"I AM THE ANDROGYNE": REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH, ANNE SEXTON AND ADRIENNE RICH.

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I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the lids
of the newborn child.

"The Stranger" (Rich 1973:19)

Contemporary women poets often write about woman's identity from the point of view of gender and of language. Though the speaker's gender in Adrienne Rich's "The Stranger" is not specified —"walking as I've walked before / like a man, like a woman, in the city" (Rich 1973: 19)— the quotation I am going to discuss in this essay can be understood as referring to female identity, not only because this is a pervasive theme in Rich's poetry, but because the poem conveys ideas that are central to women's writing, both theoretical and creative, in our time.

The first term of the definition, "I am the androgyne," can be associated with what E. Ann Kaplan calls "utopian" postmodernism, derived from feminism, deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis: "a thinking that transcends the . . . binarisms of Western philosophical, metaphysical and literary traditions" (Kaplan 1988: 5). One of these binarisms is the opposition between the feminine and the masculine. As Hélène Cixous puts it,

Where is she?

Activity / passivity,
Sun / Moon,
Culture / Nature,

Day / Night,

Father / Mother,
Head / heart,
Intelligible / sensitive,
Logos / Pathos.

. . .

Man
—
Woman (Cixous 1980a: 90)

The concepts and values associated with "Man" have traditionally been considered as models, and therefore woman becomes man's "other," his negative image.

In "The Stranger" these dualities are rejected as "dead language" and replaced by the concept of androgyny, which does not necessarily involve bisexuality, but is rather a means of transcending philosophical and cultural oppositions that for centuries have trapped women into restricting roles. Virginia Woolf was among the first female writers to argue that the artist's mind should be androgynous, including both masculine and feminine qualities. Otherwise, "The vision becomes too masculine or it becomes too feminine; it loses its perfect integrity and, with that, its most essential quality as a work of art" (Woolf 1979: 48). Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory that the child, either biologically male or female, inhabits the semiotic "chora" before gaining access to the symbolic order seems to run along similar lines: "The semiotic . . . precedes all unities, binary oppositional structures and hierarchical forms of organization" (Grosz 1989: 43) and emerges in adult discourse, and especially in poetic discourse in the form of disruptive, irrational, subversive speech patterns that defy the symbolic.

Yet, despite the fact that the semiotic is shared by both men and women, French feminists have often emphasized women's difficulties in gaining access to the symbolic, for psychological reasons —as Freud argued—, but especially for political reasons, since the patriarchy actively alienates women from the language of the Law. In this sense, and using Kristeva's words, "the pre-established harmony of primal androgyny" is invalidated, and women and men should reach "an acknowledgment of what is irreducible, of the irreconcilable interest of both sexes in asserting their differences" (Kristeva 1986: 184). Thus, a second question emerges: what kind of language is available for women to express themselves and to construct their own identity? In Rich's poem, the answer has at least four implications:

1) Woman is defined by "the lost noun," which could be equated with silence in Elaine Showalter's account of "muted" culture:

> dominant groups control the forms or structures in which consciousness can be articulated. Thus muted groups must mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures. Another way of putting it would be to say that language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it (Showalter 1986: 262).

Consequently, if women have no access to the dominant order, they must remain both unnamed and silent. In Alicia Suskin Ostriker's words, women writers often use images of "nonexistence, invisibility, muteness, blurredness, deformity" to describe themselves (Ostriker 1986: 10). However, one of the projects of feminism, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, is to give voice to the self: in Audre Lorde's words, "If we don't name ourselves we are nothing" (quoted by Ostriker 1986: 59).

2) Woman is defined by "the verb surviving only in the infinitive." This relates to Luce Irigaray's argument that

> the language of the female has nothing to do with the syntax which we have used for centuries, namely, that constructed according to the following organization: subject, predicate, or: subject, verb, object. For female sexuality cannot be subsumed under he concept of subject. Which brings into question all the syntactical norms... (Irigaray 1990: 82)

The "verb surviving / only in the infinitive" in Rich's poem suggests the supposedly undefinable quality of women's language, its instability. According to Cixous, woman's writing "can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours" (Cixous 1980b: 259)

Such a theory of language has received abundant criticism, even from feminist quarters. Kristeva, for instance, argues that "it is all too easy to pass from the search for *difference* to the denegation of the symbolic. The latter is the same as to remove the 'feminine' from the order of language" (Kristeva 1986: 11). Though it is probably an exaggeration to describe the concept of "feminine writing" as "a high-falutin version of the sexist view that women babble" (T. Eagleton 1986: 215), there is no empirical evidence of a "genderlect" for women (Cameron 1990a: 24), and even if there was, it could be argued that women need to command "male" syntax in order to fight against oppression: "politically speaking, it is only the symbolic, a new symbolism, a new law, that can challenge the dominant law" (Mitchell 1986: 102).

