UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA

Identity and myth in Denise Levertov, a poet in evolution

Identidad y mito en Denise Levertov, una poeta en evolución

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IDENTIDAD Y MITO EN DENISE LEVERTOV, UNA POETA EN EVOLUCIÓN

IDENTITY AND MYTH IN DENISE LEVERTOV, A POET IN EVOLUTION

TESIS DOCTORAL

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the themes of identity and myth in Denise Levertov, a poet with such an impressive and powerful work, has been quite an intimidating challenge for me, not only because of the choice of such daunting themes but also because of Levertov's cultural heritages and her wide array of literary influences. The skillful way in which she reshaped her rich literary lineage has made of Levertov a major poet of her generation, a key figure to understand the richness and variety of the U.S. poetic scene during the second half of the twentieth century.

Looking back in time, the truth is that Levertov has not defrauded the expectations she generated among her poetic peers. When she was but a fledgling poet recently arrived to the U.S., William Carlos Williams soon labeled her "American woman poet of the future" (1976, 40). In "Bearded Barbarians or Real Bards?: America's Young Poets Have Something To Say as Well as a New Way to Say It," a 1961 article published in *The New York Times Book Review*, Kenneth Rexroth went even further than Williams proclaiming Levertov the most interesting poet of the young postwar generation: "unquestionably the best of the lot" (43). After her many years intensely devoted to poetry, it is clear that Levertov has lived up to these expectations, the enormous quality of her literary output having consolidated her as one of the most talented women poets of the American poetic scene.

Now, barely four years after her death, the figure of Levertov has assumed an even higher profile. The best proof of this is the

number of recent publications concerned with her work and life. One of these publications of the last years is *Denise Levertov: New Perspectives* (2000), a critical volume which includes Robert Creeley's "Remembering Denise," his written tribute to Levertov after her death, and which offers the Levertov reader critical insights into her later work. Also, the 1998 publication of the correspondence between Levertov and William Carlos Williams sparked off a growing interest in Levertov's literary exchanges with major poets of the time, an interest that will hopefully be increased with the forthcoming edition of her complete correspondence with Robert Duncan –a joy to read which I have had the pleasure to experience during my stay at the Poetry/Rare Books Collection (Buffalo), where most of this correspondence is currently kept. The publication of the Levertov-Duncan correspondence will surely mark one of the poetic events of this year in the U.S. For the first time, after having remained in the dark for many years, readers will have the possibility of new insights to Levertov through her letters.

The Levertov surname first sounded strange and awkward to me when John Amador Bedford, my thesis supervisor throughout this project, lent me a book of her poems, thus generating in me a first interest, which in time grew into a sustained fascination for her work. Levertov was then scarcely known in Spanish academic circles, one of the most notable exceptions being the Department of English at the University of La Laguna where Levertov, together with other women poets belonging to her generation, was periodically taught at postgraduate courses. Right now there are several Spanish researchers working on Levertov and my hope is that more dissertations on her work might see the light in various universities of this country together with the publication of her poems[1] into

1 In the specific case of Levertov, we can only record three complete translations of her work done to this date. One is a translation of her long poem "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," published in a bilingual edition of Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (*Una antología de*

Spanish. However, I want to take advantage of this occasion to acknowledge the early interest on Levertov at the Department of English at La Laguna.

Levertov was a well-known poet to the U.S. literary public since around the mid twentieth-century, and, in fact, the first relevant publications studying her work can be traced back to these years. Throughout the following decades of critical study on Levertov, the themes of "identity" and "myth" have often been objects of enthusiastic critical response among feminist critics. A miscellanea of reasons could be put forward to try to account for such a thematic attraction. But what really captivated me was their suggestive capacity, their power to engage me as reader and to open new doors of experience before my inexperienced eyes.

Many decades of criticism on Levertov's work logically amount to a voluminous body of critical literature, which speaks for itself about the capacity to attract a special interest among literary critics and readers alike. Although many pages have been written on Levertov's poems dealing with identity or myth, what I find is that, with some exceptions, they are often treated superficially or in a fragmentary way, i.e., without specifically attending to how these issues evolve in Levertov's poetry. Since many of the publications related to either of these themes consist of articles or, in the best of cases, only of a brief section, it is obvious that they don't allow an in-depth analysis of how these themes develop in her work. One

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la poesía norteamericana desde 1950, published by Turner*)*. Another rendering of her work into Spanish consists of a translation of her essays *The Poet in the World* (*El poeta en el mundo*) edited by Monte Ávila Editores. The third relevant translation of her work is included in a bilingual anthology of Northamerican women poets titled *Siete poetas norteamericanas actuales*, published by Pamiela. Finally, the only other thing worth mentioning is the translation of a small group of Levertov's political poems, extracted from her volumes of the 60's, 70's, and 80's, appearing in Anne Dewey's article "La poesía política de Denise Levertov."

of the major setbacks this has in the existing criticism –and many of these articles and chapters do offer some excellent insights into concrete Levertov poems– is the lack of a broader perspective, which, in some cases, has been the cause of a lack of understanding on what Levertov was really trying to do in her poems which touched upon the themes of identity and myth. I will just cite two examples to better illustrate my point. In her chapter on Levertov included in *Naked and Fiery Forms. Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition*, Suzanne Juhasz chooses to center her study on the conflict between the dominant masculine tradition and the "emerging feminine traditions" underlying Levertov's work and concludes that her poetry is "skillful and beautiful but often, in the end, unsatisfying" (62) because, as Juhasz reasons, Levertov has failed to adequately negotiate a way out from this conflict. As I hope to prove along my research, a chronological study of how she deals with identity and myth throughout her work shows that such conclusions miss what is one of the characteristic traits and contributions of Levertov's poetics, which points precisely in the opposite direction to the one signaled by Juhasz in her book.

A second example is DuPlessis' "The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser," an article in which she analyzes a group of myth-related poems by these three contemporary women authors. Surprisingly, DuPlessis ends her article by explicitly stating that "with the exception of Levertov," the poets studied in her essay write poems that are "reinventions of myth, appropriating and rediscovering the essential mythic experiences: journey, rebirth, transformation, and centering" (212), thus setting Levertov apart from her revisionist companions. Levertov's constant dismissals of any feminist intentionality in her poems, together with the subtle ways in which revision sometimes works in her poetry, has probably misguided some critics, DuPlessis being one of them, into presupposing that Levertov was not interested in the revision of myths.

In opposition to these objections raised against Levertov's work on identity and myth, the vast majority of the critical books dealing with revision on women's writings do not seem to share these views on Levertov's revisionist intentions. In her landmark *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, Alicia Ostriker does include Levertov among the group of revisionist writers she analyzes. Levertov's name appears next to other contemporary women poets whose work is dedicated, in Ostriker's own words, to "subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit" (222). Perhaps the major problem with Ostriker's book, as far as the analysis of Levertov is concerned, is that though Ostriker devotes various chapters of her book to the study of identity and myth in contemporary women poets, Levertov being one of them, the large scope of her study, with such a large number of poets included in her critical scrutiny, doesn't allow her to focus specifically on the process of identity construction in Levertov's work.

In addition to Ostriker's *Stealing the Language*, another critical volume throwing new light on the figure of Levertov as a poet revising her inherited literary tradition is Linda Kinnahan's *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser*. More concretely, Kinnahan interprets Levertov's work mainly in the light of her role as Williams' poetic daughter, continually emphasizing her labor of reconstruction and rewriting of Williams' legacy. Kinnahan's book has been for me a basic book of reference throughout my research. Even though Kinnahan's approach to Levertov is more specifically related to her reformulation of the maternal in comparison with Williams –something related but not central to the scope of this work– Kinnahan's idea served me as a basis to ground my working hypothesis: the possibility of an approach to Levertov's work from the perspective of her constant "*re-inscription*"[2] of gender in her

2 I have chosen to leave this word in italics because I use it in much the same terms Liz Yorke defines "*reinscription*" in her book *Impertinent Voices: Subversive*

poems on identity and myth. Exploring Levertov's poetry from this perspective would allow me to further highlight the unquestionable validity of her revision work within contemporary women's writings.

What I think is still lacking in much criticism on Levertov, irrespective of the fact that both Ostriker and Kinnahan already point to this idea in their critical books, is a global study showing how her redefinition of identity and her reconstruction of mythic constructs evolve, in an almost parallel way, throughout her work, how they develop without ever losing their constant interactions. Showing how this specifically works in Levertov is one of the overall ideas that motivates my discourse on Levertov.

My major aim in the first chapter is to situate Levertov in her proper literary context as a woman poet trying to find and reassert her own voice within a male-dominated poetic scene. I will begin with Levertov's early determination –notwithstanding her constant connections with relevant mid-century poets– to develop her own poetic course in matters of composition and poetic voice and connect it with my hypothesis of a revisionist intention in content.

In the second chapter I will discuss my methodological approach to Levertov's work, the difficulties I have had to face in my process of research, and my constant rethinking of a suitable gendered methodology to deal with Levertov's poetic corpus. In the last section of this chapter I try to explicit where I position myself as a man writing on a woman poet.

In the third chapter I try to explore the connections between revision and new forms of self-representation in women's writings. My final objective in this chapter is to show the importance which

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Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry : "a process in which the old narratives, stories, scripts, mythologies become transvalued, re-presented in different terms" (1).

literary revision has for women writers if they want to change the dominant images of women inherited from the literary tradition.

In the first section of the fourth chapter I analyze a group of poems that are clearly interrelated inasmuch as they all express Levertov's views of herself as woman and poet. By tracking down the links the images contained in these poems establish among themselves, I want to explore whether these poems work together on a larger scale as a complex iconography with which to represent personal identity.

My concern in the second section of that chapter is the analysis of Levertov's poems specifically related with woman's sex and body. I will try to explicit how these poems constantly react against the dominating ideological framework and its representation of woman's sex and body.

In the fifth chapter I will discuss a group of Levertov's poems on erotism, both her poems explicitly addressed to Eros and her poems exploring erotism and sexuality. My intention is to study how her poems on the erotic confront patriarchal constructs on love and erotism and how they counter the forced absence of women in the expression of erotism.

Finally, in the sixth chapter I will explore the themes of inspiration, vision and the art of writing in Levertov's poetry. These aspects, as I will try to show, are related with how she developed a view of herself as a woman writer and how she positioned herself in the context of her literary tradition.

CHAPTER I

A Centrifugal Displacement: Levertov in her Context

I have broken
the small bounds
of this existence and
am travelling south

on route 90. It
is approximately
midnight, surrogate
earth time, and you

who could, can, and
will never take anything
seriously will die
as dumb as ever

while I alone in
state celestial shoot
forward at designed rate,
speed at last unimpeded.

Robert Creeley, “HO HO.”

In *Sands of the Well*, the last book of poems Denise Levertov published, she almost ominously wondered in a poem titled “For Those Whom the Gods Love Less” whether she had outlived her vocation, her poems seeming to her to traverse the same road they

did decades before. To evade artistic paralysis she offered thinking again about "the great ones" as a remedy, remembering Cezanne's crafty way of painting, "doggedly *sur le motif*," ever wrestling with the same mountain, like a biblical Jacob with the Angel, to get his theme right. *This Great Unknowing*, a book of poems posthumously published by Paul A. Lacey, her literary executor, proves that only a few days before her death in 1997, Levertov was still wrestling with that Angel, rehearsing over and over the same themes, yet always "doggedly *sur le motif*." May this be my epitaph and my sign of love and admiration for her poetry.

Levertov's literary legacy in American letters and the rippling influence of her life and work can scarcely be overestimated. More than twenty volumes of poetry, three books of essays, and a voluminous literary correspondence with some of the most influential poets of the times, remains an outstanding record for a poet who devoted a good part of her life to other social commitments. The critical attention her poetry has received, with numerous monographs dedicated to the study of various aspects of her poetry, shows to what extent the figure of Levertov looms large in American poetic studies. Any study of mid-century American poetry would now have to take Levertov into account as a poet with an identifiable voice, a voice that has accrued with time as distinctive and personal.

