

BEYOND THE DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP: ANNE SEXTON AND HER PSYCHIATRIST, DR. MARTIN T. ORNE

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I

The publication of Diane Wood Middlebrook's *Anne Sexton: A Biography* in 1991 was a sensation. Sylvia Plath, who attended Robert Lowell's seminar at Boston University with Sexton, and whose life, death, and art, resemble Sexton's in many ways, has been the subject of four different biographers,¹ but Middlebrook's book was the first major biography of Sexton since Caroline King Barnard Hall's *Anne Sexton* (1987). In the foreword to the biography, Sexton's psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne, gave evidence about his therapy sessions with the poet, and with his permission some records from Sexton's therapy tapes were disclosed to the public in the appendix. It was inevitable that Middlebrook's book would arouse a certain amount of controversy.

The publication of the Middlebrook's biography provoked a keen debate over the issue of therapist-patient confidentiality among the American public. Reacting to the news that the book would be published in September, 1991, for instance, *The New York Times* dated July 15, quoting the words of Jeremy A. Lazarus, the chairman of the ethics committee of the American Psychiatric Association, raised the issue that: «A patient's right to confidentiality survives death» (A2, C13). And five days later,

¹ The biographies in chronological order are: Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath* (New York: Simon, 1988), Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton, 1989), Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking, 1991), and Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Heinemann, 1991).

the same newspaper published an article «Betrayed: The Poet and the Public» with a conclusion: «By taking the tapes, Ms. Middlebrook followed her profession. But by offering them, Dr. Orne dishonored his» (A18).

The argument among psychiatrists, needless to say, was quite harsh. On the one hand, some psychiatrists approved of Dr. Orne's professional decision as Paul Chodoff's article suggests. In a special section about the biography in *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, he concluded that «Dr. Orne acted in an understandable, honorable, and ethical manner» (643). Others, on the other hand, fiercely rejected the idea of generous consent. Again in the same issue of the same journal, Josef H. Weissberg claimed that «professional confidentiality ... rested with Sexton's psychiatrist» (638); Judith Viorst argued «patients should be able to count on the fact that –alive or dead– their secrets are safe» (652); furthermore, Edmund D. Pellegrino criticized Dr. Orne's act as one «of moral theft» (191).

Whether or not what Sexton's psychiatrist had done was «moral theft» is not a question to be considered here. The point to note instead is the fact that Dr. Orne was an indispensable person for the reconstruction of the poet, Sexton, and my aim in what follows is to examine the role of the doctor in Sexton's life. To discuss how Dr. Orne related to the poet before and after her death would give us a new understanding of his existence in the poet's life and help us comprehend Sexton and her poetry more deeply.

II

It was in 1956 that Sexton first met Dr. Martin Orne, a psychiatrist and psychologist, whose lifelong work was in hypnosis.² He received his M.D. from Tufts in 1955, with a Residency in Psychiatry at Massachusetts Mental Health Center, and a Ph.D. in Psychology from Harvard in 1958; as this chronology shows, he was just making a start on his career as a practitioner around the time his sessions with Sexton began. Young and inexperienced as he was, the future expert in hypnosis successfully coped with her severe memory problem and trance (dissociative states), which had obstructed the treatment of the poet's mental illness. He suggested that she listen to the audiotape recorded during the therapy so that she could fill in the discrepancies between what she remembered and the actual things which had happened in the session. The result of his counsel was astonishing: Sexton, by listening to the tapes over and over, learned how to control her anger and pain, and then to surmount these negative emotions.

Dr. Orne adopted not only the use of audiotapes but also poetry therapy. It was rather recently that poetry therapy (more commonly known as bibliotherapy) was

² Dr. Martin Orne's biographical facts are from his obituary in *Almanac* of University of Pennsylvania («Dr. Martin T. Orne: Psychotherapy Pioneer.» *Almanac*. 22 Feb. 2000. U of Pennsylvania. 13 Apr. 2003 <<http://www.upenn.edu/almanac/v46/n22/022200.html>>.)

introduced and developed as a treatment for mental illness in the U.S.A. Eli Greifer, a poet, pharmacist, and lawyer, conducted the first poetry therapy in New York in the 1950s; the pioneering collection of essays in the field, *Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders*, was published by Dr. Jack J. Leedy in 1969; and it was only in 1980 that the National Association for Poetry Therapy was founded by such great experts in the field as Jack Leedy and Arthur Lerner. We can easily assume that there were no professional standards for the treatment when Dr. Orne started on poetry therapy with Sexton in the 1960s.