3) As a corollary of this definition of women's identity through "feminine language," women's "name" is "written under the lids of the newborn child." Feminine language being associated with the semiotic, and the semiotic with the maternal, woman is defined in terms of her biology. The quote from "The Stranger" suggests that women may find an identity through motherhood, which to Kristeva, for instance, is the only possibility for them to have a validated position in the symbolic —she studies the

semiotic transgression in avant-garde literature by men, but when she writes about women in such essays as "Stabat Mater" (Kristeva 1986a: 160-186) or "Women's Time" (Kristeva 1986c: 187-213) her theme is motherhood. In Showalter's opinion, "some theorists seem to have accepted the *metaphorical* implications of female biological difference in writing" (Showalter 1986: 250), and this may become a new restriction to the female creator.

4) On the other hand, the allusion to the "newborn" in Rich's poem can be interpreted in a wider sense as a metaphor for individuation, woman giving birth to her own self unhampered by male definitions of femininity and acquiring creative power in the process. Ostriker describes this process as

> an attempt by women to retrieve, from our myth of a dominating abstract father god who creates the universe ab nihilo, the figure on which (according to feminist historians of early religion) that god was originally based —the female creatrix. (Ostriker 1986: 219)

This creatrix reunites and integrates gender polarities and is therefore androgynous to some extent.

All these views on female identity and language subvert traditional gender polarities. Yet, as I have tried to show, their implications are contradictory: androgyny can be interpreted as creating either silence or an overflow of irrational language, and transcending gender may lead to asserting a kind of femininity not totally dissimilar from that imposed by tradition. In this respect, the quote I am discussing here mirrors some of the contradictions existing in feminist thinking since the late 1960's and is relevant to contemporary poetry written by women, where the question of female identity becomes central.

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In the following sections of this essay I am going to illustrate the different theories of gender and language I have outlined above with reference to the work of three influential American women poets belonging to the same generation: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich. Plath died in 1963, that is to say just before the emergence of contemporary feminism, and therefore her views on poetry as expressed in her work were not directly influenced by these theoretical issues. Sexton died in 1974 and admitted to having been strongly influenced by Plath (Sexton 1985a: 93). She was familiar and sympathetic with "women's lib" (Sexton 1985b: 197-201), though this kind of feminism became part of her life only when she had been writing poetry for years. As to Rich, her career from the late sixties has been closely connected with feminism, which she has not only been influenced by, but which she has helped shape through her activist involvement and her poetic practice. Nevertheless, however different from each other, Plath, Sexton and Rich share an interest in the problem of identity, which to them is linked to both gender and language.

SYLVIA PLATH

Plath started her poetic career within a male tradition. She worked at intricate metrical and rhyming patterns and her poems were consequently trapped by sophisticated forms (Nims 1970: 136-152). To her, poetry was a highly rational, controlled task, and the concept of poetry expressed in many of her early poems relates to the Yeatsian ideal of art as superior to life: the apprentice in the art of poetry is advised to "metamorphose the mollusk / of vague vocabulary / with structural discipline: / stiffen the ordinary malleable mask / to the granite grin of bone" (306).

Yet even at this early stage tensions can be detected. Masculine, ordering reason and feminine emotion and intuition are presented as fighting against each other, and the poet is therefore "racked between / the fact of doubt, the faith of dream" (308). As Plath's poetry develops, these two opposing sets of values become more specifically gendered. Traditional femininity is associated with fertility and creativity in many poems, and upheld as more positive than the masculine principle. In "Two Sisters of Persephone," for instance, the masculine sister who "works problems on / A mathematical machine" is seen as involved in a "barren enterprise" (31) and defined as "no woman" (32), while the other sister is associated with "pollen" and "Grass-couched in her labor's pride, / She bears a king" (32). She is an Earth Mother figure, and this figure is a model of female creativity in Plath's early poetry. Paradoxically, though, Plath's intellectual control over language is closer to that of the masculine woman in "Spinster," who sets "a barricade of barb and check" (50) against the "babel" (49) of feminine, fertile nature.

