

## FEMINIST THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE POETRY OF ADRIENNE RICH

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**Abstract.** *The thesis supported in this paper is that the poetry of Adrienne Rich can straighten out some of the controversies in recent feminist literary criticism. In order to present the way in which Rich's poetry reconciles two seemingly incompatible approaches to the question of feminine writing, I will concentrate first on the aspects of both Anglo-American and French feminist literary theory, that bring out the difference most clearly.*

### "IS A PEN A METAPHORICAL PENIS?"<sup>1</sup>

This question, posed by Gilbert and Gubar, is probably one of the most memorable opening sentences in feminist literary criticism: it deals with the metaphor of literary paternity in patriarchal Western culture. The implication of this metaphor is that the text's author is a father, a procreator whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. Moreover, his pen's power (like his penis's power) gives him the ability to create a posterity to which he lays claim. In this respect, the pen is truly mightier than its phallic counterpart the sword because "the writer engages the attention of the future in exactly the same way that a king (or a father) 'owns' the homage of the present. No sword-wielding general could rule so long or possess so vast a kingdom."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the author/father becomes the owner/possessor of the subjects of his text and his reader's attention, and "like his divine counterpart, a father, a master or ruler: the spiritual type of a patriarch, as we understand that term in Western society."<sup>3</sup>

Where does this patriarchal theory of literature leave women? According to Gilbert and Gubar, it leaves them out:

"If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power, with the idea – ex-

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Madwoman in the Attic", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.91

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.94

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.94

pressed by the nineteenth century thinker Otto Weininger – that 'woman has no share in ontological reality'. As we shall see, a further implication of the paternity/ creativity metaphor is the notion that women exist only to be acted on by men, both as literary and sensual objects."<sup>4</sup>

In her essay, *Paradoxes and Dilemmas, the Woman as Writer*, Margaret Atwood talks about the ubiquitous image of a woman writer created by the so-called 'phallic' critics that corresponds to the opinion expressed by Gilbert and Gubar:

"We found several instances of reviewers identifying an author as a 'housewife' and consequently dismissing anything she has produced (since, in our society, a 'housewife' is viewed as a relatively brainless and talentless creature)...For such reviewers, when a man writes about things like doing the dishes, it is realism, when a woman does, it is an unfortunate feminine genetic limitation."<sup>5</sup>

The issues that represent the stumbling block of all these discussions are precisely the questions that Adrienne Rich raised in her poetry : Is there a 'woman's language'? Do women write differently from men as a result of biological or cultural differences? Is it a fact that different physical experiences (childbirth, menstruation, lactation) at the same time produce a distinctively gendered discourse?

Luce Irigaray, a representative of French feminist literary theory, opposes the metaphor of two lips speaking together to Gilbert and Gubar's metaphor of the pen; however, in my opinion, writing 'concentric' ('cunt-centric') as opposed to 'phallic' discourse threatens to introduce a gender polarity which is hard to distinguish from the male chauvinist version.

It seems to me that the poetry of Adrienne Rich can straighten out some of the controversies in recent feminist literary criticism. In order to present the way in which Rich's poetry reconciles two seemingly incompatible approaches to the question of feminine writing, I will concentrate on the aspects of both Anglo-American and French feminist literary theory, that, in my opinion, bring out the difference most clearly.

In her essay, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, Showalter, a major representative of Anglo-American feminist literary theory, talks about two kinds of feminist criticism: the first one is the feminist critique, that offers feminist readings of male texts in which stereotypes of women in literature are questioned. In her opinion, this approach is limited because it relies on male critical theory to be universal. Therefore she proposes the second mode of feminist criticism, 'gynocriticism', that will construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and develop new models based on the study of female experience. This is how Mary Eagleton sees a 'gynocritic':

"The gynocritic dedicates herself to the female author and character and develops theories and methodologies based on female experience, the touchstone of authenticity. The gynocritic discovers in her authors and characters an understanding of female identity – not that she expects her authors and heroines to be superwomen, but the essential struggle will be towards a coherent identity, a realization of selfhood and autonomy."<sup>6</sup>

She also talks about the phases that women writers passed:

1. The feminine phase – when women began to write and imitate male masters, concealing their true identity (for example, George Eliot).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.95

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Atwood, "Paradoxes and Dilemmas, the Woman as Writer", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.105

<sup>6</sup> Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Criticism*, (New York: Longman Inc., 1991), p.9

2. The feminist phase - that coincides with the development of the suffragette movement. It is characterized by the outburst of women's anger and the desire to prove that women are equal to men.
3. The female (ideal) phase – that started when women began to write about their own experiences and disregarded the world of men.

