

CHAPTER ONE

Loss, Love, and the Work of Learning

Lessons from the Teaching Life of Anne Sexton

Depression is boring, I think,
and I would do better to make
some soup and light up the cave.

—*Anne Sexton, "The Fury of Rain Storms"*

The secret must sneak, insert, or introduce itself into the arena of public forms; it must pressure them and prod known subjects into action. . . .

—*Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari*

Long before her death, Anne Sexton meticulously typed her manuscripts and kept carbon copies of her letters. "She was," observes her biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook, "a self-documenting person: from childhood on she kept scrapbooks of treasured moments; from the earliest months of what was to become her professional life she . . . dated worksheets of poems . . . she saved correspondence, photographs, clippings" (Middlebrook, 1991, xxii). Sexton's many hospitalizations, taped psychiatric sessions, therapy notebooks, and medical evaluations also generated a rich collection of data that was, in 1978, transferred to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin by Sexton's oldest daughter and the executor of her estate, Linda Gray Sexton.

Sexton often hoped aloud that her poetry would endure to offer comfort and insight to those who, like herself, suffered the unrelenting pain of mental illness and addictions. The archive of Anne Sexton reveals an unconventional teaching life; reading the contents of Sexton's archive provokes in the reader a

particular form of melancholia that is associated with a life falling apart, a terminal, unrelenting, inexplicable mental illness that resulted in Sexton's ending her life by carbon monoxide poisoning at the age of 46. After returning home from lunch with her close friend, Maxine Kumin, she climbed into the driver's seat of the old red Cougar she bought in 1967, the year she started teaching, and turned on the ignition (Middlebrook, 1991, 397).



It is July 1994. I am working in the archives at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, shuffling through some folders that contain correspondences Sexton exchanged with her students.¹ I'm hungry, restless, and feeling stiff from sitting all day, so I decide to take a walk. Before I leave, I randomly pull a letter from the file, skim through it, planning to return to it later in the day. I note that the letter was written by Chris Leverich, an English major at Colgate University during the spring of 1972, and that the letter is in fact a substitute for the final assignment—an imagined interview with Anne Sexton. In his letter, Leverich details a trail of memories, lost expectations, and emotions that he has kept to himself throughout the term. "In a way, I've fallen in love with you," he writes,

Of course, it's a fantasy. I know that. Yet, there is something, a force, a charm that is ever powerful and ever attractive to me. So many times I've wanted to be alone with you, to talk to you, to break the formalities of student and teacher. . . . I guess that's a fair summation of my first feelings toward you: an initial sexual attraction gradually honed into a mixture of respect and admiration. As the semester went on and I got more and more into your poetry whole new horizons opened up before me. I knew I was reading your life and what it was to you.²

Leverich goes on to capture, with tremendous exactitude, the sense of loss he felt for never having really gotten to know Anne Sexton, noting that the end of the term would mark the last time he would hear her voice. He writes,

I sort of resigned myself to never knowing you, even after that little spark flared up in me when you called my name—"Chris." But it seemed like only a reflex action after Bruce said it. Still, I wanted it to roll around over your tongue. I wanted you to say it again in your head and remember it. I couldn't stand that you wouldn't even remember my name someday. Like you said in class about John Holmes: "If you leave someone without having them love you, then you lose them." I knew we would leave that way and I would lose.³

The explicitly sexual content of this letter can be read as an Oedipal narrative—a son's longing for his mother—and contains images of a desire to be devoured (even if in name only), coupled with the image of a spark of fire that

takes hold as Sexton utters his name, a spark that is quickly put out with a dose of reflexive speech. Leverich fantasizes about driving to Radcliffe to meet Sexton's daughter, Linda, where they would talk about philosophy. "But I didn't go. I didn't go because I knew I wouldn't see what I wanted. I wouldn't see a miniature you . . . I knew I never wanted Lolita, but Jocasta."⁴ Leverich's interest in knowing Sexton is, as he notes, a fantasy that I found troubling. On the one hand, I worried about Sexton. To what extent were the images in Leverich's letter symptoms of his desire to swallow his teacher up, a violent fantasy through which to threaten his teacher's authority and claim her for his very own?

On the other hand, I worried about Leverich. To what extent did Sexton's memories of sexual distress and loss figure into her pedagogy at this time, mixing in with this student's past, a past wrought with pain and loss that he may very well have been working hard to forget? I began to think about how the encrypted memories we hold of violence, lost ideals, and betrayals are acted out through pedagogy, memories that appear absent but take up an uncanny presence in our classrooms.

