

# *The Agony and the Ecstasy of the Annunciation in Anne Sexton's "The Fierceness of Female"*

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Anne Sexton's poem "The Fierceness of Female" describes an erotic encounter with God which both resembles and deviates from historical portrayals of the Annunciation. As images of Mary evolve according to the contexts in which they appear, recognizing and engaging contemporary depictions of Mary may require from us a greater intuitive and creative receptivity than would more traditional portrayals of her.

In this paper, I read Sexton's poem in concert with selected relevant past and contemporary theologies. I then discuss the religious dimensions of this poem in particular, and of art and poetry in general, based for the most part on Jacques Maritain's theories of beauty, art, poetry, and creative intuition. I conclude with some final reflections on poetic and revelatory experience.

Let us begin by turning to the poem itself, in its entirety:

## THE FIERCENESS OF FEMALE<sup>1</sup>

I am spinning,  
I am spinning on the lips,  
they remove my shadow,  
my phantom from my past,  
they invented a timetable of tongues,  
that take up all my attention.  
Wherein there is no room  
No bed.

<sup>1</sup> Anne Sexton, "The Fierceness of Female," in *The Complete Poems*, foreword Maxine Kumin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), p. 547. Originally published in *45 Mercy Street* (1976).

The clock does not tick  
 except where it vibrates my 4000 pulses,  
 and where all was absent,  
 all is two.  
 touching like a choir of butterflies,  
 and like the ocean,  
 pushing toward land  
 and receding  
 and pushing  
 with a need that gallops  
 all over my skin,  
 yelling at the reefs.

I unknit.  
 Words fly out of place  
 and I, long into the desert,  
 drink and drink  
 and bow my head to that meadow  
 the breast, the melon in it,  
 and then the intoxicating flower of it.  
 Our hands that stroke each other  
 the nipples like baby starfish—  
 to make our lips sucking into lunatic rings  
 until they are bubbles,  
 our fingers naked as petals  
 and the world pulses on a swing.  
 I raise my pelvis to God  
 so that it may know the truth of how  
 flowers smash through the long winter.

“The Fierceness of Female” begins with a physical description of spinning: “I am spinning, / I am spinning on the lips.” Through the repetition of the word “spinning,” the speaker draws the reader into the vortical form of the poem, like a finger guiding the gaze of another as it traces the inward convolutions of a rose.

The lulling, hypnotic tone of the poem invites the reader deep within the experience of the speaker, wherein her shadow, her “phantom of the past” is removed, and “a timetable of tongues” take up all her attention. The interior world is sparse, empty: “Wherein there is no room. / No bed. / The clock does not tick.” Half-way through this stanza, however, the poem shifts; where there was nothing, now appears an other: “where all was absent, / all is two.” An erotic tension builds: “touching like a choir of butterflies, / and like the ocean, / pushing toward land / and receding / and pushing / with a need that gallops / all over my skin, / yelling at the reefs.”

The mounting tension reaches its climax in the first short line of the

second stanza: "I unknit." A torrent of images follow: "Words fly out of place / and I, long into the desert, / drink and drink / and bow my head to that meadow / the breast, the melon in it, / and then the intoxicating flower of it." The desert has been transformed into a feminine and fertile landscape.

Still deeper inside, in a dreamy womb-like paradise, the speaker in the poem becomes immersed in a mystical yet physical relationship with the other: "Our hands that stroke each other / the nipples like baby starfish— / to make our lips sucking into lunatic rings / until they are bubbles, / our fingers naked as petals / and the world pulses on a swing." This complete immersion, resembling baptism, is followed by a resurfacing of the speaker, indicated by the change in tone and reknitting of the syntax: "I raise my pelvis to God / so that it may know the truth of how / flowers smash through the long winter."

It is difficult to discern whether or not in this poem Sexton is intentionally conjuring up or alluding to images of Mary's union with God at the time of the conception of Christ, or if depictions of the Annunciation informed Sexton's poetic vision. While in some earlier poems Sexton explicitly identifies Mary, in "The Fierceness of Female" she reveals neither the identity of the speaker nor that of the "other."

Drawing a comparison between the encounter in this poem and Mary's union with the Holy Spirit at the moment of Christ's conception is further complicated by the vagueness of the description of the latter event as recorded in Scripture, in two of the canonical gospels, Matthew's and Luke's. If we were to take the time to compare the imagery in Sexton's poem with these two Scriptural passages we would probably agree that, even if this poem is an allusion to the virginal conception, the primary influential source is not likely Scriptural, since neither Matthew nor Luke describes the encounter between Mary and the Holy Spirit as explicitly sexual.

