she sleeping?  
 Where has she been...

Now she is flying  
 More terrible than she ever was....”<sup>18</sup> (“Stings”)

-she was participating in the tradition of women’s self-discovery and self-assertion initiated by Dickinson-

“My second Rank-too small the first-  
 Crowned-Crowing-on my Father’s breast-  
 A half unconscious Queen-  
 But this time-Adequate-Erect-  
 With Will to choose, or to reject-”<sup>19</sup> (#508)

Similarly, Anne Sexton’s witch persona in ‘Her Kind,’

“I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
 haunting the black air, braver at night;  
 dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
 over the plain houses, light by light:  
 lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
 A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
 I have been her kind.”<sup>20</sup>

bears resemblance to the formidable figure in Dickinson’s “My Life had stood-a Loaded Gun-”

“And when at Night-Our good day done-  
I guard my Master’s Head-

...  
To foe of His-I’m deadly foe-  
None stir the second time-  
On whom I lay a Yellow eye-  
Or an emphatic Thumb-”<sup>21</sup> (#754)

In each of these cases, a woman and poet has unlocked the key to her own private self, only to find it in contradiction to the conventional and arbitrary image of her, and each had to resort to some precarious means to be able to walk the tightrope balancing her art and her life. This split as perceived by critic Suzanne Juhasz is a ‘double bind’ faced by women poets particularly. And though it has been a source of some of the most powerful poetry ever written by women, the resulting “stresses of this splitting have led...to *extreme consequences*: the mental asylum, self-imposed silence, recurrent depression, suicide, and often severe loneliness.”<sup>22</sup> The list can further accommodate the self-imposed presentation of Dickinson as withdrawn, white-wearing spinster, or the deliberate reticence of Marianne Moore decades later. For the bitter truth was, even though Dickinson was fortunate to escape the mental asylum, Higginson and many others referred to her as ‘cracked.’

Coming back to the role of appearance in a female poet’s life, it may be surmised that the ‘presentation’ of oneself equalled the public performance of a chosen persona. For Dickinson it meant choosing a particular lifestyle and risking being labelled an eccentric and a recluse, and exercising that choice “in an especially exaggerated mode.”<sup>23</sup> Juhasz clarifies that:

“Not all women artists, after all, resort to seclusion in their homes and the wearing of white. [But Dickinson’s] genius...was at violent odds with a particularly conservative social milieu. Thus Dickinson devises a life that will enable her to be a woman poet on her own terms: *rejecting the life for which society has prepared her, choosing the life of the mind.*”<sup>24</sup>

Hence, Dickinson had to externally renounce her femininity to be able to hold on to her core. Jean Gould makes an important point in stating that the poet’s “constant wearing of white may have expressed theatricality as much as eccentricity.”<sup>25</sup> Dickinson seems to have clearly and carefully controlled her public image, while privately expressing herself in writing, unbridled by expectations and the anxiety of reception. This deliberate cultivation of an image in the public eye is a trait that was carried forward in the first half of the next century most famously by Amy Lowell and Edna Millay.

While assessing the lives and works of past women poets, the overwhelming and troublesome area remain the double-edged nature of the contemporary literary critical establishment. If critics were not busy reducing Emily Dickinson to a lovelorn spinster who shied away from a public life, they were deriding and criticizing Amy Lowell for being too successful a writer and patron of poetry. T.S. Eliot sounds almost resentful of her popularity and literally ‘demonises’ her when he calls her “the demon saleswoman of poetry.”<sup>26</sup> In fact Amy Lowell’s poetry reading at the Poetry Society of America in 1915 and the immediate reaction of the contemporary literary audience is worth mentioning in some detail.