As a result, the masculine / feminine polarity creates tensions, often violent ones in Plath's poetry. In "The Shrike" for instance, an earth-bound wife feels envious of her husband's "royal dreams" (42), the life of the spirit from which she feels alienated, and she finally tries to destroy him. Though in other early poems, such as "Wreath for a Bridal" (44-45) the union between the male and the female appears as fertile, Plath's early female figures often feel uncomfortable within the boundaries of gender. The woman in "Crystal Gazer," for instance, wants "To govern more sight than given to a woman / By wits alone" (55), though her aspirations lead her to a vision of destruction and sterility

Consequently, from the start of her poetic career Plath often uses images of sexual ambivalence in order to transcend gender polarities. The angel is one of these images. In "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" the "skeptical," rational speaker waits for "the angel, / For that rare, random descent" (57) of the visionary. The angel is sexless, but it is also connected with female fertility since it was an angel, Gabriel, who, according to the Christian tradition, announced Christ's birth to Mary. In the above-mentioned "Wreath for a Bridal" the lovers are "bedded like angels, two burn one in fever" (45), the masculine and the feminine fusing and being reconciled.

However, the androgynous angel's beneficial powers are denied in Plath's later poetry. In "The Zoo Keeper's Wife" angels create "sheer boredom" (155), and in "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices" "the cold angels" are masculine, identified with "the abstractions" (177). Far from transcending masculine and feminine cliches, the angel's sexlessness, which has traditionally been expected from women, becomes oppressive. In this respect the angel could be equated with the virginal moon-Mary in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (172-173) and with the sterile "other" that Plath's female personae often struggle with, for instance in "The Rival" —where the rival woman is "White and blank" like the moon, "annihilating" (166)— or in "The Other," in which the persona's aggressive fertility —"Navel cords, blue-red and lucent, / Shriek from my belly like arrows, and these I ride"— is opposed to the other woman's sterility or moon-like "womb of marble" (202).

In Judith Kroll's words, the mythical moon-goddess symbolizes "the cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth; and the female functions of menstruation, and fertility or barrenness. And she is symbol of the origins of poetic inspiration" (Kroll 1976: 39) The moon in Plath's poetry can be considered androgynous to the extent that it reunites polarities: it is related to the menstrual cycle and therefore to female fertility and conventional femininity, yet it is also white, pure, cold, sexless and sterile, and these qualities are associated with masculine rationality and control in Plath's poetry. They are masculine characteristics in another sense, too: they are part of the masculine ideal of virginal womanhood.

Plath's women cannot fully identify with either side of the moon, and their attempts to heal the split between the two sometimes lead them to death —in "Edge" "The woman is perfected" (272) because she has given up the struggle and has yielded to the static, barren aspect of the moon, usually associated with silence. For instance, in "Barren Woman" the moon is "Blank-faced and mum as a nurse" (157). Yet this is not the only way in which the drama of gender is performed in Plath's poetry. More often the women in her poems achieve an aggressively feminine identity that fuses the motherly and the phallic, feminine fertility and masculine power.

Such a fusion is suggested in an early poem, "Ouija" in which an "old god" (77), identifiable with Pan in "Dialogue over a Ouija Board" (276-286) symbolizes the poet. Pan can be seen as an androgynous figure in that he is half man, half beast, that is to say a mixture of rationality (traditionally masculine) and instinct (traditionally feminine). Yet this androgynous god does not pay homage to the angel "Gabriel" but to a female, "the rotten queen with saffron hair" (77), who, like the protagonist of Plath's "Lady Lazarus," is a "bawdy queen of death" (77). Lady Lazarus's language is a chaotic "shriek" (246), and poetry under the influence of the "rotten queen" is also irrational, "a marriage with the mire," "words" that the god "dribbles" (77). As a poetic muse, the "rotten queen" inspires the subversive, surreal language that feminist critics came later to associate with "feminine writing," and also the language characteristic of Plath's later poetry.

A gain in power compensates for this loss of "masculine" articulateness and control. While it is true that in such poems as "The Arrival of the Bee Box" the "unintelligible syllables" (212) of the feminine mind become threatening to the persono who aspires to order, in Plath's late poetry, especiolly in the poems of the bee sequence, the violence of the feminine unconscious becomes fertile. In the bee poems this fertility is symbolized by the figure of the Queen Bee. While remaining assertively feminine, the Queen Bee is androgynous to the extent that she reconciles polarities. In Lynda K. Bundtzen's words, "The bee colony offers a double image of femininity . . . adequate to Plath's conflicted feelings towards her womanhood and her own creative power as an artist" (Bundtzen 1983: 186). The Queen Bee stands between the conventionally masculine drone and the feminine drudge.