Sifting through the wealth of historical references to the Annunciation would probably not help us to discern if historical depictions did or did not influence Sexton's poem, since there is no single or correct way that the Annunciation has been portrayed. For example, unlike the erotic pleasure expressed in Sexton's poem, many traditionally depicted bridal images of Mary are associated with the purity and holiness of virginity, and hence, connected with the sacred and undefiled body of the Church. In the fourth century, St. Ambrose said, in opposition to Arianism, "The Holy Church, immaculate where coitus is concerned and fertile where birth is concerned, is virgin through chastity and mother through issue. She gives us birth in a

virginal way, made pregnant not by man but by the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> The sentiments of St. Ambrose are echoed in the words of St. Augustine's reflection on Mary's virginity: "Born by the power of the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin Mary: that's how he came, and to whom he came: from the Virgin Mary in whom the Holy Spirit, and not a human husband, acted; he made the chaste one fecund, conserving her intact."<sup>3</sup>

However, other historical reflections concerning the conception of Christ seem to indicate a rather erotic union between Mary and the Holy Spirit. As a matter of fact, the imagery in Sexton's poem is especially reminiscent of some twelfth-century sermons. In the twelfth century, Marian devotion was sensuous and fervent. Anthropomorphic allusions to God, especially in relation to Mary, were common during this period.

The descriptive language in a twelfth-century sermon by Amadeus of Lausanne, a former novice of St. Bernard, sounds particularly similar to the imagery in Sexton's poem:

Your Creator has become your Spouse, he has loved your beauty. . . . He has coveted your loveliness and desires to be united to you. Impatient of delay, he hastens to come to you. . . . Hurry to meet him, that you may be kissed with the kiss of the mouth of God and be drawn into his most blessed embraces. . . . Go out, for the nuptial chamber is already prepared, and your Spouse is coming, the Holy Spirit comes to you . . . suddenly he will come to you, that you may enjoy happiness. . . . The Holy Spirit will come upon you, that at his touch your womb may tremble and swell, your spirit rejoice and your womb flower. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Although Amadeus of Lausanne does not state explicitly that the union between Mary and the Holy Spirit was sexually pleasurable, the tone in the sermon is certainly erotic. God is in love with Mary's beauty, and desires to be united with her. Furthermore, the last line quoted from the sermon, which sounds very similar to Sexton's closing lines ("I raise my pelvis to God / so that it may know the truth of how / flowers smash through the long winter"), suggests erotic pleasure: "At his touch your womb may tremble and swell, your spirit rejoice and your womb flower."

<sup>2</sup> St. Ambrose, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke II*, 7 (CSEL 32, 4, p. 45), quoted in Raniero Cantalamessa, *Mary: Mirror of the Church*, trans. Frances Lonergan Villa (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermons*, 213, 3 and 7 (PL 38, 1961, 1064), quoted in Cantalamessa, *Mary: Mirror of the Church*, p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> Amadeus of Lausanne, from his eight Marian homilies, *Sources Chrétiennes*, eds. G. Bavaud, J. Deshusses and A. Dumas (Paris, 1960), quoted in Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), vol. 1, p. 245.

However, Amadeus of Lausanne continues this sermon by rendering the image of God as the bearer of male seed: "For you, most beautiful Virgin, have been joined in close embraces to the Creator of beauty, and, having been made more a virgin, indeed, more than a virgin, because mother and virgin, have received the most holy seed by divine infusion."<sup>5</sup> Unlike the gender-specificity of this description and others of its kind, in "The Fierceness of Female" the gender of the other remains ambiguous, and the speaker in the poem is not portrayed as an open field passively receiving an infusion of holy seed. Although Sexton does not forsake the relational or complementary aspects of the union, she renders neither the lover nor the beloved as recipients or agents of fertilization and procreation. The flowering in Sexton's poem appears, rather, to be an end beyond the end, and not the object, of the speaker's supplication for union with God. In other words, the desired object of the union is first and foremost the union itself.<sup>6</sup>

The shift in focus reflected in Sexton's poem, from the biological or procreative functions of sex to loving union, echoes areas of debate and reevaluation in feminist discourse and Christian ethics. Although Sexton neither identified herself as a Christian nor as a feminist, she has, like many Christian feminists, emphasized the loving aspect of sexual union in "The Fierceness of Female" as well as in other works. However, Sexton's language is, for the most part, devoid of technical theological as well as feminist terminology.