Levertov began her poetic career under a highly congenial atmosphere for poetic innovation. A British expatriate in the U.S. after her marriage with the American novelist Mitch Goodman in 1948, Levertov, who had been schooled in the rhythm of the iambic pentameter and the high lyricism of British Romanticism, soon discovered William Carlos Williams' speech-based poetry, and his modulations of the local rhythms of speech in the poem. In his various essays on poetic composition Williams had already drawn attention to the fact that in the new era, and after new discoveries affecting our very conception of the universe such as Einstein's

theory of relativity, the metronome could no longer be valid to measure the new experiences of modern life. Williams advocated applying relativity to the line of the poem, accepting "the relativity of measurements" as a governing principle (1969, 283). Almost simultaneously, jazz music, and its free performance of musical tempos, contributed to popularize new ways of measure in consonance with the new times; the emerging poets composing in William's wake, Levertov one of them, wholeheartedly adopted these new measures as a more flexible and expansive working tool. Levertov summarized the two important influences Williams' innovations with speech and measure had on her poetic generation: "he showed us the rhythms of speech as poetry" (1992, 254).

Dawning on the 50's Charles Olson extended some of Williams' most relevant discoveries into his groundbreaking "Projective Verse." Williams' use of a poetry rooted in the rhythms of vernacular speech was carried further by Olson into a physiological poetics which emphasized the poet's ear and "the pressures of his breath" as important physiological media in the process of listening to the rhythm inherent to the experiences and translating this into verse with a personal imprint. In addition to this, Olson explicitly recognized in "Projective Verse" his debt to Williams' use of the typewriter in poetry as an adequate medium to faithfully record, thanks to its spatial precision, "the listening he has done to his own speech" (22). Drawing heavily upon Williams' teachings, Olson's theory opened the field of poetic creativity, something which, after the constrictive academic poetics of New Criticism, felt like a fresh wave of creative freedom.

Levertov's friendship with key poetic figures associated to the Black Mountain group, focal point of "Projective Verse" and of much artistic creativity, put her in the right orbit very soon. In this way Levertov linked her destiny to a wider poetic realm. Tracing her poetic career is inextricably intertwined with the tracing of the origins and the internal dialectics of poetic schools and trends that

determined the course American poetics would take in the ensuing decades.

But even if in the whole span of the 50's a good number of poets on both coasts had been applying the new principles to their poems, it was not until Donald Allen published the work of these emerging poets in *The New American Poetry* that they got the chance of reaching a really wide audience. Allen's landmark publication gave a decisive push forward to many of the poets anthologized in the book. Though most of them had been writing poetry for years, they had managed to publish their poems only in small-circulation magazines, or in limited editions (Levertov had already published *Here and Now* with Ferlinghetti and *Overland to the Islands* with Jonathan Williams). Allen ordered the various groups of the times, throwing light on their similarities but diffusing, for the sake of classification, their differences. Section I of the anthology grouped together the major poetic figures of the Black Mountain school, among them Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. Allen's criteria for classification in this first section was that they all had published some of their poems in two well-known magazines of the days, Cid Corman's *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*. In the specific case of Levertov, Allen rightly adds in a prefatory note that, even if some of her poems were also published in both magazines, she "had no connection with the college" (xii). Though she never was physically at the Black Mountain College, she had been corresponding with Creeley and Duncan and was made privy to what they were trying to do there. In this way, Olson's "Projective Verse" soon reached her, influencing her new views concerning poetic composition and determining to a great extent the course of her poetry in the years to come.

Although scarcely any critical consideration has been given to the practical effects of "Projective Verse" on Levertov's poetry, her assimilation and translation into verse of Olson's theories was certainly one the most notable breakthroughs in her career. Levertov

had the privilege of being among the first ones to receive quite direct information about the contents of "Projective Verse" from the conversations she had with Creeley soon after it was first published. As she herself recognized, she was deeply enriched by discussions with Creeley over "Projective Verse"(1992, 200). Olson's "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" influenced her idea of poetic writing as "a process of discovery," a seeking of the inherent form peculiar to each experience, scoring in the lines of the poem the process of interconnected perceptions as apprehended in the mind. One example that shows the concrete effects Olson's theory of interconnected perceptions had on Levertov is her precise use of line-break in the poem. Levertov valued line-break as a "precision tool" for designing on the page "the *process* of thinking/ feeling, feeling/thinking" by means of which one specific perception interconnects with the immediately following perception, recording even "the slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind's dance among perceptions" (1992, 79).

Writing from the Margins

In " A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: The Objectivist Poets in Context," Burton Hatlen argues that both the Jewish Objectivists (Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, George Oppen, and Louis Zukofsky) and the non-Jewish Objectivists, (Lorine Niedecker and Basil Bunting) shared a "powerful sense of marginality" (47). Whereas the Jewish Objectivists were marginalized for questions of race and communist convictions, Bunting's sense of marginality sprang from his religious background (he was a Quaker), and his dissent from national politics ("a pacifist during World War I" and a "self-chosen exile from Great Britain"); in the

case of Niedecker, however, it seems that fewer arguments were needed: "and Niedecker? A woman poet in America during the 1930s and the 1940s was by definition marginal" (47), Hatlen concludes. Significantly enough, not one decade after Niedecker's later work, Levertov was writing her first poems in America and the curious thing is that she qualified for almost every single requirement of the above list. First of all, she had a partly Jewish background, her father was a Russian Jew later converted to Anglicanism, which made her view herself a "neither/nor" mongrelized outsider in late Victorian England: "among Jews a Goy, among Gentiles (secular or Christian) a Jew or at least a half-Jew (which was good or bad according to their degree of anti-Semitism); among Anglo-Saxons a Celt" (1992, 260). And last, if not literally "self-exiled" from Great Britain, she had recently arrived in the U.S., her new country of adoption as she called it, after her marriage with Mitch Goodman. In the light of all this, her sense of marginality must have been, to say the least, more than acute in her first years as a poet in America.

Finally, if the 30's and the 40's were hard years, and they were, for any woman deciding to write poetry, the tranquilized 50's were not a convivial occassion in this respect. During this decade the dominant social ideology was sedated conformism, a decade known as the "tranquilized fifties" after Robert Lowell's coinage. If specifically applied to women, sedated conformism meant silently accepting the role model of the Victorian "Angel in the House." The neat system of role oppositions, either "Angel in the House" or monster when not compliant with social canons, considerably affected women poets in their psychological balance and it couldn't be otherwise, given the sociological context. To be more precise, two clearly conflicting forces were pulling against each other then in the mind of any woman poet: on the one hand, the immanence of these ideals of domestic perfection, more specifically those having to do with perfection in their lives as "behind-the-scenes" wives

and abnegated mothers, and, on the other hand, a more tearing force, that of a serious dedication to poetry, which is by nature, an introspective art. If we see now these two forces as not opposed it is because of women poets' efforts to close the gap between the roles of woman and poet. But what cannot be denied is that social discourses about women have always tended to split and problematize women's roles. In general terms, a woman writing poetry in the 50's was aware of the pressure that social discourses put on her to comply, above anything else, with her family role. She was conscious that in writing she was moving too dangerously on the edge of social acceptance since the time and concentration that went into her poems was an act of disloyalty to her more 'serious' responsibilities as mother and housewife. Little wonder that the double bind, the role conflict between woman and poet, would become such a recurrent motif in the poetry of a good number of woman poets writing in the 50's, some of the best exemplars being Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, and Levertov herself.

However contradictory this might sound after what was said above, the 50's were also landmark years in Levertov's confirmation as a poet. It was at the beginning of the 50's that she first met Creeley, a student friend of Mitch's at Harvard. Creeley acted as her fully-supportive poetic benefactor and reliable counselor concerning the poetic innovations available in America. Creeley had a key part in making Levertov known to the poetic audience by publishing her first poems in America when he was editor of *Black Mountain Review*. It was thanks to her frequent correspondence at the time with Creeley that Levertov first became familiar with what was going on in Black Mt. College. Finally, Creeley acted in the distance as master of ceremonies presiding over Levertov's contact with Williams. Creeley, who had been corresponding with Williams since 1950, gave her Williams' address. After an initial exchange of letters, Levertov became an *habitué* of 9 Ridge Road at Rutherford, Williams' home and one of the epicenters of poetry in those days.

Williams, as Levertov acknowledged, put her on the right track and he did so without saving any comments about the difficulties ahead of her. In the correspondence (edited by MacGowan in 1998, in a superb edition full of well-documented notes), Williams excels in his intuitive mind, in his capacity to recognize the natural talents that could make her a good poet: "there is something indescribably appealing to me in what you write" (Levertov 1998b, 9), he writes to her in one of his first letters. But, and this makes his praising comments even more valuable, in the full context of the letters the figure of Williams does not appear as a patronizing forefather; for one thing, he never repressed a revising comment whenever he found problems with how some of her poems read and he also insisted that she work more on the rhythmic organization of the poems and to "practice, practice, and practice" (4).

Yet the Williams Levertov was corresponding with was too experienced to let the opportunity pass of telling her from which place she would have to start writing. Comments such as "there is no place for you in the world I know" (7) or "for a woman, as in the case of Creeley's wife, it must be puzzling in a male world to find a way to keep the mind alive. Good luck" (29), are at the same time crystal clear and highly valuable, in the sense of pointing out possible frustrations in the future of a fledgling woman poet who was then trying to find her own way. Williams implied that she would have to start writing from the margins.

Williams' poetic legacy is most notably felt in two Levertov volumes of that decade: *Here and Now* and *Overland to the Islands*, whose first poem is done in overt imitation of *Paterson*. Even so, there is much misunderstanding concerning Williams' more salient influence on Levertov and this point needs to be clarified in order to understand what Levertov would try to do compositionally in her later poetry; rather than choosing the most popular side of Williams, the Williams of the American idiom, or the Williams of "No Ideas but in Things," Levertov concentrated more on his original

use of rhythmical modulations, on how dexterously he orchestrated the musical tempo of the lines with an adequate variation of the stress patterns per line. Williams' innovations with stress patterns, his use of the triadic line, which she adopted very soon, showed her the way to rhythmic mastery in a near future. An anecdote might suffice to illustrate Levertov's obsession with this aspect of Williams' poetry: Creeley, in his posthumous tribute to her, remembers with nostalgia how Levertov and himself would sit and discuss for hours how to work out the right scansion of Williams' triadic stanza: "we used to sit out at the edge of the orchard near her house in Puyricard, rehearsing endlessly what it was Williams was doing with the line. We were fascinated by how the pace was managed, how the insistent breaking into of the grammatically ordered line made a tension and a means more deft than any we had known" (2000, 82). The practical effects of this "rehearsing endlessly," and of her good ear for the "music" of the line, can be checked in one of her didactic essays on Williams' prosody: "On William's Triadic Line, or How to Dance on Variable Feet," which she first published in 1984. This critical piece on the regulating principle behind Williams' experimental prosody, accompanied by practical examples of his method, remains today a fundamental explanation of Williams' prosodic innovations. In her essay Levertov instructed readers to pay attention to the fact that Williams was not thinking in terms of syllables when he was composing his triadic series poems but rather in terms of triadic clusters, each section of it working as a foot, and each having the same duration, whether a many-syllabled segment or one with few syllables. She hoped the poetic community would benefit from the lessons she had derived from Williams' rhythmical innovations and his conversations with her on this subject, whilst dismounting much of the criticism that had been written on Williams' use of the variable feet.