Lowell was endowed with enormous girth which inevitably made a strong impression upon anyone who beheld her. To add to that, she opened her reading with the poem “Bath” which sensuously described the poet enjoying her morning bath. The fact that several other poems were also read hardly seemed to matter to the audience since:

“As soon as she stopped, Amy was showered with a deluge of questions, most of them concerned with her “Bath.” Many were from conservatives needle-sharp with hostility. Some of her attackers demanded to know if this was supposed to be poetry. *Some accused her of deliberately destroying time-honoured tradition.*”<sup>27</sup>

Amy Lowell was charged with sullying the sanctity of tradition; a tradition that clearly had no room for her. Furthermore, her poetic skills seemed to have been questioned, if not nullified, by her antagonistic, mostly male audience. More strikingly, it became their solemn duty to affirm that any attempt at intimacy or frankness by the poet, implicit in the nature and visual effect of the poem “Bath”, was not only unwelcome but also unwholesome. As becomes clear, Lowell faced a deluge of criticism, protest, and even personal insult in attempting to read her poems in a male-dominated public space. Her appearance was ridiculed by leading critics who dismissed her as “Hippopoetess”<sup>28</sup>.

For someone who was personally very sensitive, facing such harsh, misogynist criticism was made bearable only by the deliberate cultivation of an imperious image. To the external world she came across as a fiercely determined, tempestuous individual who could hardly care less about everyone’s opinion of her. As a result, constantly being hounded and derided by the press and assertively facing them, Amy Lowell gained fame, but mostly notoriety for being a radical, fearless, uncompromising, openly lesbian poet who “stood her ground firmly, perhaps too firmly.”<sup>29</sup> To overturn the steady flow of comments directed at her ‘size’, she would employ the strategies of obviousness and veiled sarcasm by proclaiming “Lord, I’m a walking sideshow!”<sup>30</sup> hence, settling once and for all the simple fact that she was aware of her body and needed no reminding. In other words, Lowell dealt with such personal attacks in a feminist manner by rightfully asserting that her body and her appearance were nobody else’s business except hers. People closest to her, however, were aware of Lowell’s sensitivity about her weight which was expressed in her poetry. In the poem ‘The Bungler’ her self-consciousness is revealed:

“You glow in my heart  
Like the flames of uncounted candles.  
But when I go to warm my hands,  
*My clumsiness* overturns the light  
And then *I stumble*  
Against the tables and chairs”<sup>31</sup>

The poem clearly throws light on the self-consciousness Lowell felt about her appearance, and it was indeed a feat to publicly ignore it and assert herself as a confident individual. Poet Siegfried Sassoon’s account of their meeting shows her to be “stout and masculine, jocularly downright and dogmatic, smoking a long Manila cigar, and completely confident....”<sup>32</sup> This was an image that was carefully deployed to the outside world so that she would be taken seriously as a poet and critic. Her friend, novelist D.H. Lawrence, however was aware that the external “bombast” of her public personality and attitude was a “posturing”; a strategy, which actually protected her “impassioned heart.”<sup>33</sup> And protection was something she

constantly required for her numerous, popular and highly regarded reading tours. Between her first taboo-breaking public appearance in 1915 and her last reading tour in 1923, Lowell had gained enough publicity, both positive and negative, for her defiant and fierce personality, and audience members looked forward to a sensational ‘performance’. She only read under the light of an electric reading lamp which was prone to blown fuses, and her audience often found itself in complete darkness and utter confusion. It was certainly an odd way of ‘teasing’ the crowd, but seemed perfectly aligned to her dramatic public appeal. Many have noted such incidents as ‘props’ or “devices [of] diversions”<sup>34</sup> that lent a theatrical quality to her delivery. In this regard Gould remarks that:

“It is notable that the two women who had the greatest influence on [Amy Lowell’s] life and work were connected with the theatre.”<sup>35</sup>

Any discussion of Lowell would be incomplete and misleading without alluding to her relationships with Italian actress and performer Eleonora Duse (1858-1924), and her long-term companion and lover Ada Russell, who was also an actress. Both these women inspired some of her best poetry, and immensely influenced her personally. Apart from her poetry, Amy Lowell’s legacy to successive independent-spirited female poets like Sexton has been the creation and assertion of a public space.