Showalter is gender limited, e.g. female oriented; in her opinion, women are biological entities who fight for their rights.

While Anglo-American critics are looking for women in history, French critics are looking for woman in the unconscious, that is, in language. Thus, although we may uncover forgotten novels by women writers, French feminist critics are unwilling to see them as necessarily a part of female tradition. They want to put the question that Shoshana Felman asks, the one concerning the definition or status of 'woman':

"...if 'the woman' is precisely the Other of any conceivable Western theoretical locus of speech, how can the woman as such be speaking in this book?...Is she speaking the language of men, or the silence of women? Is she speaking AS a woman, or IN PLACE OF the (silent) woman, FOR the woman, IN THE NAME OF the woman? Is 'speaking as a woman' a fact determined by some biological condition, or by a strategic, theoretical position, by anatomy or by culture? What if 'speaking as a woman were not a simple 'natural' fact, could not be taken for granted?"<sup>7</sup>

In other words: can women be said to be speaking as women simply because they are born female? For example, do female politicians of recent history speak as women or are they ventriloquist dummies for the male voice?

Kristeva, a major representative of French feminist literary theory, goes beyond gender differences; she is not female or male oriented; in her opinion, feminist writing has nothing to do with the sex of the author, it is a quality inscribed in the text itself that emerges at points when the author is usually not in control of the meaning of the text. Alice Jardin defined the term 'gynesis':

"..gynesis – the putting into discourse of 'woman' as that process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed the valorization of the feminine, woman and her obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore gynesis gives no special emphasis to female authors and characters; most of the examples of 'feminine writing' it considers are by men. Gynocriticism's belief in the control of the text by the author is refuted by gynesis. The author is dead: long live the text – and the reader.

French feminist literary theory grew out of linguistics and psychoanalysis. French feminist critics relied upon Lacan's readjustment of Freud. When describing phases in the development of a child, Lacan uses Freud's theory and translates it into linguistic terms. Therefore, the pre-Oedipal (pre-natal) phase in a child's development, the phase marked with totality and fullness and usually referred to as an idyll, because of the close connection between the mother and child, becomes in Lacanian terms the imaginary or pre-linguistic phase. The moment the father (phallus) appears, he interrupts this idyllic period and the child begins to acquire language. Language becomes the symbolic substitute for

<sup>7</sup> Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.58

<sup>8</sup> Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Criticism*, (New York: Longman Inc., 1991), p.9

the child's object of desire – its mother, that is, for the unity with the mother's body, that is now irretrievably lost. The Symbolic Order is actually the patriarchal social order of modern class-society, structured around the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the Father embodies. Kristeva's starting point was exactly this Symbolic Order in which, by entering it, we have to repress all chaotic bodily instincts (the imaginary). However, the repression of the Imaginary is not total. It can be detected in the so-called Semiotic Speech and is manifested in undermining all clear, definite meanings and opposites on which our culture rests (life/death, man/woman, father/mother,...). This Semiotic(body speech), subversive of the Law of the Father, is not exclusive to women only, it stems from the pre-Oedipal phase in which both men and women enjoyed the unity with the mother's body.

With the distinction between Anglo-American and French feminist theory, there appeared some other distinctions and as Rivkin and Ryan noticed "there was no possible meeting of minds between them, for each necessarily denied the other. Feminism was suddenly feminisms."<sup>9</sup>

For instance, liberal and radical feminists had argued since 1970s about the direction the woman's movement should take – to identify with a 'female essence' or to depart from the image of woman in patriarchal culture. Two perspectives began to form out of this split – "constructionist" – based on the idea that gender is made by culture in history, and "essentialist" – based on the idea that gender reflects a natural difference between men and women that is not only biological, but also psychological and even linguistic.

