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## Anne Sexton's Environmental Animality

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What does it mean to study the intersection of environment, animals and literature, at this juncture in human history? How might it manifest at the level of an individual poet's work, with what consequences? This paper approaches these questions through the poetry of Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet, Anne Sexton. Sexton's poetry has been exhaustively studied for its psychological dimensions and forcefulness, for her treatment of madness, suicide, and family relationships in particular. Despite a high density of animal imagery, this animal element is conventionally skimmed over. This article argues that animal presences constitute a minor but unavoidable strand amongst the ways in which she constructed her world, that concern for the animals themselves and for anthropogenic environmental damage is not absent. She was not, as she said, a polemicist, but she could not have written as she did without being cognisant of animal-rights and environmentalist language around her; she figured herself repeatedly as consumed like commercial animal products, and also saw a mode of organic animality, in quasi-folkloric, even animist terms, as central to her pervasive religious searching.

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The poetry of Anne Sexton (1928-74) is best known for its confessional self-absorption, its surreal imageries and ramshackle energy, its compulsive return to entanglements of family relationships, the hospitalised female body, the psychotherapy session, and of course her ultimately unconquerable drive to suicide. However, as her defenders have pointed out, there is more to her extensive work than tortured inwardness. Frequently, for instance, her poems ventriloquise the imagined voices of others, with an insight so persuasive that the inventiveness has been regularly mistaken for autobiography. While always remaining at some level reflective of her personal concerns, many poems carry a more general thematic importance: not merely to her own suicide or womanhood, say, but suicide and womanhood as experiences held widely in common in her contemporary American society. One might add concerns with motherhood, daughterhood, domesticity, origins and death, the religious quest, the body, medication and madness, American city life and foreign policy. Accordingly, Sexton criticism has clustered around the themes of 'the nature of the mid-twentieth century female experience, the lineaments of madness, and the character of confession' (Hall ix).

I contend here that interlinked dimensions of environmental awareness and of animal vulnerabilities constitute another intensely personal-but-public strand in Sexton's poetic expression. To date, the animal presences appear to have eluded intensive scrutiny, despite their frequency. In the 600-odd pages of Sexton's *Complete Poems*, a similar number of animal references are made, ranging from elephants to fleas (even excluding multiple appearances within a single poem and less explicit implications – images of flying implying birds, for example). At least twenty times, the most general class of *animals* or *beasts* is evoked. Mammals appear most frequently. Domestic animals with which Sexton lived are most regularly evoked, pre-eminently the dog (at least 60 appearances), including puppies; also cats and kittens. Somewhat less common are cows and bulls, horse, sheep, and goat. Wild animals include the bat, bear, buffalo, chipmunk, coyote, deer, elephant, fox, mole, monkey, moose, raccoon and wolf. Numerically and thematically important is the rat, especially in its celebrated palindromic manifestation in the phrase 'rat's star'. The broad class of birds is well represented (45 references), with additional specific evocations of albatross, eagle, gull, owl, partridge, robin, and more. Sea life is also frequently represented, especially the generalised fish (some 40 mentions), plus numerous individual species including clam, minnow, oyster, shark, starfish, turtle and trout. Last but not least, numerous insects appear, both in general and as individual

species, notably bees, flies and wasps or hornets, but also butterflies, fireflies, gnats, grasshoppers, and moths.

These references are not evenly spread over the eighteen years of her writing life, and they are used in a variety of ways. Arguably, the majority of these might be classed as emblematic, brief illustrative deployments of an animal in more or less allegorical reference to something else altogether, such as, typically, the speaker's psychological state. Below, I briefly explore this emblematic usage, particularly in relation to Sexton's religious quest, before turning to examples which appear to refer more explicitly to real animals, and indeed to evince open compassion for the plight of animals themselves. These can conveniently be divided into the spheres of domestic and wild animals, both being troublingly exploited and consumed. While those animal presences are seldom separable from expressions of the poet's inner world, Sexton frequently locates a certain wise knowingness in the animal, indeed in the animal she perceived herself as being, whether persecuted or authenticating. This 'animal sensibility' leads finally to a set of animal references that can be termed ecological or environmental in scope or context. I will suggest that Sexton's animal references are as inseparable from a more global awareness and imagery of 'Earth-processes' as from the articulation of her most personal psychological impulses. Some move suggestively towards what can be regarded as a proto-ecofeminism.

Often, these various techniques and aspects are not easily separable; in particular, the 'emblematic' uses are not always cleanly distinguishable from evocations of actual animals. Often, a single poem contains examples of all the types outlined, as well as the essential indivisibility of the psychological, the environmental and the animal. To make this fundamental point, one brief introductory example will serve. 'Suicide Note' (*Complete Poems* [hereafter CP] 156-9) is one of her most-cited 'confessional' poems, and stylistically fairly representative of her poetic techniques. It opens and closes with animal images, and employs several more in between:

Better,  
 despite the worms talking to  
 the mare's hoof in the field  
 ...

The fish and the owls are fierce today.

...

Even the wasps cannot find my eyes.

...

Eyes that have been truly awake,  
 eyes that hold the whole story –  
 poor dumb animals.

...

I could admit  
 that I am only a coward  
 cry *me me me*  
 and not mention the little gnats, the moths,  
 forced by circumstance  
 to suck on the electric bulb

...

So I will go now  
 without old age or disease,  
 wildly but accurately,  
 knowing my best route,  
 carried by that toy donkey I rode all these years,  
 never asking, 'Where are we going?'