Teaching and learning inevitably invoke ghosts from the past, family dramas, and failed romances. Nested in each word Leverich writes, in each scriptural relic, is a personal past that was awakened as he sat in class working with Sexton's poetry, among her poems "The Truth the Dead Know," "Her Kind," "Somewhere in Africa," "The Fortress," "Said the Poet to the Analyst." As a student in this class, Leverich took part in classroom assignments that were performative in structure and, hence, directed toward loss. "Give me a persona," Sexton asked her students. "Could you write with your mother's voice about her marriage, about her son . . . a woman in church, what is she thinking?"⁵ Leverich writes of the sudden death of his own father when he was eight years old, and his admitted proclivity to "look for a mother and father . . . perhaps that's what I see in you; a woman who is both dominant and passive, at once bold and timid, and even impatient yet understanding."⁶ As I read this letter, I felt as if Leverich had isolated the ache of loss because it was so deeply tied to difficult emotions. Such acts of isolation not only numb pain, but they hold it in reserve, blocking it from circulating in our imagination and in our contacts with other people. The confinement of an unbearable reality to an inaccessible region of the psyche is what Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994) refer to as "incorporation" or "preservative repression." Drawing on clinical observations made by Freud and Karl Abraham in 1922 of the increased sexual activity of people who experienced a death in the family, Abraham and Torok propose a new category of psychology. They refer to this category as "the illness of mourning." They argue that the pain associated with melancholia is not directly tied to having lost a loved one, but rather this pain is associated with the secret that the loss occasions, a secret that they refer to as the *psychic tomb*. Abraham and Torok understood the flow of sexual desire in the face of death as the final, climactic outpouring of love for the departed. Complications ensue, however, when the bereaved is a parent, grandparent, sibling, or other

“nonsexual associate,” because, in such cases, sexual feelings and outbursts are personally and socially unacceptable to the mourner; the involuntary effusion of feeling constitutes an event that the mourner cannot make sense of with respect to her or his somber feelings of loss and bereavement. In these instances, the effect experienced in the face of death must be kept under wraps, thereby transforming this final outpouring of love into an intrapsychic secret. The mourner sets up a secret enclave, what Torok refers to as a *crypt*, for the departed love-object, precisely because the survivor is being deluded by society and culture into behaving as if no trauma or loss had occurred.⁷ Or, to put it another way, the bereaved returns to haunt the living because they have not been granted a proper burial.

The work of Abraham and Torok emphasizes the ways in which the inherited fears, and anxieties that were unresolved by our descendents are carried into succeeding generations and take occupancy in our lives as memories that are neither fully evident nor fully concealed. This emphasis calls attention to the history of psychic structures, and how psychic traumas and secrets can be inherited rather than strictly tied to individual experience. The concept of the phantom offers us another route into Leverich’s letter to Sexton, a route that brings us beyond reading this document as a letter written by an individual student, to postulating that encrypted in this love letter, this failed assignment, are inherited, secret, psychic substances of his ancestors’ lives and that these substances can take up an uncanny presence in the classroom. Leverich’s love letter might be more fully understood as an indirect, circuitous outpouring of love, not solely for Sexton, as he told me years later in an interview, but also for a beloved aunt whom he had lost to drug and alcohol abuse, a woman whose presence he felt in the poetry and teachings of Anne Sexton. The memory traces in Leverich’s writing provoke an unsettling disruption in this class, a disruption that was provoked not simply by Sexton’s presence, but by the presence of others who are neither fully remembered nor forgotten, neither fully recognized nor ignored (Abraham and Torok, 1994, 166).

The individual example of Leverich depicts how a seminar space might become a site of private mourning. Leverich’s memories of loss appear to circulate and flow through his readings of Sexton’s poetry, thereby infusing the pedagogical event with the specificity of his own emotions, history, and desires. We might read Leverich’s letter as an attempt to articulate strains of feeling that he associated with intergenerational secrets that were unmoored by the poetry of his instructor. The pedagogical project lies in creating occasions, through writing, talking, and other acts of symbolization, for Leverich to refine an attachment to the half-spoken losses haunting his personal past and to coordinate these losses with the larger social field. This work is particularly difficult, however, when the losses a person suffers with are not recognized as legitimate and thus not granted public space for articulation.

The melancholic temperament that Abraham and Torok sought to understand is marked by a loss of address that gives way to an unbounded state

in which a person appears to abandon her position as a subject, for she has no addressable Other—that is, there is no one to listen to her complaints, no one who recognizes her grievances as worthy of attention. In a 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton is quite articulate about how writing poetry enabled her to create possibilities for approaching the intimate truths harbored in the unconscious that are not fully spoken, that are, in fact, outside naming and ideologies and that often create a “loss of address” (Kristeva, 1989, 298). Sexton says that

Sometimes my doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven't integrated into my life. . . . The poetry is often more advanced in terms of my unconscious than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious. The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of. (Kevles, 1978 (pg 5), xx)

The masks and dramatic personae that appear in Sexton's poetry and that she drew upon in her classroom hold traces of our selves that we are inclined to disavow, the selves we lose or believe we must lose in order to commit to one life and not another—a mother who gives up her child, a girl on the edge of adolescence, a rapist, an assassin—each persona assembled so that her students can begin to approach the uncharted recesses of their emotional lives. Sexton asked her students in one Colgate seminar, using the example of a rapist, to think,

What moment of his life would you pick to tell about? While he's having a cup of coffee at Howard Johnson's? . . . Perhaps he eats a clam roll. I myself like clam rolls. But I have more than a clam roll in common with the rapist. What have I ever wanted to take? When have I ever wanted to scare and terrify? . . . If you will look around you with eyes stripped you will hear voices calling from the crowd. Each has his own love song. Each has a moment of violence. Each has a moment of despair.⁸

In asking her students, almost all of whom were male, to locate the emotional contingencies between themselves and the persona of a rapist, Sexton threatens to disband any sense they might have of psychic cohesion, goodness, or well-being. But note that Sexton does not question her students without implicating herself: “I myself like clam rolls, but I have more than a clam roll in common with a rapist.” If one understands Sexton's pedagogy as an expression of how personal suffering absorbs and is attached to political life, how the personal is the very place where, as Patricia Williams argues, “our most idealistic and our deadliest politics are lodged, and are revealed” (1991, 93), then Sexton's use of personae can be understood as a means through which to bring her students into closer contact with the aspects of their identities that they may be inclined to disavow.