Even though there was no standard approach to poetry therapy, however, Dr. Orne effectively utilized the best elements of the new treatment. It is uncertain if Westwood Lodge, where Sexton met her psychiatrist, was enthusiastic about introducing art therapy, including poetry therapy, to their patients. It would seem, however, that they invited a music instructor for group sessions, in which Sexton participated at least once, as we see in her poem, «*Ringing the Bells*» (28-9):

And this is the way they ring
the bells in Bedlam
and this is the bell-lady
who comes each Tuesday morning
to give us a music lesson
.
.
.
and this is always my bell responding
to my hand that responds to the lady
who points at me, E flat;
and although we are no better for it,
they tell you to go. And you do.

Although the patients «are no better for it [i.e. ringing the bells],» the narrator says, the music instructor urges them «to go,» that is, to play each of their bells, and they follow her instruction. For the important thing is that the patients share music with the instructor in the group session; and that the time and space filled with music (or art) can aid the patients to realize they are a part of the world. Dr. Orne employed poetry writing in Sexton's therapy in a manner similar to that of the music instructor in the poem; in consequence, he let her define who she was and feel that she was a part of, and integrated with, everything existing in the world. According to the biography, Dr. Orne «did not discuss Sexton's poems with her as sources of insight into psychological problems» (Middlebrook 43), which was, in fact, the appropriate approach for the patient who was trying to regain her self-esteem.³

³ One of the recent practitioners of poetry therapy states that «criticizing usually isn't helpful unless it adds something to the piece» (Alschuler 114); it can be said that Dr. Orne grasped the axis of the way of conducting poetry therapy.

The poem «Elizabeth Gone» provides us with a good example of the success of Dr. Orne's way of treatment:

You lay in the nest of your real death,
 Beyond the print of my nervous fingers

 And somewhere you cried, *let me go let me go.* (8)

The woman, Elizabeth, to whom Sexton talks here, is the persona which manifested itself while she was in trance. From nowhere, the place where the poet could not reach («Beyond the print of my nervous fingers»), Elizabeth appeared and asked the poet to «let [her] go» out of «the nest» she was confined in, namely, inside her. Yet Dr. Orne did not allow the fantasy of Elizabeth to develop within Sexton. By insisting that «“Elizabeth” expresses a side of [her] childhood which showed some assets [she] never really owned» (Middlebrook 61), he persuaded her to avoid the feelings she wanted to act out as Elizabeth.

The change in Sexton's involvement with the Elizabeth persona is easily found in the other parts of the poem. Whereas she says in the first stanza that Elizabeth cried, «*let me go let me go,*» she replaces the subject by «something» in the next stanzas: «Something cried, *let me go let me go*» (8). To put it simply, the persona, which used to be another self of the poet, is degraded to a material being that can become the object of a diagnosis. Possibly, Sexton was composed enough to face and observe Elizabeth. The poem concludes: «Then I sorted your clothes / And the loves you had left, Elizabeth, / Elizabeth, until you were gone» (9). Every sentence is written down in the past tense; when completing this poem, therefore, Sexton succeeded in separating herself from the Elizabeth persona. The false self «[was] gone» outside of her through the effort of Dr. Orne and herself; and at the same moment, she repossessed her own self.

Sexton believed that the only thing she could do well was «to be a good prostitute» (Middlebrook xiii) when she met Dr. Orne for the first time. However, as the poem above implies, Sexton gradually broke through a lack of self-respect with the help of creative activities. And Dr. Orne's continuous encouragement resulted in the discovery of her inner resources as a poet; in this sense, Dr. Orne became one of the most indispensable figures in Sexton's life and art.

III

Let us now move on to the examination of the work in which Sexton reveals her admiration for Dr. Orne. One of her well-cited poems, «You, Doctor Martin» (3-4), reads as follows:

You, Doctor Martin, walk
from breakfast to madness. Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
where the moving dead still talk
of pushing their bones against the thrust
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
or the laughing bee on a stalk
of death. We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the door and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner...
What large children we are
here. All over I grow most tall
in the best ward. Your business is people,
you call at the madhouse, an oracular
eye in our nest...

The tone of the poem is cynical about the mental institution and about Dr. Orne's profession. In Sexton's eyes, the patients including herself look like «moving dead» without a soul, and her doctor deals with them only to complete his «business.» There is no human relationship between the psychiatrist and his patients. And Sexton calls her psychiatrist «Doctor Martin» instead of «Doctor Orne,» which implies her wry attitude towards the doctor. While he is a respectable person who takes care of many patients' minds, he is also a social being who can be called by his first name. It is obvious that Sexton had bitter feelings towards the hospital system and towards her psychiatrist. M. L. Rosenthal, an advocate of the idea of «confessional poetry,» states that «confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering» (60). Sexton's above-mentioned poem is an accurate description of her «suffering» as a patient in a mental institution.