As the persona's "alter ego," she is the protagonist of "Stings," a poem about female identity: "I / have a self to recover, a queen." (215). The self is recovered at the price of death —the death of the old false gendered selves—, yet an impression of power and life is conveyed: "Now she is flying / More terrible than she ever was, red / Scar in the sky, red comet / Over the engine that killed her— / The mausoleum, the wax house" (215). She is both "red comet" and "red scar," penis and vagina, both destructive and creative. In "Ariel," similarly, the female "I" is an "arrow" sexually penetrating "the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning" (240), and striving for rebirth, associated with language and childbirth —"The child's cry" (239). As Jo Brans points out, the persona of "Ariel" is "metaphorically somehow both sperm and womb, the creation autogenetic" and, in general, the poems of *Ariel* "show the creator while working to be androgynous" (Brans 1988: 216). Like "A Birthday Present," where the woman envisages self-mothering after phallic penetration —"And the knife not carve, but enter / Pure and clean as the cry of a baby, / And the universe slide from my side" (207), these poems enact an encounter between the masculine and the feminine. This encounter is violent and deadly, but from it an empowered female self may emerge.

ANNE SEXTON

Similar tensions between the masculine and the feminine, between the control of silence and the disorder of speech can be detected in the work of Anne Sexton. As Alicia Ostriker points out, "Her early poems before she hits her stride tend to be too stiff, her late ones tend to be shapeless" (Ostriker 1988: 265). The apparent shapelessness of her language is a reaction to the restrictions of gender, a rebellion against the masculine principle of order imposed on the female poet —in "Said the Poet to the Analyst," for instance, the female persona's words are "like swarming bees" (12)[2] whose feminine fertility and luxuriance the male analyst wants to check. Like Plath, Sexton searches for a subversive female identity.

Sexton's rebelliousness against traditional femininity begins early on in her poetry. In "The Farmer's Wife," for instance, the woman does not dare voice her complaints against the man, but aspires to "living / her own self in her own words" (19-20). The masculine and the feminine are unreconcilable opposites in several poems. In "The Black Art," for instance, the female writer's art is based on feeling and domestic life and includes "cycles and children," while male writing comes from the intellect, "erections" and the public world of politics, economy and war. The union between the feminine "I" and the masculine "you" is sterile: "when we marry, / the children leave in disgust." (89). In "Hurry Up Please It's Time" Sexton will suggest that gender polarities are more a result of social conditioning than something inherent in sexual difference — "I have swallowed an orange, being woman. / You have swallowed a ruler, being man. / Yet waiting to die we are the same thing." (385). Yet this is not Sexton's standard view of gender. Her poems are usually spoken by a woman in her roles of mother, daughter, wife or lover, and her search for identity is closely allied to her attempts to define femininity, either as opposed or in relation to masculinity.

In trying to define her female self, Sexton tends to adopt two main positions. On the one hand, she presents, like Plath, female fertility as a model of womanhood and of creativity, partly using traditional notions of femininity and motherhood, yet adding to them an emphasis on the sexual and the erotic that has often been absent from tradition. On the other hand, and like Plath too, Sexton explores the concept of androgyny as a means of transcending gender.

In Estella Lauter's words, some moments in Sexton's poetry are "affirmations of female creativity and sexuality as principles 'heavy' enough to counter death or God" (Lauter 1988: 155). One of the poems in which female creativity is most explicitly affirmed is "In Celebration of my Uterus," where the uterus becomes a metaphor for poetic creativity: "let me sing / for the supper, / for the kissing, / for the correct / yes." (183). This "yes" is the language of female identity asserting itself against imposed silence —"They said you were immeasurably empty / but you are not" (181), "I sing for you. I dare to live" (182). In "For the Year of the Insane" a feminine, motherly figure, Mary, is "The giver of breath" (132) and of language that may rescue the female poet from "the domain of silence." In a much later poem, "Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost," a persona identifiable with the poet seeks union with Mary in order to regain creativity —"I take the yellow papers / and I write on them / but they crumble like men's ashes" (456). Mary is the "Gentle Mother" associated with the fertilizing "bee" (457). Through identification with her the poet wishes to "be born again / into something true" (457), possibly a new creative female self.

Yet the motherly principle is not always so fertile. In "March 7th," for instance, the female creator has an alter ego, a "toad": "She is knitting up a womb, / knitting up a baby's foot" (601), and yet she is not a true mother but a threatening "mother-in-law" (602) preventing her from writing. Similarly, the female body becomes oppressive in

"The Poet of Ignorance," not a source of identity but a trap from which the speaker wants to be freed: "Perhaps I am no one. / True, I have a body / and I cannot escape from it" (434). She has "an animal," "a crab" (434) inside her which can be interpreted as a female self that she cannot either give birth to or reconcile with God, the male principle: "Perhaps God is only a deep voice / heard by the deaf, / I do not know" (434). In "The Consecrating Mother," too, the feminine principle becomes unreachable: "I could not define her, / I could not name her mood, her locked-up faces" (555).