AGAINST THE CURRENT

In the 60's Levertov's poetry took a new turn into the long, winding road of political poetry, a direction she kept in the 70's and well into the 80's. In times of social and political turmoil, she did not evade what she thought were her responsibilities as a poet in the world. Levertov participated in the forefront, and at the service, of resistance movements against the Vietnam war. Her ethos about the social commitments an artist must meet in life dragged her into a frenzy of activism, relentlessly involving herself in the War Resistance Movement, participating in numerous read-ins and sits-in, and traveling through many states to give speeches at antiwar rallies.[1] In 1971 she traveled to Hannoi with fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser and Jane Hart, wife of U.S. senator Philip Hart, and

1 Her revolutionary self-positioning against the war and her militant activism at campus rallies strengthened the hand of those literary critics who instinctively tended to box women poets into subsuming and controlling poetic groups; in this particular case, some of them were too quick to see in Levertov's antiwar activities a good argument for an association with the Beat movement. The Beat label shows how much of her poetry was, and still is, unrecognized and misinterpreted by the critics. One of the most notable critical blunders is her inclusion in an anthology of Beat women poets, *Women of the Beat Generation: Writers, Artists* & *Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (Knight), featuring her as a revolutionary Beatnik. The grounds for her inclusion in the Beat movement are never explicited in the anthology. For want of critical reasons based on poetic affinities, we can only think that it was her antiwar activities along the West Coast campuses that earned her the Beatnik association. But this argument is certainly too flimsy to be of any use. Just because she was a poet protesting at People's Park does not mean that she qualifies as a Beat poet. Nor was she the only non-Beat poet protesting against the war at university campuses.

The truth is that her poetic affinities were not set with the Beats; unbridgeable distances in matters of poetic composition and ways of translating the anger into verse separated them, even if they were drawn closer by a common revolutionary diction. One literary anecdote might suffice to illustrate this:

published, two months after her visit, "Glimpses of Vietnamese Life" (an essay included in *The Poet in the World*), a realistic chronicle about their visit, offering one of the few "on-the-scene" perspectives of the Vietnamese people, and everyday life in Vietnam. The emotional impact of her experience in Vietnam and the images related to it deeply marked her poetry of the 70's.

Since the early 60's, however, a series of rifts had already taken place with other male poets because of her antiwar poetry. George Oppen was one of her most notable detractors; Oppen, who opposed the American involvement in Vietnam, confessed in a letter to have been taken aback by Levertov's antiwar activities and by her using poetry as a vehicle for antiwar statements. Oppen could not repress a biting reference to Levertov in his 1963 essay "The Mind's Own Place," "almost written *at* her" (1990, 57) as he recognized in a 1962 letter to June Oppen, and where he advises her to undergo a period of sabbatical non-writing –"the essay very nearly tells her to stop writing for a while" (58), he comments in this same 1962 letter.[2] A "good mother," as he called her, actively engaged in political activities and writing poetry at the same time was an equation which didn't quite square in Oppen's idea of a woman poet. But Levertov, who knew the full content of the essay, didn't take his

James Laughlin, editor of New Directions, Levertov's regular publishing house since 1964, is unable to tell, in a letter he sent to William Carlos Williams, why he likes both Levertov's poetry and the poetry of the Beats in spite of his acknowledgment of their differences: "Denise disapproves of the 'Beats' very strongly, and can't understand why I like her work, which is so disciplined and careful, and also theirs" (Levertov 1998b, 86).

2 Even though there seems to be an apparent discrepancy in the dating, Olson's essay was not originally published until 1963 (*Kulchur*), and later reprinted in *Montemora* in 1975. Yet as Rachel Blau DuPlessis recognizes in one of her explanatory notes to Oppen's selected letters, "dating and sequencing the materials dealing with 'The Mind's Own Place' is a challenge" (Oppen 1990, 380).

advice too seriously and wrote instead a poem titled "Who is at my Window?" (*The Sorrow Dance*) picturing Oppen as a disturbing presence at her window, "a blind cuckoo mulling / the old song over." In the same poem she states why she wants him to go away from her window: "I want to move deeper into today, / he keeps me from that work." Denise Levertov shows metaphorically how Oppen, in his insistence to her that she should reconsider a philosophical legitimation to write about war, was distracting her from her task of immersing herself into a poetry of there and then.

During the early 70's confronted views with other critics and writers developed in full, but the major and most deteriorating dispute involved Duncan, her poetic mentor and close friend for decades. The dispute, as befitted the terms in which they had conducted their friendship for many years, was vented out in letters. It seems logical that the friendship and the sharing that had began and grown so intensely in letters should also begin to end in letters. With Duncan she maintained such a durable and productive correspondence as has few parallels among fellow poets; over 450 letters now archived at the Poetry Rare Books Collection (Buffalo) and the Department of Special Collections (Stanford). Throughout the 50's and the 60's letters would go back and forth from the East to the West Coast (where Levertov and Duncan lived, respectively), sometimes with not even an interval of a couple of days between one letter and the next, and in many occasions enclosing manuscripts or typescripts of new poems. To such an extent "did their poems and letters spring from the same source," Gelpi recalls, "that on a few occasions a letter moved spontaneously into verse" (2000, 4). This voluminous correspondence, spanning more than three decades, was however abruptly interrupted in November 1971 after venomous exchanges over Levertov's antiwar poetry.

A footnote included in Mersmann's *Out of the Vietnam Vortex* was taken by Levertov as Duncan's unburying of the hatchet. The footnote quotes an interview with Duncan in which he diagnosed

Levertov's war poems as displaced projections of her own "sadism and masochism." Duncan, who, as shown in the letters, was reading into some of the poems of *To Stay Alive* with the examining mind of a Jungian psychoanalyst, had found latent in some antiwar poems a "deep underlying consciousness of the woman as a victim in war with the Man" [October 1971] and not poems "in relation to Viet Nam." The battle of the sexes with woman as victim was, thought Duncan, the unconscious content underlying some of the lines in her long poem. In consonance with this, Duncan interpreted some of these sections as merely agitprop for women's liberation. The truth, however, is that Duncan was somewhat touching an interior, bleeding wound, since Levertov was calling for revolution not only against the war but also against all forms of domination and oppression, male supremacy not exempted. Her poetic discourse of the 70's against domination and oppression was deeply influenced by the new upsurge of feminism in the 60's which established for the first time an interconnectedness between the Civil Rights Movement's protests against racism, segregation and discrimination, and women's own oppression in their private lives. The force of these discourses impelled some women poets to start to denounce male chauvinist hegemony at a global scale, and their own oppression under it. Levertov's vocabulary against oppression drew heavily on the discourses of the new feminist ideology. As she had said, the moment when she became convinced that pacifism was no longer tenable as a personal option was when she intuitively saw "a connection between the Vietnamese people struggling for self-preservation and between people's struggling for self-determination in all places, and with racism" (1998a, 91). And in a speech for a rally at the University of Massachusetts she committed herself further: "the days of mere protest are over, and the days of separating war, and racism and pollution of natural resources, and social injustice, and male chauvinism, into neat little compartments are over" (1973, 122). Levertov didn't want her message of militant resistance

to be split up according to teleological formulations. Fighting against war was parallel in its ethical foundations to fighting against racism, or fighting for the preservation of one's identity; in either case, as her words imply, it meant making political decisions and not simply opting out: "the personal is political."

Duncan saw the permanence of these discourses, disguised under poetic form, in the radicalism of Levertov's antiwar poems. And he was not wrong in these insights into this aspect of the poems. Yet he missed the interconnectedness between the Vietnam war and her identity poetics. Duncan's categorical reference to Levertov's volume as poems "not in relation to Viet Nam," was a biased one. What cannot be denied about *To Stay Alive* is that it works as antiwar poetry; the scenario for many of the poems is the war in Vietnam, and the verses are full of revolutionary slogans against war and vivid images of those suffering the consequences of it. To miss either side of her non-compartmenting poetics is to miss the underlying connecting channels between war, domination, and women's oppression, a point that Levertov was trying to make clear in part of her antiwar poetry.

The revolutionary language was another bone of contention between Duncan and Levertov, specially the Nerudian "revolution or death" in one of her most incensing poems. In an equally abrasive letter he sent her the following month Duncan mythologizes Levertov as Kali, Hindu goddess of destruction. "Kali," wrote Duncan in his letter, "belongs to the wheel of inexorable revolution. Her wrath destroys good and evil alike, consumes us in an age of conflicts." [November 1971]. The reference to this goddess of the Hindu mythology is not gratuitous, much less coming from someone so versed in mysticism, occultism and mythology. In the Hindu mythology Kali is represented as a hideous, black-faced hag smeared with blood, her ornaments consisting of a garland of skulls and a girdle of severed hands. Wanting to smooth out the rough edges of his accusations to Levertov, Duncan rationalizes his

contention with her as an intra-psychic *animus/anima* confrontation: "my contention with you [was] my contention with my own *anima*... for much of what I suspect you of, or accuse you of, I suspect a some womanish possibility in myself." But rather than acting the *anima* in his dialectics with Levertov, Duncan was sort of personifying her *animus*, as Jung defines it, "an assembly of fathers or dignitaries of some kind who lay down incontestable, 'rational,' ex cathedra judgements" (96). These, nonetheless, were the accepted terms of her relationship with Duncan for a great span of time, with Duncan acting as a paternal figure and Levertov dependent upon his authoritative approval of her poems: "It's only what you think of a poem that really, really counts for me" [February 21], Levertov had assured him as far back as 1965.

In the midst of all this chaos, how did Levertov manage to produce such a large body of writing during this period? There is something tellingly revealing in this and it talks about courage, determination, and vocation. For at a time when the sirens were calling her to stop writing against the war or simply to stop writing for a good while, not only did she plug her ears with wax but sang back louder and almost uninterruptedly. Her writing then could only be done against the current, not only against the current of her closest poetical community, but also against the current of an all-enveloping social and political chaos which was not the best source of inspiration for a balanced poetic form; as she confessed "I do not believe that a violent imitation of the horrors of our times is the concern of poetry. [...] I long for poems of an inner harmony in utter contrast with the chaos in which they exist" (1973, 3). In other words, she was convinced that it was a responsibility of the poets to communicate what they saw, but to communicate it by means of craft and art, not by means of shock. And this was something that many reviews of her political poetry did ostensibly overlook when they so instantaneously dismissed her poetry as protest doggerel.

Other personal motivations for writing political poetry went largely misunderstood as well. As a mystic educated in an eclectic Christianism, she had a firm belief in the prophetic role of the poet, in the poet's obligation to awake the consciences of the community. And as a leftist, she saw poetry as an agent of social transformation, a site for calling to revolution, both social and personal. And this revolution was something she herself was experimenting in her poetry, in her reconstruction of the self and language in some of her political poems. This is no surprise since her protest discourse, branching out as it did from feminist ideological formulations, was to necessarily change her view of herself as a woman poet, and her relation with language, which now she saw, specially in the war rhetoric, as the oppressor's language. After her involvement with antiwar groups, her poetry became more and more a radical speech act not just against all sorts of oppressions and acts of power, sexism included, but also more self-assuredly in defense of her identity as a woman poet.

A CENTRIFUGAL DISPLACEMENT

When a woman poet makes headway in the midst of the American poetic circles in the 50's and the beginnings of the 60's, she has to be analyzed, not patronizingly I mean, but methodologically, through the lens of her marginal position in this poetic cosmology. Using this analytical focus, what one finds in Levertov's poetry is a curious gravitation of forces, both centripetal and centrifugal; there is, on the one hand, a centripetal gravitation around the center of several poetic groups, around focal points of poetic activity from which she derived much of the knowledge of what was really going on, and from which she learned how to compose and modulate more freely; and on the other, a centrifugal displacement, a tracing of her own orbit more or less free of gravitating pulls, a direction towards a more openly woman-centered,

revisionist poetics. When I say a "woman-centered" poetics I am not oblivious to the fact that I am bringing into sharp focus an aspect that Levertov in essays and interviews held as irrelevant to her poetry. But my own idea is that following the wake of her woman-centered poetry invests her art with a broader and richer dimension. There is, in the context of her dialectics with male poets, another interesting question brought about by her stubborn denial of gender in poetry. For why would a woman poet so conscious of her token role in some poetic groups, one that soon got an inkling that she had been chosen as the exception that proved the rule, "the rule that poetry was a masculine prerogative, and that women were, by and large, Muses or servants" (Wagner-Martin 1979, 98), deny that poetry was gender specific? My own guess is that her motivations for this were not specific to poetry but of another nature, more related to her own life-determined prejudices against some categories. And the best proof of this is that her dismissive arguments were always uncharacteristically evasive, and contradictory with some of her other public manifestations. For example, even though she talks about poetry in terms of gender as "a masculine prerogative" she is adamant to accept the category of woman's poetry buttressing herself behind a couple of easy syllogisms based on social statistics: first, that it is a social category ("the same as there are women architects and nobody talks of a woman's architecture"); second, and basing herself on similar statistical reasons, she argues that "among the fine poems by women I come across in recent years, the fact of being female, though it certainly does appear as subject, no more dominates, statistically, than does the fact of being male in poems by men." Yet, however contradictorily, she avails herself of the same statistical reasons to accept the category of Black poetry since, according to her, "they are far more concerned with the Black culture and struggle as subject than are most women with the oppression or the nature of women as subject" (Wagner-Martin 1979, 98).

