OVERTURNING THE "BOWLE OF CREAME": SOME REFLECTIONS ON INTERTEXTUALITY AND GENDER.[1]

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> *Her forehead yvory white*
> *Her cheeks lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,*
> *Her lips lyke cherryes charming men to byte,*
> *Her brest like to a bowle of creame uncrudded,*
> *Her paps lyke lyllies budded*
> *Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre.*
> Edmund Spenser, "Epithalamion".

Intertextuality as a term was first used in Julia Kristeva's "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966) and then in "The Bounded Text" (1966-67), essays she wrote shortly after arriving in Paris from her native Bulgaria[2]. The concept of intertextuality that she initiates postulates the text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices —instead of static products— are the focus of analysis. The "literary word," she writes in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," is "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings" (1980: 65). Developing Bakhtin's spatialization of literary language, she argues that "each word (text) is an intersection of other words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (1980: 66).

There are always other words in a word, other texts in a text. The concept of intertextuality requires, therefore, that we understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures. Rejecting the New Critical principle of textual autonomy, the theory of

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2.- In *Desire in Language*, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" is dated in 1966 and "The Bounded Text" in 1966-67; both of them appeared in her first volume of essays *Sèméiotiké. Recherches pour une sémanalyse* in 1969.

intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system.

From this initial approach, there have appeared a wide range of attitudes towards the concept of intertextuality and what it implies, to such an extent that it is practically impossible to deal with it wihout considering other related subjects or without taking into account the various contributions made by a large number of literary critics. One of the most immediate consequences of such a proliferation of intertextual theories has been the progressive dissolution of the text as a coherent and self-contained unit of meaning, which has led, in turn, to a shift of emphasis from the individual text to the way in which texts relate to one another.

Even though intertextuality is by no means a time-bound feature (the phenomenon, in some form, is at least as old as recorded human society), the twentieth century has proved to be a period especially inclined to it in all its cultural manifestations. While all authors re-write the work of predecessors, many contemporary writers *consciously* imitate, quote, plagiarize, parody... extensively. As Heinrich F. Plett (1992: 27) puts it, *ré-écriture* dominates *écriture* in twentieth-century literature: the image for writing has changed from original inscription to parallel script, and writers think less of writing origi- nally and more of re-writing. From this point of view, it is easy to understand why our century has wit- nessed such a proliferation of intertextual theories. They provide a wide range of perspectives from which to approach the complex subject of intertextuality.

Some critics, like Barthes, relate intertextuality to the poststructuralist notion of endless disper- sal of meanings, which are invariably generated by each and every text. Barthes' vision of intertex- tuality also highlights the frequent anonymity of the "sources" of intertextual quotations. The idea was implicit in Kristeva's discussion of the "absorption" of social texts, because the social may be thought of as the network of anonymous ideas, commonplaces, folk wisdom, and clichés that make up the background of one's life. This Barthes calls "the already read" (1990:160). But the "already read" in Barthes encompasses more than the idea that we all possess conventional knowledge whose sources we cannot recall. It extends towards a notion of the subject as "already read."

In contrast with the deconstructive path followed by Barthes, among others, critics like Michel Rif- faterre, Jonathan Culler and Gérard Genette have used intertextuality as a means to achieving greater interpretive certainty. In spite of the differences, their approaches are equally bent on establishing cer- tain limits to the intertextual scope of every particular text. Theirs is an attempt to delimit the defini- tions of intertextuality put forward by Kristeva, Derrida, Barthes, etc., in order to replace them with a notion more applicable to the practical analysis of texts. Genette's *Palimpsestes* (1962) is perhaps the best example of this concentration on the text as such.

