

'Need is not quite belief':

the liminal space of Anne Sexton's engagement with language

Francesca Haig

I detest my sins and I try to believe
in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
its solid neck its brown sleep.
True. There is
a beautiful Jesus.
[...]
How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!
But I can't. Need is not quite belief.

Anne Sexton, "With Mercy for the Greedy."¹

For feminists, Anne Sexton's poetry occupies an ambiguous, liminal space between a passionate critique of traditional feminine roles, and a desperate search for validation through paternal authority. This problematic relationship with feminism is shared by Julia Kristeva, whose work has been variously lauded and criticised by feminists. An exploration of Sexton's work through Kristeva's theory of abjection therefore finds itself in a contested and awkward space. This paper explores Sexton's conflicted and ambiguous relationship with language and with the act of writing, to consider whether a reading of Sexton through Kristeva can be useful for feminism. An examination of the way that abjection forces a "rejection and reconstruction of languages"² in Sexton's poetry reveals how her interrogation of the fetishism of language deconstructs the processes of signification, thus challenging notions of a fixed or unitary subject.

After defining abjection, and identifying its prevalence in Sexton's poetry, this article shows how abjection and signification are linked in their construction and maintenance of a unified symbolic subject. It is then proposed that fetishism, particularly the fetishism of language, recreates the ambiguity and oscillation of abjection, and thus interrogates the processes of language itself, as well as the unified subject that it helps to construct. The ambivalence of Sexton's fetishistic engagement with language exemplifies the writing "with and against abjection" that Kristeva outlines, and reveals its potential to destabilise the fixed symbolic subject.

i. abjection (and its difficult relationship with feminism)

It is necessary to observe that Sexton, the confessional Boston poet who committed suicide in 1974, was not a consciously feminist writer. Although her collaborator Maxine Kumin writes that Sexton was aware of the growing Women's Movement,³ Caroline Hall observes that "it would probably be inaccurate to claim her as a consciously feminist writer."⁴ Sexton described herself as "not a political poet,"⁵ and while a number of critics have embraced her as such,⁶ Jane McCabe argues that "they have had to turn a deaf ear to some of her best poetry to do so."⁷ Sexton's Oedipal preoccupations, and her poetic quest for father figures through religion, romance and analysis, all problematise interpretations of her as a consciously feminist poet.

Julia Kristeva is a Bulgarian-born French intellectual who has been broadly labelled one of the "French feminists"⁸ in the English speaking world, despite her distinctly equivocal relationship to feminism, described by Toril Moi as "that of a somewhat critical fellow-traveller."⁹ Kristeva's writings lack the utopic zeal of other French feminists: unlike Hélène Cixous she does not see the writing of the female body and maternity as necessarily emancipatory for women.¹⁰ Kristeva's comprehensive and influential discussion of abjection, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, was published in France in 1980, and offers a problematic sense of potential for feminism.

According to Kristeva, the abject is necessarily, and significantly, ambiguous; its manifestations encompass "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."¹¹ The exemplars of abjection that Kristeva offers are characterised by borders (both corporeal and figurative) and those elements that transgress them, such as faeces, infection, crime and, above all, the corpse: "the most sickening of wastes... a border that has encroached upon everything."¹² The abject lies at the border of what is human, and through its transgressions reveals the frailty of those borders.

Ambiguity also extends to the subject's reaction to the abject, which "simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject."¹³ The subject who finds him or herself beset by abjection effects a rejection that cannot be complete: the abject maintains a position at the border of the knowable or acceptable, through a flux of repulsion and attraction. As border, the abject is both rejected and necessary, repulsive and fascinating. Kristeva observes that "while releasing a

hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.”¹⁴

While Kristeva details at length the various forms in which the abject may be manifested in writing, she does not specifically propose this engagement with abjection as a progressive or feminist project. To Kristeva, the writer who attempts to express the abject undertakes “a journey without project, without faith, to the end of the night.”¹⁵ She argues that artistic engagement with the abject functions as a defilement ritual, in that it “utters and by the same token purifies” the abject.¹⁶ To Kristeva, to utter the abject is simultaneously to ensure its continued exclusion, in order that the fragile borders of the subject and the symbolic order may be maintained. Perhaps as a result of her role as a practicing psychoanalyst, Kristeva writes of abjection with an acute awareness of the risk it poses to the subject who faces it; she sees the project of writing and the project of analysis as the same: a catharsis “not of purification but of rebirth with and against abjection.”¹⁷

The following passage from Sexton’s “Flee on your donkey”¹⁸, demonstrates the prevalence of abjection in Sexton’s poetry:

That was the winter
that my mother died,
half mad on morphine,
blown up, at last,
like a pregnant pig.
I was her dreamy evil eye.