As a result, Sexton often "seeks connections with a masculine god; she no longer projects her own feminine images into a vision of a patterned, containing and loving universe" (Demetrakopoulos 1988b: 358). The connection with the masculine principle is often attempted through androgyny in Sexton's poetry. In "Consorting with Angels," for instance, the persona wants to transcend gender: "I was tired of being a woman," "I was tired of the gender of things" (111). She dreams of a city were "the nature of angels went unexplained, / no two made in the same species / . . . each one like a poem obeying itself." In this dream, androgyny is associated with power and with poetry. The poet gets rid of gender: "and I lost my common gender and my final aspect," "I was not a woman anymore, / not one thing or the other" (112). Yet the allusion to Joan's death, the image of chains, and the reference to Christ in the final lines —"I'm no more a woman / than Christ was a man"— relate androgyny to martyrdom. The androgynous self appears more as a mystical utopia than as a real option.

The androgynous self is similarly defeated in "To Lose the Earth" where a piper, a possible alter ego of the poet, is both a female creator, or "midwife," and an androgynous figure: "He is both a woman / and a man." The cave he inhabits is similar to a womb, from which a renewed self may be born. Yet an enigmatic male dwarf seems to frustrate this rebirth. "He is the other half" (125) and therefore creates division rather than integration. His "song" is violent and unmusical, and he "will not listen" (125).

In "Rumpelstiltskin" the dwarf is androgynous like the piper in "To Lose the Earth," but his androgyny is identified with sexlessness —he has a "no-sex voice" (234) — and sterility — "no child will ever call me Papa" (234)—, and totally rejected. He is biologically male, and his apparent androgyny masks a barren masculinity. Significantly, he threatens to dispossess the feminine queen of her child, her creation. Yet the queen, like a poet in control of language, manages to name the dwarf, who then becomes split: "one part soft as a woman, / one part a barbed hook, / one part papa, / one part Doppelgänger." (237). Thus, by destroying the androgynous dwarf through language, the queen becomes powerful. As Stephanie Demetrakopoulos argues, "The current theories on the healthy arrival of androgynous personality to the mature person is belied by her [Sexton's] canon" (Demetrakopoulos 1988a: 139). Sexton has an ambiguous position to the issue of androgyny. In "The Other," for instance, the masculine Doppelgänger is both "My brother. My spouse" and "My enemy. My lover" (317).

Sexton's wavering between asserting a feminine identity and acknowledging the androgyny of a split self relates to the conflicting images of language that appear in her poems. As I argued in relation to "In Celebration of my Uterus," Sexton sometimes expresses faith in "the possibilities of the word" ("Letter Written during a January Northeaster," 91), a word that comes from a strong feminine self. Writing is like giving birth in "That Day," where female "blood" "brings forth a tower," the "reconstructed city" (180) of a unified self.

Yet this unified self is often aborted: "I am filling the room / with the words from my pen. / Words leak out of it like a miscarriage. / . . . Yet there is silence. / Always silence. / Like an enormous baby mouth" ("The Silence," 319). The alternative to this silence is accepting to some extent the fragmentation of the self. This is Sexton's attitude in "The Civil War": "I am torn in two / but I will conquer myself" (418). The God of the poem can be identified with the persona's self that "feels like thousands" and who is "whore," "old man" and "child" (418-419), possessing all genders. The combination of all these selves produces poetry, "an anthem, / a song of myself" (419).

Yet Sexton is conscious of the dangers of this position. In "Talking to Sheep," for instance, "the wise medical men," embodying the masculine principle, offer only two options to the female poet: "to cry *Baa*" and forsake rationality as women have traditionally been expected to do, or to remain silent —"not let a word or a deadstone sneak out" (485). The poet chooses the first option, "the multi-coloured, / crowded voices" (485) that give expression to a self that is both fragmented and beyond gender —"The transvestite," "My mother," "My father," "My great Aunt" (486). However lively this "transvestite" self appears, though, dissolution of identity may follow: "my mind plays simple-minded, / plays dead-woman in neon" (486).

ADRIENNE RICH

In 1974 Rich envisaged "a poetry which could affirm woman or the female, which could affirm a bisexual vision, or which could affirm a whole other way of being male and female" (Rich 1975b:113). All these possibilities are implicit in her poetry, as they were in the poetry of Plath or Sexton, and they emerged in her work as soon as she started to question gender polarities and the masculine language of rationality that had been the basis of her first two books.

Like Plath, Rich started writing within a male tradition (Rich 1975a: 90-98), using a tightly controlled and conventional language. Such poems as "At a Bach Concert" (6-7)[3] or "The Diamond Cutters" (20-21) present rational order and distancing from emotion as essential to art. Yet from the start several women in Rich's poetry fight against gender roles and male oppression —the protagonists of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (4) or "An Unsaid Word" (5) are instances of this— though their rebellion is more implicit than explicit.