...

The snakes will certainly not notice.  
 New York City will not mind.  
 At night the bats will beat on the trees,  
 knowing it all,  
 seeing what they sensed all day.

In this emotional maelstrom, the animal images serve to emblemise often antithetical attitudes towards suicide and the world generally. The opening image of personified worms, which she often conventionally associates with death and burial, echoes William Blake's aphorism, 'The

cut worm forgives the plough' (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Death, she imagines, brings a different kind of conversation, a more 'natural' interchange of substance and being, one superior to the indifference of both the snakes and the cityscapes of Boston and New York. Yet the view of 'nature' is conflicted. If the owl and wasps seem 'fierce' and threatening, the tender, ephemeral gnats and moths are symbolic of her own vulnerability, 'suck[ing] on [an] electric bulb' – a particularly disturbing evocation.<sup>1</sup> The donkey image seems to allude to an actual toy from her childhood, echoed and overlaid in other poems by images of the donkey that carried Christ to Jerusalem – a journey of temporary adulation nevertheless preceding the torturous death with which she obsessively identified. The bats seem to embody a preternatural, even prognosticatory knowingness denied to the conscious or rational human mind: Sexton appeals to the 'poor dumb animals' of an inner, instinctual or primordial way of seeing 'the whole story' – at once authentic, beleaguered and pre-verbal. This is another persistent trope to which we shall return. Finally, these animal imageries are interleaved with more 'environmental' milieux: a shifting world of lakes, moonlight, and the 'lost ocean' counterbalances an implicit if undeveloped critique of the urbanised, mechanised and militarised commerce of modern American society. As this prefatory example shows, then, the distinctions delineated for argument's sake in the following sections are in practice impossible to maintain consistently.

## Emblems of the psyche

The bulk of Sexton's animal references strike one as rather opportunistic, in the modernist flash-card, vivacious manner, typically using simile, which is her style's hallmark: 'Words are like ... swarming bees' (CP 12), 'my father ... circling the abyss like a shark' (CP 294), 'I and thou and she/ swim like minnows' (CP 374), to cite just three of several hundred possibilities. Such deployment is less descriptive than emblematic, reminiscent more of Blake than of animal poems characterised by close naturalistic detail, for example Ted Hughes' 'Pike' or Elizabeth Bishop's 'Fish'. Sexton's extensive utilisation of generic animal symbols draws on a long artistic and textual history of allegorical use, dating back at least to the mediaeval bestiary – a history deliberately evoked by the title of Sexton's most obviously animal-centred poems, 'Bestiary USA' – but turned to highly individualistic meaning.<sup>2</sup> In that eighteen-poem set, even as it evokes specifically North American species (bat, hog, porcupine, hornet, star-nosed mole, snail,

lobster, snake, moose, sheep, cockroach, raccoon, seal, earthworm, whale, horse, June bug and gull), most references are subordinated to explorations of the poet's psyche. No 'real' animal can satisfactorily be recuperated from, for example, 'Porcupine' or 'Snake'. Others evoke the physicality of their subjects vividly but sporadically: the hog is a 'rolled-up pair of socks' (CP 498), the horse's nostrils 'open like field glasses' (CP 507), the gull's wings are 'like spatulas' (CP 508). Sexton's descriptions of finding a drowned mole, 'insects floating in your belly, /grubs like little foetuses bobbing' (CP 500), or of a horse's 'droppings/ sweet melons, all brown' (CP 507), do however smack of direct experience.

No poem is devoid of Sexton's characteristic modernist metaphors, at once startlingly inventive, disruptive and elusive: the hog is a 'dog's nightmare' (CP 498), the lobster a 'shoe with legs, /a stone dropped from heaven' (CP 501), the horse a 'brown furry locomotive' (CP 507). At times, a central theme is hard to discern, but none of the poems is free of a 'psychosomatic' element: that is, psychological and corporeal responses and imageries are inseparable. The porcupine's quills are envisaged as nails, knitting needles, 'long steel bullets' pushing into the speaker's very flesh, which she can however subversively extract (CP 498-9). The hornet also seems to symbolise a complex of unspecified threats, 'a nest of knives' (CP 500-1). The lobster, the hog, and the sheep all exemplify her psychic entrapment in the commerce of consumption. Often, a characteristic ambivalence is evident: the horse is both a patriarchal threat and a refuge; the cockroach both the 'foulest of creatures' and a 'common angel' (CP 503). Repeatedly, then, a single animal can symbolise both oppressive systems and a hope for personal, subversive escape or rescue. The first poem in the series, 'Bat', must stand here as exemplary:

His awful skin  
 stretched out by some tradesman  
 is like my skin, here between my fingers,  
 a kind of webbing, a kind of frog.  
 Surely when first born my face was this tiny  
 and before I was born surely I could fly.  
 Not well, mind you, only a veil of skin  
 from my arms to my waist.  
 I flew at night, too. Not to be seen

for if I were I'd be taken down.

...

That's why the dogs of your house sniff me.

They know I'm something to be caught  
somewhere, in the cemetery hanging upside down  
like a misshapen udder.

