UNIVERSITY OF NIŠ
The scientific journal **FACTA UNIVERSITATIS**
Series: **Linguistics and Literature** Vol.1, No 4, 1997 pp. 249 - 266
Editor of series: Nedeljko Bogdanović, e-mail: nedbog@filfak.filfak.ni.ac.yu
Address: Univerzitetski trg 2, 18000 Niš, YU, Tel: +381 18 547-095, Fax: +381 18 547-950
http:// ni.ac.yu/Facta

GENDER AND DIFFERENCE IN THE POETRY OF ADRIENNE RICH

UDC:820(73).09-1:396

Lena Petrović

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Yugoslavia

Abstract. *The paper is concerned with the way the poetry of Adrienne Rich effects an indirect reconciliation between the seemingly incompatible positions of the Anglo-American and French feminisms in respect to the issues of gender and difference. The poetic development of Adrienne Rich is presented as a movement from a male-oriented to woman-centred kind of writing and finally to a decentred vision that goes beyond gender and difference. By its power to rearouse forbidden desire Rich's poetry disrupts the system of linguistic and existential binary oppositions and to Freudian and Lacanian notions of subjectvity, constituted on absence, loss or separation, opposes the self in whom the body is made fully present to the mind, the memory of the lost mother recovered and being and thinking re-connected.*

Apart from its aesthetic merits, the poetry of Adrienne Rich seems to me to have the virtue of indirectly straightening out at least some of the contoversies that abound in recent feminist literary criticism. I specifically have in mind the issues of difference and gender as they condition writing: the question, that is, of what - if anything - constitutes the essentially feminine writing. There are hardly two identical answers to this question. The reason for this often confusing variety[1] lies, partly at least, in the fact that too many

Received November 30, 1997

[1] It must be frustrating to those who enter freshly the feminist debate to discover that whichever of the two stances - women are the same or women are different - they adopt, they will be dimissed as sexist. Thus, Luce Irigaray condemns the patriarchal 'logic of the same' whereby woman is forced into subjectless position, her function being to reflect back man's meaning to himself. (Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985, 22.) However, to plead that women are different seems to be eqally mistaken because in extolling the female, the woman writer does not break the pattern of patriarchal binary thought whereby the female is defined in relation to male. Stephen Heath, for example, insists that 'to lay emphasis on difference and the specificity of women (as of men) in the paradigm male/female is a gesture within the terms of the existing system, for which precisely women are different *from* men'. (Stephen Heath, 'The Sexual Fix', *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagletone, Basil Blackwell, 1986, 221.)

feminist writers guard jealously their positions without having fully examined their theoretical premises. The failure of the critic/writer to define clearly her own terminology or the failure of the critic/reader to understand thoroughly the terminology used by others is bound to result in mutual misreadings. For example, Anglo-American and French feminisms both accuse each other of biological essentialism, and one is not likely to understand this dispute unless one is aware of the different meanings they give to the terms 'woman' and 'feminine'. Anglo-American feminists, such as Elaine Showalter, for instance, centre on 'women' - real biological entities, who, at this moment in history, are forging a politics based on shared experience and needs. French interest, on the other hand, focuses not on women but on 'woman', who, in Alice Jardine's words, is not a person but 'that which has been the master narratives' own non-knowledge, what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a space of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as *feminine*, as *woman*...'[2]. Thus when the French talk of *l'ecriture feminine* they do not mean the tradition of women's literature that Anglo-American feminists have laboured to uncover, but, as Julia Kristeva insists, a certain mode of writing that unsettles fixed meanings.

However, although the cultural gap between the French and Anglo-American approaches is wide, it is not unbridgeable.This is how Jardine's summary of some of the oppositions is reported by Mary Eagletone:

> The Anglo-Americans emphasize 'oppression', the French 'repression'; the Anglo-Americans wish to raise consciousness, the French explore the unconscious; the Anglo-Americans discuss power, the French pleasure; the Anglo-Americans are governed by humanism and empiricism while the French have developed an elaborate debate on textual theory. But Jardine ends with a hope for contact between the Anglo-American 'prescription for action' and the French preoccupation with the 'human subject's inscription in culture through language'. Her way forward looks to a cautious and critical marriage between the two positions.[3]

Although the passage does not mention explicitely the issue of gender or difference, I quoted it because its conclusion is relevant to the purpose of this essay. Namely, I propose a reading of Rich's poems as moving in the direction of the marriage, albeit poetic rather than critical, Jardine hopes for. In order to demonstrate the way in which Rich's poetry effects a reconcilliation between the two seemingly incompatible approaches to the question of sexual identity and feminine writing I feel it necessary to dwell a moment longer on those aspects of Elaine Showalter's and Julia Kristeva's theories which bring out the difference most clearly.

