Chapter 7

“I wish to enter her like a dream”: Anne Sexton and the Prophecy of Healing

As we have seen, it is only now, after twenty years of developments in feminism and psychoanalysis, that the significance of Sexton’s life and work can be recognized. Likewise, Sexton’s spiritual poetry can be read, only now, for its important and visionary qualities. I will show how Sexton not only struggled alone to make sense of her pain, but also how she managed, alone, to create a vision of healing from her pain. Recent critics, given the benefit of twenty years of change in society, have begun to reassess Sexton’s work for its innovative ideas about sexuality and spirituality. Some focus on Sexton’s ability to celebrate the body and its erotic life in her poetry. Others link the prophetic quality of her later work to recent developments in feminist spirituality. Still others, and I locate myself in this category, make explicit connections between the attempt to celebrate the sexual and the spiritual. Given the argument I have made earlier concerning childhood sexual trauma, I will argue, Sexton’s vision of healing from that trauma consists of a connection between the body and spirit. Trauma injures both the body and the spirit; a vision of healing from trauma must address both the body and the spirit together. As Maria P. P. Root writes, “The [spiritual] characteristic of feminism is important to trauma, because one of the prominent wounds of trauma is the crushing of the human spirit . . . which may be the hardest wound to heal.”

Yet such a vision of healing is not wholly disconnected from history, either. As I will show, Sexton’s particular vision for a future where women are healed from their trauma comes from her growing understanding of history. We will see how Sexton crosses through history in order to arrive at a vision for the future. Thus, Sexton’s vision is not utopian in a strict
sense but rather is historical, as Simone de Beauvoir's description of the split between sexuality and spirituality in Christianity shows:

The Christian is divided within himself; the separation of body and soul, life and spirit, is complete; original sin makes of the body the enemy of the soul; all ties of the flesh seem evil. . . . Evil is an absolute reality; and the flesh is sin. And, of course, since woman remains always the Other, it is not held that reciprocally male and female are both flesh: the flesh that is for the Christian the hostile Other is precisely woman. In her the Christian finds incarnated the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. 5

Sexton's attempt to rewrite this history of "female sexuality . . . as the agent by means of which sin came into the world" is, then, not only an attempt to heal herself from a history of a personally traumatic past. 6 Sexton's vision is also an attempt to provide a vision for all women of new possibilities for imagining sex and spirit as sources of goodness and not only sites of woundings. 7

What makes Sexton's attempt particularly remarkable is that she manages to bring sexuality and spirituality together. She does not, as many white feminists of the nineteenth century did, focus only on the higher spiritual nature of women in order to argue for women's worth. Nor does she only celebrate sexuality without an understanding of how body and spirit are connected, as many second-wave white feminists have done. Instead, she shows, as de Beauvoir did, how women's bodies, women's spirits, and women's oppression exist together, and through her poetry, Sexton presents a vision of the possibility for healing at all levels. Sexton's experience as a survivor of sexual trauma allows her to gain a personal as well as philosophical understanding of how women's bodies have been marked by the violent opposition between self and other. To claim her body as her own, Sexton's poetry teaches us, a woman must learn to acknowledge her own feelings, desires, and pains as her own. This means turning from the other as arbiter of needs and desires toward the self, toward a sense of self within. To develop this sense of a spirit internal to the self is, as we will see in Sexton's poetry, parallel to claiming one's body as one's own. And, by showing how both women's bodies and women's spirits have been split and co-opted by violence, Sexton opens the way toward showing how they must be reconnected and reclaimed for a vision of healing.

This vision, as we will examine, while it predates the development of "feminist spirituality" in our country, also uncannily foretells its most essential insights. 8 Feminist spirituality is attentive to the wounding of women