In fact, Anne Sexton’s first public appearance in London at the Poetry International Festival, 1967 sparked a similar outrage as Lowell’s poetry reading had done in 1915. Other notable poets at the venue included W.H. Auden and Pablo Neruda. Jon Stallworthy summed up Sexton’s ‘performance’ in the following words:

“When Anne had finished, she laid down her book, threw wide her arms *like a pop singer embracing her audience*, and blew them a fat kiss. It was the most grotesquely ill-judged gesture I’ve ever seen at a poetry reading.”<sup>36</sup>

Stallworthy’s epithet of choice was ‘grotesque’ and he compared her to a pop singer in an effort to differentiate and also perhaps belittle Sexton and her work from the canonised poetry of grand, old, male figures like Auden and Neruda. She is perceived and represented as the oddity; the outcast performer of ‘pop[ular]’ and sensational poems who clearly does not belong in the intellectual poetry circle of London. Even Auden was ‘cross with’ a ‘foreign’ poet taking up ‘so much time’, and not to mention, attention with her outrageous behaviour.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, she had overstepped some invisible but potent line of control, and the next day the English press castigated Sexton’s impropriety in the headlines.

What both Lowell and Sexton, decades and two world wars apart sought, was to reach out to their audiences in a manner different from the traditional impersonal, formal distance between poet and listener, and establish first-hand contact without hiding behind a persona. Another figure, whose effect on female poets matched that of Lowell before the generation of Wylie and Millay made its presence felt, was Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). In fact, both these poets and contemporaries, living on either side of the Atlantic, were constantly compared with each other, favourably and unfavourably. Though their poetry differed greatly, their appearance and reception by critics were often uncannily similar. Critic Robert McAlmon compared two of the most influential female poets of his times in the following manner:

“[Gertrude Stein was] a much better *specimen* than Amy Lowell, though they were species of the same family: *doubting and spoiled rich children*, hurt only when they discover they can’t have the moon if they want it.”<sup>38</sup>

And went on to mock their appearances - “[O]ne thing was certain: Amy did weigh a good deal more than Gertrude.”<sup>39</sup>

Such comments show McAlmon in a poor light, and as with Eliot’s resentment of Lowell, any attempt to denigrate two pioneering and unconventional female poets as nothing more than ‘children’ and ‘wealthy’ only points to the critic’s presumption and bias. Even more importantly, his male gaze not only objectifies Stein (and Lowell) as ‘specimens’, but his snide reference to both of their physical traits underlines the oft-practised and reductionist view of women as nothing more than their bodies. However, unlike Lowell whose steely exterior masked sensitivity about herself, Stein retaliated to criticism by employing a satiric tone in her poetry. The following lines from her ‘play’ “I Like It To Be a Play” confront the often disapproving and critical gaze directed towards her appearance and personality:

“You were astonished by me.  
 All of us complain.  
 You were astonished by me.  
 Don’t you interested trying.  
 ...  
 No indeed I do not.”<sup>40</sup>

Whatever established critics may have opined, Stein was a forceful presence, and especially during her largely sold-out 1933-34 lecture tour of America, she became a reluctant ‘celebrity’ being constantly hounded by the press and with newspaper articles devoted to her. She enjoyed success as a speaker, being able to draw her audience with “a performance, delivering her talk in a kind of chant,”<sup>41</sup> an attribute that critics wrongly claimed to be a stutter. Being under constant scrutiny, her curious appearance garnered enough attention. With her close cropped hair, large head, and heavy, long skirts she often looked masculine and was variously compared to “a Roman emperor”, “a Buddhist monk”, and even a “judge.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps her formidable appearance was something that set off so much negative criticism from ‘astonished’ male critics not used to women being authoritarian, especially in public spaces. Edna Millay and Anne Sexton’s poetry-performances bear strong family resemblance to Stein’s celebrated lectures, and unfortunately, all three generations of women faced similar attacks directed towards their tradition-defying personalities.

Edna Millay, and to a considerable extent her peer Elinor Wylie, represented the ‘free woman’ of the 1920s and 30s in America owing to their liberated personalities and open marriages. Unfortunately, history has often paid more attention to the scandals in their lives than their poetry. Wylie was a celebrated beauty who struggled to be taken seriously as a poet. Elizabeth Sergeant once remarked – “If you observe [Wylie] tossing off a cocktail...you will think her perhaps just the latest celebrity.”<sup>43</sup> But in her poetry she strove to dismiss the very beauty of the surfaces for which she was renowned. In her own words: “I was, being human, born alone; I was, being woman, hard beset;....”<sup>44</sup>