Intertextuality has also been put at the service of political and historical projects, as in the case of *Rezeption-Ästhetik* and the school of critics associated with Michel Foucault. Although every text possesses countless points of intersection with other texts, these connections situate a work within the existing networks of power, simultaneously creating and disciplining the text's ability to signify (Fou- cault 1972). Foucault insists that we analyze the role of power in the production of textuality and of textuality in the production of power. This entails looking closely at those social and political institu- tions by which subjects are subjected, enabled and regulated in forming textual meanings. Even if his concept of culture as intersecting discourses has led him to deal with texts from a historical and ide- ological perspective, he has shown an almost complete disregard for gender issues. Historicist criticism in the eighties and nineties has generally attempted to correct this lacuna in Foucault's project, so much so as to suggest that historicist critics should begin by hyphenating race-class-gender.

This is also the stand adopted by oppositional criticisms. Under them, intertextuality acquires a new tinge derived from the belief that an adequate theory of criticism can only be developed by fully considering the art produced by women, by working people and by national minorities (Lauter, 1993: 242).

Just as Anette Kolodny contended that feminist theorists should revise Bloom's theory of influence[3], feminist and critics of colour have begun to rethink the notion of intertextuality. This has been the case with Barbara Johnson (1987: 124), for whom "questions of gender may enrich, complicate and even subvert the underlying paradigms of intertextuality theory." It hardly needs to be said that the work of decentering male-centred culture as it is expressed in language, literature, art and institutional configuration has always been a major concern of feminist criticism. For more than two decades now, feminist scholars have been reacting against the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others. Moreover, as Lillian S. Robinson (1993: 214) points out, the predominantly male authors in the canon have dealt with the female character and the relations between the sexes in a way that both reflects and reinforces sexist ideology. In this sense, feminist approaches can be said to have opened new and interesting possibilities for intertextual analyses. On the one hand, they have contributed to widening and enriching the intertextual space through the recovery of lost works by women, and the revaluation of disdained genres. On the other hand, they have emphasized alternative readings of the tradition, readings that re-interpret women's character, motivations, and actions, and that identify and challenge sexist ideology. By presenting classic works in a new light, feminist critics have shown how literary conventions shape, and are shaped by, social ideas.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to concentrate on the way in which intertextuality works in several poems, all of them on the subject of the female body. This fact inscribes them in a well-known poetic tradition, which acts as intertext. Some of these poems constitute a more or less direct illustration of the images and topics which characterize the Western male encomium on the female anatomy and, in particular, the breast. As I have shown somewhere else (Martínez, 1997), the view of woman they present is then subverted in a second group of poems, which turn the intertextual relationship they evoke into a tool to re-read and re-write (from a female perspective) a poetic genre against which they can eventually be said to react.

The first three passages –two by Ronsard, the last by Olivier de Magny– are used by Riffaterre[4] (1978: 82-86) as a means to explaining the notion of "ungrammaticality" as well as his own view of intertextuality and intertextual reading.

> Ha, seigneur dieu, que de grâces écloses
> Dans le jardin de ce sein verdelet,
> Enflent le rond de deux gazons de lait,
> Où des Amours les flèches sont encloses!
>   [...]
> Belle gorge d'alabastre, et vous chaste poictrine,
> Qui les Muses cachez en un rond verdelet:
> Tertres d'Agathe blanc, petits gazons de lait,
> Des Grâces le séjour, d'Amour et de Cyprine:
> Sein de couleur de liz et de couleur rosine.
> De veines marqueté, je vous vy par souhait
> Lever l'autre matin, comme l'Aurore fait
> Quand vermeille elle sort de sa chambre marine.
>   [...]

3.- There are no female figures against which a woman writer can react in an attempt to demarcate herself from them, since not only Bloom's but any literary canon among those traditionally proposed include no women writers. In addition, Bloom's theory reproduces very specifically the Oedipal conflict between *sons* and *fathers*, which makes it ultimately inapplicable to the case of women.
4.- Riffaterre's sources for these passages are the following (in the same order they are quoted): Ronsard, *Amours* [1553] , xli, ed. Laumonier (Paris: Société des textes français modernes), vol. 5, p. 109; *Sonnets pour Hélène* [1578] II, liii (vol. I, p. 321); Olivier de Magny, *Odes* [1559] (*Œuvres*, ed. Courbet, p. 126).

Et qui void ses petits tetons
Void de lait deux petits gazons
Ou bien deux boulettes d'ivoire.