In her book *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter divides the tradition of women's writing from 1840 to the present into three phases which she calls Feminine, Feminist and Female. During the Feminine stage women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalised its assumptions about female nature. The distinguishing formal sign of this period is the male pseudonym, while the feminist content is typically oblique, displaced, ironic or subversive. In the Feminist phase, from

---

[2] Quoted in *Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Mary Eagletone, Longman, London and New York, 1991,9.
[3] *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, 206.

about 1880 to 1920, women reject the accomodating postures of femininity and use literature to dramatise the ordeals of wronged womanhood. In the Female phase, ongoing since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature.

In a rough correspondence to these stages of gradual emancipation in women's literature, Showalter makes a distinction within feminist criticism between feminist critique and gynocriticism. Feminist critique is male-oriented in that its subjects include images and stereotypes of women in male literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in male criticism, and fissures in male-constructed literary theory. Gynocriticism, on the other hand, concentrates not on women as readers, but on women as producers of texts: on history, themes, structures and genres of literature by women. Instead of studying stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women played in history, instead of, that is, learning what men thought women should feel, gynocriticism is turning to the authority of women's writing in order to learn what women really feel and experience.

Thus, just as the rejection of imitation and protest in Female literature indicates a liberation from two forms of artistic dependency, gynocriticism, Showalter claims, represents a breakaway from the angry or loving critical fixation on male literature:

> Gynocriticism begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the nearly visible world of female culture.[4]

Thus the task confronting feminist critics is to identify the unique difference of women's writing. Their aim, and, according to Showalter, that is apparently as far as feminist criticism can go, is to seek out a feminine aesthetic, or 'essence': a language specific to women's writing, whose difference is guaranteed by the 'femaleness' of the author.

In contrast to gynocriticism, which sees women-centred and difference-centred literary studies as the final stage of feminist literary emancipation, Kristeva claims as the ultimate purpose of feminist criticism a decentred vision - one that goes beyond difference and beyond gender. Her refusal to deal with female texts exclusively implies a belief that historical oppression of women, as Jardine points out in her summary, cannot be properly understood if it is not related to the psychological repression of what Jacques Lacan terms the Imaginary.

Lacan's work[5] is essentially a rewriting of Freud's teaching from the standpoint of linguistics. According to Freud, as we know, the object of primary desire is, psychologically, the body of the mother, and anthropologically the body of mother earth. However, just as with the historical development of patriarchy this desire becomes a taboo, thus in the Oedipal phase of individual development the desire for the mother is frustrated by the father, or by what Lacan calls the Law.

Lacan's concern is primarily with the liguistic aspect of this process. According to

---

[4] Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. K. M. Newton, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1988, 269.

[5] For my discussion of Lacan's and Kristeva's notions of psychoanalysis and language I am indebted to Terry Eagletone's excellent commentary in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, 163-79.

him, the transition from the pre-Oedipal phase, or the Imaginary - marked by a sense of unity, presence and plenitude - into the Oedipal phase, or the Symbolic - marked by lack and absence - coincides with the acquisition of language. The repressed desire for the primary reality, the mother's body, is never completely neutralized, and language becomes the surrogate which symbolically fills the void, the gap which has opened between desire and its prohibited object. All language is metaphorical precisely because it replaces some wordless direct possession of the thing itself. In entering language then our destiny is apparently to be forever severed from the real, that inaccessible realm which is always beyond signification, always outside the Symbolic order, that is, always outside language. And since language is both condition and consequence of identity, identity itself is founded on the dissociation of being from thinking. Unlike Descartes' rationalist formula I think, therefore I am', which reduces being to thinking, Lacan's own formula 'I am not where I think, and I think where I am not' recognizes being as the Other, as that which, paradoxically, makes thinking and identity possible only by virtue of its absence.

Although Lacan is not interested in cultural and anthropological implications of his psychoanalysis, if applied to the analysis of culture, his concept of the Symbolic would endorse our white, male-dominated, class society as the only possible cultural model. Morover, the ability to conform to its norms would be the only criterion of sanity.

Now Kristeva herself starts from the concept of the Symbolic as a realm where language happens and identity is established. However, whereas Lacan would consider whoever fails to enter the Symbolic register of language as simply psychotic, Kristeva shows how the Symbolic order itself can develop into a kind of madness. In her essay 'Psychoanalysis and the Polis'[6] she suggests that there is an analogy between the language of modern society and the language of paranoia and claims that the political delirium, together with the atrocities committed in its name, is but a symptom of the pathological need to banish beyond the boundaries of what our paranoid ideology calls reality the dark mystery of being, the 'unnamable mother': to sever what Freud calls the umbilical cord between the conscious and the unconscious, reality and language, the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Kristeva is aware that the Symbolic is, of course, inevitable; and so are consciousness and language. However to prevent it from turning into a discourse of delirium, language must be perpetualy renewed; and what renews it is the heterogeneous energy of the unconscious, a play of forces and drives which represent the residue of the pre-Oedipal stage. For language as such to happen, this heterogegeous flow must be repressed, but the repression, for Kristeva, is fortunately not total. In modern literature the speech of the body appears as a pulsational pressure inside the language itself: in its tone, rhythm, and also in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, absence and silence.