These comments were made around 1964 after she was asked by the editors of *Trellis* to collect a group of poems by women for a small publication. One can always argue in her defense that she was right in the middle of a second feminist upsurge and that she needed more time to assimilate the relevance gender had in her everyday life as poet. But the paradox, as I will try to prove, is that while during these years she was far advanced in the process of gender construction in her poems, closing that gap between woman and poet (and she had a considerable number of poems dedicated to this process), she never did so in her interviews, not even when she was a senior poet; one instance of this: upon being questioned by Nancy K. Gish, after Levertov had embraced the Catholic faith, on "the relationship between speaking as woman and believing in a religion which has, at least historically, whether valid or not, grounded itself in a primacy of maleness," Levertov gives this as her unorthodox answer: "as a poet I'm a poet. I'm not a woman poet, I'm not a man poet. I'm a poet" (Levertov 1998a, 178).

Once again, this cannot be made to cohere with other pivotal statements in her career. It is particularly hard to figure out how that awkward compartmenting of personal experience (woman vs. poet) could be distinctively realizable in her life. I wonder whether this dividing "into neat little compartments" is not what she vehemently opposed in her speech for a rally? But if what she means is that her experience as a woman cannot be brought to bear on her poetry, it seems to me that her poetry contradicts her position very strongly, and proving this is one of the objectives of this work.

Levertov's universalist humanism, and her eccentric tradition in life –a Jewish father converted into an Anglican priest and a Welsh mother, herself an English alien in U.S. and with an eclectic literary tradition too– made her fear inclusion in such categories, for she thought that the woman label devalued her inclusion in the more roomy category of universal art. Her marginal position certainly situated her on the edge, but in a place from which she could move

freely in various directions, in form and content, without having her poetic and personal convictions compromised. "I had, certainly, the great advantage of not being connected to any 'literary world' in particular" (1992, 205), was a sentence she repeated almost literally in more than one occasion.

But let me explain how that centrifugal force translates into formal experimentation. From a very early stage, Levertov gave signs of wanting to take her own relatively independent course in matters of poetic composition, technique and poetic voice. She had, for instance, more than purely incidental reservations about some of Olson's poetic formulations, Olson's breath theory being just one of them. Whereas Olson put pulmonary capacity first as a reliable verse metronome, Levertov thought that line length should be determined not by a purely physiological capacity (what she saw as tainted by Olson's masculinism) but by her "cadences of perception," each line of the poem being the visual score of the process of feeling/thinking at the moment of composition.

One subtler, yet in the long run more determinant, poetic reformulation had to do with the Black Mountain maxim about the interactions between form and content. It was at the Vancouver Poetry Festival of 1963, a highly resonant poetic forum, that she partially reformulated Creeley's "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" included in Olson's "Projective Verse," into a slightly different "form is never more than a *revelation* of content." This formula was more suited to her conception of poetry as an organic form which she defined as "a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories" (1973, 7). Levertov's organic formula and her development of it must be understood in the context of her own personal initiative, her original idea of fusing the Black Mountain poetic ideology with her own mystic tradition,

that is, with her experience of nature as a supreme form (divinely inspired) and poetic composition as a process of discovery and revelation of it.

One of the most reliable indications of her centrifugal course is her search for a personal poetic voice, something that soon became a constant concern for Levertov. There is a literary anecdote in her correspondence with Williams that tells of her aural attentiveness. The anecdote referred to a group of poems Levertov had sent Williams in one of her letters; Williams had his wife Flossie read him the poems and found that two of them, "Canticle" and "Corazon," read well in the American idiom but the third one, "The Jacob's Ladder," read rather retrogressively in the "staid iambic" of her English tradition; its effect on the poem he literally termed "disastrous." In his response to Levertov, Williams drew her attention to what he thought was a flaw in the way the poem measured and, an instructive hint indeed, in the same letter he enclosed his essay on the American idiom. Yet far from being persuaded into a revision of the whole poem, Levertov refused to change the measure of it, and self-confidently replied in a new letter that the poem "sounds the way I think and feel about it" adding that "my shaking up of its structure into something else would be a betrayal of what I know I must do" (1998b, 100). As far as the essay on the American idiom was concerned, Levertov recognized its validity for a number of young American poets uprooted from their vernacular roots, but she said she didn't think it applied in her case. In the days a great number of poets of all denominations jumped onto the bandwagon of the American idiom, Levertov took a more independent turn away from what was a major poetic fashion then and assured instead that her priority was more "the tone and measure" of her own feelings because, as she wrote to Williams, "the poet's first obligation is to his own voice –to find it and use it" (100). And finding her own voice for her was not necessarily the American idiom, since as she confessed, she was

"not an all-American girl," it was not until she was 24 years old that she had come to live in the U.S., and she had the privilege of a multicultural heritage.

But more than anything else it was probably her confident tone that made Williams go over the poem again and after that send her a letter in the manner of a formal recantation: "the measured way in which you handled your material of the Jacob Ladder incident until the very scraping of the angels' wings upon the stone makes me cringe with embarrassment that I should have missed it in the first place" (Levertov 1998b, 105). Out of context, without a comprehensive knowledge of the terms of their correspondence, it is difficult to tell who is the neophyte and who the experienced poet; yet this small episode should not blur the enormous incidence of Williams' teachings on her. I have chosen it to emphasize Levertov's attempts to find her personal voice and also her clear notions about what she must assimilate from her literary forerunners, and what didn't apply to her specific circumstances. Perhaps the distinctive trait of a future important poet.

So far, I have roughly sketched some of her deviations from some relevant poetic formulations of the time concerning matters of poetic composition, and voice. It is not my idea to delve into these issues in my discourse on Levertov. Some of them, however, might well be at the basis of an extended research, still lacking, on Levertov's independent contribution to mid-century poetic experimentalism. Only tangentially do they touch, when they do, the scope of my analysis in the ensuing pages. I have given them some consideration in this chapter just to exemplify her "Will to choose" rather than be the chosen woman among masculinist poetic milieus and, most importantly, because these formal revisions might serve as a common premise for another hypothesis: a thematic revisionism. Whenever one finds formal revisions, however slight, one might also suspect a revision in the content (in themes, in poetic images). My object of study is more concerned with this revision in content,

more specifically with the visible ways in which she gradually moves in her poetry to a closing of the gap between the woman and the poet, with how she tried to redefine her changes in personal identity through evolving images of self-representation. I will also explore her vision of her woman's body and sexuality. Does this vision remain the same or does it also evolve as she grows more self-assured about her identity? Both her erotic and inspirational poetics will also constitute special objects of study in this work; as far as the former is concerned I want to focus on how she tries to redefine the erotic in her poetics, on whether or not she manages to surmount the many cultural barriers and taboos which exist against women's full expression of a personal eroticism. Finally, I will try to explore in depth her poetry on the Muse in order to find out in what terms and by what means she allies herself with woman-identified sources of inspiration and spirituality.

My overriding interest is to know whether she created in that dialectics an art not only that resists but also that serves to go ethically and aesthetically beyond the artistic frame delimited by phallogocentric art; and if the answer is yes, through which aesthetic media? Which is the process of gender construction in her poems, how does it evolve chronologically, what images of self-representation does it create and to what extent do these images change and become more complexly interrelated? How does she negotiate the socio-historical representation of female sexuality and the body? Did she create a personal mythology to contest myths fossilized in literary tradition and, by extension, in our culture? For instance, does she revise the figure of the Muse, and if the answer is yes, how does she reinvent the relations between woman poet and Muse? In what specific way is this personal mythology revisionary of the old myths, or more concretely, what constructive and deconstructive models operate in her invention of the new ones?

CHAPTER II

Where Can I Find the Gender Map and What Is My Place on it?

If I come into a room out of the sharp misty light
and hear them talking a dead language
If they ask me my identity
what can I say but
I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the lids
of the newborn child

Adrienne Rich, "The Stranger," *Diving into the Wreck*

Nem sempre sou igual no que digo e escrevo.
Mudo, mas não mudo muito.
[...]
Por isso quando pareço não concordar comigo,
Reparem bem para mim:
Se estava virado para a direita,
Voltei-me agora para a esquerda,
Mas sou sempre eu, assente sobre os mesmos pés–
O mesmo sempre, graças a haver a terra
E aos meus olhos e ouvidos atentos
E à minha clara simplicidade de alma...

Fernando Pessoa, "XXIX,"*Alberto Caeiro*.

> ... En aquel Imperio, el Arte de la Cartografía logró tal Perfección que el mapa de una sola Provincia ocupaba toda una Ciudad, y el mapa del imperio, toda una Provincia. Con el tiempo, esos Mapas Desmesurados no satisfacieron y los Colegios de Cartógrafos levantaron un Mapa del Imperio, que tenía el tamaño del Imperio y coincidía puntualmente con él. Menos Adictas al Estudio de la Cartografía, las Generaciones Siguientes entendieron que ese dilatado Mapa era Inútil y no sin Impiedad lo entregaron a las Inclemencias del Sol y de los Inviernos. En los desiertos del Oeste perduran despedazadas Ruinas del Mapa, habitadas por Animales y por Mendigos; en todo el País no hay otra reliquia de las Disciplinas Geográficas.
>
> Suárez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*,
> IV, cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658
>
> Jorge Luis Borges, "Del rigor en la ciencia," *El Hacedor*

When I first decided that I wanted to work on identity and self-representation in the poetry of Denise Levertov, seduced as I was then and still am now by the immense suggestive power of poems such as "The Goddess," "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman," "In Mind," "Cancion," "Song for Ishtar" and a long list of many other good poems, I could but barely imagine then what lay ahead for me, for these same poems I admired so much would later be the cause of so much personal reexamination, forcing me in the end to question my deeply-rooted views about gender, sexuality, and the body. Nor could I figure out in the least the unfolding of unknown dimensions before my eyes which has resulted as a consequence of devoting so much time and personal effort to the study of women's writings in general and of Levertov's poetry in particular. It seems to me, in any case, that these episodes of confusion and bewilderment

speak more about misunderstandings of what is woman and how she creates art, existing within my mind at the time.

Even if from the first moment I clearly knew that I wanted to discuss the theme of "identity" in Levertov's poetics, I had then but the slightest idea of the myriad complexities I would have to face up to as a consequence of my choice. A male critic indulging in a critical inquiry on identity and representation in a woman poet is always bound to open the Pandora's box of misunderstandings, misreadings and misappropriations of all sorts. Identity is criss-crossed by so many and varied axes of race, social class, cultural background (in the case of Levertov she possessed a multicultural heritage) religion, gender... that the very choice of subject matter makes it all the more feasible to commit a long series of chained mistakes. The more I was muddling through the inflection of personal identity in Levertov's poetics, the more unstable, even undecidable, it showed itself before my eyes. For this reason, and rather soon I have to admit, I almost intuitively dispelled the illusion of a comfortable critical standpoint. Nevertheless, and in spite of the nagging presence of this early reminder, I always tried, as hard as possible, to push this sense of uneasiness to the back of my mind, to corner it into a place where it would not disturb my comfortable position. This attitude also formed part of a critical inertia that makes one go on, no matter what, without having to question personal convictions, trying to evade every possible debate that might have in its very nature the questioning of personal assumptions.