Sexton offers educators lessons in using personae to address the difficult parts of our selves. Many of the poems Sexton wrote and taught in her classes contain themes of loss and mourning and attest to the psychic and social threat of cancer, early sexual distress, addictions, and madness. Maxine

Kumin remembers Anne Sexton in her early years as a poet, working strictly with traditional forms, “believing,” writes Kumin, “in the value of their rigor as a forcing agent, believing that the hardest truth would come to light if they were made to fit a stanzaic pattern, a rhyme scheme, a prevailing meter” (1981, xxv). Sexton often spoke of writing poetry as an act of psychoanalysis that created coherence out of the disjunctive, fragmented experiences that came to take possession of her. For a time, the dramatic situations Sexton rendered in her poetry functioned as an effective methodology for inquiring into memory and grief. In “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)” she renders a searing representation of sexual violence:⁹

Each night I am nailed into place
and I forget who I am.
Daddy?
That’s another kind of prison.
It’s not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some jellyfish. (Sexton, 1981)

Here, Sexton uses vivid images to convey how sexual assault functions to eradicate identity, “I forget who I am,” resulting in a form of amnesia that effectively takes a victim’s life, “nailing her in place,” imprisoning her, stripping her of will and agency. Throughout the time Sexton wrote poetry—from 1957 when, at the suggestion of her psychiatrist, she enrolled in a poetry workshop taught by John Holmes at the Boston Center for Adult Education, to the time of her death in 1974—she used writing to “make a new reality and become whole. . . . When writing,” Sexton explained, “it is like lying on the analyst’s couch, reenacting a private terror, and the creative mind is the analyst who gives pattern and meaning to what the persona sees as only incoherent experience” (qtd. in Middlebrook, 1991, 64). At Colgate, Sexton described the tight lyric form as a cage in which a writer could put wild animals in, a means through which to “make a logic out of suffering. . . . One must make a logic out of suffering or one is mad.” She asserted: “All writing of poems is sanity, because one makes a reality, a sane world, out of insane happenings.”¹⁰

Yet the memories of loss that Leverich inscribes in his letter and Sexton in her poetry do not surface through a sheer act of will. Nor can I simply summon up my own memories and set them in the syntax of an essay. Women, marginalized people, and those who have endured trauma cannot write from memory, argues Shoshanna Felman (1993), for our autobiographies are composed of precisely what our memories cannot contain, or hold together as a whole, although our writing inadvertently inscribes it. While the historical conditions that constituted trauma for a white middle-class woman such as Sexton cannot

be equated with the historical conditions of people who have endured generations of colonization, in both cases the structure of trauma works to obliterate an addressable Other. Felman finds that memories can surface and circulate only *vis-à-vis* a process through which we access our stories indirectly—by conjugating literature, theory, and autobiography through reading, writing, and, I will add, history and performance, and in turn reading into the texts of culture our difference(s) as missing, absent, lost.¹¹ This approach to writing, reading, and teaching autobiography requires that we are united with the lives of others, not by a synthetic understanding, but whereby one person's concerns are meaningful to another and these concerns return to us an unexpected revelation, desire, or insight in our own life.¹² The letter written by Leverich was just one artifact that returned an unexpected insight. As I reread his letter, I remembered a scene earlier that term, long before I had left to make the trip to Austin, Texas, a scene that reminded me that Sexton was indeed perceived by many as a teacher perpetually in error.

THE RETURN OF AN INSIGHT

Shortly after I had received the news that I was awarded funding from the University of New Hampshire to travel to the archives, one of my colleagues made it quite clear that he thought the university was wasting its money on this project. "My wife wondered," he told me with a laugh, "why you would want to study someone who was not only crazy, but who slept with her students? And what has this project got to do with teaching and teacher education anyway?"

At that moment, I became acutely conscious of how precarious Sexton's status as a teacher would be. It is one thing to write about mental illness and loss as a poet, but to teach in the throes of profound melancholia, anxiety, and alcoholism is quite another. It became evident that the remains of Sexton's teaching life were quite troubling, because the images that surfaced when I proposed that her teaching life be remembered, that we might even be instructed by her pedagogy, were those of a woman in ruins, untrustworthy, and strange. I found myself defending Sexton. "The truth is," I told him, "Sexton did not sleep with her students." As I approached Sexton's life as a teacher, I felt myself writing and teaching from a vulnerable position. I began to loosen my grip on the sense of command and authority I brought to the archive. In retrospect, I remember this encounter with my colleague because, as much as I wanted to deny it, his questions were questions I had harbored all along. The letter written by Chris Leverich was but one relic that provoked my own anxieties to surface, anxieties that I had managed, until now, to ignore.