The visceral preoccupation with death, bodily deformity and pregnancy provides potent examples of abjection, in terms of both themes and imagery. Ambiguity is rife here, in the image of the mother, depicted as “half mad”, a mixture of human and animal (“pig”), and described as “pregnant”, a definitively ambiguous state, in which there is a lack of differentiation between self and other.

Poems such as this invite a consideration of the workings of abjection. As Alicia Ostriker observes:

[...] Sexton’s material is heavily female and biological. She gives us full helpings of her breasts, her uterus, her menstruation, her abortion, her [...] vagina, her love life, her mother’s and daughter’s breasts, everyone’s operations, the act of eating [...] even the trauma of her childhood enemas.¹⁹

While these grotesque, ambiguous images are prolific in Sexton’s poetry, and can be classified as abject, Kristeva suggests that there are some forms of

ambiguity that have a particular and founding potency for the human subject. Foremost amongst these is the ambiguity represented by the mother, and Kristeva's psychoanalytic analysis of the formation of the speaking subject deals at length with the abjection of the mother. She postulates that the dyadic relationship between mother and child is a pre-objectal one, existing before the child is able to distinguish between them. This stage, which Kristeva labels the semiotic, is repressed by the subsequent symbolic order, which is heralded by the introduction of a third term (the Name of the father), the Oedipus complex, law, and language. In order to become part of the symbolic, and to establish itself as a subject through differentiation from objects, the child must reject the absolute union with the mother, who represents a nurturing figure, but also potentially a devouring one.

This difficult separation from a mother figure is evident in the grotesque, ambiguous dead mother of "Flee on your donkey", who is "blown up, at last, / like a pregnant pig". The narrator states:

they carried out my mother,
wrapped like somebody's doll, in sheets,
bandaged her jaw and stuffed up her holes.

However, the dead mother is subsequently "delivered" by her daughter:

I told you [...]
that the knife was for my mother...
and then I delivered her.

The lack of differentiation between mother and daughter is rendered so drastic that the speaker "delivers" her mother, while the births of the speaker's own daughters are described in equally ambiguous, abject imagery:

I was the one
who opened the warm eyelid
like a surgeon
and brought forth young girls
to grunt like fish.

Maternity, in Sexton's poetry, implicates an abject threat to the self. The image of the surgical opening of "the warm eyelid" evokes the notorious image from Luis Buñuel's 1929 surrealist film, *Un Chien Andalou*, in which a woman's eye is sliced open with a razor blade. It also evokes, perhaps more obviously, the blinding of

Oedipus, in the seminal tale of the dangers of a failure to separate from the mother.²⁰ This difficult process pervades Sexton's poetry, in works such as "The Double Image,"²¹ and "The Division of Parts,"²² in which the speaker asserts to her dead mother: "this is the division of ways." "The Double Image" offers arguably the most elaborate example of Sexton's contagious mothers, intertwining three generations in a network of maternity and madness. The poem revolves around the "double image" of the title, a reference to the matching portraits of mother and daughter, which symbolise the trap of the contagious mother:

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time [...]

The decision by the speaker's mother to have their portraits painted is an attempt to save her daughter by maintaining the fierce connection between them:

I cannot forgive your suicide, your mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

However, this mirroring, and the abject lack of differentiation that it represents, is depicted as destructive:

On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer.

Importantly, not only is death "catching" between mother and daughter, but the site of transmission is the breasts, maternally connoted. The breasts are both "sweet" and deadly, evoking the ambivalence that characterises Sexton's poetry about mothers.

Ultimately the speaker rejects the process of mirroring represented by the portraits, and recognises the need for individuation, and a renunciation of the dyadic bond. Mother and daughter must go "our foreknown separate ways." The speaker's mother becomes: "[...] my overthrown / love, my first image. [...] / that stony head of death / I had outgrown." As Richard Howard observes, in Sexton's poetry the mother is "an outraged voice with whom Sexton is to wrestle in almost

every poem [...].”²³ ‘In summary, these omnipresent, ambiguous mothers support Kristeva’s claim that the maternal is the most enduring and unstable of the abjected non-objects that continue to fascinate and repel the subject from their position at the border of the symbolic.

ii. abjection, signification, and the construction of the unified symbolic subject.

This casting off of the maternal, which Kristeva sees as the inevitable corollary of the establishment of the subject in the symbolic, is intimately connected to language. She argues that language inaugurates the symbolic “precisely by repressing maternal authority [...]”.²⁴ For Kristeva, influenced by Jacques Lacan, language is not assimilated by the subject upon entry into the symbolic order; rather, language assimilates the subject. Language is constitutive, not merely descriptive; it delineates what is signifiable, and thus knowable, to the subject. Kristeva argues that the abject is imperfectly excluded from the symbolic order, and its existence reveals the vulnerability of the symbolic’s borders by simultaneously constituting and exposing the boundary of what is acceptable.