What begins as a perceived physiological likeness modulates to imagined identity; the speaker becomes the clandestine witch-like night-flyer, subjected to similar suspicion and persecution, seeing the world 'upside-down' and so abjected as 'misshapen'. She repeats here that tension between birth and death characteristic of her life-work: the phylogeny-recapitulates-ontogeny birth-idea completes its inevitable trajectory in the 'cemetery'. Some close and naturalistic observation – recognition of the animals' essential otherness – is thus combined with a sense of commonality, of communality and identification. 'Bestiary USA' deserves an article to itself, but I want to move to briefly explore the role of animal presences in Sexton's persistent search for religious succour and meaning.

## Creatures of the Lord

In a journal entry dated 19 November 1971 and published as 'Dog', Sexton wrote:

'Oh, Lord,' they said last night on TV, 'the sea is so mighty and my dog is so small.' I *heard* dog. You say, they said *boat* not *dog* and that further *dog* would have no meaning. But it does mean. The sea is mother-death and she is a mighty female, the one who wins, the one who sucks us all up. *Dog* stands for me and the new puppy, Daisy. ... Me and my dog, my Dalmatian dog, against the world. 'My dog is so small' means that even the two of us will be stamped under. ... I, with my little puppy, Daisy, remain a child. (Colburn 29)

'Too complicated, eh?' she joked – but the passage exemplifies the aleatory cast of her poetic mind, her capacity indeed to turn actual event into emblem. Her equally arbitrary, but fruitful, palindromic play with *dog/God*, and her occasional but strong self-identification as 'Ms Dog' in a number of poems, plunges us into the probing paradoxes of her religious search – and in particular its relation to material animality. 'I fight my own impulse,' she said; 'There is a hard-core part of me that believes, and there's this little critic in me that believes nothing' (Colburn 104). The dog motif,<sup>3</sup> and her other favourite palindrome, *rats/star*, figure this tension; both have been often noted, but seldom explored in any detail. Nor have I space to do so here; I will focus on a couple of poems that, despite their emblematic quality, demonstrate both an ecological leaning, and a jocular optimism often overlooked, from the 'psalm' series 'O Ye Tongues' (CP 396ff).

This long-lined, almost chant-like series of nine 'Psalms' is a kind of refurbished origins-myth-cum-spiritual autobiography stimulated by eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart's responses to the Bible. It contains in parts a high density of animal imagery. The 'Third Psalm' revisits the story of Noah's 'ark of salvation', reiterating the creative 'Let [there be]' of Genesis, as well as humble dedication to service and blessing. Following a series of 'Let there be seasons' in 'First Psalm', which established a living environment for eagles, finches, seagulls, 'sky dogs', eel and raccoon, now Sexton envisages a kind of communitarian ecosystem that includes her and her imaginary brother-in-faith, Christopher (Smart):

Let Anne and Christopher kneel with a buzzard whose mouth will bite her toe so that she might offer it up.

Let Anne and Christopher appear with two robins whose worms are sweet and pink as lipstick.

Let them present a bee, cupped in their palms, singing the electricity of the Lord out into little yellow Z's.

Praise the Lord with an ox who grows sweet in heaven and ties the hair ribbons of little girls.

Humble themselves with the fly buzzing like the mother of the engine.

Serve with the ape who tore down the Empire State Building and won the maid.

Dedicate the ant who will crawl toward the Lord like the print of this page. (CP 400)

And so on, through sable, rabbit, locust, kingfish, angelfish and sea horse, ending: 'Let Anne and Christopher rejoice with the worm who moves into the light like a doll's penis' (CP 401) – a rather creepy image, to be sure, but associating the worm not with death but emergence and birth. Indeed, the series can be read as Sexton's ecologically positive riposte to the condemnatory list of animals in Leviticus 11. The dedicatory tenor is continued in 'Fifth Psalm', where the primary anaphoric phrase is 'Come forth', and runs from a comical 'pig as bold as an assistant professor', through mole, snail, squid, dog, cockroach, carp, leopard and, to end, 'a tree frog who is more important to the field than Big Ben. He should not be locked in' (CP 404). But here there are now stronger hints of the troubled attachment to nasty materiality that seemed to inhibit complete faith: the squid 'will come bringing his poison to wash over the Lord like melted licorice'; the cockroach is 'large enough to be Franz Kafka' (referring jokingly to Kafka's famous story 'Metamorphosis', and so invoking entrapment in an awkwardly self-conscious body); the carp is 'two-thirds too large to fit anywhere happy'. The same might be said of Sexton herself. Still, finally, the 'Seventh Psalm' returns to a less complicated rejoicing in the 'weird abundance' of the world, including its plants and animals, even its ugliest predators: boa, vulture, spider, beetle, crocodile, sea otter, lobster, oyster, panda, the roach 'who is despised amongst creatures', the anchovy and the whale (CP 406-7). This evidences a generosity, and a sense of pastoral reconciliation, rare in Sexton's oeuvre. Further, such conglomerations embody what Aaron Moe conceptualises as 'zoopoetics': 'As the poems mime, imitate, innovate upon, and play with the bodily *poiesis* of animals, the page becomes a multispecies event' (Moe 28).

Sexton's inner religious conflict is more characteristically encapsulated in the figure of Jesus, with whose (self-) sacrifice (or suicide) she frequently identified herself. Jesus (too complex a symbol to be explored further here) garners his share of animal symbolism. He is the conventional Lamb; even his Cross is envisaged as being 'made of lamb bones' (CP 492). The donkey that carried him to Jerusalem is emblematically central to the poem 'Flee on your Donkey' (CP 97); and the manufactured-for-sacrifice Easter Bunny/egg is parabolically treated in 'The Passion of the Mad Rabbit' (CP 538-9). It seems that Sexton desired less to save the

human soul (she struggled even to define the term), than to exhume a fundamental material animality, 'letting the animal [within] find its soul' (CP 520).