I have since learned that much of what remains of Sexton's teaching life represents excessive sexual violence, anxieties, fears, and desires to remember and be remembered, all of which will not remain repressed. To consider bringing these excesses into the realm of education is to threaten the meticulous work that is being done by mainstream culture: (1) to solidify normative notions of

what it means to be a good teacher and a good student; (2) to possess emotional stability; and (3) to determine which physical bodies and bodies of knowledge are most worthy. Sexton is the symptom that signals the (failed) repression of the infectious, melancholic teacher; she is the nonnormative teacher who is believed by many to lack academic taste and who, as my colleague demonstrated, can function as a foil for educators to declare themselves “dissimilar” to her excessive, tormented pedagogy.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENT

Anne Sexton appears as an uncanny interlocutor through whom I have begun to approach questions unresolved about memory, knowledge, and the body—questions that were fused into my teaching life from the very start. I began to teach in 1981, the year my father began to suffer with esophageal cancer, a disease that is aggressive and for which there was very little curative treatment. Esophageal cancer does not strike randomly; rather it is selective, primarily inflicting people who are addicted to alcohol. One morning, early in December, after my father had just returned home from a month-long stay in the hospital, I sat at the kitchen table with him, not knowing what to say, yet aware that I had to say something, for he had arrived, we were told, at the limit of his life. And what was left for him to do he had to do alone. “Does it terrify you to know you will die soon?” I asked him quietly. “Alone into the alone,” he quoted from C. S. Lewis. He said it felt like that. And, how improbable that it should be otherwise. Long before my father had died, he felt cut off from us, and it was not simply the certainty of his death that made this so. Nor was it the fact that, as a doctor, he knew all too well what the months ahead would hold, his biggest fear being that he would suffocate to death.

My father suffered with severe melancholia that took hold of him at unexpected times, thrusting him into painful silence, isolation, and despair. He drank, I think, to ease an unrelenting anguish that he never spoke of but that intruded on him throughout his life. I could tell you that like many men growing up during the depression and World War II, my father learned to believe that drinking was a part of being a man. I could tell you that like many men of his generation, drinking was tied to rituals that bound people in rites of celebration, mourning, friendship, romance, and religion. But such a narrative departure into cultural history would only serve as a defense against the pain, loss, and sense of betrayal that came to feel so familiar to me as a child. For me, alcohol was never endowed with romantic or sacred properties. Rather, in my mind, it was nothing less than a lethal substance my father used to commit a slow suicide.

How could a devoted doctor knowingly and most deliberately abuse himself? How can a person who excessively abuses himself so skillfully offer others a cure? I was left with questions that I could not put to rest, and for which I could find no meaningful allegorical equivalents or redemptive possibilities.

The losses that I accrued through my father's life and death—a sense of abandonment, betrayal, a severed attachment—are among the encrypted details that seep through my pedagogy and my scholarship.

My father's life and death taught me to be skeptical of knowledge. Skepticism approaches relationships with scrutiny. The skeptic examines events and makes distinctions in an effort to cultivate mastery and see things clearly. Not only is the skeptic determined to avoid confusion, but she is also fond of delay and doubt; she harbors suspicions about forming attachments to concepts, persons, and beliefs. Perhaps this is why the null hypothesis always intrigued me—it offers a method through which to claim an attachment and then delay commitment through methods of deliberate disavowal. The art and science of a democratic education offered me processes through which I could put my skeptical temperament to use. The scientific method of John Dewey subordinates transmitting the past to creating a future that is distinct from the past. This method of inquiry makes precept a function of practice; it exalts variation over repetition, encourages the free cooperation of differences to displace the regimented reproduction of identicals, prefers the doubt, the inquiry, the experiment of competitive cooperation of the sciences to the obedient and unquestioning rehearsals of dogmatic faith that we struggled with in our Catholic household. "One can never know," my father's father would say as he read the newspaper in the evening, sitting on the terrace, drinking a glass of wine.

But the truth is that the feelings of skepticism that flooded our home were more akin to a kind of wholesale mood of exaggerated distrust and an unexpressed yearning not to repeat the past than they were to the disciplined forms of scientific inquiry that my father found so compelling. I could write a narrative history of my family's skepticism for you. I could write about the ambivalence my paternal grandfather felt about educating his children—skeptical as he was of the educational value of academic knowledge, both wanting and not wanting his children to secure academic degrees, feeling torn, possessing, despite his lack of formal education, an enormous appetite for the lyricism of Dante, Leopardi, Puccini. I could go on to link my family's proclivities to doubt our lovers and scrutinize our politics, religious faith, and one another to philosophical traditions that scrutinize the sanctities of faith and hope. And I could render scenes of teaching where skepticism seeped into my classroom, touching my curriculum entirely. But such a move, once again, would only serve as a defense against a more profound lesson my father handed down to me. From my father, I learned that knowledge and the body are often at war and, despite our apparent mastery of knowledge, our bodies too often remain vulnerable. In seeking knowledge, we are really seeking insight into what to do with our bodies, for teaching and scholarship are inevitably about decisions of the flesh.

In looking back, I learned to recognize that in the throes of illness, loss, or during a crisis in "meaning," there are cultural prohibitions placed on the expression of weakness, fear, and pain. But, perhaps more important, I have come to understand that the shameful, undisclosed suffering of the dead, suffering

that could not be expressed, returns to their descendents and is unsuspected; this suffering continues to lead a painful half-life in them. Thus, the undisclosed suffering of my father, made manifest in his acute melancholia, lives on, haunting me in unsuspected ways, slipping into my pedagogy uninvited, compromising my capacity to refine my attachments to memory and history. From this point of view, a dividing line no longer falls between my father's life and death. His life and death can flow together, repeating and reinforcing each other *vis-à-vis* my teaching life.