Yet even if he was not agreeable as a person to the sick poet, Dr. Orne was a central figure in her life as a writer from the beginning of their meeting as we have already seen. Also, it is well-known that Sexton's mother, Mary Grey Harvey, prevented Sexton from becoming a poet (or even an amateur writer) because of her competitive tendency, and that Sexton consequently stopped writing as a high school girl, being afraid of hurting her mother's feelings. Then, for Sexton, whose literary talent had been denied by her kin, Dr. Orne came into sudden prominence as a kind of savior, who encouraged her to write and purse her latent literary talent. Contrary to her ironic remarks in the poem, Sexton was indebted to Dr. Orne for his encouragement to write poetry, and that is why her first collection of the poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, opens with this poem, a call to her psychiatrist. It is possible that Sexton naturally regarded Dr. Orne as the person who understood her the best.

This can be further clarified when we read the poem «The Doctor of the Heart,» written after Dr. Orne terminated his therapy session with Sexton due to his move to Philadelphia:

Take away your knowledge, Doktor.
It doesn't butter me up.

You say my heart is sick unto.
You ought to have more respect! (301)

The poem is included in the volume *The Book of Folly*, published in 1972, which is eight years after Dr. Orne left Boston; quite possibly, Sexton addresses another doctor, Dr. Constance Chase, here.⁴ The use of a German word, «Doktor,» clearly shows that the doctor is a target of Sexton's humor. Compared to Sexton, a high school dropout and moreover, a mentally ill person, the doctor has a lot of «knowledge.» But she is now a Pulitzer Prize winner and an instructor in poetry at Boston University; moreover, she is a human being just as the doctor. Hence the poem criticizes the doctor, demanding that she should get «more respect.»

At the end of the poem, the poet declares her definite infidelity to the doctor in a metaphorical expression:

I am at the ship's prow.
I am no longer the suicide
with her raft and paddle.
Herr Doktor! I'll no longer die
to spite you, you wallowing
seasick grounded man. (302)

For her, a patient of manic depression, death was a source of titillation and fascination. She boldly confesses her suicidal wish in one of her essays about her friendship with Sylvia Plath: «We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!» (*No Evil Star* 7). Also, her poem «Wanting to Die» says: «[S]uicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*. / They never ask *why build*» (142). It is hard to evade death for the poet, because she is destined to comprehend its «special language.»

⁴ The relationship between the doctors after Dr. Orne and Sexton did not work very well: Dr. Ollie Zweizung had an affair with her, which made it impossible to continue the therapy; the next doctor, Constance Chase, accepted the position as the poet's therapist on condition that the poet would never see Dr. Orne, who had been coming back to Massachusetts now and then to see his old patients. It is plausible, from the date, that the doctor in the poem indicates Dr. Chase.

In this manner, Sexton is not scared of standing «at the ship's prow» while the doctor, a non-applicant of death, is «wallowing» owing to seasickness caused by heaving seas and chooses to be «grounded» in the end. Hall is right when she maintains that the poem «offers a defiant verbal gesture which says to the 'doctor' and everyone, go away» (119). Sexton is «no longer the suicide» who stands «at the ship's prow,» holding fast to «her raft and paddle» for survival. She is ready to die at the time when she chooses to commit suicide; «her raft and paddle,» namely, the help from the psychiatrist, are not necessary any more. This poem totally negates the significance of the doctor: doctors other than Dr. Orne would not do.

In another poem, «Flee on your Donkey,» Sexton delineates her admiration for Dr. Orne: he «promised me another world / to tell me who / I was» (100). She admitted the psychiatrist to be a person who foresaw her way of establishing her identity and urged her to achieve great success in the world of letters («another world»). Here, we see their connection beyond the doctor-patient relationship. John Holmes, William D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, George Starbuck, Maxine Kumin, Sylvia Plath –these people associated with and gave some insights to Sexton as fellow poets or mentors. But it would be no exaggeration to say that Sexton's life as a poet was generated and matured by Dr. Orne. Without him, she could not have regained her interest in poetry, continued writing, nor could she have written many of her best poems in which Dr. Orne is depicted. And above all, such a creative life helped her to hang on to the self-identity she regained with his help.

IV

Sadly, Sexton took her own life ten years after Dr. Orne left her. Obviously, his absence affected her tremendously, as Dr. Orne himself acknowledged. We read his conclusion to the foreword to Middlebrook's biography as follows: «Sadly, if in therapy Anne had been encouraged to hold on to the vital supports that had helped her build the innovative career that meant so much to her and others, it is my view that Anne Sexton would be alive today» (xviii). He might have been one of the causes of Sexton's suicide, however, it is also true that he was instrumental to her survival even after her death: he disclosed her session tapes to the public in Middlebrook's biography, which resuscitated the poet, Anne Sexton.

In fact, Sexton was quite lucky in that Middlebrook's biography appeared in print without any censorship before publication. The biographers' attempts are frequently obstructed by the objects' families and friends, who hope to protect themselves.