Because I am almost animal  
and yet the animal I lost most –  
that animal is near to God,  
but lost from Him.  
Do you understand? (CP 452)

She did not claim herself to 'understand', in the sense of formulating a philosophically coherent theological position; rather, she remained ever-conscious of the limits of her 'hieroglyphics.../ There is no perfect language' (CP 452), and of her felt insignificance:

*[H]ave you not perceived ever since the world  
began that God sits throned on the vaulted roof of  
earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers?*

Grasshoppers  
and me one of them,  
my eight<sup>4</sup> legs like crutches.  
Bless the animals of this earth,  
the wolf in its hiding spoon,  
the fly in its tiny life,  
the fish in its fragrance I lost,  
the Genghis god of the Serengeti  
that kills its baby  
because it was born to kill,  
born to pound out life like flour,  
the mouse and the rat for the vermin  
and disease they must put up with,  
all, all, bless them,  
bless them,  
lest they die without God. (CP 453-4)

This fervent prayer for succour and salvation in a violently natural world can be read as dense with allusion to personal traumas – marginalisation, crippling medical conditions, that murderous safari, her own abortion, diseases that took family members. However, I suggest that Sexton could not have written this way had she not been receptive to the discourses and sensitivities of animal vulnerability (if not quite ‘animal rights’) already formed in ambient society. Generally, it seemed to be with earthy (and conventionally marginalised) animality rather than with God (at least in ‘His’ conventional theocratic manifestation) that she desired to be united. Or, for her, they were indistinguishable.

### Hunted and consumed

In a substantial number of instances, then, Sexton identified with animals or animality as a mode of being-in-the-world, a mode at once reflecting her own vulnerability and a more authentic wisdom. This is perhaps most neatly captured in her epigraph to the ‘Bestiary USA’ series: ‘I look at the strangeness in them and the naturalness they cannot help, in order to find some virtue in the beast in me’ (CP 497). A statement resonant with ambivalences: she is *looking at* the animals now, rather than referring to them as literary ciphers, finding in them both a strangeness – reflecting her own sense of estrangement from the world – and a commonality. She recognises the ‘virtue’ of an animality within herself, too, though the word ‘beast’ can be read as having self-derogating undertones, even as she attributes to it an enviable natural knowingness.

Sexton tends to begin this animal identification or empathy, then, with a sense of lack, or woundedness. ‘[L]ife is a kitten in a sack,’ she wrote in the early poem ‘Some Foreign Letters’ (CP 9; cf.259). This motif of animal-like vulnerability – of being helplessly destined for premature drowning – is revisited in numerous forms throughout her oeuvre. One incident is related in an interview with Barbara Kevles. Sexton was struggling to complete a volume of poems, and couldn’t give a reason:

There's nothing I could do about this and then suddenly, our dog was pregnant. I was supposed to kill all the puppies when they came; instead, I let them live and I realized that if I let *them* live, then I could let *me* live, too, that after all I wasn't a killer, that the poison just didn't take. (Colburn 97)<sup>5</sup>

Sexton became, as she wrote in relation to oppressive fatherhood, 'a dog refusing poisoned meat' (Colburn 27). She was haunted by the perception that she was materially and ethically under threat from patriarchal killer-mores and their associated economies, and of becoming collusive in them. She wrote, 'I'm no better than a case of dog food', combining that sense of speciesist derogation with commercial anonymity (CP 173; cf.190). Or: '[Y]ou dragged me off by your Nazi hook. / I was the piece of bad meat they made you carry' (CP 207): this paralleling of animal slaughter and the Nazi Holocaust also recurs with some regularity, conflating the mechanistic disposal of edible animals and disposable humans, including herself: 'the body is meat' (CP 57).<sup>6</sup> The images of eating and being eaten, as by 'hucksters/ selling their animals for gold' (CP 431), are amongst the most frequent of Sexton's tropes. In this, she foreshadows feminist critiques of the patriarchal twinned derogation of animals and women, then pervasive in American advertising, for instance (see Adams 2003; Denys 2011; Myers-Spiers 1999). Many more instances show awareness of the industrialised nature of human consumption, within which Sexton, even at the heart of domesticity, feels herself consumed:

[S]he eats betrayal like a slice of meat. (CP 293)

I remember the stink of the liverwurst.  
How I was put on a platter and laid  
between the mayonnaise and the bacon. (CP 324)

The turkey glows. It has been electrified. The legs huddle, they are bears. The breasts sit, drying out, and the gizzard waits like a wart. Everyone eats, hook and sinker, they eat. They eat like a lady and a bear. They eat like a drowning dog. The house sits like the turkey. ... (Colburn, 30)

Repeatedly, such signs of animal death manifest in the quotidian. Sexton's husband Kayo had followed her father into the wool business, another form of domestic-animal exploitation; the job not only took Kayo away from home too often for Sexton to cope, but came at times to represent the wider forces of patriarchal commercialised neglect and suppression of the emotionally fragile woman. In 'O Ye Tongues' she figures her babyhood as 'swaddled in grease wool from my father's company', unable to 'move or ask the time' (CP 401). In the poem 'And One for My Dame', Sexton writes of the sales prowess of both men, born talkers who 'could sell one hundred wet-down bales/ of that white stuff' and 'make it pay'. So she depicts her father hovering over 'the Yorkshire pudding and the beef: a peddler, a hawker', alongside the animal-derived leather of his 'matched luggage' (CP 95) – suitcases of 'light tan, the color of dog shit but as soft as a baby's cheek and smelling of leather and horse' (Colburn 28). These domestic derivatives of animal death are metonymic of the entirety of American culture: 'America is a suede glove manufacturer sitting in his large swivel chair feeling the goods and assessing his assets and debits' (CP 405).