Though I was trapped by this force for quite a long while during my process of research, I remained adamant against stopping to consider the possibility that gender might have a part in the configuration of personal identity through art. This is why I comfortably shielded myself behind those personal statements offered in interviews where Levertov rejected the category of woman's poetry, making a

strong claim for subsuming her art in the roomy rubric of the universal, as I have discussed in the previous chapter. I found these personal statements by Levertov and other woman poets[1] quite befitting to my general purposes. As a man educated in the study of art as a universal (Rich denounced such universalistic formulations as a worn euphemism for art as "nonfemale"), I feared any critical inquiry subordinated to gender for it could go in detriment of Art, with a capital "A." Rather advantageously, I have to say, I profited from these women poet's confessions as a sort of *carte blanche* to talk about identity in Levertov's poetry without having to care about gender.[2]

Small wonder, specially in the light of these personal orientations, that my first articles on Levertov's poems, which now I read with mixed feelings of patronizing embarrassment, could seem to me now so ungainly, so tainted by an awkward shying away from gender, as if one could write an essay on Impressionist painting and not even mention the fugitive effects of light and color on the canvass. Rather than saying anything original about a woman poet, they now read to me as a string of clichés, their pages fraught with

1 Elizabeth Bishop, for example, though acknowledging the role of gender in the creation of art, discredits any compartmentalization of art into gender categories as a devaluing of the former: "undoubtedly gender does play an important part in the making of any art, but art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc., into two sexes is to emphasize values in them that are *not* art" (Gilbert and Gubar 1985, 1739).

2 It appears clear to me now that I was ideologically biased in choosing to accept such denials. An evidence of this: Levertov had also stated elsewhere "that the great work of art is always greater than the consciousness of its author" (1992, 105). I could just as well –why not?– have made use of this to, at least, consider the possibility that gender might be a consideration in her making of art. Why not think about the hypothesis, irrespective of the writer's declaration that she never made an aesthetic decision based on gender, that the presence of gender in her works of art might be "greater than the consciousness of its author"?

binary arguments. This sounds all the more absurd to me at this point because I see that I was ostensibly misreading what was a fundamental feature of Levertov's poems on identity. While it is true that Levertov was dramatizing the split between what women are and what they are supposed to be and conveying the true terms in which this split affected her as a woman poet, she never accepted with resignation the effects of the split-self for a prolonged time. In other words, by negotiating and integrating allegedly "split" aspects of her condition as a woman poet, above all by showing that the split-self could be reversed in poetic discourse, she was also discrediting it as more a social myth than an in-born and permanent quality in women. This process of integration, which led to a challenging of the double-bind, was something I now realize I overlooked in my first essays on Levertov. Regrettably so, I preferred to cling to the split-self in my criticism as a sort of eternal condition in women rather than acknowledge that the split-self could be, and in fact was being, countered in her poetic discourse.

When I was employing "double-bind," or "split-self," a recurrent terminology in feminist criticism,[3] I was simply going along with

3 Feminist criticism on contemporary women's poetry has used in abundance such descriptive tags to refer to the schizoid condition of the modern woman poet. Deborah Pope goes to such lengths in her estimation of the incidence the split-self has in contemporary women's poetry that she subsumes it into the category of a subgenre: "women feel an additional distance between self and self, expressed most clearly in the subgenre of split-self poems that runs through woman's poetry" (1984, 8). The split-self has also been the object of many articles, partially or exclusively devoted to Levertov, by prominent feminist scholars. Sandra Gilbert's "'My Name is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition," Alicia Ostriker's "In Mind: The Divided Self and Women's Poetry," and Debora Pope's "Homespun and Crazy Feathers: The Split-Self in the Poems of Denise Levertov" are but a short representative list that can be selected from a considerably large body of critical literature on the split-self in Levertov's poetry.

the critical currents yet not really aware of the implications embedded in such terms. I can only say now in self-defense that as a man I had always seen the double-bind at a safe distance, never having experienced a conflict of such nature, much less thought about the real causes leading to it. Since I remained completely foreign to the latent social forces originating that conflict, I used to tentatively approach the double-bind as if it were one of those strange hereditary diseases in women whose symptoms you can see yet never know their real origin nor the strain that they cause. I leaned heavily on a positivistic jargon, a set of blanket terms such as "ontology of selfhood," "womanhood," "personhood" "wholeness," "wholesome selves" that were politically correct and so did not need any questioning. Since these were, to a large extent, dummy terms, I could resort to them once and again without having to commit myself any further. Formalism, as Rich showed when she commented on the formalist diction and metrical composition of her first poems, can be part of a personal strategy, a sort of "asbestos gloves" I could wear not to have to "handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded" (Rich, 1993, 171). Apart from this, my choice of such phraseology would, I was persuaded then, invest my essays with a high-brow categorical status that would make them almost *de facto* accepted in the academe.

In a series of personal discussions with Prof. John Amador Bedford, my supervisor throughout this work –and I must say that I owe much of my reconsidering of gender and sexuality to what I learned from these sessions– he pointed out to me that I could no longer allow myself to evade a series of existing paradoxes; more concretely, one of the paradoxes arising from my choice of terms such as wholeness, or ontological womanhood, was that they had connotations of closure attached to them, whereas one of the salient characteristics of Levertov's poems on identity was her "will to change," to continuously reformulate the category of woman, to progressively show her woman identity as open and multi-faceted.

A concrete evidence of how this worked in the process of corrections: in his revisions of my comments on Levertov's "In Mind," Prof. Amador Bedford pointed to me the presence of more than two women in the poem (I could only perceive two then) inviting me to take less narrow roads and to think about the possibility that Levertov might be reconfiguring identity as plural and not necessarily dual.

From my first talks with Prof. Amador Bedford on how to approach women's poetry, he sounded a very clear note on the risks implicit in boxing gender, life and a writer's work into separate pigeonholes. Rather soon, I must confess, one of those risks materialized before me under the guise of a gargantuan paradox, which stemmed directly from my decision to submit gender to a dark corner of my analysis. More concretely I was at a loss to explain to myself and to others how I could give gender such a marginal role in criticism when Levertov's poems on identity, the body, sexuality, the erotic, and the spiritual were continually informed by the need to revise, redefine and finally reassert gender in her poetic discourse. For reasons which are obvious, any discourse constructed on contradictory premises such as these falls down like a house of cards at the slightest blow. Mine was not an exception.

The successive corrections made to my work, and the profusion of accompanying and thought-provoking comments and questions, clarified to what extent were these paradoxes invalidating my work. Consequently, I had no other choice but to reconsider my point of departure, my working hypothesis, and my methodologies, in one word, everything. Few were the arguments that could be recycled, and those that were rewoven into the new texture proved finally to cause further problems instead of making matters easier. When criticism is contaminated by so many false assumptions, it is better to start again with a clean slate, which is what I decided to do.

But, with the benefit of just a little bit of hindsight, what I most cherish now from the many personal discussions periodically maintained with Prof. Amador Bedford is that they made me aware of

the need for a harmonious crossover between the personal and the critical –it still puzzles me how instinctively one tends to separate them and treat them as different when practicing criticism; as a result, it appeared increasingly more obvious to me that the act of criticism is not fundamentally different from other acts in personal life, and accepting this simple equation means knowing that unless one submits one's critical choices to a thorough revision in the actual practice of criticism, the odds are that we will not challenge them. Once these stances fossilize as personal convictions, they go far beyond the scope of one specific critical work such as this to enter into the fabric of a whole series of personal acts in life. These convictions also gave me the courage to decide not to suppress any question, no matter how complex, during my work process, and to honestly reflect upon the reasons why one did not want to face them. For me, right from the start, the spooky question, the one that I always tended to suppress, was gender. Once one accepts that the question can be no longer avoided, the complexity inherent to treating gender in criticism makes it all the more difficult to formulate the right question and stop at that point. Much on the contrary, in the specific case of gender criticism, one question about gender reveals another and then another, like a whole set of Russian dolls. A short index of possible interrogations might give a rough idea of this: what is gender? How does gender interact with the construction of personal identity? How can one find suitable approach to gender in discourse? Is there a safe methodology that can always be applied to gender when doing criticism?

The very statement of these questions is not without its side effects too. One of them is that the very act of thinking about gender, about the possibility that gender might have such a paramount relevance in poetic discourse, enacts a parallel process of deconstruction in the male critic who must perforce spiral backwards to investigate the possibility that his own gender might also be a mediating factor in criticism. In what sense? One of the problems of being a man

writing on woman's poetry is that, in general, men are unconsciously contaminated in their criticism on women's literature. If we think for a minute about what the common notion about gender is among men, i.e., that gender is a prediscursive given, a natural and direct consequence of sex, one of those parameters that rarely change throughout life, it shouldn't come as a big surprise that the critical tools employed in discourse might remain so obsolete, the methodology so rigid. This is compounded in my specific case by the fact that I am dealing with the work of a modern woman poet, and modern art –modern poetry written by women not being an exception– characterizes itself by a radical questioning of the sacred truisms within our cultural legacy, and, among them, the concepts of gender and identity. So unless the male critic submits many personal assumptions, in this case specifically related to gender and identity, to a thorough revision, the odds are that he will end slipping into some kind of grotesque critical anachronism. Can someone still anchored in Ptolemaic premises carry out an unbiased research on how the universe is expanding?

If impelled to choose a theory of gender to study works of art made by women, essentialism, and its conceptualization of gender as a stable parameter of identity that is transhistorically and transculturally determined by sex, is so attractive to the male critic that the temptation to embrace it is too strong to not readily succumb to it. I have to recognize that I did wholeheartedly subscribe to it for quite a long while in my process of work, wielding pragmatism as the most convincing argument. I had read Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature* & *Difference* and was totally convinced, I thought at the time, by her persuasive arguments on the need to destigmatize essentialism in critical discourse: "the risk of essence may have to be taken," a statement repeated in more than one occasion in her book, virtually imprinted itself in my mind.

For me, and I guess that this can be extended as well to many other male critics writing on woman, essentialism had a strong,

convincing force. I accepted that the practical advantages of embracing essentialism were legion: first, I could rather easily dispel the more problematic issues concerning gender difference inasmuch as the material body could always be argued as an excuse for and a justification for almost everything; in other words, gender difference could always be succinctly accounted for in terms of the natural and direct consequence of a certain anatomical index without having to enter into further considerations; thus my newly-embraced essentialism provided me with critical shortcuts to approach gender difference. By exclusively resorting to anatomy I could explain in few words what would most surely have needed a longer and more in-depth discussion –anatomy could strategically be held in the sleeve as a trump card, and thrown onto the table when necessary. With these discursive strategies, and a simple use of methodology, I encountered very few difficulties in the act of criticism. So when I finally decided to question my essentialism, it was not precisely because of its pragmatic disadvantages. Nor was it critical wit that forced me to finally renounce to essentialism and choose another critical trend. I have to confess that, generally, when I have decided to change my critical directions it has been, more often than not, as a consequence of being forced to do so, as a result of the considerable cracks which so obviously began to appear on the surface of my work.

It seemed increasingly clear to me that my perspective of Levertov's poetics was becoming too narrow and reductive. I was failing to adequately treat in my analysis the sociological and ideological components present in Levertov's poems on gender and the body for the simple reason that my essentialism did not allow me to account for a whole web of non-anatomical factors that were constantly brought up in the discussion of these poems. Strangely enough, whereas Levertov was moving towards a representation of gender and the body as complexly structured, as a construct mediated by numerous social discourses, my critique of these poems was

stagnated in the same repetitive orientations. It couldn't be otherwise for how could I possibly refer to how discourses of power intervened in the construction of woman's bodies, to cultural barriers obstructing women's relations with the erotic in their bodies, to cultural readings of women's sexualities, and, above all, to Levertov's negotiation of these issues in her poetics, from the reductionist banks of essentialism?