Perhaps the two most troubling areas for many critics of Sexton's poetry are her religious views and her identity as a woman in relation to feminist discourse. The problem here, I believe, is that Sexton defies most ideologies. While some of her poems may bolster religious or feminist causes, others can just as easily deflate them. Perhaps this is because Sexton's investment, like that of all good artists, is to tell the truth. By truth I mean that she does not seem to soften or ameliorate her poetic vision, nor does she attempt to taper it, in order to reach any end beyond the good of the poem itself. And in this way it is an honest, unadulterated, and chaste relationship between artist and artwork.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, Sexton considered her poetry closer to the truth than her own self. She said in one interview,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> This notion echoes Maritain's theory of the engendering of art as a result of the superabundant overflowing of poetic knowledge into an object made.

<sup>7</sup> On the operation of art for the good of the work, see Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism, With Other Essays by Jacques Maritain*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), p. 14.

"In some ways, as you see me now, I am a lie. The crystal truth is in my poetry."<sup>8</sup>

Rodin said, "The ugly in art is the fake, whatever grins at you without cause, senseless affectations, pirouettes and capers, mere travesties of beauty and grace, whatever tells a lie."<sup>9</sup> Jacques Maritain reiterates this idea when he says that "every work of art must be logical. Therein lies the truth. It must be steeped in logic; not in the pseudo-logic of clear ideas, not in the logic of knowledge and demonstration, but in the working logic of every day, eternally mysterious and disturbing. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Part of my fascination with Sexton's poetry is that it cannot be easily defined; it cannot be captured; that is, it cannot be contained in any category, religious or political. Instead, it moves freely between opposite poles, between belief and unbelief, between comedy and tragedy, between life and death. Sexton's poetry, prose, and personal history are full of reconciled and unreconciled contradictions. For example, in her poem "Words" she recognizes that words can be "both daisies and bruises."<sup>11</sup> At times, Sexton synthesizes the dualities. At other times, she appears to sit comfortably with them. And then there are periods where the contradictions seem to torment her. However, she never seems to undermine the complexity, "mysterious and disturbing," by denying or simplifying it.

Take, for example, Sexton's "religious" poetry. It has been rejected by many as "junk," a product of "self-indulgence" or "madness." Sexton herself described her series of poems *The Jesus Papers* in *The Book of Folly* as "either 'blasphemous' or 'devout'—it's probably blasphemous."<sup>12</sup> One critic, James Wright, wrote the following in the margins of the manuscript of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*: "Leave God his own poems, and cut these lines out. . . . [S]top trying to be a saint. Be a poet, and get rid of that junk."<sup>13</sup> Another critic calls her religious poems "verbal comic

<sup>8</sup> Anne Sexton, interview by Bridgett Weeks, in *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986), p. 115. Originally published in *Boston Magazine*, August 1968.

<sup>9</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Anne Sexton, "Words," in *The Complete Poems*, p. 464. Originally published in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, in *No Evil Star*, pp. 154–55. Originally published in *American Poets* in 1976, ed. William Heyen (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merill, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, with a foreword by Martin T. Orne (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 367.

strips."<sup>14</sup> However, Sexton believed irreligious people had a more difficult time with her "religious" poetry than with her "confessional" kind. Regarding the critics, she once said, "I think they tackle the obvious things, without delving deeper. They are more shocked by the other, whereas I think in time to come people will be more shocked by my mystical poetry than by my so-called confessional poetry."<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, she remarked that the Jesuits "find my work very religious, and take my book on retreats, and teach my poems in classes."<sup>16</sup>

Discerning the value of art for theological reflection is visibly difficult, as reflected by the criticisms of Sexton's work. Two main areas of debate surround questions of content, and issues of morality and authority. Let us first consider the question of content.