Lambs, lobsters, oysters, cattle, birds, pigs, and other species are depicted as caught in these hallucinatory machineries of exploitation in ways Sexton reads as continuous with her own entrapments: sleepless, she counts 'hogs in a pen ... moving on the shuttle towards death' (CP 498). Again: 'My body became a side of mutton/ and despair roamed the slaughterhouse' (CP 441). Sexton thus observed and poetically transformed into psychic capital, so to speak, the treatment and consumption of domestic animals in daily life. She evinced some empathetic awareness of the plight of wild animals, too.

Fishing, both oceanic and recreational, is a regular metaphor for the self being caught and consumed. Narcissistic though Sexton's deployment of many such images undoubtedly is, at times they hint at genuine compassion for the animals themselves, sometimes quite explicitly. This is the case in one journal entry, published as a kind of prose-poem titled 'Trout':

The trout (brook) are sitting in the green plastic garbage pail full of pond water. They are Dr M's trout, from his stocked pond. They are doomed. If I don't hurry and get this down, we will have broken their necks (backs?) and fried them in the black skillet and eaten them with our silver forks and forgotten all about them. Doomed. There they are nose to nose, wiggling in their cell, awaiting their execution. I like trout, as

you know, but that pail is too close and I keep peering into it. We want them fresh, don't we? So be it. From the pond to the pail to the pan to the belly to the toilet. ... Fishing is not humane or good for business. (Colburn 23-4)

Moreover, her treatment of the stranded fish motif on occasion attains distinctly ecological dimensions. Amongst the purveyors of death are commercial fishermen, who plunder and soil the ordinary oceans, in a manner conflated with her own psychological plight:

There's a sack over my head.  
 I can't see. I'm blind.  
 The sea collapses. The sun is a bone. ...  
 If I were a fisherman I could comprehend.  
 They fish right through the door  
 and pull eyes from the fire.  
 They rock upon the daybreak  
 and amputate the waters.  
 They are beating the sea,  
 they are hurting it,  
 delving down into the inscrutable salt. (CP 389)

Analogously on land, images of hunting animals and being hunted like a wild animal recur regularly, and are typically conflated: 'her heart jumps like a jack rabbit in a trap' (CP 343), as Sexton wrote. Hunting scenes occur perhaps most memorably in the *Transformations* collection, though alongside those fairy-tale (re)settings Sexton could draw on direct experience: hunting was in the family, and it distressed her. The 'family went out to shoot', the 'ducks fell down like fruit' (CP 592), and antlers were reduced to 'hat racks' (CP 502). She also once wrote: 'Kayo is on a hunting trip (bear and deer) this week. He loves to kill. Oh dear, I wish he didn't' (Sexton, *Letters* 91). I focus here on 'Loving the Killer' (CP 184), Sexton's account in poetic form of a hunting safari to Tanzania, on which she accompanied her husband Kayo in 1966 (see Middlebrook 262-3). The safari was merely an extension of the culture of hunting at home, and Linda Gray Sexton noted that her mother increasingly dreaded the trip, having already become virtually vegetarian (a very practical demonstration of animal compassion) (Sexton, *Letters* 297). The African safari also plays out as another phase of

troubled family dynamics: the speaker, who will only carry a camera, is literally nauseated by the macho posturing over animal trophies, and over the paradox of loving the same man who deals out such destruction: 'Love came after the gun,/ after the kill,/ after the martinis and/ the eating of the kill.' Thence they ship home, along with 'bales of grease wool' from Cape Town, 'Bones!// Bones piled up like coal, animal bones/ shaped like golf balls, school pencils,/ fingers and noses' (186). Again she compares this with the Nazi Holocaust, and her self with Emily Goering, wife of the hunting-obsessed Nazi leader. Her own experience is vividly captured, indeed with a realism of detail unusual even for the observant Sexton:

Bones and skins from Hold #1  
 going to New York for curing and  
 mounting. We have not touched these  
 skulls since a Friday in Arusha where  
 skulls lay humbly beside the Land Rover,  
 flies still sucking on eye pits,  
 all in a row, head by head,  
 beside the ivory that cost more  
 than your life. The wildebeest  
 skull, the eland skull, the Grant's  
 skull, the Thomson's skull, the impala  
 skull and the hartebeest skull,  
 on and on to New York along with  
 the skins of zebras and leopards. (CP 187-8)<sup>7</sup>

This numbing list of victims then transmutes, characteristically, into the speaker's own bones, 'fastened together in an intricate/ lock' with her lover-husband's. This, too, is a self-image to which Sexton returns elsewhere, as 'chicken bones ... pure garbage' (CP 318). In sum, being consumed and ejected like animal parts, buried and lost on a polluted planet, are amongst Sexton's most arresting tropes of personal psychological trauma.

## Animals of wisdom

Paradoxically, animal vulnerability provides both stimulus and grounds for finding a sort of wisdom amongst those very animals: they know 'the whole story'.