In “Said the Poet to the Analyst,”²⁵ Sexton deals explicitly with the limitations of signification, in an interrogation of language and memory. The opening sentence is a confident statement of the poet’s position in relation to language: “My business is words.” However, the poem goes on to reveal that the business of words is a complicated one:

Words are like labels,
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.

The first simile is a stable one, but the idea of words as unproblematic “labels” is immediately undermined by the more abstract similes that follow: coins and bees. Language as transparent communication is rendered problematic, especially as the bee simile is further elaborated:

as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.

Felman writes of the “nostalgia” of some critics for a time when words were “like labels”:

[...] a transparent, transitive, communicative language, in which everything possesses, unequivocally, a single meaning that can be consequently mastered and made clear, in which each name “represents” a thing, in which each signifier, properly and adequately, corresponds both to a signified and to a referent.²⁶

“Said the Poet to the Analyst” constitutes a Saussurian²⁷ exposure of the instability of the signifier/signified relationship; it “unbuckles” the connection between signification and truth.

I must always forget how one word is able to pick
out another, to manner another, until I have got
something I might have said ...
but did not.

At the same time, however, the speaker reveals nostalgia for a transparent language. Sexton performs a double manoeuvre, expressing a longing for the straightforward signification, but also demonstrating its instability:

But if you should say this is something it is not,
then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny
and ridiculous and crowded with all
the believing money.

The speaker shows a degree of faith in her story and its “believing money.” The word “believing” here has a double meaning: it points both to the naïve credulity of the poet, “believing” in the money, and simultaneously, to the poet’s awareness that the memory may be inaccurate, that the money is *only* “believing” money. These two positions, and the tension between them, suggest the possibility of multiple, heterogeneous positions within signification, through a deconstruction of its workings.

Kristeva asserts that the attempt to signify the object does violence to the very system of signification:

In abjection revolt is completely within [...] the being of language. Contrary to hysteria, which brings about, ignores, or seduces the symbolic but does not produce it, the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages.²⁸

As Elizabeth Grosz argues, “Kristeva’s preoccupation remains the subject’s complex and contradictory relation to and in signification.”²⁹ In considering

Sexton's poetry, therefore, it is useful to seek out her confrontation with the process of signification, and its potential to deconstruct the fixed symbolic subject position. Fetishism provides a useful model by which to trace Sexton's relationship to signification, and abjection.

iii. fetishism, and the interrogation of language

Fetishism, according to Sigmund Freud's formulation, is a mechanism of coping with the discovery of the mother's 'castration,' or lack of a phallus, through the substitution of a fetish object, which stands both for the missing phallus and its absence.³⁰ It is this double mechanism of fetishism that is relevant here, as described by Juliet Mitchell:

[...] fetishists have their cake and eat it: they both recognise that women are castrated and deny it, so that fetish is treated with affection and hostility, [...] the body does indeed know of castration, yet simultaneously does not know. There is always this oscillation between disavowal and acknowledgement.³¹

Kristeva claims that language operates for each speaking subject as a fetish. Addressing the question of how we can recognize abjection in ourselves without, like Oedipus, gouging out our eyes, she writes,

Our eyes can remain open provided we recognize ourselves as always already altered by the symbolic – by language. Provided we hear in language – not in the other, nor in the other sex – the gouged out eye, the wound, the basic incompleteness that conditions the indefinite quest of signifying concatenations.³²

This tracing of lack to the inadequacies inherent in signification differentiates Kristeva from Freudian and Lacanian schools of thought, which are more inclined to situate lack in the feminine. Kristeva suggests that language both substitutes for and constitutes our lack. In this way, each speaking subject is a fetishist:

[...] is not language our ultimate and inseparable fetish? And language, precisely, is based on fetishist denial ("I know that, but just the same," "the sign is not the thing, but just the same," etc.) and defines us in our essence as speaking beings.³³

Existence as a speaking being involves a complicity with a system of signification based in lack and separation. The inadequacies of such a system of representation ensure that all speaking subjects experience lack, beginning with

the loss of the mother necessitated by the symbolic order. The fetish of language both points to and masks that loss. "Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want,"³⁴ writes Kristeva.

Sexton's poetic preoccupation with separation from mother figures, as explored in poems such as "The Double Image" and "Flee on your donkey", gestures towards the particular significance of the fetishistic function in Sexton's poetry. In the fetishism of language, Kristeva locates the subject's founding lack in the loss of the dyadic relationship:

[...] language begins with a *denegation* (*Verneinung* [disavowal]) of loss, at the same time as depression occasioned by mourning. 'I have lost an indispensable object which is found to be, in the last instance, my mother', the speaking being seems to say. 'But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather because I accept to lose her, I have not lost her (here is the *denegation*), I can get her back in language.'³⁵

This *denegation* is the fetishism of every speaking subject, for whom language disavows the loss of the mother that institutes the entry into object relations. For Anne Sexton, whose poetry engages so forcefully in the question of separation from the mother, the fetishistic mechanism is particularly relevant.