Sexton's poetry is not solely or simply explicitly religious, although many of her poems incorporate religious themes. In an essay by Frances Bixler, "The Religious Pilgrimage of Anne Sexton," the following observation is made:

Anne Sexton's religious poetry presents different problems to different readers. For those who no longer accept the Christian God as a reality, her search seems dated and inexplicable. Those who empathize with her need to make God a reality may feel at a loss to comprehend the twistings, contradictions, and confusions displayed by a large body of her work. Sexton's poetry is also a puzzle for believers because of her frequent disregard for orthodox theology. Thus, no reader comes away from her religious poetry feeling fully at ease.<sup>17</sup>

I consider the sense of discomfort produced in the reader by Sexton's poetry an achievement rather than a weakness of the work. The disturbing character of Sexton's poetry is not entirely unlike many Biblical narratives themselves, which are also largely unsettling and complex. Furthermore, for a work of art to be religious, or even Christian, does not require that its content be identifiably "religious." In the words of Jacques Maritain, "Christianity does not make art *easy*. It deprives it of its facile means, it stops its progress in many directions, but in order to raise its level."<sup>18</sup> In

<sup>14</sup> William H. Shurr, "Mysticism and Suicide: Anne Sexton's Last Poetry," in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 68 (Fall 1985), pp. 335-56. Reprinted in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), p. 204.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with Barbara Kevles, in *No Evil Star*, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Frances Bixler, "Journey into the Sun: The Religious Pilgrimage of Anne Sexton," in *Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton*, ed. Frances Bixler (Conway, Arkansas: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1988), p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 73.

this way, I find Sexton's poetry raised beyond the level of much intentionally illustrated liturgical art and devotional depictions.

One reason that contemporary fine arts may be more valuable for theological inquiry and reflection than intentionally religious illustration is that contemporary fine art is often imbued with infinite layers of meaning, whereas illustrative art often lacks depth and dimension. In his essay entitled "Absurdity in Sacred Decoration," Thomas Merton distinguishes between symbol and illustration:

Symbolism fortifies and concentrates the spirit of prayer, but illustration tends rather to weaken and to dissipate our attention. Symbolism acts as a very efficacious spiritual medium. It opens the way to an intuitive understanding of mystery—it places us in the presence of the invisible. Illustration tends rather to become an obstacle, to divert and to amuse rather than to elevate and direct. It tends to *take the place of* the invisible and obscure it.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Maritain distinguishes between Christian art and art which intends to be, among other things, religious. This distinction made by Maritain is related to what he considers to be the "thesis" as opposed to the "habit" of art.

The term *thesis* will be applied to any intention extrinsic to the work itself, when the thought inspired by such an intention does not act upon the work by means of the artistic habit moved instrumentally, but puts itself in juxtaposition to the habit so as itself to act directly upon the work. In such a case the work is not wholly produced by the artistic habit or wholly by the thought inspired, but partly by one and partly by the other, like a boat pulled by two men. In this sense any thesis, whether it profess to demonstrate or to move, is an alien importation in art and as such an impurity. It imposes upon art, in its own sphere, that is to say in the actual production of the work, an alien rule and end; it prevents the work of art issuing from the heart of the artist with the spontaneity of a perfect fruit; it betrays calculation, a dualism between the intelligence of the artist and his sensibility, which the object of art is to have united.<sup>20</sup>

In this way, "religious" illustration which intends to demonstrate or move may have a thesis; it may be "an art specified by an object, an end, and definite rules."<sup>21</sup> Christian art, on the other hand, is free. However, according to Maritain, it is only Christian insofar as it "overflows from a

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Merton, "Absurdity in Sacred Decoration," in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), p. 265.

<sup>20</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

heart possessed by grace."<sup>22</sup> That is, "the work will be Christian in proportion as the love is alive."<sup>23</sup>

Can contemporary art, such as "The Fierceness of Female," which is not necessarily intentionally sacred or explicitly Christian be a valuable, valid, and revelatory source for theological interpretation? Art and theology, according to Maritain's classically influenced categories, are two distinct disciplines governed by their own sets of rules, goals, and objectives.<sup>24</sup> Theology is a habit of the speculative order, and art of the practical.<sup>25</sup> Art, like wisdom, is a virtue, valuable in itself, but the virtue of art tends to the good of the work to be made, and not to knowledge for its own sake.

The practical order is further divided into two distinct spheres, Action and Making. It is with this distinction that Maritain defends *art's complete freedom from external rules and moral judgments*. Moral judgment, or prudence, is distinguished from artistic judgment, although both are concerned with the means to an end. Prudence, however, is the intellectual determination of *actions to be done*, while art is the intellectual determination of *works to be made*. Making, as opposed to Action, is ordered not to the common end of all human life, but to the object made.