This phenomenon, which Kristeva terms the semiotic, has a function similar to that ascribed by Jung to visionary art. Working within 'ordinary' language, it threatens to disintegrate its sacred social meanings, and deny all fixed, abstract truths. And since the ideology of modern society relies on such fixed signs as God, father, state, reason, property, order - modern literature, by producing a shock in the consciousness of the reader, forces him to question the absoluteness of all such signs. It dissolves the tight

[6] In *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: An Introduction*, eds. V. Lombrapulous and D. N. Miller, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1987, 363-378.

divisions between the feminine and the masculine and deconstructs all the binary oppositions - norm/deviation, sanity/madness, life/death - on which societies as ours depend for their power.

Moreover just as Jung located the source of visionary art in the realm of the mother, Kristeva maintains that the semiotic is the feminine of the text because it stems from the Imaginary, which is bound up with the child's contact with the mother's body, whereas the Symbolic is associated with the Law of the father. Yet, because the Imaginary, or the pre-Oedipal, phase recognizes no gender differences, the semiotic is by no means a language exclusive to women. Thus it was possible for Kristeva and French feminists in general to shift their attention from the sex of the author to the sexuality of the text and to claim at the same time that this kind of criticism is not a turning away from women but a route back to women.

This last point suggests a link between French feminism and Ted Hughes' analysis of the failures of patriarchal culture in his 1992 study *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. This work can be read as a restatement, in historical and archetypal terms, of Kristeva's psycholinguistic theory. Hughes is at pains to demonstrate that the repression of the feminine, recorded first in the exemplary act of the killing of Mother Goddess Tiamat by her son Marduk and perpetuated in subsequent patriarchal myths and the history which they generated, is in fact a suicidal act. For both as mother and sacred bride, giving life and love, and confirming and supporting her son's and lover's rational, ordered existence, and as Qween of Hell, an orgiastic, ammoral and even non-human being associated with the mysteries outside the rational ego and threatening to disrupt its self-control, the Goddess of Complete Being was a projection of the totality of the hero's own psyche. Since she is one and indivisible, his attempt to separate her into two, suppress her demonic and make a binding contract with her divine aspect, is doomed to failure - he has to reject both: as Shakespeare's Adonis does, when he abandons the role of lover to become a warrior instead. But, as the fate of Tarquin and of all the tragic heroes shows, the denial, exile or annihilation of the Goddess in whatever concrete woman she happens to be embodied is at the same time the hero's estrangement from, supression or destruction of his own soul.

Thus Shakespeare's foregrounding of male experience of woman is not sexist: the agony, violence, madness and death of his tragic protagonists is a stubborn investigation of the consequences for male psyche of the crime against the feminine. Rather than indulge in the depiction - sentimental or sadistic as it often is in male literature - of the victimization of women by men, Shakespeare offers an insight into the hidden damage of the Western soul as it affects both victims and victimizers, the oppressor and the opressed, with equally intense suffering.

The suffering produced by the painful inner split between the 'animus' and 'anima' aspect of her own soul has from the very beginning been a recurrent obsession of Adrienne Rich's poetry. Her handling of this theme has changed with years, however. Combining the seemingly incompatible positions of Showalter and Kristeva into natuaral and inevitable stages in the process of her growing poetic and sexual self-awareness, she has developed towards a vision that goes beyond gender and diferrence. Indeed, her quest for a unified self, for a synthesis that would bring her back to herself, culminates in her recent poetry in a rearousal of forbidden desire whose force pierces the 'frozen web' of most binary oppositions that govern the structure of patriarchal thought and language, severing them from and insuring their power over the reality of being. Against Lacan's

repressive psycholinguistic theory, she attributes to all true poetry the power to reconnect being and thinking by releasing and re-naming of repressed desire. The statement of the American poet Diane Glancy - 'I moved towards being in my poetry' - quoted by Rich in her latest book *What Is Found There*, describes equally well her own poetic work, whose movement involved 'the uncovering of appetites buried under the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged upon us, have accepted as our own'. For...

> 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.[7]

But this belief in the validity of her own desire, displayed so self-confidently in her later poetry, came only after years of self doubt and guilt induced by her defiance of such self-evident propositions as, for example, that woman's destiny was selfless serving of others and man's egotistic self-realization. They are recorded in the 1950' and 1960' collections of her poetry, which, as I hope to show, recapitulate the evolution of women' writing traced by Showalter. Although they overlap, the Feminine, Feminist and Female stages are discernible both in themes and techniques in Rich's poems of that period.