(Ronsard 1) Ah Lord God, how many graces blossom / in the garden of this pretty green bosom / and swell the round of two milky lawns...

(Ronsard 2) Beautiful alabaster breasts, and chaste bosom, / who keep the Muses hidden in a pretty green circle; / mounds of white agathis, little lawns of milk / sojourn of the Graces, of Cupid and Cyprine Venus; / breasts the colour of lilies and the colour of rose, / inlaid with vein, it was my pleasure to see you / rise from the bed the other morning, like Dawn herself / when she comes forth rosy from her sea chamber.

(Magny) Whoever sees her little breasts / sees two little lawns of milk, / or else two little ivory balls.

These three passages belong in a poetic genre (the *blason*) whose basic rule is that every part of the female body must be celebrated. One required motif, and the most frequent, is the praise for the lady's snowy breast. As Riffaterre explains, the context of this convention is so well established, the details so unmodifiable, so predictable down to the colour of the bosom and the similes of laudation, the expectedness at all stages of description so strong, that "what hits us in all these three poems is truly startling: the image actualizing so familiar a motif contains in all three a contradictory representation of the much-extolled whiteness as green grass" (Riffatere, 1978: 82). The perception of such a representation as contradictory on the part of the reader occurs in a first stage of reading, which is naive, "mimetic" and yields what Riffaterre calls the "meaning" of a work. It is in the course of this reading that one encounters "ungrammaticalities" —difficulties, obscurities, undecidable moments, figurative language, any wording so shocking or incomprehensible that it prompts the reader to look elsewhere for the "significance" of the work, which emerges only in a second stage of reading, no longer lineal but comparative. Thus ambiguity exists temporarily, as a phase in the reading process that serves to alert the reader to the presence of an intertext, which will clear out the work's difficulties. These difficulties (or "ungrammaticalities") function as traces left by the absent intertext, as signs of an intertext to be completed elsewhere (Riffaterre, 1980: 625-27).

Following such a train of thought, Riffaterre proposes Alcina's portrait in Ariosto[5] as the intertext which solves the "ungrammaticalities" in Ronsard's and Magny's verses:

Bianca nieve e il bel collo, e'l petto lattte;
             [...]
Due pome acerbe, e pur d'ivorio fatte,
Vengon e van come onda al primo margo
             [...]
Non potria l'altre parti verder Argo:
Ben si può giudicar che corrisponde
A quel ch'appar di fuor quel che s'asconde.

White snow is the lovely neck, and milk the breast / [...] / two unripened apples, green yet ivory, move to and fro like a wave / [...] / Argus himself could not see the rest, / but you can judge that a match is / what is hidden for what is seen.

The image evoked by Ronsard and Magny (green breast, two round milk-lawns), far from being unjustified, derives quite logically from Ariosto's primary metaphor ("two unripe apples," *due pome acerbe*). In addition, this primary metaphor is linked with the others by a "garden" sememe: they all rely on the poetic view of the garden or the walled orchard (*locus amoenus*) as representing woman's most secret charms. Without breaking this link, the Italian "*pome acerbe*" ("unripe fruit") becomes

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5.- Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Canto 7, 14.

"*sein verdelet*" where the word *vert* (plus a -let suffix, which denotes a positive valorization of the word it modifies) means both unripe (*pas mûr*) and green in colour. But "*sein*," breast, cannot be any such colour. It is this wrong look in turn that determines the generation of "*gazons de lait*":

> ... on the one hand *gazon* [lawn] is an apt metaphor for the breasts in the love-garden complex, and yet we still need *de lait* [milky], incompatible with green grass, for without this modifier the reader may not recognize that the lawns stand for breasts. Yet the incompatibility is there only if the text is used as a reference to reality. The incompatibility vanishes once the text is read the way texts are built to be read, as a reference to its own models, to words further back down the line. (Riffaterre, 1978: 85)

Through these and other examples, Riffaterre shows the way in which, according to him, intertextuality should be used when "reading the way texts are built to be read," that is, comparatively. Clarifying though it may be, Riffaterre's intertextual analysis seems to tend, invariably, not to explore the various ways and moods in which every particular text relates to others but, rather, the manner in which that text can be submitted to the taken-for-granted authority of the one with which it is eventually made to "harmonize." Shocking images, ambiguities, obscure or provoking relationships, startling associations... are only temporary. The "ungrammatical" phase is to be succeeded by a second stage in which the text becomes smooth, docile, "domesticated." If the reader cannot reach this second stage, Riffaterre argues, s/he must at least *presuppose* it; s/he must presuppose an intertext which gives structural and semantic unity rather than fracturing the text under consideration.