For some time, however, Rich's models will remain masculine. In "The Roofwalker," for instance, Rich identifies with "a naked man fleeing" (49), and in "Antinous: The Diaries" (38-39) her persona is a male, though homosexual. A similar male alter ego is Orion, whom she defines as her "fierce half-brother" ("Orion," 79). This animus or masculine principle within herself is nevertheless a source of sterility, and the female speaker fails to give birth to an integrated self: "a dead child born in the dark" (79).

In later poems Rich will try to achieve what Claire Keyes calls "a radical sense of the nature of the self which points beyond the 'androgynous wholeness' of Jungian psychology toward a feminist vision where the self is not locked into gender-specific roles" (Keyes 1986: 49). Yet androgyny is the first step towards this vision, and in several poems ("The Stranger" among them) Rich searches for an androgynous self. This is the case with "I Am in Danger—Sir—," where Emily Dickinson becomes an androgynous model for the poet: "you, woman, masculine / in single-mindedness" (71). Yet androgyny creates "silence" in Emily's life, and though this silence appears as positive, the opposite of the "spoiled language" of the patriarchy, Rich will later on emphasize the need of an assertive voice for women rather than this kind of subdued duplicity. Androgyny is still upheld in "Diving into the Wreck" —"I am she: I am he" (164), but she will eventually dismiss it: "There are words I cannot choose again: *humanism androgyny*" ("Natural Resources," 262). At this point, as often in her poetry, she considers feminine fertility a model of creativity: "to help the earth deliver" (263).

Yet Rich's attitudes to femininity, identity and language are no less complex than Plath's or Sexton's. Though she often expresses belief in the capacity of women to mother themselves and create a new, powerful sort of femininity, she is also aware of the difficulties: "and pregnant women approach the white tables of the hospital / with quiet steps / and smile at the unborn child / and perhaps at death" ("Poem of Women," 91). Similarly, she believes in women's capacity to produce coherent, forceful language —"Only were there is language there is world" ("The Demon Lover," 84)—, and sometimes she presents this language as related to the rhythms of the female body: "Take the word of my pulse, loving and ordinary" ("Implosions," 95). Yet many of her poems show how self-mothering and identification with the body can bring about disintegration of the self and of language: "The strain of being born / Over and over has torn your smile into pieces" ("Leaflets," 103). In "Nightbreak," for instance, she enacts disintegration through imagery and through the blank spaces within the lines. She strives to integrate the broken self, but silence, not language is the outcome: "Time for pieces to move / dumbly back toward each other" (99).

This fragmentation of the self and of language can be politically subversive — "Revolution is poetry," she argues in "Ghazals. Homage to Ghalib" (107)—, yet transcending it is the next step:

this word I paste together
like a child fumbling

with paste and scissors
this writing in the sky with smoke

this silence

this lettering chalked on the ruins
this alphabet of the dumb

this feather held to lips
that still breathe and are warm.

("Photograph of the Unmade Bed," 136)

The word, however, does not always win over silence and over chaotic "feminine" language, and going back to a supposed primal, unconscious female language does not necessarily empower women: "Go back so far there is another language / go back far enough the language / is no longer personal // these scars bear witness but whether to repair / or to destruction / I no longer know" ("Meditations for a Savage Child," 181).

As a consequence of these doubts, a new attitude to the issue of female language emerges in Rich's poetry of the late 1960's and early 70's. This attitude can be summarized by two lines of "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children": "this is the oppressor's language // yet I need it to talk to you" (117). Rich acknowledges here women's need to use some of the weapons that the the patriarchy has used against them. This attitude accounts for the limits that Rich sets to experimentalism in her poetic practice (she remains an articulate, reasoning poet) and for her emphasis on women's education —in "Education of a Novelist," for instance, she blames Ellen Glasgow for not teaching her black servant-friend to read and write ("But you never taught her," 315). Moreover, Rich's suspicion of linguistic experiment has led her to place language in a less central position when it comes to defining woman's identity.

In an essay on Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich argues the following:

> Poetic language —the poem on paper— is a concretization of the poetry of the world at large, the self, and the forces within the self; and those forces are rescued from formlessness, lucidified, and integrated in the act of writing poems. But there is a more ancient concept of the poet, which is that she is endowed to speak for those who do not have the gift of language, or to see for those who —for whatever reasons— are less conscious of what they are living through. (Rich 1979: 119)

Very often in Rich's poetry female identity results not from constructing an isolated self, but from the female self's involvement with women as a group. In "The Spirit of Place," for instance, identity for women is inseparable from solidarity in a political

sense: "It was not enough to name ourselves anew / While the spirit of the masters / calls the freed woman to forget the slave" (298).