Maritain also distinguishes between poetry and art, a distinction which he describes at length in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. Although art and poetry are interconnected, they are also vastly different according to the terms which Maritain assigns them. Art, defined by Maritain, is "the creative or producing, work-making activity of the human mind." Poetry, on the other hand, is "not the particular art which consists in writing verses, but a process more general and more primary: that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self. . . ." <sup>26</sup> It is "the free creativity of the spirit, and the intuitive knowledge through emotion, which transcend and permeate all arts, inasmuch as they tend toward beauty as an end beyond the end."<sup>27</sup>

Poetry, according to Maritain, has no external object but tends to the infinite, through a "release and actuation of the free creativity of the spirit."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> For a further discussion on the practical and speculative orders, see Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 1-8, and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Bollingen Series, 35 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), pp. 44-51.

<sup>26</sup> Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 393.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

It is “free,” unlike art, insofar as it is not oriented toward making; it is not bound to an object. In this way, poetry transcends art since it is the “secret life of all the arts.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, although poetry is knowledge oriented toward expression, it is not practical knowledge, as is art. Poetry is not limited to the practical knowledge of making, but is instead bound up with being.

Creative intuition has both objective and subjective elements which are finally revealed in the object made. In poetic intuition, objectivity and subjectivity, the world and the whole of the soul, coexist inseparably.<sup>30</sup> Poetic intuition is “filled with the subjectivity of the poet as well as with the thing grasped, since the thing grasped and the subjectivity are known together in the same obscure experience, and since the thing grasped is grasped only through its affective resonance in and in union with the subjectivity.”<sup>31</sup>

By way of knowledge through connaturality, the objective reality of the world is grasped through the subjectivity of the poet, “according to any direction whatever in which an act of spiritual communication with the things of the world can be brought about,” and which can be expressed only by recasting these things into an object.<sup>32</sup> Poetry is thus made concrete.

The work of art brings poetic intuition into objectification. “And it must always preserve its own consistence and value as an *object*.”<sup>33</sup> However, it is a “sign”—“both a direct sign of the secrets perceived in things, of some irrecusable truth of nature or adventure caught in the great universe, and a *reversed sign* of the subjective universe of the poet, of his substantial Self obscurely revealed.”<sup>34</sup> It is “both a revelation of the subjectivity of the poet and of the reality that poetic knowledge has caused him to perceive.”<sup>35</sup> The process of creative production is mirrored in the creative reception by the beholder of the work made. In both creative production and reception, the spiritual is revealed intuitively and affectively in and through the physical.

According to this design, we can see that art is not in line with doing but with making. Therefore, moral judgments are generally inapplicable to what concerns the good of the work, that is, the process of the creative production of the work of art. We can also see that objects of contemporary

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

fine art, even those considered as "secular," are or may be valid and valuable sources for theological inquiry, because they are revelatory.

I consider Sexton's poetry religious poetry, or better yet, revelatory, and not only those poems which incorporate "religious" themes. Sexton's poetry is like a glass, darkly, through which an obscure yet deep encounter takes place between created and creator, between herself, her readers, the world, and ultimate mystery.

Sexton intentionally gives her poems to her readers. For her there is no single or correct answer when it comes to responding to the question of meaning in her poems. The poem, according to Sexton, "should be what it means to its *readers*. They can grow with it. If some reader likes a poem, he might read it five years later and see in it something very different, because he's lived a little longer and suddenly sees something very startlingly new."<sup>36</sup>

Sexton's "confessional" mode of poetry is one of the techniques by which she invites her readers into the poem, and through which her readers may find a voice for their own experiences. Confessional poetry, which was introduced as a genre by W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell in the mid-1950s, begins with the autobiographical experience of the poet and is usually expressed in the first person. In this way, the reader may feel an intimate relationship, or an identification, with the voice in the poem. Furthermore, Sexton as a "confessional" poet becomes the authority of her own experience. It is through the form of the poem that Sexton penetrates the truth of her life—reaching universal proportions through the concrete and particular.

As I read and reread the "The Fierceness of Female," I witness a joyful mystery, which is the mystery and miracle of recognizing a loving union between self and other, between the physical and spiritual. However, I also experience the painful lack, the yearning for complete and eternal fulfillment. The poem ends with the speaker raising her pelvis to God in supplication, before or without God's response. We are left with an image of desire—to be wedded to God, to know fully. But for now, "we know only in part" (I Cor. 13:12).