The constructionists state that gender identity is a construction of patriarchal culture as for example the idea that men are superior to women. They worried that the essentialists interpreted the subordination of women as women's nature. There is a need for change: but we should not change the way patriarchal culture traps a woman's identity – we should change the way all gender (both male and female) is fabricated. Some cultural processes as performativity, masquerade, imitation generate gender identities that appear to possess a pre-existing natural or material substance. Psychological identity is perhaps more important than physical or biological difference. Critics like Judith Butler and Susan Jeffords argued that women can be as "masculine" as men, and men might pretend to be such out of obedience to cultural codes.

Luce Irigaray argued that women's physical differences (giving birth, menstruation, lactation, etc) make them more connected to the world around them than men. Being an essentialist, she makes a distinction between blood and sham (that is, between the link to nature in women's bodies on the one hand, and, on the other hand, male abstraction); she sees how matter (that is linked to maternity) is "irreducible to male Western conceptual-ity, matter is what makes women women, an identity and an experience of their own, forever apart from male power and male concepts."<sup>10</sup>

According to binary thinking the male and the masculine constitutes the norm, the positive and the superior; the female and the feminine is the negative, the inferior. As Luce Irigaray suggests 'the feminine finds itself defined as lack or deficiency or as imitation and negative image of the subject.' In extolling the female, the woman writer does not break the pattern of binary thought whereby the female is defined in relation to the male but continues to operate within the existing system.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., "Feminist Paradigms", in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p.529

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.529

Difference as binary opposition is largely acceptable to the dominant order. There is a long tradition of reactionary argument that discusses sexual difference in language. The implication is that women's language is subjective, emotional or impressionistic while male language is authoritative, rational; Margaret Atwood complains about the popular notion of the sexual differences between the male and female language and about the idea that if women wish to improve their position, then they must become adept in the use of the male language:

"The 'masculine' style is, of course, bold, forceful, clear, vigorous, etc., the 'feminine' style is vague, weak, tremulous, pastel, etc. In the list of pairs you can include 'objective' and 'subjective', 'universal' or 'accurate' depiction of society versus 'confessional', 'personal', or even 'narcissistic' or 'neurotic'."<sup>11</sup>

In this situation, Irigaray's advice is that one must assume the feminine role deliberately. She calls it 'mimicry' – the feminine is not a natural predisposition for women, it is "the conscious utilization of a deconstructive method."<sup>12</sup> Irigaray stresses that this is a perilous undertaking:

"To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to re-submit herself – in as much as she is on the side of the "perceptible', of 'matter' – to 'ideas', in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition what was supposed to remain 'invisible' – the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means to 'unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply absorbed in this function. THEY ALSO REMAIN ELSEWHERE: another case of the persistence of 'matter', but also of 'sexual pleasure'."<sup>13</sup>

For both Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray the creative lies not in difference as opposition but in difference as multiplicity and heterogeneity. Therefore, when Cixous mentions the binary oppositions on which our Western culture rests:

"Where is she?  
 Activity/ passivity  
 Sun/Moon  
 Culture/Nature  
 Day/Night  
 Father/Mother  
 Head/heart  
 Intelligence/Palpable  
 Logos/Pathos  
 Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress/  
 Matter, concave, ground – where steps are taken, holding-and dumping-ground  
 Man/Woman"<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Atwood, "Paradoxes and Dilemmas, the Woman as Writer", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 104

<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine", in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin and Ryan, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p.568

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 570

<sup>14</sup> Helene Cixous, "Sorties", in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin and Ryan, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 578

She says that one cannot talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes; her idea is that the feminine cannot only be defined in relation to the masculine, it escapes 'being theorized, enclosed, coded'. Similarly, Irigaray emphasizes the fluid oscillation and permeation of self-touching against the 'centrism' of phallic order. Cixous focuses on movement, abundance and openness. However, we see that 'victory' always comes down to the same thing: things get hierarchical. The implication is that organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual subject to man. That is why Cixous suggests that:

"Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into the history – by her own movement... Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it."<sup>15</sup>

An interesting concept that Cixous proposes is the concept of bisexuality. She distinguishes between two types of bisexuality in order to show the difference from the popular notion of this concept (bisexual meaning 'neuter'):

1. Bisexuality – a fantasy of a complete being, a fantasy of unity – two within one, and not even two holes;
2. Bisexuality – being able to locate within oneself the presence of both sexes, "evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this 'permission' one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body"<sup>16</sup>.