In this form of linguistic fetishism, to which Kristeva attributes a "founding status,"³⁶ the stakes are high; facing the loss inherent in its formation, the speaking subject faces utter abjection:

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being.³⁷

Through its sustained examination of the fetishistic mechanisms that maintain language and, through language, a unified subjecthood, Sexton's poetry finds its most profound abjection, and offers its most potent assault on notions of coherent identity. Examples of Sexton's oscillation to and from language abound. In "Jesus Suckles,"³⁸ Sexton begins with a string of metaphors evoking the relationship between mother and child:

Mary, your great
white apples make me glad...
I'm a jelly-baby and you're my wife.
You're a rock and I the fringy algae.

You're a lily and I'm the bee that gets inside.

However, this lyrical stream of metaphors is abruptly aborted:

No. No.
All lies.
I am small
and you hold me.
You give me milk
and we are the same
and I am glad.

No sooner is poetic language rejected, however, than it reasserts itself, albeit in a less lyrical form:

No. No.
All lies.
I am a truck. I run everything.
I own you.

Ostriker observes of this poem:

First metaphor is killed, then the love, joy and sense of universal connection that generated the metaphor. We have a tidy drama of pleasure-principle succumbing to reality-principle [...].³⁹

While it is initially true that "metaphor is killed," it is important to observe its emphatic return: "I am a truck." Ostriker's analysis astutely notes the movement from the dyadic relationship to the symbolic that such a change in imagery represents:

The poem reminds us that to a god, or a boy child, grateful love and helplessness are "all lies," and that reality – assuming the dualistic universe that Christianity does assume – means power, repugnance toward the flesh, and rejection of the mother.⁴⁰

However, she does not comment on Sexton's process of rejecting and reclaiming poetic language. Sexton repeats the term "lie": the lyrical metaphors of the first stanza are "all lies," but so is the stark explication of the second stanza: "No. no. All lies." "Jesus Suckles" reveals Sexton's awareness of the inadequacy of language, and her oscillation between figurative writing and its rejection. It demonstrates her disavowal of the loss that the fetish of language masks: she is

aware of language's illusory nature ("all lies"), but nonetheless needs the illusion to express and communicate. Grosz writes of the fetishist that "[d]isavowal entails a *simultaneous affirmation and denial* of his observations."⁴¹ Sexton's simultaneous exploration of the inadequacies of language, and of its crucial importance for the subject, engages forcefully with abjection by interrogating the processes that maintain the borders of the symbolic.

A similar mechanism may be observed in "The Double Image," in which the speaker addresses her estranged daughter:

And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you.

Again, Sexton exposes her own "lie," thus exposing the tendency of language to act as fetish; in this poem, the "lie" is a literal substitute for a tangible lack (the absence of her daughter). Simultaneously, however, the poem grants credence to the importance of language, signification and naming, reaching out for language to heal the estrangement, as well as to reveal it. Diana Hume George draws attention to this tension between language and its frailty: "The speaker, estranged from her own daughter by her inability to mother her, tells herself one of those complicated lies and then unravels it."⁴² She refers here to "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further,"⁴³ in which Sexton discusses her confessional poetic:

I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie [...].

To George, this "complicated lie" is a recognition that "we each create our own story [...] and shape a truth that has as much of the necessary lie as of authenticity."⁴⁴ Sexton's "complicated lie" could also refer, however, to her acute awareness of the complexity and inadequacy of language as a means of communication and representation. The repeated use of the term "lie" in her poems centres on this tension between language and silence, truth and falsehood. In "Admonitions to a Special Person,"⁴⁵ one of the last poems that Sexton wrote, she observes:

To love another is something
like prayer and it can't be planned, you just fall
into its arms because your belief undoes your disbelief.⁴⁶

This evokes the statement in "With Mercy for the Greedy" that "Need is not quite belief." This exploration of the tension between belief and need, belief and disbelief suffuses Sexton's poetry, and represents a fetishistic oscillation that interrogates the processes that construct a unified subject position.

George's complex analysis of Sexton's poetry, *Oedipus Anne*, comes closest to observing the fetishistic oscillation that Sexton both displays and interrogates. George focuses on Sexton's often dichotomous writing, arguing that it reveals the true heterogeneity of a poet struggling for identity: "Anne Sexton moved between contraries with equal force, equal conviction, and equal doubt."⁴⁷ This vacillation destabilises identity and provides an experience of the impossibility of any stable position, through her treatment of signification and identity as heterogeneous processes.