Her poetry was often compared by her contemporaries to that of Emily Dickinson's and even Shelley's, who was her hero. Gould has noted how the mystical quality of her later work was not a 'pose' but a reflection of the "conflict between the material and the spiritual, between the finery she loved to wear and the sterner metaphysics of the mind...."<sup>45</sup> Wylie acutely felt such tension in her own life, being simultaneously worshipped for her looks and condemned for her lifestyle. Her close friendship with Millay was highlighted when The League of American Penwomen 'disinvited' her for her 'questionable personal life', which drove Millay, who was also invited, to promptly refuse to attend. Millay, who was actively involved as a suffragist in college, was aware of the discrimination faced by free-thinking women in a socio-cultural setup that "placed the circumstances of one's personal life above literary accomplishment."<sup>46</sup>

On her part, Millay was a celebrity both in poetry and social circles. She was noted for her appearance as well as her poetry, which employed "language common to all,"<sup>47</sup> and effectively re-invented traditional poetic forms like the sonnet at a time when T.S. Eliot's brand of Modernism sought to attack such poetry. It maybe surmised that by putting aside the dominant impact and influence of Eliot and the New Critics in mid-century American poetry, one could draw a straight line from Millay's love sonnets to Sexton's 1969 collection *Love Poems*. Millay's fame rested, very importantly, on her public persona projected especially during her poetry readings. And it is exactly in this regard that her legacy becomes so pivotal to the achievement of Anne Sexton even in a completely different generation. Research since the 1990s by the likes of Artemis Michailidou has sought to re-create the already-existent but largely-ignored tradition of female poet-performers, a close look at which would enable critics and poetry-lovers to better appreciate and understand the female genetic strand in 20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry.

As exemplified by Gertrude Stein, a reading tour was a profitable and interesting way to promote one's work. In Millay's hands, the 'reading' became a 'performance', as the poet invested herself in an independent 'persona' while onstage. The origins of this can be traced to Millay's avid interest in theatre during college. Apart from writing for the stage, she was also noted for her histrionic ability and powerful dialogue delivery. All of these fused together harmoniously during her poetry readings which became famous for their dramatic intensity. Millay offered her audience something vastly different than the prim and proper recitation sessions practised by most other poets. Such was her popularity that she received an "enormous fee"<sup>48</sup> for just a single appearance. Her reputation as openly bisexual and "the spokesman (sic) for the new woman"<sup>49</sup> also added to the audience experience and expectation. And although never as provocative as Sexton, she managed to have a devoted male following. Like her friend Wylie, Millay too faced the double standard of cultural establishment in assessing female poets who refused to concede to prevalent stereotypes. In her poem 'The Singing-Woman from the Wood's Edge' she wrote:

"What should I be but a prophet and a liar,  
Whose mother was a leprechaun, whose father was a friar?

...  
After all's said and after all's done,  
What should I be but a harlot and a nun?

...  
And yanked both ways by my mother and my father,  
With a "Which would you better?" and a "Which would you rather?"

With him for a sire and her for a dam,  
What should I be but just what I am?"<sup>50</sup>

She rejected the set stereotypical options available to women, and refused to choose between ‘harlot’ and ‘nun’, and concluded the piece with an assertive acceptance of her oppositional drives and her unique individuality. As even Sexton and Plath had to face in their own times, Millay hit out at the expectations and demands made upon women poets to live up to an unrealistic and unfair ideal of femininity, something seldom faced by male poets.

Male poets like Robert Lowell and John Berryman, both poets of the ‘Confessional’ genre, were hailed as ‘poet-prophets’ even when writing about personal tragedy and shortcomings. But women writing similar poetry - Plath and Sexton - were considered narcissistic and poets plagued by limited scope. In relation to the ‘Confessional’ movement in American poetry during the late 1950s and 60s, it is essential to discuss how it was a reaction against the sterile, informal poetry encouraged by Eliot and the New Critical School of literary critics. The latter dominated the American literary scene from the late 1930s, and produced Robert Lowell (1917-1977), who, ironically, was one of the founders of ‘Confessional’ poetry.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Eliot’s clout as a critic and a poetic father rested to a large extent on his assertion that the poetry of Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, and Millay were distinctly ‘low-brow’ and redundant in comparison to the intellectual and high-on-form modernist poetics practised by himself and his followers. In fact both Stein and Millay openly criticized the absolute and high-handed manner in which Eliot sought to transform the idea of poetry, and clearly establish a hierarchy where the ‘love poems’ of most women poets in the preceding era would be deemed inferior. Interestingly, all three women, especially Lowell and Stein had bitter experiences with Eliot’s mentor Ezra Pound and had to call out his ‘chauvinism’ by either wresting control from him or ignoring his savage criticisms. However, Eliot went on to deeply influence the next generation of poets and future literary critics, who following his standards, denounced the poetry of Millay’s generation as too full of “glibness and popularity”<sup>51</sup> to be considered ‘high art’. And hence, from the late 1930s to the 1950s a whole tradition of powerful women’s poetry was effectively dismantled and buried as unmeritorious and as “lowest of the low.”<sup>52</sup>