With all my questions,  
 all the nihilistic words in my head,  
 I went in search of an answer,  
 I went in search of the other world  
 which I reached by digging underground,  
 past the stones as solemn as preachers,  
 past the roots, throbbing like veins  
 and went in search of some animal of wisdom...  
 ...  
 There I found a mouse  
 with trees growing out of his belly.  
 He was all wise.

Like many of Sexton's poems, 'The God-Monger' (CP 457-8) is accessible to different readings: the questions themselves are unstated, the conclusion ambivalent, modulating into fairy-tale. In any case, the answers apparently lie beyond both nihilism and the grim rituals of preachers, in the depths of an earth redolent of both organic fecundity and the grave, safeguarded by the animal.

Repeatedly, Sexton aligns this sort of intuitive knowingness with animality. This is a well-used modernist trope, but one through which Sexton reaches back in various ways to its expression in pre-modern societies. For example, the poem immediately following 'The God-Monger' is titled 'What the Bird with the Human Head Knew' (CP 458) – a kind of therianthrope promising rare succour. And in the poem following that, 'The Fire Thief' (CP 460), Sexton reworks the stories of Eden and Prometheus, in the a-logical, magical manner of many cultures' origins myths – a technique she refined over the years. At the same time she alludes subtly to the natural processes of evolution, ice ages and geology, and the development of the human out of the 'animal'. The story unfolds of God offering fire to a series of

unsuccessful animals, but it ends up (disastrously) with Man. The fire seemingly symbolises both the advent of human consciousness and a Fall into punitive knowledge; in some sense Sexton's response to Christian theodicy, the poem also implies a certain pagan or animist investment of spirituality in the animal.

Similarly, 'The White Snake' is one of Sexton's re-workings of folklore in the volume *Transformations* (1971). The personalised ruminative prelude to the transformed Grimm's tale begins like many world origins myths, from Native American to Bushman: 'There was a day/ when all the animals talked to me', when 'I knew that the voice/ of the spirits had been let in – / ... and that no longer would I sing/ alone' (CP 229). Becoming subjected to human cultural mores, it seems, is a fall from an Edenic animality, an inevitable precipitation into the consciousness of our own dividedness. In 'The Evil Seekers', the speaker asserts 'one must learn about evil, learn what is subhuman ... one must listen hard to the animal within ...' (CP 443-4). At times, a specifically female dimension emerges: a woman, ideally, may be seen in 'animal loveliness' (CP 194); and a beneficent 'eco-animality' governs Sexton's portrayal of Mary in 'Jesus Unborn':

The well that she dipped her pitcher into  
has made her as instinctive as an animal.  
Now she would like to lower herself down  
like a camel and settle into the soil. (CP 343)

But the birth of Jesus brings difficulty, not salvation; and a more powerful if ambivalent wisdom seems to reside with the denizens of the soil itself, the ultimate locus of both origins and death. In that soil, the worms both 'struggle blindly' and 'mov[e] deep into God's abdomen' (CP 373), manifesting both an escape from and a confirmation of the rapacity of the world:

I would like to think that no one would die anymore  
if we all believed in daisies  
but the worms know better, don't they? (CP 374)

In this better knowing, the foregoing implies, recognisably rest both ecological and feminist perspectives on the world. Hence I argue below for Sexton's place as a kind of proto-ecofeminist, though she might well have denied the label.

## Earth, earth

In a significant number of instances, Sexton embeds her deployment of animal fates within a distinctly ecological awareness, even distressed protest. There is nothing conventionally Romantic here, though. Trees, roots, leaves, earth and ocean are as pervasive in their presence as are the animals, but Sexton rarely lingers on, let alone valorises the healing powers of 'Nature' in the manner of, say, her rough contemporaries Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver. Quite the contrary: human and natural worlds are analogously vicious. In an ice storm, for example, animals assume their fundamental nature, as packages of 'sealed in food': 'Owls force mice out into the open. Owls thrive. / The ice will do the birds in...' (CP 210). *En route* to a hunter's cabin the speaker notices

a dead rabbit  
 in the road, rotten  
 with crows pecking at his green entrails.  
*Nature*, you would have said from habit  
 and continued on to cocktails. (CP 207)

And she once wrote: 'I really didn't have too much fun in the woods this time. The trouble with the woods is that you take yourself ... living in the woods is no escape. The trees become mirrors and only your voice answers back. The deer is not my brother, nor the trout as I pull him in, slapping at death' (Sexton, *Letters* 82-3). Her view, insofar as it can be specified at all, is tough, entangled and ambivalent, a wary and ironic pessimism shot through with occasional hopes of succour, enlightenment or peace.

On occasion Sexton explicitly addresses the ecological state of life on Earth, its anthropogenic damage, and its possible future. A somewhat indirect approach is the early (1960) poem, 'Venus and the Ark' (CP 13-15). This poetic fable combines the Biblical story of Noah with a science-fictional expedition to populate Venus. The Cold War framing of the American worldview is immediately evident: 'The missile to launch a missile/ was almost a secret.' Sexton imagines – as many did at that time – a man-made nuclear holocaust in which

... rival nations, angry and oily,  
 fired up their best atom blast  
 and the last Earth war was done.

The simultaneously-launched 'missile' bound for Venus, in contrast, is an ark project, two PhDs its double Noah, loaded with a patchwork cargo of life for the establishment of a new living world:

one hundred  
 carefully counted insects,  
 three almost new snakes, coiled in a cube,  
 exactly fifty fish creatures  
 in tanks, the necessary files  
 ... fourteen white rats,  
 fourteen black rats, a pouch of dirt...