Her beginning as a poet can be traced back to a forgotten moment in childhood when, as she says, describing what is in effect a Lacanian entrance into the Symbolic, 'my mother's feminine sensuousness, the reality of her body began to give way for me to the charisma of my father's assertive mind and temperament...and he began teaching me to read'[8]. As if to prove that the childhood fantasy of paternal seduction had a grain of symbolic truth in it, she remembers that at first she wrote for the terrible critical eye of her father: seduced by his charm, and contolling cruelty, into the implicit trust in the paternalist cultural heritage, she pleased him by writing in imitation of male masters. In this initial Feminine phase her poems echo the style of Donne, Yeats, Auden, while her use of 'she' instead of 'I', or even of the male persona when dealing with the specifically feminine lot, betray the insecurity of a woman trespassing on the grounds reserved for men. Trying hard not to identify herself as a female poet, she paid careful attention to form and craftmanship and produced poems praised for their gracefulness, for their cool and composed detachment and objective, observant tone. Yet, in spite of those self-distancing strategies, those 'asbestos gloves' that allowed her to handle materials she coudn't pick up bare-handed, the poems such as 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'(1951), could not conceal glimpses of the split she even then experienced between 'the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the the girl who was to define herself by her relationship with men'[9]:

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,

---

[7] Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, Virago Press, London, 1955, 1993, xiv-xv.

[8] Quoted in Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachustts and London, England, 1980, 263.

[9] Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, 58.

Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the trees;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through the 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 hand will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

This opposition between the woman's imagination, worked out in her tapistry, and her lyfe-style, 'ringed with the ordeals she was mastered by' established a permanent motif in Rich's poetry. Approached only obliquely in this early poem, it was to be explored more directly and personally in what I regard as her Feminist and Female stages. This new development, involving a movement beyond imitation and a breakaway from literary tradition, coincided with her departure from her father's home. The theme of homelessness, both filial and literary, is treated in a prophetic way in 'The Middle-Aged' (1955), where she identifies herself with the Magi, for whom 'the palaces behind have ceased to be/Home' and who recognize that

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

Already a wife and a mother of two children, Rich discovers that marriage, inspired as it was by a 'passionate need to reconstruct/The columned roofs under the blazing sky' - the parental domain - is not 'the site of love' or 'the place where we are most ourselves'. Both the idea and the image are picked up again in 'Roofwalker' (1961):

Was it worth while to lay-
with infinite exertion-
a roof I can't live under?
-All those blueprints,
closing of gaps,
measuring, 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...

Although her female identity is still masked by a male personna, the poem announces a period in which immitation of traditional forms gives way to a longer and looser mode than Rich ever trusted herself with before. This formal shift, a result of her newly acquired ability to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing herself as a woman, is matched by a change in emotional attitude to her own femaleness. Instead of recording, in carefully cadenced stanzas, her acquiescence in a world where woman must learn not 'to call her man/From that estranged intensity/Where his mind forages alone'('An Unsaid Word', 1955), she now claims this intensity of the mind for herself. However, the numbing effects of traditional marriage on woman's imagination and feelings are inescapable, and the 1963 collection *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* records the inevitable frustration and anger at this loss of the self. In 'Peeling Onions', she sees herself as estranged and 'dry-hearted as Peer-Gynt/...no hero, merely a cook', and notes harshly that only peeling onions can provoke her unwept tears. 'A Marriage in the Sixties' describes a yearning for a contact which she knows in advance is impossible. For her husband and herself,

> Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock,
> may have at last the perfect hour of talk
> that language aches for; still
> two minds, two messages.

And as the external separation between them widens into an unbridgeable gulf, across which 'My words reach you as through a telephone / where some submarine echo of my voice / blurts knowledge you can't use'('The Lag'), the inner conflict comes to the brink of insanity. Section No 2 of 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law' concerns a woman who thinks she is going mad: she is haunted by voices telling her to resist and rebel, voices which she can hear but not obey:

> Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
> she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
> past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.
> Only a week since They said: *Have no patience*
>
> The next time it was: *Be insatiable.*
> Then: *Save yourself; others you cannot save*
> Sometimes she's left the tapstream scald her arm,
> a match burn to her thumbnail,
>
> or held her hand above the kettle's snout
> right in the wooly stream. They are probably angels
> since nothing burns her anymore, except
> each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.