Sexton's poetry reveals a need for, and a profound scepticism towards, language and writing. Repeatedly, as in "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," she describes turning to writing in order to communicate, and to make whole her fractured being. Equally often, however, she draws attention to the inadequacies of language; to that which writing cannot represent or signify. In a letter written in 1960, Sexton admits: "I, myself, alternate between hiding behind my own hands, protecting myself anyway possible, and this other, this seeing ouching [sic] other."⁴⁸ The co-existence of the desire for security, and the "seeing, ouching" artist, is one of the more interesting aspects of Sexton's poetry, in which writing represents both loss and denial of loss.

This oscillation (evocative of the repulsion/attraction model so characteristic of abjection) is also strongly evident in Sexton's engagement with religion. "With Mercy for the Greedy"⁴⁹ demonstrates some of Sexton's oscillation to and from both religion and writing. Addressed to a friend who urged her to join the Roman Catholic Church, the poem details the speaker's attempt to believe in Jesus:

I detest my sins and I try to believe
in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
its solid neck its brown sleep.
True. There is
a beautiful Jesus.
[...]

How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!
But I can't. Need is not quite belief.

"Need is not quite belief" provides a useful insight into Sexton's writing: while she ostensibly rejects religion on these grounds, it is the oscillation between need and belief that constitutes her relation to both religion and language. The poem concludes with an explanation that poetry is the speaker's chosen confession:

My friend, my friend, I was born
doing reference work in sin, and born
confessing it. This is what poems are:
with mercy
for the greedy,
they are the tongue's wrangle,
the world's pottage, the rat's star.

"The rat's star" refers to Sexton's favourite palindrome: 'rats live on no evil star.' This always delighted her, and although she had a full awareness of its workings she nonetheless believed in it, "as if it were [...] a miracle I really wrote."⁵⁰ Discussing it with her doctor in 1958, she explained: "Of course I KNOW that words are just a counting game, I know this until the words start to arrange themselves and write something better than I would ever know."⁵¹ Interestingly, rats appear in Sexton's poetry as figures of horror, disgust and madness (such as "the gnawing pestilential rat" of "Rowing"⁵²) as well as symbols of redemptive transformation ("the rat's star"). In Sexton's expression of linguistic fetishism, need is not quite belief, and the rats are not quite stars, but the tension between the two offers a potent engagement with abjection, through a disruption of signification itself.

Estella Lauter observes that Sexton's poetry from 1970-1974 revolves around "her repeated discoveries of the Father-God's inadequacy coupled with her inability to give him up."⁵³ Ostriker observes a similar tendency in Sexton's letters:

Many of Sexton's letters depict an intense need for faith undermined by solid scepticism: [...] "God? spend (sic) half time wooing R. Catholics who will pray for you in case it's true. Spend other half knowing there is certainly no god."⁵⁴

Ostriker writes, "I am tempted to say that Sexton's final wrestling was between loving and loathing God, and that she lost it because she knew too much."⁵⁵ It is this "knowing too much" that makes Sexton's religious poetry

interesting: she simultaneously needs religion and is aware of its deceptions, and the lack that it masks. The mechanism of fetishism that her poetry exposes allows her to interrogate the symbolic through its inconsistencies, and to explore the inconsistencies in her own investment in language and religion.

“In the Deep Museum”⁵⁶ is a poem in which the twin fetishes of religion and language intersect, as Sexton rewrites Jesus’ disappearance from the tomb:

What place is this?
Cold and queer, I sting with life. I lied.
Yes, I lied.

George observes that while the poem “irreverently imagines a biological rather than spiritual explanation for the disappearance of Christ’s body, it does so in a way that can only be called religious.”⁵⁷ Sexton herself observes of this poem: “When I was taken down off the Cross, and buried alive, I sought solutions; I hoped they were Christian solutions.”⁵⁸ As in “With Mercy for the Greedy,” Sexton’s awareness of the “lie” does not nullify her need for it. She interrogates the religious myth, and reinvents it. As rats devour him, her Jesus reflects:

Unto the bellies and jaws
of rats I commit my prophecy and fear.
Far below the cross, I correct its flaws.
We have kept the miracle. I will not be here.

Sexton’s method of keeping the miracle is disavowal: she simultaneously writes of the “lie,” while finding a way to cover it over. Jesus articulates his confusion:

Surely my body is done? Surely I died?
And yet, I know, I’m here.

This echoes strongly the mechanism of fetishistic disavowal, as described by Kristeva: “‘I know that, but just the same,’ ‘the sign is not the thing, but just the same,’ etc.”⁵⁹ Sexton’s miraculous palindrome, “rats live on no evil star” encapsulates her fetishism of language, and in this poem those rats enable Jesus to uphold the miracle that is necessary for his “prophecy” and identity, even as they simultaneously undermine it. Beverly Fields writes that this poem reveals “both nostalgia for and denial of absolute love.”⁶⁰ By exposing this disavowal, which

epitomises the function of fetishism, Sexton's poem is able to destabilise the symbolic from within.