Coming back to Sexton’s dejection after attending Robert Lowell’s workshop, her biographer Diane Middlebrook explains: “[Lowell] spent a good deal of time mulling over whether this or that poet was “major” or “minor,” and women were almost inevitably categorized as “minor, definitely minor”....”<sup>53</sup>

Hence, for the impressionable Sexton, early on in her career, writing meant ‘writing like a man’ since Eliot and his influence, in this case in the form of Lowell, had succeeded in reducing the achievement of American women poets to an unremarkable, even unnecessary footnote in history books. So in her later poetry, when Anne Sexton eventually broke away from Lowell’s authority, she paid homage long due to that very female poetic tradition of which she was intensely aware of being a part of, but which she had to suppress. And this was much before second wave of Feminism shed new light on America’s poetic foremothers.

The female predecessor that Sexton truly identified with and eventually emulated was Edna St Vincent Millay. Robert Lowell did compare her to Millay, albeit in an ambiguous tone, thus manifesting Sexton’s fear:

“In the beginning...she gave promise of becoming a fifties Edna Millay. Her gift was to grip, to give words to the drama of her personality. *She did what few did, cut a figure.* What went wrong? For a book or two, she grew more powerful. Then writing was too easy for her. She became meagre and exaggerated.”<sup>54</sup>

Given Millay’s critical obscurity at the time, Lowell, as one of the most influential voices in post-war American literary scene, seemed then to define an upper limit for Sexton’s poetic achievement. Lowell’s backhanded praise followed by absolute dismissal of Sexton however unwittingly shed light on her captivating physical presence; her ability to “cut a figure.” The “drama of personality” was as integral to a poet-performer as were “humour, shock, narrative, and a hypnotic voice,”<sup>55</sup> which both Millay and later Sexton effectively deployed. In fact according to Cheryl Walker:

“[Millay’s] reading presence was notorious: ...she purposefully projected a sense of being the poet in the flesh, of the flesh; the poet whose flesh was somehow the very material of her material.”<sup>56</sup>

So while Amy Lowell may have simply read out her poems before an audience with outrageous determination, Millay’s performance was a more complex, controlled, and self-conscious act which kept the audience unable to distinguish between poet and persona. As Sexton in her later years would come to follow, improve upon and perfect, Millay never sought to distance herself from any of her personas; rather she relied upon and manipulated personal experience to write about and perform something that could be truly shared with one’s audience. Coming back to Sexton’s career it may be argued that, as criticism of her poetry readings grew, so did her inclination to experiment. She sought to expand the role of a poet precisely by making poetry readings an integral and even necessary part of her poetic career. The contemporary literary scene banked on readings by authors in a bid to garner attention from both college students and academics. However these affairs were expected to be prim and proper formal occasions aimed at the elite intellectuals present on college campuses. As a result much of the experience resembled a prestigious lecture session and less that of a writer reaching out to his/her audience in an impactful manner. Sexton’s earliest readings followed this pattern as she merely *recited* her poems from the podium. But with passing years and growing popularity and success, she moved towards a more interactive phase with her audience to the point where it was ‘grotesquely ill-judged’ and discomfited her peers with its intimacy and frankness, much like her poetry. While critics berated the shameless openness of her poems in presenting personal experience, Sexton skilfully understood the need to bring the same to her poetry readings. Suzanne Juhasz, in assessing the role of the female poet as found in the works of Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, wrote:

“A quality that emerges from the best of Levertov, from the later poems of Plath, and from most of the poetry of Sexton is a sense of the writer herself as a person who communicates with and touches other people (readers, listeners) because she involves herself in her poetry. *She uses poetry as a means, a way to contact other people.* This is a use of that poetic device, the persona.”<sup>57</sup>

Sexton was not satisfied with the written word alone, hence she used the poetry readings to really ‘contact’ and ‘communicate’ with her audience. In this regard she was also taking forward Robert Lowell’s initial desire behind writing Confessional poetry – poetry that would

not just be read but, more importantly, listened to. As mentioned earlier, Sexton being influenced by Millay brought the ‘drama of her personality’ to the readings, thus transforming the experience into a ‘performance’ of the various personas that inhabited her poems. At the same time her effort was different from characters presented by Robert Browning in his famous dramatic monologues or the modernist turn given to the very same genre by T.S. Eliot in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Where Eliot denied the emotional connection between the man and the poet, Sexton made it the very point of her artistic career. For that is how she could really reach out to her audience, mainly (though not confined to) women, and establish this sense of empathy which was integral to her poetry and her performance. Her career as a psychoanalytic patient mirrored that of many housewives of her time and just as writing helped her to recover her sanity, she wanted her poetry to similarly enter others’ lives and empathize with them, and perhaps heal them. Also, her relationship with therapy and her therapists had been less than perfect which led her to critique the debilitating influence of the treatment methods in several of her poems. The following is from the posthumously published ‘Letters to Dr. Y. (1960-1970)’ where Sexton seems to lash out at a disrespectful therapist –

“Dr. Y., I have a complaint.  
Why do you smile that liverish smile?  
Why do you double over in a spaz and a swoon,  
gurgling on my past, my grief, my bile?  
Am I a joke?  
Am I a gas?  
...  
Urine and tears pour out of me.  
I’m the one you broke.”<sup>58</sup>

It may be surmised that she sought to enlighten women like her in that regard and show them an alternate path towards well-being and self-assertion.

Sexton was never outspoken about her Feminist leanings, though she regarded the movement towards change in contemporary society and culture positively, having survived the shackles of the post-war ‘Feminine Mystique’ like so many of her peers, notably Adrienne Rich. After Sexton’s death, Rich recalled:

“[Sexton] was not in any conscious or self-defined sense a feminist, but she did some things ahead of the rebirth of the feminist movement. *She wrote poems alluding to abortion, masturbation, menopause...long before such themes became validated by a collective consciousness of women,* and while writing and publishing under the scrutiny of the male literary establishment.”<sup>59</sup>

In this regard, Sexton was as much of a precursor to the many budding female writers and poets of the Feminist movement, as the likes of Millay, Teasdale, and Amy Lowell were to her. However the pressure to be taken seriously by the largely male-dominated literary establishment often led writers like her to deny their feminist roots and preferences or simply their love for earlier women writers. Tillie Olsen (1912-2007) who lived through both the first and second waves of Feminism in America recalled one of the conversations she had with Sexton when they were both teaching at the Radcliffe Institute:

“I quoted Sara Teasdale and Anne said, ‘Oh, so you love her poems too! But you must never, never admit it to anyone.’ She told me once she had let it slip in [John Holmes’ workshop] that she liked Sara Teasdale, and discovered that [Teasdale] was the lowest of the low....*From the outset we talked about writers who were life to us.* We never needed to be guarded or dissemble. *Our love of Teasdale or Millay didn’t shame us, with each other.*”<sup>60</sup>

During a brief period following her Pulitzer win in 1967, Anne Sexton came into contact with, what Middlebrook called, a “circle of women artists”<sup>61</sup> which was also her first true brush with radical feminist notions. Her academic and personal interactions with Olsen, the artist Barbara Swan, and her life-long friendship with poet Maxine Kumin led to a change in both personal and artistic direction and freedom from the gaze and influence of male peers or mentors such as Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass and Anthony Hecht among others. Discarding ‘shame’ and embracing her latent preference for poetic foremothers marked a clear move away from the patriarchal setup of contemporary literary circles. Sexton needs to be assessed as a Feminist figure who sought to unearth and utilize a forgotten female tradition in American literature thus anticipating feminist literary criticism since the 1970s. And she not only revived such a tradition but also transformed it into a useful tool for the cause of ‘her kind’.

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