The incipient breakdown is caused by the passionate need and the powerlessness felt by a woman in traditional marriage to transform reality by what Wallace Stevens called the Necessary Angel of imagination. In her own attempt, at the time, to analyse the real nature of the conflict, Rich makes a distinction between the passive day-dreaming, phantasizing which need not be acted upon, and the active, and subversive, processes of imagination:

> For a poem to coalesce, for a character or action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed - freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your own thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away.[10]

Moreover, as she adds using terms remarkably similar to Derrida's 'freeplay', if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives perhaps to the very life one is living at the moment:

> You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn it into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming. Now to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding back, a putting aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism.

No wonder, then, that she experienced the subversive exercise of imagination, tending as it does to deconstruct the very reality to which as mother and wife she is committed, as a failure of love in herself. And although she envisaged a synthesis which would unite 'the energy of creation and the energy of relation', in the early sixties' it was still to come.

Meanwhile, in the title poem of *The Necessities of Life* (1966) we encounter a woman looking back upon her life with a mixture of rebellion and acquiescence. It is, as Helen Vendler remarked, an obituary to a whole section of life: from youthful passion and ambition, when the self, Jonah-like, was blissfully dissolved in dreams of its own fulfilment; through the Egyptian bondage of marriage and child-bearing, when the self was devoured by others, until, 'wolfed almost to shreds', she learned to make herself unappetizing, preserving the minimal vitality to be able 'with economical joy / now and again to name / over the bare necessities'; to the final tentative resurrection, when piece by piece, the self re-enters the world. It is a mock resurrection, though: the society a woman joins when the mists of child-bearing lift is that of old wives, and the triumph, if there is any, consists in the falsely mature acceptance of the unacceptable.

The poems in *Leaflets* (1969) mark a period of transition leading to a direct questioning and rejection of the idea that the anatomy is destiny, to a challenge, that is, of a traditional distribution of gender roles whereby woman's sacrifice of imagination is experienced as bare necessity. The poet's readiness to identify with the red fox, the vixen, whose only past is 'a thrill of self-preservation' and 'who has no archives / no hairlooms, no future / except death' signals the intention to release the instincts from their confinement within the culturally imposed identity and enter what she was to call in a later poem 'that part of the brain / which is pure survival'. The recovery of the body coincides with the recovery of the poetic self whose loss was mourned in 'The Necessities of Life'. As Rich herself comments, 'Orion' was 'a poem of reconnection with a part of myself I had felt I was losing - the active principle, the energetic imagination, "the half-brother", whom I projected, as I had for many years, into the constellation Orion'[11]:

---

[10] Ibid., 60.
[11] Ibid., 62.

Far back when I went zig-zagging
through tamarack pastures
you were my genius, you
my cast-iron Viking, my helmed
lion-heart king in prison.
Years later now you're young

my fierce half brother, staring
down from that simplified west
your breast open, your belt dragged down
by an oldfashioned thing, a sword
the last bravado you won't give over
though it weighs you down as you stride

and the stars in it are dim
and maybe have stopped burning.
But you burn, and i know it;
as I throw back my head and take you in
an old transfusion happens again:
divine astronomy is nothing to it.

Indoors I bruise and blunder,
break faith, leave ill enough
alone, a dead child born in the dark.
Night cracks open over the chimney,
pieces of time, frozen geodes
come showering down in the grate.

A man reaches behind my eyes
and finds them empty
a woman's head turns away
from my head in the mirror
children are dying my death
and eating crumbs of my life.

Pity is not your forte.
Calmly you ache up there
pinned aloft in your crow's nest,
my speechless pirate!
You take it all for granted
and when I look you back

it's with a starlike eye
shooting its cold and egotistical spear
where it can do least damage.
Breathe deep! No hurt, no pardon
out here in the cold with you
you with your back to the wall.

It is no accident, as Rich explains in her comment, that the words 'cold' and

'egotistical' appear in the poem and are applied to herself. For the choice, in 1969,

> still seemed to be between 'love' - womanly, maternal love, altruistic love - a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture, and egotism - a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. For, weren't they men, and wasn't that their destiny, as womanly selfless love was ours? We know now /1971/ that the alternatives are false ones - that the word 'love' is itself in need of re-vision.[12]

Yet, the false alternatives persist into the next volume and can be detected beneath the surrealist surface of the poem 'I Dream I am the Death of Orpheus':

> I am walking rapidly through stations of light and dark thrown under an arcade.
> I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers
> and those powers severely limited
> by authorities whose faces I rarely see.
> I am a woman in the prime of life
> driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce
> through a landscape of twilight and thorns.
> A woman with a certain mission
> which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact.
> A woman with the nerves of a panther
> a woman with contacts among Hell's Angels
> a woman feeling the fulness of her powers
> at the precise moment when she must not use them
> a woman sworn to lucidity
> who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires
> of these underground streets
> her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind
> on the wrong side of the mirror.