Though applicable to some texts, Riffaterre's method falls short on other occasions, and it does so precisely because of that thrust towards clarification, reconciliation, harmony. It could even be argued that his priviliging of unity over fragmentation comes near to betraying the principle that lies at the core of intertextuality itself. Even though he reacts against the view of the text as a self-contained system, he dangerously reduces the variety of relationships that can be established between text and intertext. For, what happens when the discovery of an intertext on the part of the reader does not clear out the text's "ungrammaticalities" but makes them appear all the more "ungrammatical"? In those cases, the "ungrammaticalities" do not only reveal the existence of an intertext, as Riffaterre rightly points out, but also become the means by which the text defines itself as a negativity with reference to its intertext. Unable to resolve them, the intertext is made to co-exist with the text's "ungrammaticalities," which thus move from the margin in Riffaterre's scheme (they are mere hints, traces left by the intertext that simply disappear once the latter has been found out by the reader) to the centre: it is through its unsolved "ungrammaticalities" that the text qualifies itself as a reaction against or a subversion of its intertext. That the text can define itself in such a way does not seem to be a possibility contemplated by Riffaterre in his in-other-aspects useful theory. This has not been the case with other critics, though. Ross Chambers, for instance, approaches the subject in the following terms:

> Within [the literary] system, certain texts have become recognised, that is "canonised", and so come to stand for the hegemonic social forces, the system of power that gave them status. In proposing itself as "not-X" (where "X" is the intertextual referent), a text claims literary status, but simultaneously distinguishes itself as a negativity with respect to the canon, and in so doing distances from the socially marked discourses that, nevertheless, necessarily traverse it. (Chambers, 1990: 143)

This Chambers calls "'alter ego' relationships": the text defines itself by defining an intertext as that which it is not and, in similarly negative fashion, the text defines itself as text against its own discourse, with which it should not be identified (Chambers, 1990: 143). Thus we know that *Madame Bovary*, for instance, is not a clichéd text but a text "about" cliché, since it sets itself off intertextually from the stereotypes of a romantic literature of sentiment.

The fact that Chambers should mention the question of canons and hegemonic social forces seems to suggest that these "alter-ego" relationships can be successfully, if not exclusively, traced in most of the texts written by those who have traditionally been relegated to the margins of the Western capitalist white male system.

The passages from Ariosto, Ronsard and Magny, which I have quoted above in order to explain Riffatere's intertextual method of analysis, as well as the one from Spenser in the epigraph, belong to a poetic tradition that, for centuries, has repressed and objectified the figure of woman. The poems which integrate the genre of the *blason* invariably present the woman as the object of the male gaze, and pen. The man becomes the active agent that looks at and writes about the woman. By contrast, the woman is the one who is looked at and reduced to the different parts of her anatomy. Among these metonymic substitutions (the female body stands for the woman as a whole), the breast, as we have seen, occupies a privileged place.

The revaluation of the figure of woman by female authors have been made possible due to the actual participation of women in the literary conversation. Thus the static, objectlike perfection of the female breast as well as its luxurious quality become quite a different thing in poems like Anne Sexton's "The Breast" (1981: 175-76):

> A xylophone maybe with skin
> stretched over it awkwardly.
> Only later did it become something real,
> Later I measured my size against movie stars.
> I didn't measure up. Something between my
> shoulders was there. But never enough.