In the narrative account I offer, I turn to teaching as a consolation for my loss, and this turn exacts a serious price. Not only do I position myself as a vulnerable daughter who inherits a scholarly and pedagogic project from her father, but, by using pedagogy as a consolation for loss, I displace my sense of abandonment, betrayal, and outrage rather than work through it.¹³ My loss registers in strikingly apparent ways, for example, in the books that I choose to read with my students in courses I teach in curriculum studies, literacy, and English education. Among the books I choose are *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant, *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat, *My Brother* by Jamaica Kincaid, and *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. Each of these stories portrays profound loss, from the death of a beloved aunt and a brother, to the horrific loss of life endured by the people of Haiti, to the brutalities of World War II. These books function like urns, holding loss, keeping it in place. As my students and I read *Krik? Krak!*, events that we have failed to learn about claim a presence in the room, a presence that leaves us speechless. Yet, to what extent do we use this book to console ourselves after learning of the U.S. involvement in Haiti and the horror of living under the brutal threats of the Tonton Macoutes? Do the routes that we take through Danticat's book only function to offer my students a narrative adjustment to loss, a consoling sign that enables each of us to adjust to the injustices that Danticat writes about? Do these consoling signs in turn distract us from properly remembering the dead? The historical figures in these stories are not easily quieted by the official discourses of monuments and memorials.

In her analysis of *Shot in the Heart*, the account by Mikal Gilmore of his family history and the execution of his brother, Gary, Leigh Gilmore emphasizes that "trauma causes history to erupt from its manageable confines. In this context, the dead are no longer persons who lived in the past, but angry, bitter, and mournful ghosts. The dead in this construction refuse to do the work of history, which is to stay buried, in effect, to 'be' the past, and to maintain the rationality of time as past-present-future. . . . The dead return because they were not properly buried" (2001, 5). To address trauma in the classroom raises questions, notes Gilmore, "about how the dead will permit and be permitted by the living to live on." Such questions invariably pose rhetorical challenges that are directly tied to melancholia, for melancholia is brought about by a "failed mourning," a failure that torments the melancholic by stealing speech because the losses that she has endured are not deemed grievable by our culture, and therefore they cannot be spoken aloud.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler (1997) elaborates on the ways in which melancholia works as a lyric lament to protest our culture's narrow prohibitions on who can rightfully grieve, and which losses are worthy of attention. Following Butler, I want to argue that melancholy can be a rich resource for teaching and scholarship, for it holds nascent political texts that students and teachers can draw on to redraw the lines that demarcate their own psychic and social life, and, in turn, renegotiate the personal, social, and political prohibitions on grieving. The pedagogy of Anne Sexton offers us insight into how poetry and writing can be used to renegotiate these prohibitions, particularly the lecture notes she wrote while teaching at Colgate University during the spring term of 1972. These lecture notes provide a more complex way of putting melancholia to productive use in the classroom, offering us insight into the ways in which we might use poetry, performance, writing, and reading for learning about the transitions necessary to life, grieving being one among many of the vital transitions we can work through.

THE MELANCHOLIC PEDAGOGY OF ANNE SEXTON

Throughout Sexton's pedagogic documents are moments in which she directs her students' attention to social issues pertaining to the suffering, violated entity Elaine Scarry has termed "the body in pain."¹⁴ The bodies in Sexton's poetry are most often women's bodies—one freshly scarred from a hysterectomy, a dying woman who is incontinent, a young girl giving up her baby, a daughter refusing to grieve—who speak to the reader through dramatic speech. When writing poetry with her students, Sexton asked them to use the force of dramatic consciousness to engage in composition processes that demanded what Sexton described as a "total immersion of you into the subject." In her poems, as she tells her students, we have the poet as actor:

Wearing different faces; the young girl running from her lover . . . the unknown girl giving her baby up so intensely, so close to the bone . . . we have the seamstress bitter and gnarled over her sewing machine, spitting bile onto the zippers and we have the young lovers, the young girls specifically with her adulterous moment trying to marry for a moment at least some happiness.¹⁵

The acts of total immersion that Sexton engaged her students in often began with the invitation to "write a short poem, a character sketch using a persona . . . become that person, put on that mask." The methods of dramatic introspection and incorporation that Sexton used to write poetry and to teach writing are strikingly akin to those used by actors as they work to build their characters. Nowhere are these methodologies more evident than in the notes she wrote for a course she taught as the Crawshaw Chair in Literature at Colgate University. The Crawshaw Chair required a long, weekly commute from Sexton's home in Weston, Massachusetts, to Hamilton, New York. Sexton was required to teach two days of classes back-to-back, a poetry writing workshop for about ten students in the

evening as well as a lecture course on poetry in the afternoon. During the time Sexton commuted from Weston to Colgate, she often complained of feeling anxious to the point of nausea. Much of Sexton's teaching was accompanied by stage fright and uncertainty, and there were many bad days and fears of failure. Leverich describes Sexton as a shy, sensitive person who, on certain days, would sit at her desk in class, chain-smoking cigarettes, croaking out words between drinks of water. She seemed to him a desperately lonely creature. At the same time, there was a force, a charm, that was ever powerful about her. She was both bold and timid, dominant and passive, even impatient, yet understanding.