Thus in accord with Irigaray's suggestion that we should cast phallogentrism in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language (the feminine language), Helene Cixous states that today's writing is woman's. This statement should not be regarded as a provocation, it simply means that woman admits that there is an OTHER. In the process of becoming woman she has not erased that other in her; it is much harder for a man, though, to let the other come through him. In my opinion, the poetic development of Adrienne Rich represents the realization of this process. For Cixous, as well as for Rich, writing represents:

"...the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live – that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who? – a feminine one, a masculine one, some? – several, some unknown, which is indeed what gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars. This peopling gives neither rest nor security, always disturbs the relationship to 'reality', produces an uncertainty that gets in the way of the subject's socialization. It is distressing, it wears you out; and for men, this permeability, this nonexclusion is a threat, something intolerable."<sup>17</sup>

The variety and exuberance of writing links with the full orgasmic overflow of female pleasure. Since female desire, what women want, is misrepresented or repressed in a phallogentric society, its expression (through writing) becomes a starting point for de-

<sup>15</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 320

<sup>16</sup> Helene Cixous, "Sorties" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin and Ryan, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p.582

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p.583

constructing male control. Therefore, feminine writing deliberately undermines all the hierarchical orders of male rationalist philosophy by breaking from the ideal of coherent meaning and good rational style. Feminine language is the language of contradiction, fluidity, illogicality, nonrationality etc. It goes without saying that for French feminist critics some of the greatest male writers (for example, Joyce) possess the characteristics of feminine language.

....

A recurrent theme in Adrienne Rich's poetry, the suffering produced by the painful inner split between the 'animus' and 'anima' part of her soul, has changed with years. By combining Showalter and Kristeva's views, in the process of her growing self-awareness her quest for a unified self, based on a vision that goes beyond gender and difference, is finally fulfilled in her recent poetry. True poetry, according to Adrienne Rich, has the power to reconnect being and thinking by releasing and re-naming of repressed desire. In her collection of essays *What is Found There*, Adrienne Rich talks about the rearousal of the forbidden desire:

"Our desire is taken from us before we have had a chance to name it for ourselves (what do we really want and fear?) or to dwell in our ambiguities and contradictions...As a poet, I choose to sieve up old shrunken words, heave them, dripping with silt, turn them over, and bring them into the air of the present...Poetry unsettles apparently self-evident propositions – not through ideology, but by its very presence and ways of being, its embodiment of states of longing and desire."<sup>18</sup> However, this belief in the power and validity of one's own desire came after years of self-doubt and guilt that can be first traced in the 1950' and 1960' collections of her poetry.

In the essay *When We Dead Awaken*, Adrienne Rich talks about how she began to write poetry and uses herself as an illustration of what it was like to grow up in the male dominated society, to accept its rules and definitions and later to become aware of the split within herself – between the girl who wrote poems and defined her inner being by writing and the girl who defined herself by her relationships with men. The authorities on writing for her were Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, Stevens, Yeats. She learned the craft of writing from them. This first phase in Rich's personal development coincides with the first and partly the second phase in the development of feminist writing according to Showalter – when women were imitating male masters, trying to conceal their true identity and being afraid to express what they really felt and meant.

However, even then, her poems reflected the thoughts that she was not consciously aware of:

"But poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know."<sup>19</sup>

In the poem *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* from her first collection of poems *A Change Of World (1951)* she talks about a woman who suffers from the split between her imagination, presented in her tapestry, and her life-style, mastered by the 'ordeals' of the society she lives in:

<sup>18</sup> Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks On Poetry And Politics*(London: Virago Press, 1993), p.xiv-xv

<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.85

"Aunt Jennifer's tigers stride across a screen  
 Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.  
 They do not fear the men beneath the tree;  
 They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.  
 Aunt Jennifer's tigers fluttering through her wool  
 Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.  
 The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band  
 Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.  
 When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie  
 Still wringed with ordeals she was mastered by.  
 The tigers in the panel that she made,  
 Will go on striding, proud and unafraid."