Stranded by the destruction of Earth, after seven months the now 'listless' PhDs release their already breeding charges:

Bees swarmed the air,  
 letting a warm pollen slide  
 from their wings and onto the grass.  
 The fish flapped to a small pool  
 and the rats untangled their hairs...  
 Trees sprang  
 from lichen, the rock became a park ...  
 it grew quick and noisy with  
 a kind of wonder in the lonely air...  
 and the waters grew, green came  
 taller and the happy rats sped  
 through the integrated forest...

The ironic and comic touches save this compressed parable of evolutionary development from naive idealism, as does the fate of the PhDs, the 'last' of men – they have evidently neglected to include a breeding pair of humans. On their dying day they perceive 'two fish creatures stop/ on spangled legs and crawl/ from the belly of the sea.' The cycle, at once fruitful and foreboding, begins again.<sup>8</sup>

Sexton repeats this idea in 'The Wall' (CP 445), in more sober ecological terms:

Nature is full of teeth  
 that come in, one by one,  
 decay,  
 fall out.  
 In nature nothing is stable,  
 all is change, bears, dogs, peas, the willow,  
 all disappear. Only to be reborn.  
 Rocks crumble, make new forms,  
 oceans move the continents,  
 mountains rise up and down like ghosts  
 yet all is natural, all is change.

Humans, including her fragile self, participate in this cyclical rebirth and distressing burial. Dwarfed by movements of tectonic plates, we are no more important than other animal denizens of the natural world: 'We are all earthworms, / digging into our wrinkles .../ beneath the ground'. Yet humans do bear unique responsibility. In 'The Earth Falls Down' (CP 424), the speaker looks for whom to blame for 'conditions', concluding:

[...] I'll blame it on Man  
 For Man is God  
 and man is eating the earth up  
 like a candy bar  
 and not one of them can be left alone with the ocean  
 for it is known he will gulp it all down.  
 The stars (possibly) are safe.  
 At least for the moment.

There are many such stabbing critiques of human damage, from smoking-induced cancers to 'the bad breath of the coal mines' (CP 85), encapsulated in the quotation from André Gide that serves as epigraph to Sexton's 1966 collection, *Live or Die*: 'Despite every resolution of optimism, melancholy occasionally wins out: man has decidedly botched up the planet' (CP 94). One more quotation, from 'As It Was Written', will secure the point:

Earth, earth,  
 riding your merry-go-round  
 toward extinction,  
 right to the roots,  
 thickening the ocean like gravy,  
 festering in your caves,  
 you are becoming a latrine.

Then the ecological scope narrows again to the fate of abjected animals –

The sky is yellow with its jaundice,  
 and its veins spill into the rivers  
 where the fish kneel down  
 to swallow hair and goat's eyes

– and finally to the speaker's individual state of woundedness and 'scars', in her bed each night, listening to the world 'strangling'. Each of the three aspects – global ecological damage, animal vulnerability, and personal psychological state – is nested within the others, inseparable.

### **The awkward ecofeminist**

In many instances, then, Sexton is approaching, *avant la lettre*, a prototypical ecofeminism, especially that variety that attends to 'intersections' of gender, animality, the earth, and globalised economies (Adams and Gruen). Sexton's multiple, if uncoordinated, references to all these aspects<sup>9</sup> invite particularly an ecofeminist analysis of the 'interrelated dominations of nature – psyche and sexuality, human oppression, and nonhuman nature' (Ynestra King; cited in Gaard and Murphy, 3). A kind of eco-phenomenology is at work, in which the poet's individual

bodily and psychic functions are expressed as synecdoches of wider 'Earth processes'. The medical assault on her body resonates with the wider toxicity of civilisation, animal vulnerability with her own fragility in a husband/therapist-dominated world, and her own eating habits with national economies of animal slaughter and consumption. Her inmost fears and intuitions are also those of animals, subjected to multiple intersecting cruelties, exploitations and wisdoms.

My aim emphatically is not to argue that Sexton was an 'environmentalist' in its activist sense, any more than her awareness of womanhood and patriarchal forcefulness made her a 'feminist' (a label she denied).<sup>10</sup> 'Feminism' as a vigorous, self-defining field had not quite taken off in Sexton's lifetime; once, when asked about her position in the 'women's movement', she replied, 'There was no women's movement. We were it' (Colburn 172). 'I am not a polemicist' (110), she added. Unlike her contemporary, poet Adrienne Rich, Sexton did not articulate an activist's philosophical position. Indeed, in 'To Like, To Love' (CP 581-3), she is faintly mocking of the addressee's commitment to public causes, with her 'kittens and puppies, /subscribing to five ecological magazines' (CP 582). It is worth noting, however, that her career precisely spans the period between the appearance of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 and, in the year of Sexton's death, the first use of the term 'ecofeminism' in Françoise d'Eaubonne's 1974 book *La Féminisme ou la Mort*. The language and awareness of evolutionary theory, anthropocentric ecological damage, and animal rights was 'in the air', and Sexton was breathing it all in.