Both poems dramatize the socially instituted sexual difference as an inner opposition between the energy of creation and energy of relation. In this deadly internal combat between the 'woman' and the 'poet' it is only the death of the one that seems capable of feeding the life of the other. As the poet in 'Orion' is released from prison and the old transfusion of creative energy happens again, both the erotic and maternal flow dry up, and the woman dies to the world of relation. In the second, antithetical poem, the invisible authorities severely limiting the potential power of the woman are precisely the naturalized fiction of gender differences, the Law of the Father depriving woman of speech, forcing silence upon the feminine. It is this law that assigns a mission to the woman to kill the poet in herself, and it is only by obeying it to the letter that she can save herself as a woman. Yet they both survive their 'deaths', although just barely: the woman in 'Orion' sufficiently to feed the children with the crumbs of her life, and to make sure to shoot her 'cold and egotistical spear / where it can do least damage'; and the dead poet in 'Orpheus' rises again to learn to walk backwards against the wind.

[12] Ibid., 63.

Yet, stuck as they both are in the same deadlock position, confronting equally partial and disabling options, the poem on the death of Orpheus represents an advance on 'Orion'. The volume it comes from is called, significantly, *The Will to Change* (1971) and together with Rich's subsequent poetry, especially that of *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), records her resolute plunge into herself and beyond herself in quest of a place where she is one and undivided. It is at this point that the range of her poetry, centred as it was on woman's experience of frustration, anger, protest or acquiescence - Showalter's Feminist and Female phases - widens to include a sexually decentred vision, which alone, according to French feminists, can explain the suffering of both men and women by revealing the unseen, articulating the unsaid of culture; which alone, as Hughes points out, can undo the inner split and heal the soul by recognizing and atoning for the crime against the feminine. Indeed, Rich's will to change appears first of all as the will to insight, or vision: it emerges in 'Orpheus', embodied in the 'woman sworn to lucidity / who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires / of these underground streets'. And in 'August'(1972), it reappears as a will to knowledge, declared with greater explicitness, made more poignant and urgent by the fact of her husband's suicide two years before:

if I am flesh sunning on rock
if I am brain burning in fluorescent light

if I am dream like a wire with fire
throbbing along it

if I am death to man
I have to know it...

But neither body, mind, nor imagination - least of all the destructive difference of gender - can be explained by objective knowledge:

They say there are ions in the sun
neutralizing magnetic fields on earth

Some way to explain
what this week has been, and the one before it!

Astrophysics is rejected for the sake of myth. It is in prehistory as it surfaces in her nightmares that the truth is to be found: she locates the source of suffering in that primordial act by which woman was dispossessed of her mother right and her son snatched away from her and claimed by the father:

His mind is too simple, I cannot go on
sharing his nightmares

My own are becoming clearer, they open
into prehistory

which looks like a village lit with blood
where all the fathers are crying: *My son is mine.*

Similarly, contemplating the decay of her marriage and the death of her husband in 'From a Survivor'(1972) she realizes that their failure was not special to them, and could

be understood only in a larger perspective of a cultural disaster:

I don't know who we thought we were
that our personalities
could resist the failures of the race.

Lucky or unlucky, we didn't know
the race had failures of that order
and that we were going to share them

Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special...

Next year it would have been 20 years
and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making
which I live now
not as a leap
but a succession of brief, amazing movements
each one making possible the next

The leap they might have made, but did not, I interpret as a stepping out of the gender-enclosed and mutually estranging identities prescribed by the Symbolic order and a temporary immersion in the realm of the Imaginary - an experience which would have enabled their two separate narratives, 'two minds, two messages' to meet at last. But the encounter would have been impossible without the deconstruction of the language of the Symbolic: and it is this doubt about the adequacy of ordinary language, inseparable from her mistrust and final rejection of patriarchal tradition, that is the most radical sign of Rich's will to change. To seek the new self, capable of receiving and transmitting messages from its own interior, by means of conventional language is useless, because it can only perpetuate the old separate self it was invented to deal with. For, as she says, despairing of communication, 'if no two are alike / then what are we doing / with those diagrams of loss?' ('The Snow', 1972)

Thus in 'Planetarium' (1971) the discourse that can only draw diagrams of loss - absence would be Lacan's term - is forsaken in favour of the speech that would eventually get to the source of our common humanity by re-finding the body and making it fully present to the mind. The poem was written, as the motto informs us, while thinking of Caroline Herchel, astronomer, and represents a synthesis of a sort, as in it 'at last the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem become the same person'[13]. Indeed, the astronomer's gaze outward beyond the frontier of the known universe is not opposed, but rather balanced by, or made equivalent to, the poet's gaze inward into the undiscovered interior space. Heartbeat of the pulsar is powered by the same energy that pumps 'the heart sweating through the body' and the poet herself becomes an instrument for faithful transcription of bodily drives and pulsations into images:

I am bombarded yet I stand

I have been standing all my life in the

[13] Ibid.

direct path of a battery of signals
the most accurately transmitted most
untranslatable language in the universe
I am a galactic cloud so deep so involuted that a light wave could take 15
years to travel through me And has
taken 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.