There is no way to reconcile the images of the breast in this poem with Spenser's "bowle of creame," Ariosto's "*pome acerbe*" or Ronsard's "*gazon de lait.*" Sexton's "something between my shoulders" recalls a poetic tradition (the poem's main intertext) which makes the image "ungrammatical," in Riffaterre's terms. That "ungrammaticality," however, amounts to a refusal to conform to the male poetic standards which traverse Sexton's poem and against which it defines itself. Thus the text acquires literary status by opposing a tradition that has set up the male ideal as a model against which every woman has to measure her size. Such a male ideal is represented in the poem by the movie stars the lyrical subject refers to. Her sense of disappointment and failure takes the reader beyond the female body and into that place between the shoulders from which the poetic voice speaks.

Other poets, like Fleur Adcock (1982: 92-93), react against the idealized images inherited from male fantasies by boldly defending a state of complete independence in which women can be themselves:

> I write in praise of the solitary act:
> of not feeling a tresspassing tongue
> forced into one's mouth, one's breath
> smothered, nipples crushed against the ribcage,
> and that metallic tingling
> in the chin set off by a certain odd nerve:
> unpleasure. Just to avoid those eyes would help.

The man's objectification of the female body comes near to rape, a violent act through which the man has silenced the woman by forcing a tresspassing tongue into her mouth and smothering her breath. Man "rounded" her breast in his poems, she felt her nipples crushed against the ribcage. The passive object of the male gaze becomes the subject that is to avoid "those eyes," *his* eyes. By bringing to light their discomfort, the lyrical subjects of this and the previous poem claim a self and a history, an interior of their own.

One further revision of the image of the white round breast occurs in the following poem by Lucille Clifton (1969):

> If I stand in my window
> naked in my own house
> and press my breasts
> against my windowpane

> like black birds pushing against glass
> because I am somebody
> in a New Thing
> and if the man come to stop me
> in my own house
> naked in my own window
> saying I have offended his
> Gods
> let him watch my black body
> push against my own glass
> let him discover self
> let him run naked through the streets
> crying
> praying in tongues.

The green colour associated with the breast in Ronsard and Magny becomes black in Clifton's poem. Black birds replace the more than typical white doves and no reference whatsoever (as in "*gazon de lait*") is made to the whiteness which has traditionally characterized such a part of the female anatomy. Moreover, the "ungrammaticality" becomes all the more radical on account of the fact that the breast's blackness is the opposite, the "negative" of the European image.

The poem defies conventions just as the lyrical subject adopts a defying attitude herself. She is "somebody in a New Thing," strong, determined, whole, in control of mind and body. The female becomes the possessor rather than the object of possession: it is *my* body, *my* window and *my* house that she talks about (the word "my" is repeated eight times throughout the poem). She can indeed be said to have killed "the angel in the house" and conquered not only "a room" but a house "of her own." The connotations that possessive particles/syntagms as well as words like "house," "room"... acquire when one thinks of such titles as *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 1993), *Killing the Angel in the House* (Woolf 1995), *Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubart 1979), *A Literature of their Own* (Showalter 1977), etc., add complexity to Clifton's poem: the lyrical subject does not only react against the objectification of the female body in male poetry; her discourse also constitutes a bold self-assertion of a voice formerly denied artistic authority. Thus her attitude, far from being submissive or passive, reveals a lack of fear and even a willingness to confront not "a man," not "any man," but "*the* man," which is generic man and also the patriarchal system with all its rules and prejudiced values (the man's "Gods").

The windowpane plays its part as well in the poem's careful subversion of a whole poetic tradition. On the one hand, it frames the woman's body, rendering her nakedness as a sort of spectacle which the man is free to contemplate (the conventional view of the female body as an object of the male gaze). On the other hand, the picture is not static: the lyrical subject presses her breast against the window, "like black birds pushing against glass." Moreover, she holds the male gaze and returns it upon itself. Commenting on this poem and these lines in particular, Barbara Johnson (1987: 133) interprets that the man, who looks at the naked woman and is simultaneously looked at by her, "is about to become incomprehensible to himself. He is told to 'discover self' and 'pray in tongues,' to learn the experience of exclusion, alienation, dispossession. He must discover himself as *other.*"