Sexton's poetry is thus able to simultaneously inhabit and interrogate the symbolic, and through it, the unified subject. Just as Kristeva argued that Marquis de Sade's writing could not be abject because it forfeited the sanctity of the symbolic⁶¹, so Sexton's poetry finds its most potent abjection in its ambiguous dual-investment, both in the symbolic, and in the semiotic that is heterogeneous to it. Kristeva pronounces that abjection can only be experienced from within the symbolic.⁶² Sexton's doubled, fetishistic approach to language, and to religion, allows her to expose the constructed nature of the symbolic, through an interrogation of its processes.⁶³ In "Love Song,"⁶⁴ describing the experiences of a young woman, Sexton announces:

Oh! There is no translating
that ocean,
that music,
that theater,
that field of ponies.

While her poetry draws attention to the tensions within language, the fact that there is "no translating" certain aspects of existence, it marries this awareness with her need to attempt that very translation. It is this oscillation that provides the abject tension of her work, exposing the boundaries of the symbolic. Abjection ejects, or keeps at bay, that which threatens the subject. Sexton's writing addresses the fact that the abject is not destroyed but persists as a threat at the borders of the subject. If, as Kristeva states, abjection "does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger,"⁶⁵ then Sexton's fetishistic oscillation to and from language can be interpreted as a prolonged engagement with this "perpetual danger," and can be described by Kristeva's model of abjection: "Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself."⁶⁶ In positing herself "beside herself", Sexton's poetry fragments the unity of the symbolic subject.

iv. deconstructing the unified subject through fetishism

Kristeva's argument that writing the abject is a catharsis "not of purification but of rebirth with and against abjection"⁶⁷ will disappoint a feminism that seeks

to find emancipation in privileging abjection and the semiotic. However, a feminism that engages thoughtfully with Kristeva's complex theories may find less immediate, but more rigorous, potential. The dichotomy of "with and against abjection" frustrates attempts to simplify it: Kristeva argues that to write "with" abjection leads to breakdown, while to write "against" abjection is a reactionary reinforcement of the symbolic order. Sexton's poetry demonstrates both of those movements, in her oscillation to and from language and religion. If there is a use value for feminism in Kristeva's theory of abjection, and in Sexton's poetry, it lies in the dual movement of "with and against abjection"; neither *with* nor *against*, but *through* the process of abjection, and fetishism, the tension that simultaneously exposes and protects the boundaries of the symbolic, and thus deconstructs the myths of transparent language and the stable or unitary subject.

By revealing the tensions inherent in signification and subject formation, Sexton's poetry points beyond the limited symbolic towards more heterogeneous notions of signification and identity. Moi observes that, for Kristeva, language "is a complex signifying *process* rather than a monolithic *system*."⁶⁸ It is this process that Sexton's poetry exposes. Poems such as "Said the Poet to the Analyst," examined above, fracture the monolithic logic of the symbolic by deconstructing the processes that maintain it.

The Kristevan project of the deconstruction of the symbolic implicates not only communication, but identity, of which Grosz writes:

[i]ts self-certainty is a defensive ruse. The subject's identity is not given in consciousness or in the form of an ego, but comes from being positioned by language as an 'I'. The subject is not the master of language, its controlling speaker, but its result or product.⁶⁹

In exposing the processes that constitute the symbolic, Sexton's poetry also suggests the lack of any innate or stable identity beyond it. The desperation that often accompanies Sexton's engagement with signification reveals her awareness of the need for the symbolic, and for the compensatory and constitutive power of language. In "The Silence"⁷⁰, whose narrator describes the struggle between silence and writing, Sexton writes, "The silence is death." Nonetheless, Sexton chose for the poem an epigraph (by C. K. Williams) that attests to the enduring presence of the abject at the edges of signification: "The more I write, the more the silence seems to be eating away at me." Despite the poem's insistence on the need for language, the process of signification is interrogated, and shown to be complex:

I am filling the room
with words from my pen.
Words leak out of it like a miscarriage.

Confusing any straightforward binary opposition between language and silence, the 'miscarriage' imagery is subsequently evoked in Sexton's description of the silence as "an enormous baby mouth." Confounding the mouth's usual association with speech, in this poem the mouth also represents silence, a connotation established in the poem's earlier description of plants "pushing out their rubbery tongues / but saying nothing." The final image of "the vibrating red muscle / of my mouth" is insistently ambiguous: the speaking mouth and the silenced void are indistinguishable. "The silence" represents the liminal space of signification, at the border of language and silence. The fetish of language is used to fill the void of silence, as the narrator "fill[s] the room / with the words from my pen"). However, as in all fetishism (and abjection), the threat is never banished entirely: "Yet there is silence. Always silence". Despite its assertion that "the silence is death", the poem undertakes an interrogation, rather than an affirmation, of language, and the identity that it constructs.