It seems that the poetess wanted to distance herself from Aunt Jennifer by the objective, observant tone of the poem and its formalism, the woman described in the poem even belongs to a different generation, the poetess uses the pronoun 'she' instead of 'I'— all of this was necessary for her to be convinced that no identification between them was possible. Formalism was a part of the strategy in describing this 'imaginary' woman – it prevented her from asking the questions: Is there a possibility that this woman is real? Is it someone that I know? Trying hard not to identify herself as a female poet, she produced poems in this period of her life that were praised for their gracefulness and objective tone. However, this opposition between the woman's imagination worked out in her tapestry and her life-style established a permanent theme in her poetry.

The second volume of poems, *The Diamond Cutters*, was published in 1955 when she was already married. The whole volume deals with the theme of homelessness, both filial and literary, and is treated in a prophetic way in *The Middle Aged*, where the poetess identifies herself with the Magi and recognizes that:

"Our gifts shall bring us home: not to beginnings  
 Nor always to the destination named  
 Upon our setting-forth. Our gifts compel,  
 Master our ways and lead us in the end  
 Where we are most ourselves."

In *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) we find that marriage has turned the earlier filial exile-in-space into something more bitter – separation under the same roof, the silent isolation that is followed by a choking, deprived speech. At about this time, Rich's dilemmas make for unresolved poems, ending, for example, in a flight of a naked man across roofs of houses in *The Roofwalker*:

"I feel like hem up there:  
 exposed, larger than life,  
 and due to break my neck.  
  
 Was it worth while to lay –  
 With infinite exertion –  
 A roof I can't live under?  
 All those blueprints,  
 Closing of gaps,  
 Measurements, calculations?  
 A life I didn't choose



Chose me: even  
 My tools are the wrong ones  
 For what I have to do.

I'm naked, ignorant  
 A naked man fleeing  
 Across the roofs  
 Who could with a shade of difference  
 Be sitting in the lamp light  
 Against the cream wallpapers  
 Reading – not with indifference –  
 About a naked man  
 Fleeing across the roofs."

She wanted to prove to everyone and especially to herself that she could live a 'full' woman's life, although she felt that something was missing. At first sight, everything was in perfect order, she was married, looked after her children, but the secret emptiness and frustrations came to the surface in her poems. The numbing effects of traditional marriage on woman's imagination and feelings are inseparable and this collection records frustration and anger at this loss of the self. That is why she is wandering across the roofs now, aware of what she has to do: to search for her identity, for her true self that was lost in the traditional life she was leading. At that period in her life, Rich writes about herself in her diary as " a young girl thought sleeping, but certified dead."<sup>20</sup>

Although there were doubts and periods of depression, she thought that these could only mean that she was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps even a monster. She was haunted by voices telling her to resist and rebel, voices that she could hear but not obey. A holding back in her poetic development was required because, as Rich said, she had to fulfill the role traditionally prescribed to women: to be maternally with children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage. As a result of this kind of life, her imaginative activity was put aside and a kind of conservatism was demanded. However, the poet in herself was choking and wanted to break through, to search for her identity, her original, genuine self:

"And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is a part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped us as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name and therefore live afresh."<sup>21</sup>

Although her female identity is still masked by a male persona, in this volume Rich's lines loosen up into free verse; Helen Vendler in her essay *Part of Nature, Part of Us* noticed that " it was inevitable that Rich should forsake her sweetness, cadence, and stanzas once her life began to refuse its earlier arrangements. Nervous, hardened, noting harshly that only cutting onions can provoke her unwept tears into her eyes, she moves under a

<sup>20</sup> Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.87

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.88

'load of unexpired purpose, which drains/ slowly.' She vomits up 'dead goblets' of herself, 'abortive, murdered or never willed for new recognition'; she crawls out of her cocoon like a fish attempting the grand evolutionary trick of becoming a bird:

Like a fish  
 Half-dead from flopping  
 And almost crawling  
 Across the shingle,  
 Almost breathing  
 The raw, agonizing  
 Air  
 Till a wave  
 Pulls it back blind into the triumphant  
 Sea."<sup>22</sup>

The following volume of poetry *The Necessities of Life* (1966) derives its power from its absorption of all past phases into a present one; it is, in Helen Vendler's words " the obituary of a whole section of life – from youthful passion and ambition to the final resurrection, which is, in fact, a mock resurrection; even though she re-enters the world, her triumph consists of the mature acceptance of the unacceptable – the mourning over the loss of the poetic self.