In a conversation I had with the chair of the Department of English at Colgate, Bruce Berlind recalled the difficult weekly routine of picking Sexton up at the airport in Syracuse, driving back to campus (frequently singing songs from the 1940s), and, the next day, driving back to the airport where she boarded a small plane for Boston. They co-taught the poetry workshop, and Sexton taught the lecture course alone. The lecture course, entitled "Anne on Anne," co-designed with Bruce Berlind, was composed of a series of eleven lectures for a small group of English majors. Berlind describes this course as a "course in herself":

Its structure was simply linear, beginning with *Bedlam* and coming up-to-date. The lecture component of the classes was minimal. Mostly the classes were discussion sessions based on the students' readings of her books, copies of Anne's drafts of many poems, and copies of various interviews and reviews of her work. The "first-person presence" was, of course, at the center—although Anne often claimed that the *I* in poems dealing with her affairs was a fiction.¹⁶

According to Berlind, the aim of this course was to engage students imaginatively with the writing life of Anne Sexton by studying and then performing the interpretive methods she used to write poetry. Gathered together in Lawrence Hall, room 320, students would sometimes inhabit the poetic form of a Sexton poem and then extend it, at times changing the content, but miming the metrics. Sexton openly invited her students to study along with her what she referred to as the tricks, flaws, and false starts that a poem undergoes before it reaches its final, published form. Throughout her lecture notes are meditations on poetry, mini-lectures, and classroom assignments that suggest that Sexton was not satisfied with having her students talk about poetry. Rather, she demanded that they inhabit poetic forms and take on personae. In Lecture I of the Crawshaw series Sexton read the following statement by one of her critics: "Anne Sexton's poems, for example, create largely the world of her persona, the *I* of the poems, which undergoes a continuing development and is clearly related intimately and painfully to the poet's autobiography." She, in turn, responded to this statement by stating that

I would like for a moment to disagree. It is true that I am an autobiographical poet most of the time, or at least so I lead my readers to believe. However,

many times I use the personal when I am applying a mask to my face, somewhat like a young man applying the face of an aging clown. Picture me at my dressing table for a moment putting on the years. All those nights, all those cups of coffee . . . all those shots of bourbon at 2 A.M. . . . all this applied like a rubber mask that the robber wears.¹⁷

Like Sexton's composing processes, theories of melancholy evoke acts of incorporation, skin, and the personal and cultural objects we endow with meaning. In ways akin to a method actor, the melancholic incorporates the dearly beloved; she takes them in as idealized, demonized, in some cases, exoticized, others. In his 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1989) argues that when a person has lost someone he or she loved, the ego incorporates aspects of the lost other into its very structures, thereby "sustaining" the life of the bereaved through acts of imitation. "By taking flight in the ego," writes Freud, "love escapes annihilation" (630). Yet this escape from annihilation comes at great cost, for the incorporative strategies used by the melancholic function to disavow the loss and deepen the grief.

These incorporative strategies are an effective means through which to remake the ego into the person who has been lost. It is in this sense that the melancholic bears a resemblance to a method actor, for her body becomes a double body, skilled at reproducing the gestures and being of some other person, a lost love, a charismatic leader, the ethos of a nation.¹⁸ The language that Constantin Stanislavski used with his actors during rehearsals is replete with the language of incorporation and is useful for understanding the strategies employed by the melancholic. In *Building a Character*, Stanislavski (1945) documents a young actor's discussion of the process he used to create the character of a man who possessed distinctly different characteristics from himself. He writes:

. . . as soon as I was in this other man's skin, my attitude towards you [Stanislavski] underwent a radical change. . . I enjoyed looking you full in the face in a brazen way and at the same time felt I had the right to do it without fear. Yet do you believe I could have done this in my own person? Never under any circumstances! In that other person's skin I went as far as I liked, and if I dared do that face to face with you I should have no compunction in treating the audience across the footlights in the same way. (27–28)

The capacity to cross the boundaries of skin into the character of another, and to do so with intention, caution, consistency, and to keep within the boundaries of the character, the play, or the "given circumstances," is work the actor, unlike the melancholic, is adept at. The melancholic does not exert agency over her desire to transpose the ego of the bereaved into her own. And while both the actor and the melancholic may be skilled at transposition and incorporation, the actor retains these incorporative strategies as techniques, while for the melancholic these strategies serve to chisel away at the ego, resulting in a profound sense of ego loss.

Jacques Hassoun (1997) characterizes the melancholic as the eternally ravished one, the passive victim, who is depleted of drives and thus incapable of investing anything in the social world, sinking deeper and deeper into a desperate, endless recitation of complaints that are directed at unnameable, ungrievable losses. I find Hassoun's portrait of the melancholic only partly useful. In his analysis, he casts melancholia as a passive state wherein a person is utterly stripped of agency and will. While this may in fact accurately capture how some people experience loss after the death of a loved one, it does not fully capture the attitude of revolt and feelings of anger that can also accompany the melancholic. Returning to Freud, I found a somewhat different portrait, for the plaints and endless lyric laments of the melancholic proceed, according to Freud, from an attitude of revolt, a mental constellation by which the experience of loss has been transformed into melancholic contrition (1989, 169–170). I want to proceed from the position of revolt and lyric lament that characterizes much of Sexton's poetry to the place of her pedagogical performances. As I do so, I want us to keep in mind that while the melancholic is overpowered, she refuses to be tamed.¹⁹

Apparent Confessions

Sexton appeared to engage in self-conscious confessions in the seminar room, displaying her own raw and visible wounds. Confessions work to enlist the sororial and fraternal sympathies of the listener so as to exonerate the sinner and, in turn, efface the differences between them. The confessional narrative casts Sexton as the victim, and, through the medium of narrative, she passes her guilt on to her students and readers. After all, we may very well summon up some sympathy for Sexton, secretly finding that we are more like her than we dared imagine, and, out of our own unexamined anxieties, we might very well exonerate her.