The speaking subject, Kristeva writes, "in order to tally with heterogeneity, must be, let us say, a questionable *subject-in-process*."⁷¹ Sexton's poetry, in its fetishistic oscillation between language and silence, performs the function that Kristeva attributes to poetic language:

poetic language unsettled the position of the signified and the transcendental ego [...] it posits its own process as an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between *language* and *rhythm* [...], between the symbolic and semiotic.⁷²

An understanding of the subject-in-process necessitates the deconstruction of the notion of the fixed or unitary subject, instead offering a more pluralist subject, "the divided, decentred, overdetermined and differential notion of the subject" developed after Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche.⁷³

Keith Booker asks a question pertinent to feminists facing the dilemma of reconciling Kristeva's argument for the necessity of the symbolic with their ongoing desire for productive challenge to the patriarchy: "how does one overturn one set of hierarchies without setting up another (probably just as invidious) set of hierarchies in its place?"⁷⁴ Neither Kristeva nor Sexton advocates the inversion of existing hierarchies. What Sexton's poetry does offer, when examined through

Kristeva's notion of abjection, is an examination of the processes that construct and maintain the symbolic. What she undertakes, therefore, is a process not of inversion but of deconstruction.

This deconstruction is evident in self-reflexive poems such as "The touch"⁷⁵:

The hand had collapsed,
a small wood pigeon
that had gone into seclusion.
I turned it over and the palm was old,
its lines traced like fine needlepoint
and stitched up into the fingers.
it was fat and soft and blind in places.
Nothing but vulnerable.

And all this is metaphor.

William Dickey argues that Sexton's writing fails to construct a coherent or believable world, and labels as indulgent her tendency "to permit all metaphors and then to dismiss them as metaphor."⁷⁶ Conversely, it can be argued that Sexton's approach reveals an awareness of the constructed nature of language and identity, and as such it points to the inauthenticity, or impossibility, of coherence. In poems such as "The touch", the "violence of poetry" that Kristeva identified in the writing of abjection⁷⁷ becomes a violence enacted upon the notions of transparent language and the fixed subject position within the symbolic.

Sexton's poetry exposes and explores the processes of fetishism and abjection, and through them, the tenuous construction of the unified symbolic subject. In "Words"⁷⁸ Sexton again interrogates the processes of signification, declaring that she is "in love with words," whilst simultaneously acknowledging, "Yet often they fail me." It is Sexton, in the final lines of this poem, who perhaps best summarises the enduring feminist potential of Kristeva's deconstructive project, and of her own poetry:

Words and eggs must be handled with care.
Once broken they are impossible
things to repair.

Francesca Haig is writing her PhD in Creative Arts at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include contemporary historical literature, confessional poetry, and postmodern philosophy. Her academic work has appeared in Traffic, and her first book of poetry, 'Bodies of Water', was recently published by Five Islands Press.

-
- ¹ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 62-3.
- ² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 45.
- ³ Maxine Kumin, "Introduction" in Sexton, xxx.
- ⁴ Caroline K.B. Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 81.
- ⁵ Anne Sexton letter, 1970, quoted in Cassie Premo Steele, *We Heal From Memory: Sexton, Lourde, Anzaldia, and the Poetry of Witness* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 16.
- ⁶ See Deborah Landau, "'Not a Woman, Quite': The Body Poems of Anne Sexton and Alice Fulton" in *Critical Studies on the Feminist Subject*, Giovanna Covi, ed. (Trento: Dipartimento di Scienze Filologiche e Storiche, 1997).
- ⁷ Jane McCabe, "'A Woman Who Writes': A Feminist Approach to the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton" in *Anne Sexton: the Artist and her Critics*, J.D. McClatchy, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 216.
- ⁸ Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray are the most influential writers to share this label, although their concerns and arguments often differ substantially from Kristeva's.
- ⁹ Toril Moi, ed. *The Kristeva Reader*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 9.
- ¹⁰ For Cixous' manifesto of body-writing, see Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *Feminisms: an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 347-362.
- ¹¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
- ¹² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.
- ¹³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.
- ¹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.
- ¹⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 186.
- ¹⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.
- ¹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 31.
- ¹⁸ Sexton, 97-105.
- ¹⁹ Alicia Ostriker, *Writing Like a Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 59.
- ²⁰ This reading is supported by the poem's earlier reference to "eyes newly cut".
- ²¹ Sexton, 35-42.
- ²² Sexton, 42-6.
- ²³ Richard Howard, "Anne Sexton: 'Some Tribal Female Who Is Known But Forbidden'", in *Anne Sexton: the Artist and her Critics*, J.D. McClatchy, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 198.
- ²⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 72.
- ²⁵ Sexton, 12-13.
- ²⁶ Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 39.
- ²⁷ Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure made the seminal observation that "[...] the link between sign and signification is arbitrary" (Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye eds, Roy Harris, trans. (London: Duckworth, 1983), 67). This insight, at the heart of structuralism, undermined the assumed correspondence between sign and signified, and prompted new interrogations of the processes of signification.
- ²⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 45.
- ²⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body of Signification," in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva*, John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 80.
- ³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*, James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1962).
- ³¹ Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Pelican, 1975), 85.
- ³² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 88-89.
- ³³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 37.
- ³⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 41.
- ³⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil Noir: Dépression et Mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard 1987), 55, Lechte's translation, quoted in John Lechte, "Art, Love and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva," in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva*, John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, eds. (London: Routledge 1990), 35.
- ³⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 37.
- ³⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.
- ³⁸ Sexton, 337-8