This thirst for complete union with God is temporarily quenched in the union with beauty. If beauty belongs to the order of the transcendentals—that is, to the order of properties, such as the one, the true, and the good, "which surpass all limits of kind or category and will not suffer themselves to be confined in any class, because they absorb everything and are to be

<sup>36</sup> Anne Sexton, interview by Gregory Fitzgerald, in *No Evil Star*, p. 186. Originally published in *Massachusetts Review* 19 (1978).

everywhere"<sup>37</sup>—then we, when we experience beauty, also experience God; or, as stated by Maritain: "Once we touch a transcendental, we touch being itself, a likeness of God."<sup>38</sup>

Quoting St. Thomas, Maritain says that beauty, *per effectum*, is what gives pleasure on sight, *id quod visum placet*. It is "a vision," an "intuitive knowledge, and a joy."<sup>39</sup> He continues, "The beautiful is what gives joy, not all joy, but joy in knowledge; not the joy peculiar to the act of knowing, but a joy superabounding and overflowing from such an act because of the object known."<sup>40</sup> Beauty "has the savor of the terrestrial paradise, because it restores for a brief moment the simultaneous peace and delight of the mind and the senses."<sup>41</sup> It is "essentially delightful. Therefore by its very nature, by its very beauty, it stirs desire and produces love. . . ."<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, Maritain suggests, it is love that ultimately produces ecstasy: "Love in its turn produces ecstasy, that is to say, makes the lover beside himself: an ec-stasy of which the soul experiences a lesser form when it is gripped by the beauty of a work of art, and the fullness when it is absorbed, like dew, by the beauty of God."<sup>43</sup>

Edgar Allan Poe describes the ecstasy and the sorrow of temporarily experiencing union with God through beauty:

Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry, or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods, we find ourselves melted into tears, we weep them not, as the Abbate Gravina supposes, through excess of pleasure, but through a certain petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. See *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 5, a. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales and Poems*, vol. 4 (London: J. C. Nimmo, 1884), quoted in Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 174, n. 70. Maritain writes, "Baudelaire is here reproducing an extract from the preface to his own translation, *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires*, an extract inspired by and almost a translation of a passage in a lecture by Poe, *The Poetic Principle*."

"The Fierceness of Female" describes a longing for God similar to that expressed by Poe in his reflection on beauty. The speaker in this poem has experienced a glimpse into the life of the divine, into the transcendent, albeit briefly and indeterminately. At the end of the poem, it appears that the speaker is trying to grasp, "at once and forever, those divine and rapturous joys" which she has encountered in love. Similarly, in an earlier poem entitled "When Man Enters Woman" (1975), which also depicts an erotic encounter, Sexton expresses the frustration of having touched, without having fully reached, wholly and eternally, God. This poem ends with the following passage: "This man, / this woman / with their double hunger, / have tried to reach through / the curtain of God / and briefly they have, / though God / in His perversity / unties the knot."<sup>45</sup> It appears that the speaker in the "The Fierceness of Female" has also experienced an untying of the knot, and so attempts to reconnect by raising her pelvis to God. According to my interpretation, the final physical image in the poem is a personal and theological testament to the Incarnation; the speaker desires God to reveal the truth in and through her body.

Whether Sexton intentionally alluded to the conception of Christ in this poem, it is for me an icon of hope for the holy union of self and other, of self and God, and for the fruit of that union. The fruit of that union lies in the final supplication for the truth to smash through the long winter like flowers. What is the "fierceness of female"? For me it is the fierceness of the activities of the Spirit, which create and sustain love and new life—that which is best expressed by Sexton in the final fierce image of faith, hope, and love.<sup>46</sup>

The "fierceness of female" is also revealed in and through the image of Mary, who comes to communicate with the physical universe spiritual things. In order to communicate, her image evolves according to the needs, languages, and symbols recognizable to the people of particular historical and socio-cultural contexts. The ambiguity of contemporary images of Mary requires from us an even greater intuitive, a deeper, or more alert, receptivity to the persons and things revealed therein, and likewise, a more active participation on our behalf than would more easily recognizable portrayals. In other words, we must, through our creative receptivity penetrate the depths of these images so that their spirit may be revealed.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Sexton, "When Man Enters Woman," in *The Complete Poems*, p. 428. Originally published in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion on female imagery of Spirit, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 83.