Much was at stake then as far as the quality of my own work was concerned. In discourses about gender and the body, criticism of whatever kind cannot dispense with a whole set of socio-historical components, which influence how gender is read in our culture, without proper fear of becoming reductionist. The need for a new perspective became all the more evident to me since I knew that I had reached a point where my analysis was hitting rock bottom unable as I was to go beyond mere presentation of her poems as an evidence of the poet's resignation to her double-bind. Entrenched in essentialism, I was incapable of tracking down what I noticed at one moment was a markedly rich aspect of Levertov's poetics on identity. For instance, Levertov was using a series of images of self-representation that were interconnected throughout several poems and set in a dynamics of constant change, thus mapping out personal changes in her perception of herself as a woman poet. A rather similar case was her poetics on the body, where she was going through evolving phases in her reading of the female body within the cultural framework.

Yet essentialism allows little critical margin, if any, to formulate gender and the body in terms of socio-cultural chief representations that women artists try to counter engaging on a personal dialectics with them. I could also see no way in which essentialism could be brought to bear upon Levertov's restructuring of gender, nor how it could be made to account for the deployment of cultural and social aspects affecting the reading of gender and the body at a particular time in history.

Influenced by all these considerations, and above all, by Levertov's own redefinition of personal gender through, for instance, the power of poetic self-representations, my own views about gender finally veered from essentialism to constructivism. There is in postmodern criticism a fine set of arguments in favor of applying constructivist theories to the analysis of gender and the body. I found in de Lauretis' *Technologies of Gender* the philosophical grounds from which to approach and discuss aspects of gender related to its construction through representation. What attracted me to de Lauretis' theory was how she continually interconnects the vision we have of gender with the hegemonic representational framework in which woman is represented and read. As a cinematic scholar who has devoted much critical attention to women's cinema and film theory, de Lauretis knows exceedingly well how representation works, having also investigated the semiological components attached to the representation of women in our culture. In *Alice Doesn't*, for example, she elaborately shows how cinema functions as an apparatus of social representation, invested with ideological predicaments, and laden with sociological meanings. Poetry being, despite its obvious differences with cinema, another medium concerned with images and representation, I concluded that de Lauretis' analyses could be of great value to the critique of representation in poetry, primarily to the dialectics between accepted representations of women in the hegemonic cultural framework and women's revision of these representations and their invention of new images of self-representation in poetic discourse. DeLauretis' maxim "*the construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation*" (1987, 9), made good sense to me, specially after realizing how the images of self-representation were functioning in Levertov's poetry.

Almost simultaneously, and in an attempt to ground my analysis of the body and the erotic on a strong theoretical basis, I decided to use Foucault, specially his three volumes on *The History of*

Sexuality. Foucault's thesis that sexuality has been discursively regulated and determined across different historical periods by the intervention of powerful political and ideological technologies deeply marked my perception and understanding of sex. More concretely, Foucault's definition of sexuality as "the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology" (1981, 127) seemed very appropriate for my study of the body and the erotic from the broader angle I needed. If sex and the body were the product of ideological intervention, as Foucault showed rather profusely, it seemed clear to me that referring to the body as if it were prediscursive and nonproblematic was totally misguided.

Further still, my renewed faith in some constructivist tenets allowed me to delve into a series of contradictions and ambivalences in Levertov's poems on the body. These resulted from a tension, relatively unresolved until late in her life, between essentialism and constructivism, between seriously questioning the reductionist ways in which the female body is represented and interpreted in our culture, and, on the other hand, yielding to the essentialist "anatomy is destiny." Underscoring these contradictions and showing how they were finally resolved, would expose to what extent Levertov was straddling between essentialism and constructivism in her poetry on sex and the body, more an indication of her use of a poetry as a process of discovery than a sign of weakness.

When sexuality –something for so long accepted as unproblematic and naturally determined by anatomical sex– is revealed as a socio-historical product of politics and ideology, as Foucault showed in his study of sexuality, gender cannot remain unaffected. The equation sex is to nature what gender is to culture can no longer hold true. Both sexuality and gender are constructed by the intervention of politics and ideology, each with its own specific parameters. As a result, I was convinced that I couldn't go on analyzing Levertov's sexual discourse without adequately considering the specific

discourses mediating the construction of women's sexuality which, we must admit, are very different to those intervening in the construction of men's sexuality.

In *Technologies of Gender* de Lauretis properly cautioned against giving an equal treatment to sexuality irrespective of gender by persuasively arguing that what Foucault had discovered about sexuality could just as well be extended to the study of gender. Elaborating on Foucauldian theory but making significant departures too, de Lauretis proposes that just as sexuality is the product of a technology of sex, so is gender the product of "various social technologies," among which she not only includes cinema, but also epistemologies, critical discourses, etc. Yet, and here comes the relevant departure, de Lauretis puts gender as a site of ideological investment on the par with sexuality which means that gender is not less discursively mediated than sexuality. So for de Lauretis gender can be defined in the same terms Foucault used to define sex: "a set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations" enacted by a "complex political technology." This led me to consider the particularities of gender criticism. In other words, to accept that gender is also the direct product of power investments on the body is to recognize that any discourse focused on women's views of the bodies and sexuality has to take into account that the ideological and power investments on the body are not the same for both genders, for the simple reason that women have historically remained desired targets of oppressive regulation and intervention. Unfortunately, Foucault sidestepped the different and concrete effects the deployment of sexuality distinctively had for men and women,[4] and so his theory, as de Lauretis and other feminist scholars

4 Even though Foucault admits that the "complex political technology" does not have the same effects across different social classes, he does not mention gender as a relevant and asymmetrical parameter in the deployment of sexuality:

have shown, is crippled as far the interconnections between gender and the body concerned.

While on the one hand I saw in de Lauretis' proposal a convincing case of deductive logics, on the other hand my inertia as a man was to presuppose that the deployment of sexuality was the same for both genders rather than reckon that this deployment has historically worked with its own specific rules for women. Hence, I had to make a considerable effort in criticism not to lose sight of the fact that gender is a differentiating factor, and that it was my own responsibility to highlight the difference gender makes in my discourse on the body, sexuality, and the erotic, to bring it to the fore of discussion as often as necessary.

But even if had found the constructivist approach extremely fitting to what I was seeing in Levertov's poetry, and however much it might have been extremely useful in providing me with adequate tools to analyze Levertov's reconstruction of gender, sex, and the body, there were still more stumbling blocks along the road I found hard to solve. I saw at one point that not only were Levertov's

> It is true that sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology, one has to admit that this deployment does not operate in symmetrical fashion with respect to the social classes, and consequently, that it does not produce the same effects in them. We must return, therefore, to formulations that have long been disparaged; we must say that there is a bourgeois sexuality, and that there are class sexualites. (1981, 127)

If In the first pages of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler reasons beyond Foucault that "if the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all." As she more than aptly concludes, "it would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category" (7).

images of self-representation becoming more complexly articulated in poem after poem, but that they also started to work retroactively, readjusting or modifying self-representations appearing in previous poems. Women's reconstruction of personal identity in the post-modern era, the critic must be under no illusion in this, does not follow a straightforward linear design and in one direction alone but it is articulated in a rather more complex way with continuous changes and deconstrucions of former identities.

So now I had to grapple with two apparently conflicting trends: first, the idea of gender as a discursive construction, and, the other side of the coin, the idea of gender as susceptible to continuous self-modification in discourse, in other words, a discursive self-deconstruction. The constructivist approach could not for itself supply the critical tools needed to adequately deal with this self-deconstructing factor. Adhering to constructivism is fine to have a general view of how gender, sex, and the body have been socially constructed across various phases of history, but if one wants to follow more closely how women revise and modify some of these socio-historical constructs, how they readjust or reinvent those images which women themselves have previously created, then one is in need of new theoretical companions.

Judith Butler and Diane Elam are two feminist scholars whose studies on gender have greatly influenced my rethinking of gender as constantly generating new meanings through its continuous self-deconstruction. Both Butler and Elam place themselves on the opposite pole to those critical theories in which gender was viewed as a stable parameter that could be defined recurring either to a natural continuum with anatomy (Luce Irigaray) or the result of psychosexual development marked by stages of parental attachments (Nancy Chodorow and other feminist psychoanalysts).

Recoiling from an almost pervasive literature on gender that has always tried to be systematic, to classify and explain gender, to delineate the limits for self-representation, Butler and Elam present

a case in favor of the impossibility of exhausting gender in its possible meanings. Drawing heavily upon deconstruction, Butler provides in *Gender Trouble* a definition of gender as “a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time” (16). Elam, borrowing from Derrida’s *mise en abyme*, a structure of endless deferral into spiral regressions, suggests that the concept “women” is immersed too in a regressive spiral of self-deconstructions, and thus it remains a locus which generates heterogeneous and conflicting meanings: “‘women’ is a *permanently contested site of meaning*” (32). What remains a constant in their theoretical formulations on gender is that they foreclose the possibility of framing gender within a single set of meanings since they view gender as undetermined and constantly open to new redefinitions. While Elam acknowledges that “‘women’ remains as yet to be determined category” (27), Butler states that “if feminism presupposes that ‘women’ designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability” (1995, 50).

I welcomed these viewpoints on gender, not out of a personal ambition to brandish a deconstructive flag, but rather because by resorting to them I could gain a position from which to offer appreciation of an inner dialectics in Levertov’s images of self-representation, of how they were immersed in a similar process of self-deconstruction.

In the marriage between the historicist and the deconstructivist trends I found a highly congenial methodology to analyze the reconstruction of gender in the poetry of Denise Levertov, and to do so using open structures and more flexible analytical tools. Further still, thanks to these critical currents I guess I learned to explore Levertov’s self-representations: how they worked in connection, how they evolved in time, how she subjected previously-created images to an ongoing dialectics of self-modification and restructuring

ending always in an enrichment of personal identity through more complex representations. With the benefits derived from a triple critical approach, I hope to have been able to extract part of the polysemyc charge contained in Levertov's poetics of gender self-representation.

I have to admit that to have crossed from essentialism all the way through to a mixture of historicism (Foucault), feminist constructivism (de Lauretis) and feminist deconstruction (Elam and Butler) has also been for me a big leap in the void. The risks taken and the problems inherent to it are not only of a methodological nature, but also psychological, in the sense that they demanded a great deal of personal assimilation and a change in my way of thinking.

One of the implications of adhering to a conception of gender as an unstable category is that, since gender is constantly self-deconstructing and reproducing new meanings in its discursive production, whatever illusions the critic might have about the possibility of a predictable knowledge of gender have to be dispelled beforehand. Hence, my capacity to refer categorically to gender undergoes a serious crisis since the possibility of capturing the real meaning of gender in discourse becomes more elusive after each successive failure to do so. This is hard to accept for a man writing on women, since the literary and philosophical tradition of men's writings on women has always stated the contrary. Men have written about the other gender with a strong sense of self-reliance, positive about their knowing everything there is to know about "the other." Flaubert's words, "Madame Bovary c'est moi," could well be taken as representative of an still extant discursive fallacy, whereby man is legitimated to claim in discourse a full knowledge of any woman's true nature, her emotional life, her experiences, the contradictions of her heart, etc. While using feminist deconstructionist views of women as an undetermined category has been rather helpful for me as a male critic, I do not forget that it is always hard to detach oneself from a weighty tradition of male appropriations

of women in discourse, the vices are too ancestral to make it that easy, so it is not a question of simply saying that one knows what the dangers ahead are but more of facing up to critical challenges, of sometimes taking the long and hard road to find the adequate legitimation, and working hard to avert the likely possibility of misappropriating woman in discourse.