One of the notorious examples is the case of Sylvia Plath. Her husband –and also a famous poet– Ted Hughes, discarded Plath's unpublished writings in a dubious

manner, as his defensive words in the «Foreword» to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* indicates:

The journals exist in an assortment of notebooks and bunches of loose sheets. . . . The last of these [i.e. two more notebooks] contained entries of several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it. . . The other disappeared. (xiii)

His wife's suicide partly related to his flirtation; it is understandable that Hughes did not want to leave all of her journals. Still, this is a great loss. In *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, published in 2000, the editor claims: «Sylvia Plath speaks for herself in this unabridged edition of her journals» (ix). But even if the new edition includes two journals that Hughes finally unsealed just before his death in 1998, the parts he «destroyed» are lost forever.

Ted Hughes' sister, Olwyn Hughes, has also tried to keep Plath's biographers at a distance. Anne Stevenson, a biographer of Plath, for example, told Janet Malcolm:

The image I have of myself and Olwyn is of me sitting happily at my desk writing, with Olwyn looking over my shoulder. Every time she doesn't like what I write she shoves me off the chair and takes up the pen herself. (Malcolm 81-2)

And as a matter of fact, Olwyn Hughes' fierce intervention in Stevenson's completion of the biography made it «an imperfect, compromised thing» (Malcolm 105) in the end. Thus, the people around Plath have struggled over her personal documents for their own sake, as a result of which we can never get the whole figure of the poet.

Compared to Plath's biographers, those of Anne Sexton have a clear advantage when it comes to obtaining materials. Her daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, who was appointed to be her mother's literary executor on her twenty-first birthday, is extremely cooperative with biographers. Being a writer herself, it might be a little easier for her to be generous about unveiling the hidden parts of her mother's life. In her memoir, she frankly talks about (auto)biography: «To write about Mother and me would enable me to take control of the demons inside and let them know who was boss» (*Searching for Mercy Street* 296). Unlike Ted Hughes, Linda Sexton had no responsibility for the poet's death. All she needed to do was to outlive her painful past concerning her mother. Accordingly, even when someone other than herself wrote about her mother, she felt that she could «exorcise Mother» (*Searching for Mercy Street* 296) by reading a hurtful story and overcoming grief.

One of Linda Sexton's articles in *The New York Times* uncovers Linda Sexton's courageous attitude towards living as Anne's daughter:

«You have already written a great deal that is painful,» I wrote Diane Middlebrook in July 1990. . . «We (i.e. family members) were all hurt by having lived through her life beside her, beyond her, in her shadow. The only way to transcend the hurt is to tell it all, and to tell it honestly.»

Only writing and reading everything concerning her mother enabled her to overcome the painful memory. That is to say, any truth revealed in biographies could be acceptable for her own sake as well as for her mother's. As a result, she agreed with no objections to Dr. Orne and Middlebrook's suggestion that they disclose her mother's session tapes.

In this way, under the literary executor's protection –and because of Dr. Orne's enthusiasm for uncovering the true Sexton– the poet's audiotapes for therapy were released, which brought her back to life. As noted at the beginning of this paper, Dr. Orne was condemned for turning over the tape recordings. However, his statement in his letter to *The New York Times* should be given serious consideration:

Anne Sexton chose disclosure of her therapy in keeping with what she stood for as a confessional poet. . . Sharing her most intimate thoughts and feelings for the benefit of others was not only her expressed and enacted desire, but the purpose for which she lived.

All he did was to respect what Sexton had hoped to do most as a poet and to fulfill her intention. The question of professional ethics on the part of a psychiatrist is indeed a controversial issue. Yet Dr. Orne was not inconsiderate of the privacy of Sexton and her family by any means; on the contrary, he was sensitive enough to understand their feelings. It is reasonable to conclude that Dr. Orne, who developed the poet Sexton in her lifetime, continued to support her after her death as well.

V

Middlebrook gave her opinions on the completion of the biography:

I could not talk to her (i.e. Sexton), but on the tapes she spoke for more than 300 hours –as if to me, or so it often felt– about the transition she was making in 1961-64 from housewife and mother into prize-winning poet. («The Poet's Art» A26).

Of course, Linda Sexton's cooperation with the biographer cannot be overlooked. If it had not been for Dr. Orne, however, Middlebrook's conversation with Sexton could not have been actualized at all. Not a literary critic but a doctor threw light on the critical circle of Sexton.

Now that Dr. Orne is dead we are not able to expect any assistance from him in deciphering Sexton and her poetry. But his achievement as her doctor is still valid and accessible through Middlebrook's biography and Sexton's poetry. It should be our present task not to misconstrue him. And Sexton, whose life has been sustained by Dr. Orne, lives on with him and will in her poems so far as we read her poetry. We have to perform our part so that the unfathomable bonds between the poet and the doctor can last forever.

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