The poems in *Leaflets* (1969) mark a transitional period in her life: the residual animal instinct of self-preservation is finally awake – she compares herself with ' the red fox, the vixen' in order to finally release her instincts from culturally imposed confinement and to challenge traditionally prescribed roles, one of them being that the sacrifice of woman's imagination is considered as a bare necessity. The recovery of the body coincides with the recovery of her poetic self:

"Only in her nerves the past  
 sings, a thrill of self-preservation –  
 and she springs toward her den  
 every hair on her pelt alive  
 with tidings of the immaculate present...  
 She has no archives,  
 No heirlooms, no future  
 Except death  
 And I could be more  
 Her sister than theirs  
 Who chopped their way across these hills  
 a chosen people."

This rather weak poem makes clear the point of the book: forget the past, the mind and tradition, live in sex and the present. Thus, in the poem *Planetarium*(1971), from the volume that is entitled significantly *The Will to Change*, she favours the speech that can get us to the source of our common humanity. The astronomer's gaze outward beyond the frontier of the known universe is balanced by the poet's inward gaze into the undiscovered interior space:

"I am bombarded yet I stand  
 I have been standing all my life in the

<sup>22</sup> Helen Vendler, "Part of Nature, Part of Us", in *Modern American Poets* (Harvard University Press, 1980), p.250

Direct patch of a battery of signals  
 The most accurately transmitted most  
 Untranslatable language in the universe...  
 I am an instrument in the shape  
 Of a woman trying to translate pulsations  
 Into images for the relief of the body  
 And the reconstruction of the mind."

This is how another phase in Rich's poetic development began. In the seventies, she was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing herself as a woman. There was a common theme in all her writings – the theme that she was unwilling to acknowledge before because she had been taught that poetry should be universal, which meant – nonfemale. But she was not afraid to identify herself as a female poet anymore, and she was ready to undertake a quest in her poetry, the quest for something beyond myths, for the truths about men and women, about the 'I' and the 'You', the He and the She.

The wreck she is diving into in the poem *Diving into the Wreck* is the wreck of absolute myths, myths about men and women. She wants to discover the reality behind the myth, 'the wreck and not the story of the wreck/ the thing itself and not the myth'. As an explorer she is detached; she carries the knife to cut her way in, to cut structures apart; a camera to record and the book of myths itself in which there is no place for explorers like herself.

"I came to explore the wreck.  
 The words are purposes.  
 The words are maps.  
 I came to see the damage that was done  
 And the treasures that prevail."

What she finds there is half treasure, half corpse and she realizes that she herself is part of it. Namely, the poet herself becomes an instrument for the transcription of bodily drives into images, in other words, the poet gives up the lens, the map and pulls herself up by her own roots. Deprived of all instruments, she dives into the wreck in order to face the fact that the instrument for the relief of the body and the reconstruction of the mind is one's genuine self whose wholeness has been impaired:

"This is the place.  
 And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair  
 Streams black, the merman in his armored body,  
 We circle silently  
 About the wreck  
 We dive into the hold.  
 I am she: I am he  
  
 Whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes  
 Whose breasts still bear the stress  
 Whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies  
 Obscurely inside barrels  
  
 Half wedged and left to rot  
 We are the half destroyed instruments

That once held to a course  
 The water-eaten log  
 The fouled compass

We are, I am, you are  
 By cowardice or courage  
 The one who find our way  
 Back to this scene  
 Carrying a knife, a camera  
 A book of myths  
 In which  
 Our names do not appear."

Here, Rich forsakes distinctions between men and women and sees us all as crippled creatures, scarred by the process of socialization and nurture. The ultimate purpose of diving into the past or into the self is not the escape from but the re-finding of personality. The structures governing patriarchal language and consciousness have produced barriers that separate men from women and that is why the poet identifies herself with both man and woman in this poem thus sharing their common grief. This 'book of myths' in which her/his 'names do not appear' consists of the old myths of patriarchy, the myths that split male and female into warring factions, the myths that perpetuate the battle between the sexes. Implicit in Rich's image of the androgyne is the idea that we must write new myths, create new definitions of humanity which will not glorify this split but reconcile it. Rich's visionary androgyne reminds me of Virginia Woolf's statement that the great artist must be mentally bisexual. But Rich takes this idea even further: it is not only the artist who must make the leap beyond gender, but any of us who suffer from this split. The same idea is expressed in Cixous' concept of bisexuality – one should locate within oneself the presence of both sexes; the 'nonexclusion' of sexes is the only way for all of us to return to our genuine, original selves.