The image of a man running naked through the streets, crying and praying in tongues presents him as alienated, and even mad. Yet there is something in that image which prevents it from appearing wholly negative. The experience that the man is invited to go through is both shocking and illuminating: shocking because, as Barbara Johnson puts it, he will discover himself as other (he will cry, he will run through the streets) and illuminating because, above all that, he will learn. His praying in tongues may be related to the man's feeling of dispossession, exclusion and alienation. Yet it also evokes an episode from the New Testament which describes how the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles conferring on them the ability to speak in tongues. Likewise, it is as if by contemplating the woman's nakedness and then his own, the man could be infused with an important piece of knowledge.

Paradoxically, then, the discovery the man is about to make appears to be both disturbing and *self-explaining*.

We can retake now the subject which led us into this discussion: the question of intertextuality and gender issues. From this perspective, the message of Clifton's poem becomes quite suggesting. Her work evokes a tradition which acts as an intertext against which we can measure the text's "ungrammaticalities." These "ungrammaticalities," however, refuse to be solved and this fact, in turn, presents the poem as what it is: a re-writing of a male poetic genre which it tries and, I think, manages to subvert. But the poem goes beyond that: it stands as a revision of the whole male literary tradition, reacting against the way in which woman has been reduced to an object of male pleasure, and her artistic voice silenced, excluded. Moreover, not only does the poem revise the male tradition, it also invites the male tradition to revise itself ("let him discover self"). T. S. Eliot famously suggested that each new author makes the preceding ones appear in a new light; each new author changes the whole literary tradition (Eliot 1971). Accordingly, the intertextual house must be pulled down and built again every time a new room is added. Women's room is one of those which remained locked for a long time as male-centred culture failed to appreciate woman's possibilities, both as character and author. According to Lillian S. Robinson (1993: 217), "the epistemological assumptions underlying the search for a more fully representative literature are strictly empiricist: by including the perspective of women (who are, after all, half the population), we will know more about culture as it actually was." There is no reason why literature should be made to speak with *one* voice or as one *man*. As the previous three poems illustrate, women writers have appropriated well-established literary conventions in order to question, parody, or subvert the way in which femininity and gender relations have been constructed by them. Decentering male texts (including phallocentric criticism) has led to a broadening of the "textual milieu" from which we derive critical and historical propositions. Such a broadening, as has already been pointed out, has had a remarkable effect on intertextual analysis: the rediscovery of works has logically widened the intertextual field and alternative perspectives have been provided from which to approach well-known texts, both in critical analysis and re-writings of the tradition. Moreover, even the notion of intertextuality itself has been subject to revision on the part of feminist critics and women writers. Thus most feminist critical approaches have questioned the overall anonymity that surrounds the figure of the author in the main discourses of intertextuality. This is, for instance, what has happened in the American critical scene. Certainly many American critics have used the term in its pure French form, but in general the transplanted concept has resisted the erasure of the writer[6]. To give an example, Nancy Miller's method in her work "Arachnologies" appears as a deliberate blending of Barthesian notions of the text as "textile" or "web" with a clashing American feminist insistence on the importance of the author. But where Barthes' text is an infinite web seemingly spinning itself, Miller insists on re-introducing the spider — as author, as subject, as agent, as gendered body, as producer of the text (Friedman, 1991: 158).

At a time in which the boundaries between centre and margins have begun to blur and when previously silenced voices can at last make themselves heard and declare to be, as in Clifton's poem, "somebody in a New Thing," this paper has only intended to be an invitation to rethink intertextuality in the light of a changing or, more accurately, an ever-changing tradition.

6.- This does not exclude the existence of a similar reaction on the continent. Friedman (1991: 176) cites as examples Wittig's reference to an intertextuality in which the author is still clearly present in "The Mark of Gender" and a British volume entitled *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, edited by Roger Fowler, in which intertextuality is defined under the general category "Creation" in the context of Marxist criticism. For Fowler and Wittig, the author's agency is assumed in the "practice" of intertextuality.

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