Yet not only does this perspective become problematic within the context of men's writings –insofar as I am a man writing a discourse that clashes against many masculinist principles ruling the basic parameters of male criticism concerning women–, but the same perspective has also been made problematic within some feminist ranks. In her article "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Skepticism," Susan Bordo carries out an extensive critique of what she thinks are some of the epistemological fantasies animating some feminist theories on gender in the postmodern era. Bordo sees with dismay how these epistemological fantasies have crystallized around what she calls "gender scepticism," a theoretical scepticism on the use of gender in methodology as a safe and non-problematic analytical category. From the first pages of her article she puts postmodern feminism to task for wanting to go beyond the binary structures around gender replacing them with a view of gender as endless formation in discourse. This last view of gender is, in Bordo's understanding of it, animated by ambitions of transcending into a metatheory cut loose from the "realities" of the world, a theoretical balloon, as it were, too aloft from what she calls "the limitations of embodied existence" –meaning with this abstract phrase that the critic adopting this perspective necessarily becomes self-delusive, indulging in what she later defines in the same article as a "fantasy of escape from human locatedness by supposing that the critic can become wholly protean by adopting endlessly shifting, seemingly inexhaustible vantage points" (142).

> From this perspective, the template of gender is criticized for its fixed, binary structuring of reality and is replaced with a narrative ideal of ceaseless textual play. But this ideal, I will argue, while arising out of a critique of modernist epistemological pretensions to adequately represent reality, remains animated by its *own* fantasies of attaining an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence –a fantasy that I call a "dream of everywhere." (136)

Notwithstanding Bordo's objections, in claiming my allegiance to a view of gender as a discursive construction, unstable and constantly open to new meanings, I am not attempting to usurp a privileged perspective of "everywhere" nor do I presume, as Bordo does,[5] that the critical trends she criticizes so much in her article might be animated by such grand critical ambitions. The best proof of the former is that what my allegiance to this postmodern view of gender has done for me is to help me be more conscious of what is and what is not my position –the position of a man writing on a woman poet, a man with the experiences of a man, and who continues mediated by myriad discourses on how a man is supposed to approach women in discourse. From this perspective, the best possible picture of woman I may achieve must perforce be distant and limited (given the unquestionable relevance of these mediating

5 Bordo's syllogism is based on a considerable flaw of logics which is to presume that discrediting the binary system, and replacing it with a conception of gender as an unstable discursive formation, necessarily presupposes the critic's self-positioning as a dervish, dizzily spinning into multiple perspectives. Or that the critic might presume these perspectives to be always already available and inexhaustible ("endlessly shifting, seemingly inexhaustible vantage points"). Paradoxically enough, what gender scepticism is contesting is precisely this methodological fantasy, that is, the ideal according to which there are privileged perspectives (Bordo's "vantage points") needing no self-legitimation and from which the critic can enjoy a discernable view of all the possible performances of gender, a view of everywhere.

factors). Acknowledging the complexity of gender as a discursive construction, recognizing it as open to multiple meanings generated along its self-deconstructive process, brings me to a self-awareness of my place in the topology of gender, which can never be a view of everywhere. For this reason what I can perhaps now see clearer than before is that my perspective is entirely my own. Where I stand then is not everywhere, but rather "here and now," trying to see clearly what has driven me to this position (acknowledging that many of the mistakes I committed were as a consequence of adopting a position that was not the appropriate one, reconsidering a lot of wrong assumptions in my understanding of women). For the very simple reason that I have been forced to change my critical standpoint a couple of times, because I have come through the experience of having to reject previous certainties, I think I can say I am totally self-conscious about what I am saying, when I am saying it, and from what position or perspective, and the latter is not, it cannot possibly be, I want to insist, a view from everywhere. So if some aspects of Levertov's poetics have perhaps been wrongly highlighted in my study while others are unjustly neglected, the cause is not, I think I can say at this stage, any lingering prejudice on my part, but rather a personal limitation.

SOME FURTHER PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

First and foremost I hope to have made clear that I position myself as a man writing as a man, conscious of the differences in the experiences, perceptions, stances, ways of knowing, etc. akin to women as compared to men's. To claim otherwise is to be too dangerously close to a fallacy of writing position, a special ruse of patriarchal strategies of textual persuasion. This is something postmodern feminism has been wisely much more conscious of, whence its vigilant attentiveness to the essentialist basis of some uncontested positions within feminist discourses, exposing the

exclusionary operations inherent to these positions. Judith Butler for instance makes the right question to this effect when she wonders "how is it that a position becomes a position" (1995, 42), concluding that some subject positions are only attained through exclusionary practices. So there is something to be learned here from postmodern feminism's problematizations of position. But to go back to Butler's question and to relate it specifically to writing, a writing position, as far as I consider it, may be determined by a conglomerate of factors related with personal identity such as gender, race, class, religion... all of them intervening and mediating in how life is personally experienced. Attending only to gender, I can only conclude that my experience of life must be radically different to what a woman's experience might be. Notice that I have abstracted other determinants such as race, social class, or even historical factors, and history is another relevant marker of how woman has been differently constructed. If I stop to think for example about the oppression women have historically suffered and still suffer today, and about the effects this process of accretion (many centuries of practical and ideological discrimination and domination) has on the mind of the oppressed, I have no other choice but to recognize that these specific forms of oppression are as alien to me, as lived experience, as are, say, the experience of being black and the discriminations one is subject to for questions of race. This obviously determines not only the position from which I write, a position clearly from the outside, but the way I address the object of my discourse which must perforce be tentative, since there are a lot of elements about it that must be unknown to me.

Once the writing position has been assumed, another question arises and it has to do with how one can construct a discourse on the other. Is there a safeguarding legitimation, whether ethical or epistemological, for that? Even though at first I had a slight notion that I would have to deal with legitimation, my object of study, my later awareness about the problems implicit in my perspective, and

the history of male misappropriations of women's discourse that filtered into my consciousness as I delved into women's studies necessarily led me in more than one occasion to ask myself the same question: in what name am I speaking, under what legitimation? I felt this even more pungently when I started to work on rather sensitive issues such as the body, desire, pleasure in Levertov's poetry. The problem with these topics is that unless one seeks convincing forms of self-legitimation, and thus grows aware of the risks involved, one ends replicating and perpetuating in one's discourse the same old usurpations found so abundantly in our literary and philosophical tradition.

I am not implying, however, that legitimation is the sinecure of male criticism on women, nor that after one has found and argued some form of legitimation then one can say what one pleases, as if legitimation were a critical armor or something similar; legitimation, at least the way I see it, must serve above all to convince oneself about the predictable dangers implicit to a specific set of discourses, (critical blunders, misappropriations...). It should also distance the critic from daily certitudes in order to challenge and dispute them at a deeper level of analysis. The critic, as Benhabib argues in her article "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," "does not find criteria of legitimation and self-criticism to be given in the culture as one might find, say, apples on a tree and goldfish in an aquarium" (27). Since there is not one single set of criteria that might validate criticism once and for all, the critic has to be constantly reinterpreting and reconstituting the dominant norms and values, self-conscious of what norms are prioritized and why the critic speaks in their name. This is the function of legitimation and these are the purposes it serves.

From my perspective the only possible grounds of general legitimation, given the obvious limitations inherent to a discourse on the "other," is that such a discourse can only be constructed as a listening, which I would like to define as a respectful attention to

the other, attention to what comes to me from the other, yet without supplanting the other in its position. Again position becomes a quintessential factor, but one that is too easily overlooked. Let me use an example of this: in an interesting discussion about the pre-suppositions and assumptions made when a writing man refers to woman in discourse, Derrida goes as far as accepting the possibility of "talking from the listening place of the woman" as one alternative. Then, as if he were talking about that same alternative, he extends his ideas in a longer answer : "Yes. In other words if we consider for example what is called a writing man –for example me, to the extent that I'm supposed to be a man– then writing on woman should be less writing on woman than writing from or on the basis of [depuis] what comes to me from the feminine place" (1985, 32). I subscribe to this idea of "writing from or on the basis of what comes to me from the feminine place" and I also would like my discourse to be seen in those same terms, but, unlike Derrida, I don't accept the possibility of "talking from the listening place of the woman" and this for many reasons. First of all, because it is self-contradictory, one cannot be in two different places at the same time, much less accept that "man writing as a man" position and then magically reappear in a woman position. Second, because this possibility is inscribed in those masquerading strategies men have traditionally used to exclude women from discourse at the same time that they theorize about them.

Having said this, I would like to consider now the nature of the term "listening" and its applicability in discourse. Listening has certainly become a watchword in some feminist discourses on gender studies. Susan Bordo for instance refers to its as the "chief imperative" thus underlining its importance inside feminist debates. Postmodern feminism has been, however, more than right in turning the attention to the term's self-referentiality, that is, in presenting listening as not only an act of listening to the other but also an act of listening to oneself "to become aware of one's biases, prejudices,

and ignorance" (Bordo 1990, 138). This listening to oneself constitutes an excellent exercise in discourses on the other, and a much-needed preliminary requisite, in the sense that it is only after this sort of introspective listening has been rehearsed over and over that one can really start to *listen* to what comes from the other. What all this comes to in the end is that listening is all there is or all there should be in discourses on the other or, to put it differently, to speak in discourse about woman from a "man writing as a man" position, is, more than anything else and however paradoxically, to listen, more vigilantly as it were, to oneself and, more attentively, to the other.

Accepting this discourse as a discourse on the other has its ontological and epistemological implications too. The first one is that, since there can be no unmediated experience of otherness, any positivist claim must be necessarily disdained beforehand. Having just left the 20th century behind us, and at a time when the so-called social sciences, anthropology, history, cultural studies, etc. have in postmodern faith greatly modified their epistemological foundations sloughing off many of their most sacred beliefs, the dead skin of their positivism being one of them, it would be, as I already argued before, grotesquely anachronic for me to hold a sure claim to knowledge on this matter. But, to be honest, while I'm saying this I hope that it might act as an enchanting mantra, that it might keep me from the Cartesian *cogito* that is so deeply entrenched in our culture, from the almost compulsive obsession to appropriate a scientific vantage point from which to observe and later to proclaim truths about others and in the name of the others, and I have to confess I have not been exempt from this during the process of my research. In fact, one of my most notorious blunders, and I have had many on the way, was precisely to think initially that there were some ontological and epistemological guarantees, some nonproblematic givens one could always cling to when speaking about woman. As I advanced more in my research, blindly guided

by this considerable flaw of logic, I found myself skidding over the cryptical elusiveness of the concept as if had suddenly and dangerously stepped on a banana skin. This forced me, as I said before, to go back to square one, to rework my premises and hypothesis, to renounce previous certainties, and to accept uncertainty in this matter as a better ally. As Elam states in her hallmark *Feminism and Deconstruction. Ms. en abyme*, women is still an undetermined category:

> we do not yet know what women *are*. It remains uncertain what it would mean to be a woman (to be part of the group "women"), just as it remains uncertain what precisely would constitute knowledge of women. There are neither epistemological nor ontological grounds which would settle the issue once and for all. (27)

And these are the somewhat unstable premises from which I depart. I know they sound a low note, and a trembling one, for an academic discourse like this should always be surrounded by expectations of getting to one more definitive truth, about woman in this case, but the way I see it now this is the only possible frame for my discourse, which, let there be no misunderstanding in this, does not foreclose the possibility of writing about woman but just goes in the line of considering the category of woman not as a closed one but as a site of constant openness. To end this introduction reinforced by a quote of *autoritas* I would like to submit to readers, who might be disheartened by my discourse, Foucault's cautionary words in the prologue to the second volume of his *The History of Sexuality*: "as to those, in short, for whom to work in the midst of uncertainty and apprehension is tantamount to failure, all I can say is that clearly we are not from the same planet" (7).

CHAPTER III

Prototypes: Adjusting the Frames of Re-vision

my patron said, “name it”;

I said, I can not name it,
there is no name;

he said,
“invent it”.

H.D., “Tribute to the Angels.”

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of
me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch
or am touch’d from,

Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

In this chapter, I propose to examine the interconnectedness between revision and new aesthetic forms of representation in women’s writing. I would like to show that revision, if carried out correctly, and new forms of self-representation in women’s texts are not discontinuous but rather inextricably intertwined, one leading

to the other. Showing how this interconnection works is of paramount importance in order to understand in what ways Levertov's work, at least a relevant part of it, places itself within revisionist tradition in contemporary women's poetry. It was mainly thanks to her thorough work of revision, visible in a good number of poems throughout her career, that readers can hear in her poems a distinctive woman's voice amidst a poetic scenario crowded with men poets. Further still, the intelligent way in which she handled her revisionist tools not only allowed her to negotiate her own way out of a weighty patriarchal literary tradition, but also to make substantial contributions to women's poetry, basically through her reinvented images of self-representation.