As a consequence, though Rich continues to consider specific forms of creativity for women that are related to female natural fertility —"our ancient art of making out of nothing" ("Turning the Wheel," 307)—, her emphasis now is on community and power rather than on biological, psychological or cultural definitions of woman: "I am not the wheatfield / nor the virgin forest" ("From an Old House in America," 216). Her definition now takes into account geography, history and community as well as gender: "I am an American woman" (215). To this definition new elements will be added throughout Rich's poetic career. One is lesbianism —"I am a lesbian" ("Mother-in-Law," 292)—, which to Rich is not only a matter of sexual choice, but a feminist commitment to women , "woman identification and woman bonding" (Rich 1986a: 23) Another element of the definition is Jewishness, a theme central to Rich's latest two books, *Your Native Land, Your Life* and *Time's Power*.

Probably as a result of considering nationality, historical inheritance and race, not only gender, as central to the self, Rich seems to have recovered an interest in the male's search for identity: "She is listening for shreds of music. / He is searching for his name" ("Poetry: I," 1986b: 66). For the first time in many years men in Rich's poetry have a positive part to play in changing society and in destroying gender divisions: "we who refuse to be women and men as women and men are chartered" ("Yom Kippur 1984," 1986b: 78).

Time's Power, Rich's last book to date, has a much less self-assured tone than some of the poet's previous work. The definitions of the self she attempts bear some resemblance to earlier definitions of the female self ridden by either silence or inarticulateness:

Unnameable by choice.
So why am I out there, trying
to read your name in the illegible air?

—vowel washed from a stone,
solitude of no absence,
forbidden face-to-face

—trying to hang these wraiths
of syllables, breath
without echo, why?

("Turning," 1989: 55)

The complexities of the female self are now related to the effects of time and the loss of memory in all human beings. If the word "universal" did not have sexist connotations —the universal has traditionally been confused with the masculine—, it might be applied to many poems of the book. Though her feminism continues to shape

her poetry, Rich presents here the search for identity as a common human pursuit in which not only gender, but community and history are involved.

CONCLUSIONS

Much of the complexity and richness of the poems I have discussed in this essay probably relates to their authors' passionate search for an identity as women. To Plath, Sexton and Rich, poetry is a means of giving birth to themselves, to use an image which is central to their writing, and therefore both gender and language are important themes in their poetry. They all started their literary careers within the framework of a male poetic tradition, and their early writing, especially in the case of Plath and Rich, shows an allegiance to rationality, order and formal restraint, that is to say to values that have traditionally been labelled as masculine. Moreover, in their early work gender is conceived of in terms of unreconciled polarities, and in many of their poems women are "muted" because the only possibility of expression offered to them is the language of masculinity, one that denies woman's feelings, her body and her unconscious desires. Yet even at this early stage Plath, Sexton and Rich rebel against the restrictions of conventional femininity, and their use of gendered images and of poetic language gradually becomes more subversive.

They adopt similar strategies. As far as their use of images of womanhood is concerned, they sometimes present a biologically fertile, feminine archetype as a model of artistic creativity. Although this Earth Mother figure is inspired by traditional myths of femininity, she is active rather than passive, and powerful rather than oppressed. Often, however, Plath, Sexton and Rich show the Earth Mother's fertility as threatened or defeated by masculine destructiveness, and attempt to create an androgynous self that combines feminine fertility with masculine aggression and power. In Plath's poetry the androgynous self is born in only a few poems, and then only at the price of violence and death. In Sexton's the androgynous ideal often masks a barren sort of masculinity, or is more a utopia than a real option for women, and the same applies to the androgyne in Rich's poetry. However, both the Earth Mother type and the androgyne play important roles in the work of these three poets, since they serve to challenge traditional views on gender.

These poets' attitude to language and their use of poetic language in their work runs along similar lines. Their early restraint gives way to experimentalism in later writing. Nevertheless, even in their more experimental poetry their views on language, like those on gender, remain complex and give rise to tensions. Sometimes they associate female identity with silence. Sometimes they define feminine language as overflowing, surreal language originating in woman's unconscious and in her chaotic body. In other poems, though, the fertile female persona produces more assertive and coherent words. Their vision of identity also wavers between the unified female self

they aspire to achieve, capable of powerful, articulate language, and a fragmented, inarticulate self that is nevertheless poetically productive. Similarly, the androgynous identity that they sometimes envisage can be identified with a split, incoherent self producing irrational language, or with a self doomed to duplicity or silence.