Sexton openly admits to “doing reference work in sin,” and to using her place at the podium to seek “an appeal before a trial of angels.” In one of her lectures at Colgate, she brings her students back to the scenes that inspired her poem “Flee on Your Donkey.” She begins this lecture by telling her students that they will learn things that “no one else in the world knows” from looking at her worksheets. Back at the scenes that inspired this poem—a poem that would take Sexton from June 1962 to June 1966 to complete—students learn of Sexton's desire to flee not only from life but from madness. She confesses that this is “a poem that everyone told me not to publish. It was too self-indulgent; it was material I had already gone over. And yet, I hadn't told the full story of my madness. I hadn't talked about fleeing it as well as fleeing life.” Her lyric laments persistently invoke the bodies of women who are confined, maimed, dying, contemplating suicide, melancholic, medicated, or penetrated without consent.

Yet, while Sexton appeared at every turn to confess her life repeatedly and unabashedly to her students, positioning herself as an apparent victim, her lyric laments and apparent confessions come from a mental constellation of revolt that is characteristic of melancholia. The term *melancholia* evokes more than depression or body chemistry gone awry. I do not wish to deny the biological dimension of melancholia. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that melancholia contains the possibilities of articulating more fully the boundaries between psychic and social life, and, like every human emotion, it offers us the opportunity to gain insight into self and the Other. "Sadness," writes Michael Vincent Miller, "informs us that the loss was important; anger alerts us that the person in our path is an obstacle. Depression can be the most chastening state imaginable: it throws us back on our deepest sorrows and feelings of helplessness. What it may tell us about our limitations, our fears of abandonment, failure, death, ought not to be narrowed too quickly to a matter of neurotransmitters flowing between synapses" (qtd. in Hassoun, 1997, viii–ix).

The melancholic revolt expressed by Sexton is manifested both in the trope of the mask that appears throughout the Crawshaw lectures and in her parodic sensibilities. Sexton insisted on the fictive character of the *I* in her poems and explained to her students that, in the case of her poetry, "I am often being personal but I am not being personal about myself." Sexton's parodic sensibility functions to undermine the normative order of "performing confession" in the academy. Parody need not be comic. Derived from the Greek *parodia*, parody is a countersong, a neighboring song (Crapanzo, 1990, 144). Like melancholia, parody is structured in ambivalence, for it too has the paradoxical capacity both to incorporate and challenge that which it criticizes. There is a paradox inherent in the incorporative tactics of Sexton's composing processes: She simultaneously incorporates loss or lack in her body and disincorporates the authority of the master by wearing her wounds, or, to paraphrase Franz Fanon (1952), on the surface of her skin like an open sore—an eyesore to the colonizer.

The losses and ambivalence that Sexton carried into her teaching life manifest themselves, I believe, in a specifically performative approach to teaching writing. Put more directly, the performativity marking Sexton's teaching documents is drenched in melancholia, and these performances allegorize losses that are deemed ungrievable in academic institutions where grief is preempted by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing loss. I do not intend to suggest that all performative pedagogies are manifestations of trauma, but I do want to argue that there is social value in framing performative pedagogy as a structure of address that is directed toward loss. This value is articulated by Judith Butler: "Insofar as the grief remains unspeakable," writes Butler,

The rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that rage is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial for survival, for reassembling community, for

rearticulating kinship, for reweaving sustaining relations. . . . What cannot be avowed as a constitutive identification for any given subject position runs the risk not only of becoming externalized in a degraded form, but repeatedly repudiated and subject to a policy of disavowal. (1997, 148–149)

By giving dramatic language to loss, Sexton demonstrates how pedagogy can be used to avow a broader range of subject positions in the classroom. Her use of performance accommodates the double-ghosted bodies that are housed in the melancholic. Performative modes of address have the capacity to bring about dialogue with the phantoms we hold, precisely because in performance the body is metonymic, of self, of characters, of voice, and of personae. As I said earlier, what marks the melancholic student is a loss of address, an unspeakability that is not a symptom of thoughtlessness or, what is often described in schools as “retrieval problems,” but rather a symptom of what cannot be spoken in school. In my case, I failed to locate a narrative structure through which I could speak of and grieve my father’s self-abuse and my sense of abandonment. Consequently, I used teaching as a means through which to compose a narrative that could contain my loss. This move, however, only served to harbor the not fully confronted phantoms or secrets from my earlier family history. The figure of Anne Sexton is but one example of an historical figure who I turned to in order to establish an addressable other through whom I could work through the losses that were encrypted in my pedagogy. In this sense, we might think of Anne Sexton as a mask through which I approached the secrets of my past, secrets that prevented me from using language in conventional or normative ways. Thus, the mask constitutes another kind of expressive contract; it organizes another operation of language.