The intention is radical, the tone self-confident; yet in 'Diving into the Wreck' she has, once again, to face the fact that the instrument for the releif of the body and the reconstruction of the mind is that very self whose wholeness has been impaired: 'We are the half-destroyed instruments / that once held to a course / the water eaten log / the fouled compass'; and it is left to her alone to make the plunge she might have made with her husband and assess the damage. The poem explores both 'the failures of the race' and the possibilities of language. It is important to remember that Kristeva never proposed the semiotic as the alternative to the Symbolic, but as a pressure working within it to undermine its absolute meanings. An irrevocable return to the Imaginary would be an obliteration of consciousness, not its renewal: and the diver in the poem senses the danger of self-oblivion as she goes further down into 'the deep element':

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying the crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

Her intention is not to abandon language but, as a another poem of the volume restates it, 'to go back so far there is another language / go back far enough the language / is no longer personal'. And thus, she resists the temptations of the deep and reminds herself that what she came for is both to examine the evidence of disaster and salvage what vitality remains:

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.

And if the worst damage has been caused by forcing unequal selves and lives upon men and women, then, by implication, the vitality that can be salvaged for future restoration is precisely the ability to forsake the distinction between them, and see them both as crippled creatures, scarred by the very processes of socialization and nurture that

once had been the poet's - and our - possession and treasure:

> 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, verneil cargo lies
> obscurely inside barrels
> half-wedged and left to rot...

The ultimate purpose of diving into the past or into the self and the dissolution of inner divisions, then, is not the escape from but the re-finding of personality. Structuring of experience is inevitable for language and consciousness to take place, but the structures governing patriarchal language and consciousness have hardened into impenetrable barriers separating, as Rich has repeatedly pointed out, not only men from women, but 'private from public, Vietnam from the lovers' bed, the deepest images we carry out of our dreams from the most daylight events out in the world'[14]. The knowledge gained by examining these barriers, however, is only one step towards the relief of the body and the reconstruction of the mind: it is, indeed, like 'studying the crystal' ('The Snow'). By identifying herself with both man and woman in 'Diving into the Wreck' and sharing their common grief, Rich takes another necessary step already anticipated in 'The Snow', where each unique snow crystal was allowed to melt into a tear. And in another poem, called significantly 'Re-forming the Crystal' (1973), the process of re-structuring of identity enters its final phase. The new joyous self emerges, its old shell no longer dissolving in grief, but cracked by the force of indiscriminate erotic desire:

> I am trying to imagine
> how it feels to you
> to want a woman
>
> trying to hallucinate
> desire
>
> centred in a cock
> focussed like a burning glass
>
> desire without discrimination:
> to want a woman like a fix

In a poem that combines verse and prose passages, refusing to be restricted by traditional formal options, the traditional psychological alternatives are also swept away at last: the choice is no longer between serving the self and serving others: 'the poet' and

[14] Letter of October 25, 1972.

'the woman' lose their gendered identities and 'creation' and 'relation' finally unite as the speaker recognizes that the energy she serves is one and the same, and 'could be used a hundred ways', equally disruptive of crystalized pattern of available relationships:

> My desire for you is not trivial...But the energy it draws on might lead to racing a cold engine, cracking the frozen spiderweb, parachuting into the field of a poem wired with danger, or to a trip through gorges and canyons into the cratered night of female memory, where delicately and with intense care the chieftainess inscribes upon the rock of the volcano the name of the one she has chosen.

This last possibility, with which the poem ends, has been prepared for in a preceding verse section, where the rebirth of the self is achieved by the rejection of the *Nom du Pere* in both its senses, as the name visible on her identity papers, and the invisible, internalized Law of the Father:

> Tonight I understand
> my photo on the licence is not me,
> my
> name on the marriage contract was not mine.
> If I remind you of my father's favourite daughter,
> look again. The woman
> I needed to call my mother
> was silenced before I was born.

Thus Rich's prophesy that 'our gifts shall bring us home.../ where we are most ourselves', uttered at the beginning of her career in the fifties', comes true in the poems written since the seventies'. She describes them as 'coming home to the darkest and richest source of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds, sexual identity, sexual politics...'[15] And, she might have also added, coming home to the mother. For the longing to break down artificial barriers that she claims to inspire everything she writes has been fulfilled, in the poetry following *Diving into the Wreck*, in the final demolition of the most absolute barrier of all, that between the conscious self and the memory of the mother's body. In contrast to Freud's and Lacan's notion of psychic health, founded as it is upon the absence of the mother, in both anthropological and psychological senses of the word, the woman in 'Re-forming the crystal' finds the cure for her divided mind by reviving the racial memory of the Goddess of Complete Being and the personal memory of her own dispossessed mother.