Accordingly, the poems of Plath, Sexton and Rich are full of images of silence and of chaotic sound, as well as of homages to "the word" and attempts at assertive, forceful language. Plath's *Ariel* illustrates these contradictions: the screams, birth cries and "unintelligible syllables" described through imagery contrast with the conciseness and bareness of Plath's style in the book. The masculine symbolic and the feminine semiotic are opposite poles that these poets try to integrate.

Harmony between these opposites or between conflicting views on female identity in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich is seldom, or never, achieved. In this sense, the contradictions in the work of these poets parallel those of feminist criticism in the last two or three decades. Many of their poems, both in terms of language and in terms of theme, could be related to the concept of *écriture féminine* in contemporary French feminism, but on other occasions they search for form in more "masculine" ways since they are aware of the powerlessness that a fragmented self and fragmented language may imply. Self-mothering is a central concern in their work, as it is in much feminist theoretical writing of our time and, like many feminist critics, they sometimes present this self-mothering in the literal, biological sense, and sometimes as a metaphor for individuation that does not exclude masculine aspects of the self.

Rich's case is slightly different. In recent years she has come to regard language as less central to a definition of the self, and to consider involvement with community and history as a source of identity for both women and men. Her poetry has always been more directly political than Plath's or Sexton's, and therefore more in tune with the English and American feminist tradition than with current post-structuralist theories inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis or French feminist thinking. Her position can probably be related to the first wave of feminism in this century in that, like the feminists of that period, she is intensely preoccupied by political power, its effects on women, and the ways in which women, while keeping their identity, can appropriate power for their own purposes. To her, finding an identity for women is not a final aim, but a step towards women's liberation, and the latter depends on solidarity among women and on their capacity to fight patriarchal oppression in practical, not just theoretical, terms.

Nevertheless, Rich shares with Plath and Sexton, and with most contemporary feminists, a subversive attitude to gender. Moreover, like Plath and Sexton, and unlike some feminist theorists, she has usually refused to define women in one way only. Although feminist criticism is, in general, varied and anti-dogmatic, theoretical writing lends itself more to establishing polarities: "feminine" versus "patriarchal" language, the semiotic versus the symbolic, the biological or psychological versus the cultural or

political... In poetry, however —or at least in the work of the poets I have discussed here— such categories tend to collapse. Plath's, Sexton's and Rich's explorations of gender, language and identity lead to the idea that woman is undefinable:

> If you think you can grasp me, think again:
> my story flows in more than one direction
> a delta springing from the riverbed
> with its five fingers spread.
> (Adrienne Rich, "Delta," 1989: 32)

This is probably their most interesting challenge to a tradition of masculine thinking that has tried to define women in rigid ways while men were more frequently allowed the privilege of diversity and change.

NOTES

1. All the quotes from poems in the Plath section of this essay are from Plath 1981.
2. The quotes from poems in the Sexton section of this essay are from Sexton 1981.
3. Most quotes from poems in the Rich section of this essay are from Rich 1984. When dealing with poems not included in this edition, I give the year of the volume they belong to.

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METODOLOGÍA SEMÁNTICA DE ANÁLISIS DE TEXTOS LITERARIOS

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1. OBJETIVOS

Hoy en día es posible admitir, de acuerdo con las ideas de Leo Spitzer, que el examen de los hechos del significado puede poner en evidencia aspectos importantes del pensamiento del autor de un determinado discurso (Albaladejo 1983: 161-62). Esto convierte el análisis lingüístico de la obra literaria —la cual está, además, estrechamente relacionada con los mecanismos de la lengua poética, para muchos una modalidad privilegiada de lenguaje (cfr. Kristeva 1981: 228-32)— en una de las aproximaciones a la misma potencialmente más fructíferas, a la vez que ayuda a explicar la tendencia actual a valorar positivamente los estudios lingüísticos de lo literario.

Tras el largo periodo de aislamiento mutuo de lingüística y literatura, en el presente estado de cosas, que es consecuencia de las investigaciones de los formalistas rusos y checos, de la Estilística y del *New Criticism* (García Berrio y Vera Luján 1977: 232-34) y, de forma significativa, de las teorizaciones expuestas en el Congreso de Indiana de 1958, la lingüística se considera, de manera generalizada, como la ciencia necesaria en la evolución de la crítica literaria, reconociéndosele el alto grado de rigor que aporta (Alcaraz 1990: 82). Esta situación permite revitalizar las tesis de Spitzer y, siguiendo a Lotman, que afirma que "la idea no está contenida en unas citas, incluso bien elegidas, sino que se expresa en toda la estructura artística", propugnar que "el pensamiento del escritor se realiza en una estructura artística determinada de la cual es inseparable" (Lotman 1982: 22, 23).

La necesaria relación de adecuación entre pensamiento y forma, que exige un acercamiento inmanentista a la obra literaria, es posible trasladarla al plano operativo