The melancholic seeks an object that is continually out of reach, therefore posing a series of difficult challenges to writing and teaching: How do we teach a history that remains unnameable? How can we teach writing when the persons and objects one longs to make present are encrypted in a half-spoken history? Students who get lost in their own circuitous speech can often establish an object of address through the expressive registers of the mask and the persona. Because performance is contingent on physically establishing an addressable other—an audience—and crafting a character and a point of view (subjectivity), it offers a viable means through which to begin introducing the Other into pedagogy. In this sense, performative modes of address can ritualize melancholia by creating an occasion for writing that is open to the experience of inarticulateness and ambivalence that accompanies unnameable loss. Another important aspect of this approach to life writing includes the coordination of half-spoken personal loss with the larger historical field. This move to “conjugate” the personal with the social, theory, and history with literature opens texts up to meanings that have otherwise been foreclosed.

If I began this chapter in the archives in Austin, I want to end with a phone call to Aspen that was prompted by the love letter I found in the archives. On

February 18, 1998, I interviewed Chris Leverich. As far as he knows, Sexton never responded to his letter, although he did receive a B+ in the course. Leverich felt some satisfaction when I told him that Bruce Berlind vaguely recalls a remark made by Sexton suggesting that Leverich probably deserved an A because he was the only “really honest student in the class.” During our conversation, Leverich remembered Sexton as fragile and sickly, suspicious, her eyes glazed over with tranquilizers. “I felt that she was working hard to get through the class. She was so terrified to be there, and you could see the terror in her body.” When I asked Leverich what price he exacted as a student in her class, he told me that “Anne Sexton’s teaching triggered for me a deep channel of emotion and areas of thought which were oftentimes frightening, so much so that I would push them aside. Sexton wrote and spoke to us about her deepest emotional and social involvements, and she taught me to address mine.”

The exchanges among Anne Sexton, her students, and the personae in her poetry arguably offer a fresh representation of how the performative, “as if” position can be used to give shape to what students find difficult to articulate. Leverich’s memories suggest that Sexton’s pedagogy of masks presented her students with opportunities to approach, in some instances to wear, the masks of figures we find disquieting, excessive, or terrifying—figures who possess aspects of ourselves we have yet to confront and figures we have lost and loved. While the close reading of one student letter in the life of a teacher is not a sufficient basis from which to draw sweeping conclusions of either a theoretical or methodological nature, the act of interpreting the love letter Leverich substituted for Sexton’s final assignment does provide an opportunity to reflect on specific questions concerning the generative force of half-spoken secrets associated with figures we long for, but who have passed on and left behind unresolved conflicts. In other words, Leverich’s response to Sexton provokes us to think about the pedagogical uses of melancholia.

The love letter that Leverich substituted for Sexton’s final assignment points to the ways in which, as teachers, we rarely know how our lessons are received or what lost loves, desires, or ideals they will summon up for our students. Grades do not present a meaningful picture of our teaching, nor do student evaluations or the solicited letters that sit in our tenure and promotion files. I suspect that Sexton unwittingly acted in ways that sustained Leverich’s fantasies of her—sustaining in his imagination images of her as the ideal teacher, mother, sister, aunt, and, as he notes, father. At the outset of this chapter, I confessed to being worried about Sexton after I read this love letter. I worried that Leverich wanted to swallow his teacher up, to feed off of her, so to speak, having little conception of her as Other. To use his teacher well, the student must have a sense of boundedness, a sense that they are separate from one another and that an exchange is possible between them. As I noted earlier, Sexton never did respond to Leverich’s letter, nor did she confer with him during the semester. According to Leverich, she really never noticed him at all. It’s tempting for me to try to solve the riddle of this letter—to conclude this chapter by summing

up what we can learn about pedagogy and melancholia before moving on. But if Sexton's pedagogical performances can teach us anything, it is the value of keeping our readings of her teaching life in play, not settling on which reading of her lectures is the true or most "knowing" one, which reading is right. The complex questions that melancholia raises for teaching—questions pertaining to loss like a loss of address, lost selves, ideals, and half-spoken secrets harbored by prior generations—point to the very educational value inherent in the *struggle* to articulate what our culture is ambivalent about or what our society and communities deem shameful. The melancholic cannot reproduce or prove the presence of the Object she longs for. One lesson offered to us by Anne Sexton, however, is that the melancholic can work at using the art of composing personae to restage the *effort* to remember her loss, thereby gaining insight into how loss can acquire meaning, and potentially generate recovery, not of the bereaved, but of herself, as the person who remembers.²⁰



As shown in the next chapter, which concerns the assignment that Leverich failed to hand in, the subject position that Sexton takes up is one of an 'unruly teacher,' whose academic taste is questionable. The final assignment, like the exercises she used in class, is performative in structure; it requires that students experiment with varying degrees of dramatic introspection, impersonation, and personae building. The narrative tactics that surface in the materials Sexton used while teaching at Colgate University unsettle the 'given' social expectations about the psychic, emotional, and physical borders that should circumscribe a teacher's body, particularly a female teacher who suffers with addictions and mental illness. Sexton's final assignment can be read as a parody of the expectations educators often harbor for their students—that they reproduce our ideas as well as the style and tastes we endow with meaning.