In the poetry following *Diving into the Wreck*, especially volumes *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1976) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1977), the idea that Adrienne Rich expresses is that the pre-Oedipal bond with the mother can be remembered and recreated in an adult love relationship, that is, a lesbian relationship.

*Splittings*(1974) is a poem dedicated to her lesbian lover:

"But we, we live so much in these  
 configurations of the past I choose  
 to separate her from my past we have not shared

I will not be divided from her or from myself  
 By myths of separation

I refuse these givens the splittings  
 Between love and action I am choosing  
 Not to suffer uselessly and not to use her  
 I choose to love this time for once  
 With all my intelligence."

Rich's refusal to live by myths of separation has also included a refusal of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. A whole new poetry, as Adrienne Rich herself explains, begins

with this point of view. The latest phase of Rich's development as a feminist and a poet is described in her essays about lesbianism. She rebels against the traditional female roles in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. She says:

"In none of the books which concern themselves with mothering, sex roles, relationships, societal prescriptions for women is compulsory heterosexuality ever examined as an institution powerfully affecting all these, or the idea of 'preference' or 'innate' orientation even indirectly questioned."<sup>23</sup>

In her opinion, it is not enough for feminist thought that lesbian works exist. Feminists should fight against any theory or culture that treats lesbian existence as marginal or less 'natural'. Therefore she defines the term 'lesbian existence' as a mode of life different from genital lesbianism:

"Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has of course included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide and intrawoman violence, we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning."<sup>24</sup>

Adrienne Rich defines the term 'lesbian continuum' – in order to make a difference between the popular definition of lesbianism and what it really is:

"If we consider that all women – from the infant suckling her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother's milk-smell in her own;...to the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women – exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not."<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, Rich suggests a reconstruction of the concept lesbian in terms of a cross-cultural lesbian continuum which can capture women's ongoing resistance to patriarchal domination. However, although Rich sees lesbianism as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy and an act of resistance, the regrouping of women without men will not solve the problem of sexual difference, but rather perpetuate it. It seems to me that this point of view threatens to introduce a gender polarity that is hard to distinguish from the male chauvinist version, that is from the version of the 'phallic' critics that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Nevertheless, her poetry betrays that 'thinking with the body' is not exclusive only to women, but to men as well. That is why this final escape into lesbianism remains a mystery for me. Perhaps it was Rich's reaction to modern man's unwillingness to acknowledge the denied feminine in himself or as Cixous would say to admit that there is an OTHER and to abandon rational control and power and let the Other come through him. Adrienne Rich had the courage to undertake the quest of self-transformation and that gives us hope that modern man will experience the same ordeal and meet her half way. Only then will the quest for the unified self be completely fulfilled.

<sup>23</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p.26

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.26

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.27

In conclusion, feminists have certainly proved that under no circumstances can a pen be considered to be a metaphorical penis, a mode of expression of only male attitudes, opinions, points of view. From the start feminists felt that writing, literature, criticism were places for them to be. Now we can see how the proliferation of writing by and about women has had a decisive effect on the publishing industry, academic institutions, the nature of critical theory, the practices of teaching and literary criticism. Of course, this is not necessarily a sign of the end of patriarchy. Yet, it is an indication of feminism's pervasive and sustained impact.

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## FEMINISTIČKA KRITIKA I PRAKSA U POEZIJI EDRIJEN RIČ

**Milena Kostić**

*Teza koja se obradjuje u ovom radu je da poezija Edrijen Rič može da pomogne u rešavanju nekih kontroverznih pitanja u novijoj feminističkoj kritici. Da bismo pokazali kako poezija pomenute pesnikinje miri dva samo naizgled suprotstavljena pristupa ženskom pismu, prvo ćemo se skoncentrisati na one aspekte anglo-američke i francuske feminističke književne teorije koje najjasnije ističu ovu razliku.*