The two conceptions of identity are juxtaposed quite explicitely in 'Splittings' (1974) The agony of being separated from her lover leads the poet to ask whether separation and loneliness are inevitable human condition, or whether the pre-Oedipal bond with the mother can be remembered and recreated in an adult love relationship:

> I am not with her I have been waking on and off
> all night to the pain not simply absence but
> the presence of the past destructive
> to living here and now...

[15] Ibid.

Does the infant memorize the body of the mother
and create her in absence? or simply cry
primordial loneliness? does the bed of the stream
once diverted mourning remember wetness?

She knows that the pain of division is inseparable from the mind that divides, that what blots her lover from her is not so much time zones or miles as a myth of the self-enclosed conscious ego dissociated from and resistant to the barrier-dissolving pre-conscious erotic energy. The poem ends with her resolute declaration against this myth and a choice to love with all her intelligence:

I will not be divided from her or from myself
by myths of separation
while her mind and body in Manhattan are more with me
than the smell of eucaliptus cooly burning on these hills

I want to crawl into her for refuge lay my head
in the space between her breast and shoulder
abnegating power for love
as women have done or hiding
from power in her love like a man
I refuse these givens the splitting
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

But, as this particular poem and her subsequent love poetry, especially that of *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1976) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1977), demonstrate, it seems that the love learnt from the mother can resurface only in a lesbian relationship. Rich's refusal to live by myths of separation has also included a refusal of 'compulsory heterosexuality'.This latest re-orientation, from which, in her own words, a whole new poetry begins, invites some comment. In pausing to make it, I am aware that I am running a risk of being labelled a sexual chauvinist and a reactionary by the most radical feminist critics. Yet I accept the risk because, contary to Rich's own interpretation of lesbianism 'as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy', as 'an act of resistence'[16], the regrouping of women without men seems to me to perpetuate the problem of sexual difference, rather then solve it. For what was the purpose of all that painful decreating of sexual opposition inside the self if not to create a basis for a reconciliation of the sexes in the outside world? But then again, knowing as she evidently does, or at least as her poetry betrays, that 'thinking with the body' is not exclusive to women, and passionate and uncompromizing as she is, Rich must feel frustrated by modern man's apparent unwillingness to abandon the postures of rational control and power and become more fully human by acknowledging the denied feminine in himself. Thus, rather than see it as any personal failure, I wish to attribute her escape into lesbianism once again to the failures of the race. It is perhaps, at present, an inevitable response on the part of a

[16] Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, 24.

woman of her kind to man's reluctance, or inability, to meet her half way by going through the same ordeal of of self-deconstruction and self-transformation that she had the courage to undertake.

REFERENCES

1. Eagletone, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.
2. Hughes, Ted *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber, London, 1992.
3. Kristeva, Julia, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis", *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: An Introduction*, eds., V. Lombrapulous and D. N. Miller, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1987.
4. Rich, Adrienne, *Poems: Selected and New*, 1950-1974, Norton, New York, 1978.
5. Rich, Adrienne, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagletone, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.
6. Rich, Adrienne, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, Virago Press, London,1993.
7. Showalter, Elaine, "Towards a Feminist Poetics", *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*: A Reader, ed. K. M. Newton, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1988.

ROD I RAZLIKE U POEZIJI ADRIJANE RIČ

Lena Petrović

Autor ukazuje na način na koji se poezija Adrijane Rič može čitati kao posredno pomirenje naizgled nepomirljivih shvatanja anglo-američkih i francuskih feminista o pitanjima seksualnost i razlike. Pesnički razvoj Adrijane Rič prikazan je kao kretanje kroz nekoliko faza: od imitacije tradicionalnog muškog pisma, do perioda revolta i traganja za autentičnim ženskim izrazom i konačno do vizije ucelovljenja koja nadrasta patrijarhalno shvaćene pojmove seksualne polarnosti i razlike. Svojom sposobnošću da probudi zabranjenu želju, poezija Adrijane Rič podriva nasilnu hijerarhiju unutar jezičkih i egzistencijalnih binarnih suprotnosti i Frojdovom i Lakanovom shvatanju identiteta, zasnovanom na odsustvu, gubitku ili razdvajanju, suprotstavlja koncepciju ucelovljenog jastva, u kojoj je obnovljeno sećanje na pre-edipalnu majku, telo prisutno i dostupno umu, a biće i mišljenje sjedinjeni jedinstvenom stvaralačkom energijom.