-
- ³⁹ Ostriker, 74.
- ⁴⁰ Ostriker, 74.
- ⁴¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 57.
- ⁴² Diana Hume George, *Oedipus Anne: the Poetry of Anne Sexton*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 11.
- ⁴³ Sexton, 34-5
- ⁴⁴ George, 10.
- ⁴⁵ Sexton, 607-8.
- ⁴⁶ Steele, 112.
- ⁴⁷ George, xiv.
- ⁴⁸ Linda Grey Sexton and Lois Ames, ed. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 105.
- ⁴⁹ Sexton, 62-3.
- ⁵⁰ Anne Sexton and Steven E. Colburn (ed.), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), xi.
- ⁵¹ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 124.
- ⁵² Sexton, 417-8.
- ⁵³ Estella Lauter, "Anne Sexton's 'Radical Discontent with the Awful Order of Things'" in Diana Hume George, ed. *Sexton – Selected Criticism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 151.
- ⁵⁴ Ostriker, 73.
- ⁵⁵ Ostriker, 71.
- ⁵⁶ Sexton, 64-5.
- ⁵⁷ George, 107.
- ⁵⁸ Sexton and Colburn, 104.
- ⁵⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 37.
- ⁶⁰ Beverly Fields, "The Poetry of Anne Sexton," in *Poets in Progress: Critical Prefaces to Thirteen Contemporary Americans*, Edward B. Hungerford, ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 284.
- ⁶¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 21. Kristeva claims that de Sade's writings are entirely devoid of abjection, due to the absence of a constraining or judging symbolic. Sade's orgiastic writing, she asserts, "[...] had nothing abject about it [...] everything is nameable for it, the whole is nameable. [...] Rational and optimistic, it does not exclude. That means that it does not recognize a sacred..."
- ⁶² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 10.
- ⁶³ In contending that Sexton's poetry interrogates the fetishistic mechanism inherent in language, this paper aims not to pathologise Sexton's poetry as a function of fetishism, but to focus on Kristeva's assertion that all subjects experience the primal fetishism of language, and to examine the ways in which Sexton's poetry deconstructs this condition, through its focus on the process of disavowal that constitutes her relationship to language. Kristeva, while asserting that the fetishism of language is universal, also discusses fetishism and psychosis as the two psychic risks of subverting the symbolic with the semiotic. In these instances she makes a distinction, which this paper seeks to uphold, between the clinical fetishist and the writer. Kristeva maintains that while the poetic function "converges with fetishism; it is not, however, identical to it. What distinguishes the poetic function from the fetishist mechanisms is that it maintains a signification" (Moi, *Kristeva Reader*, 115). Sexton's examination of the semiotic is artful, not pathological. The mechanism of fetishism, as postulated by Freud and discussed by Kristeva, is useful here not as a diagnostic tool, but a device for exploring the complexities of Sexton's poetry. Kristeva observes, "The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 38). Sexton was, ultimately, "frightened to death," but before her suicide she displayed a mastery of language that precludes her being labelled a clinical fetishist.
- ⁶⁴ Sexton, 115-6.
- ⁶⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.
- ⁶⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.
- ⁶⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 31.
- ⁶⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), 152.
- ⁶⁹ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 19.
- ⁷⁰ Sexton, 318-9.
- ⁷¹ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez et al., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 135.
- ⁷² Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 135.
- ⁷³ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 152.

⁷⁴ Keith M. Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991), 124.

⁷⁵ Sexton, 43-4.

⁷⁶ William Dickey, "Review of Love Poems," in Anne Sexton: *Telling the Tale*, Steven E. Colburn, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 214.

⁷⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 141.

⁷⁸ Sexton, 463-4.