Sexton has been more than thoroughly absorbed, if not commandeered, by sundry feminist theorists, but almost entirely in the realms of therapy, family relationships and the tyranny of the domestic – but her 'environmental animality' appears neglected. In interesting ways, Sexton's apparent split between being repelled by a predatory and indifferent nature, and being materially absorbed into it, enacts within her singular poetic psyche a philosophical split within ecofeminism broadly. Some ecofeminists, roughly following Simone de Beauvoir, have disparaged any woman-nature-animal conflation as another tool of repressive patriarchy; while others, notably Susan Griffin and Starhawk, have valorised exactly that link or networking as a means of outflanking or transcending patriarchal, reason-dominated hierarchies (see Gaard and Murphy 3). Perpetually self-critical and self-ironising, unsettled by doubts and poetically elusive, Sexton cannot be easily accommodated within a programmatic ecofeminism that seeks new stories 'that honour, rather than fear, women's biological particularity' (Diamond and

Orenstein; cited in Gaard and Murphy 2). Nor does she fit easily or consistently into ecofeminism's pragmatic articulations with animal rights movements (see Adams and Gruen, 20-25). From a literary critical point of view, however, those very inconsistencies may be seen to foreshadow the ironies inherent in ecofeminist criticism, as articulated by both Douglas Vakosch and Jeffrey Lockwood. The latter's closing thoughts on ecofeminism as an 'ironic philosophy' might well be applied to Anne Sexton's oeuvre. One should not aspire to incoherence, he suggests, but

an element of inconsistency seems necessary to live and act in a world where ecological variation, perverse incentives, unintended consequences, moral luck, and humbling complexities abound. (Lockwood 134)

Despite her awkward fit, I think it is not too great a stretch to assert that in the 'environmental animality' strand of her work, Sexton can be called a proto-ecofeminist, albeit not self-consciously so. As Lawrence Buell averred, 'ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful ... when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere' (cited in Kostkowska 1). This certainly applies to reading Sexton's work, but she was often demonstrably drawing on a then-emerging rhetoric of ecological, evolutionary, and animal-rights sensitivities in order to elucidate her own position in the world. The main point is this: she could not have expressed herself as she did without that conceptual undertow.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sexton also used this image when relating her discussions on suicide with Sylvia Plath (Colburn 92).

<sup>2</sup> Ted Hughes' *Crow* (1974) is perhaps analogous in its refurbishment of a highly conventional symbolic and folkloric figure, though Sexton never creates such a 'character-sequence'.

<sup>3</sup> The Sextons always had dogs, and bred Dalmatians; numerous lines of her poetry attest to the presence and behaviour of dogs in the domestic space. In one recorded interview on YouTube, in which Sexton is guiding the interviewer around her house, you can hear her trying to hustle the 'damned dogs' out of the room.

<sup>4</sup> This of course is wrong, grasshoppers having six legs: a momentary error, or possibly indicating some limit to Sexton's naturalistic observation.

<sup>5</sup> This incident resurfaces in the poem. 'Live' (CP 69). Linda Gray Sexton claims there was no such plan to drown the pups; but it is irrelevant to my point, which is that the possibility existed, that both acts, of killing and compassionate rescue, were societal attitudes available for her to draw on. That she *was* empathetically *imagining* their drowning might be supported by her more personalised return to the subject in the poem 'Imitations of Drowning' (CP 107-9).

<sup>6</sup> Controversial at times, the Holocaust parallel was not unique to Sexton. The Nazis drew it themselves, and Theodor Adorno wrote: 'Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they're only animals' (quoted in Denys 45). Though this quotation is apparently apocryphal, the idea has been revisited by, amongst others, Jacques Derrida, J M Coetzee in his novel *Elizabeth Costello*, and Charles Patterson in his study, *Eternal Treblinka* (the title taken from a phrase of Isaac Bachevis Singer's: 'In relation to them [animals] all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka.')

<sup>7</sup> Sexton also wrote to Robert Bly, significantly linking Kayo's job with the violence: 'I am very fond, personally, of zebras and giraffes, having just returned from Africa. Much to my horror my husband shot a zebra so unfortunately we will have a zebra skin in our 'family room' ... Luckily giraffes are protected from hunters so I can keep on living with my love for them

without suffering immediate guilt about having watched one die. My husband is an 'ordinary salesman' and his case is much worse (more EXTREME) than Willie Loman's [of Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*] because he is married to me. ... Thus, instead of killing himself he goes out to kill the wild creatures of Africa and test his courage. ... I tell you, Africa was better than an abortion or a cancer operation if one is looking for mutilation and butchers. However it didn't excite me. Later I washed the blood off in the Indian Ocean' (Sexton, *Letters* 301-2).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 'The Fish That Walked' (CP 428).

<sup>9</sup> I am thinking here particularly of the tropes of consumption, the presence of the visceral, of body and body-parts, the effects of everyday animal contact, and the animal presence in the folkloric poems.

<sup>10</sup> We do know, however, that Sexton owned and annotated a copy of Betty Friedan's pioneering *The Feminine Mystique* (Gill 65), a work which strongly echoed Sexton's domestic situations, but incidentally has nothing to say about either ecology or animals. Indeed, as recently as 2007 Lynda Birke could state that 'relatively few feminist authors have addressed connections to animals', even been 'reluctant to widen the political net to include nonhuman animals' (Birke 308). See, however, Adams and Donovan (1995:7); 'Women must not deny their historical linkage with animals but rather remain faithful to them, bonded as we are not just by centuries of similar abuse but also by the knowledge that they –like us, often objectified as Other – are subjects worthy of the care, the respect, even the reverence, that the sacredness of consciousness deserves'. Sexton might well be seen as a forerunner of this stance.

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