Levertov's case is, in this sense, no exception in the context of women's writing. In fact, most women artists are, generally speaking, not oblivious to the fruits revision can bring, for they have themselves experienced how the work of revision commenced by some of their forerunners have made things considerably less difficult for them. Revision has proved in many cases to be the doorway to solid artistic manifestations, which resist the pressure originated by a powerful literary tradition, whilst acting as a supportive pillar of women's writings. The best proof of this is in Levertov is that were it not for her revisionist enterprises, her work would be remembered only for its compositional achievements, not for being the unique poetic expression of a woman's experience and worldview, which is how her work has developed throughout her many years devoted to poetry and how it is generally appraised nowadays.

Given the paramount importance revision has in the context of women's writings, it is logical that the term "revision" might still remain, after so many years, a watchword in feminist literary criticism. To such a point that one can say without risk of error that one of the themes that most tightly links feminist debates on both sides of the Atlantic is the inexorable need to revise everything: cultural norms, historiography, science, politics, mythology, painting,

etc. The clarion call for revision has been specially pressing in the realm of literature, quite understandably so, given the sociological ascendance these forms of art have as media of representation, and the role they play as vehicles for the transmission of myths. Most of the myths that form part of our culture have been basically conveyed through the language of literature and through pictorial representations, both media being highly responsible for the conservation and propagation of these myths. On the other hand, if we think about the strong persuasive power these myths have acquired through the centuries, not only determining beliefs, but also designing patterns of experiences, models of identification, and drawing, as Northrop Frye states, "a verbal circumference of human experience" (1963, 32), the importance of literary revision is more than apparent.

Yet in these decades of much scholarly work on revision, the concept has revealed itself epistemologically kaleidoscopic, a proto-science where many different disciplines coalesce: literary criticism, anthropology, visual arts, archeology, hermeneutics, psychology... Feminist literary criticism has both enriched and been enriched by a fruitful cross-fertilization of theories, knowledge, and discoveries emanating from the interrelations between the various disciplines. As a consequence, feminist literary criticism has broadened the perspectives of critical analysis in order to get a more complete picture of what must be revised and how to proceed.

Another relevant aspect of revision is that, apart from being far-reaching, it must also adjust the frames for concentrated focus. If the language of patriarchal myth, as Daly correctly holds in *Gyn/ecology*, is the distorting lenses through which we see much of reality, revision must have the correction of these lenses as one of its overriding concerns. Yet, as Ihab Hassan has argued, the problem with "revision" is that it has been so overexploited in our postmodern era that the word has now suffered too much erosion. Hassan goes as far as to claim that "the pun on revision has become rather stale

and weary: we revise everything and rarely see anything anew." And he finally wonders: "can this failure be due to the frames of our vision?" (45). The prefix "re-" is misleading in that it tends to be associated more to the act of looking back and less to the act of seeing anew, or "seeing afresh" (1993, 167) in Rich's words. This conception of revision as looking back and seeing anew is fundamental to a revisionist mythmaking which must be based on a looking back to the origins of myth and a trying to unveil not only their deceptions but most importantly the intentions behind those deceptions. That patriarchal myths are inherently deceptive is a point revisionist mythmakers have documented beyond reasonable doubt, yet what still remains to be proved in many cases is to what end, what are the initial intentions. First because, as Barthes aptly recalls, myth "is a speech defined by its intention, much more than by its literal sense" (1973, 134), which means that unless the skeleton of their devious intentions is exposed, demystified, it will go on producing the same effects, causing the same damage. Second, and as I will try to show when I refer more explicitly to the case of the prototypes, and to how Levertov uses them, being conscious of the intentions behind a set of myths or archetypes is of great help to avoid falling in the same trap whenever a woman writer is trying to revise those same myths or archetypes.

Using these two aspects of revision (wide angled and sharp eyed) is, I think, a suitable method to investigate its direct implications in the creation by women of new self-representations intended to be transformative of the governing principles behind their representation in the dominant art. What I may advance so far is that my understanding of revision as a whole is mainly double-fold: it not only has to deconstruct some of patriarchy's most persuasive strategies of deception, but also define the terms under which an independent, woman-defined writing and a new literary tradition might be possible; a revision made by women and for women, yet always trying to reach an osmosis between, on the one hand,

its hermeneutical practices, its strategies of demystification and mythbreaking, its exorcism of the patriarchal gods, of the spellbinding language conveyed through myths, and, on the other hand, the final objectives it tries to achieve, such as new spiritual sources of identification, a complete revaluation of language, and an independent mythmaking. In sum, a compendium of Daly's "gynecology," or "seeing the totality of the Lie which is patriarchy, unweaving its web of deceptions" (20) and Showalter's "gynocritics," "how can we constitute women as a distinct literary group? What is *the difference* of women's writings" (1986, 248). In other words, revision must never be autotelic, exhausting itself in revising all yet changing few things, theorizing about causes yet producing negligible effects; on the contrary, revision, to be effective, must be directed to support a new art which must be set as a counterforce to the dominant art. The battle for difference in women's writings must be fought and won on the grounds of the creation by women of a whole set of new and revised myths. "The best weapon against myth" recommends Barthes, "is perhaps to mythify in its turn" (1973, 222).

In this sense, what I think characterizes Levertov's poetics is how dexterously she has worked on both sides. Though it's true she has devoted much stamina to deconstruct many of the stereotyped images of woman conveyed across by myth, she has also managed in many cases either to reconstruct these myths, attaching new values to the mythic images, or to invent new images of mythic proportions. This double-edged aspect is what, I would suggest, makes her poetics on myth and identity so revolutionary, so efficiently disruptive of many stereotyped images of women abundant in the literary canon.

Yet revision should never be taken as a last-resort literary device to be used only in those cases where the myths are patently offensive against women. On the contrary, every time a woman writer is using previously accepted myths or images, the odds are that she

will have to revise them, even when, at surface level, they show their most innocent face.

Rich is perhaps one of the most notable feminist voices who have, and from a rather early stage, unambiguously stressed how important it is for women writers to use revision in a continuous and consistent manner if they want to disentangle themselves from the oppressor's legacy. As Rich aptly defined it, revision is something more than "a chapter in cultural history" but rather "an act of survival" (1993, 167) by means of which women attempt to live beyond the destructive legacy of patriarchal culture. But the question remains, how to survive?; how to dissociate oneself from a cultural tradition that is at times so "naturally" implanted in women as the air that is breathed into the lungs?; what is the right method to revise the archeological sites of patriarchal culture?; what are the exact terms of this revision, or how must it proceed?

In Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" (1973), revision is symbolically referred to as a ladder attached to the sides of schooner, a ladder that serves to go down to the site of destruction, the record of a considerable damage: "We know what it is for, / we who have used it. / Otherwise / it's a piece of maritime floss / some sundry equipment"; the ladder, if rightly used, can be a suitable tool to access the very origins of myth, to discover "[...]the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail." Levertov, as I hope to make clear in the ensuing chapters, is one of those women poets who have used this ladder and who know its real value in poetry.

FEMALE PROMETHEUSES, PANDORAS: THE ARCHETYPE OF THE FALLEN WOMAN

Since the literary tradition is both repository and transmitter of a myriad of myths and archetypes, revisionist mythmaking, to be really effective, must concentrate first and foremost on bringing

revolution to the sphere of literature. The image-making power of literature is such that whatever enterprises are designed to unsettle its very foundations, they have to be animated by the most radical ideals, otherwise, literature will carry on with its capacity to project distorted images intact. It is in this respect alone that the myth of Prometheus, which Alicia Ostriker puts forward as model women must imitate, instating women writers to be "female Prometheuses, *voleuses de langue*, thieves of language" (1986b, 315), might be somewhat adequate. The story of a mythical Titan who rebelled against Zeus stealing the flame from the gods and giving the firestock to the mortals must surely be a seductive example for many women mythmakers. For one thing, Prometheus enacts the rebellious enterprise women mythmakers have long been demanding, calling all women writers to steal back some word power from the hands of patriarchy and show its use to other women. Moreover, the fire Prometheus stole from the gods symbolizes many of the qualities women writers are eager to repossess through their new art. Hassan argues in *The Right Promethean Fire* that the light of the Promethean fire is "science and vision, technic and myth, language and dream, the whole ardor of life, pure spirit also, and many magical things"[1] (xv).

1 In Percy Bysse Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1819), Asia, daughter of Ocean and Prometheus' beloved, likewise enumerates the benefits Prometheus has brought to mortals:

> He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
> Which is the measure of the Universe;
> And Science struck the thrones of Earth and Heaven
> Which shook but fell not; and the harmonious mind
> Poured itself forth in all-prophetic song,
> And music lifted up the listening spirit
> Until it walked, exempt from mortal care,
> Godlike, o'er the clear billows of sweet sound;
>
> [. . .]

Yet –and this might show to what extent choosing an already existing myth and leaving it unrevised is always problematic– the decision to use the structure of the Prometheus myth could well backfire, for the simple reason that what is embedded in the plot of the Prometheus myth is the story of woman as ever-recurrent scapegoat, the one to blame for all the calamities on earth. Women mythmakers should not turn a blind eye to the fact that some myths are extremely tricky for, attached to them, there might appear certain subplots which carry falsified and prejudiced images of women. In the specific case of the Prometheus myth, the general motif of a double punishment has been accounted in many and varied versions of the same myth: the first punishment was to Prometheus himself, who was chained to a pillar and had his liver devoured by an eagle and constantly renewed; the second punishment was sent to humans, those who had obtained the fire from the hands of Prometheus, who had to suffer a plague of evils issuing forth from Pandora's jar. The patriarchal objective behind this was to invent a story that might serve to transfer all the blame onto a woman, thus leaving Prometheus (man) clean of all responsibility for our suffering. The curious thing is that even though Pandora did not originally figure in the stories that gave rise to the myth, she was eventually reabsorbed into the myth as a chosen culprit. As Raymond Trousson reveals, "the story of Prometheus eventually included the story of Pandora, the *fiancée fatale* sent by the gods to retrieve their stolen food and the harbinger of misfortune and death" (969). Pandora, the mythical woman that lets loose all the evils and horrors of mankind when she opens the lid of her jar,

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He told the hidden powers of the herbs and springs,
And Disease drank and slept –Death grew like sleep.–
He taught the implicated orbits woven
Of the wide-wandering stars, and how the Sun
Changes his lair, and by what secret spell
The pale moon is transformed, when her broad eye
Gazes not the interlunar sea;

should be a specially sensitive case for women because she is, as Kate Millet confesses in *Sexual Politics*, "one of two important Western archetypes that condemn the female through her sexuality and explain her position as her well-deserved punishment for the primal sin under whose unfortunate consequences the race yet labors" (52). The myth of the Fall would then be but a more elaborated version of the same story whereby the female was held responsible for humanity's original sin. It is also true that Pandora still has hope concealed at the bottom of the jar, yet Christine Battersby brushes off any unjustified optimism in this particular case with a quibble: "unfortunately, we have to fumble deep into the darkness of the jar of patriarchal myth before we can bring out Hope" (47).

I take this Prometheus/Pandora myth to be tellingly revealing of the problematic slippages women might incur each time they allude to myths designed by patriarchal mythmakers. Since these existing myths are more often than not based on a fixed script that at some point depicts woman as supreme archetype of evil, I seriously wonder whether women's allusions to them, particularly those made by women mythmakers, may not be understood to be sanctioning, by default, many of these myths, and by extension, letting in some misogynist elements still chained to the plot of these myths. As I will argue below, the hope Pandora represents for women myth-makers is accessible only by revising absolutely every patriarchal myth.

Where, I think, Ostriker does not err at all is in qualifying revisionist mythmaking in prosaic terms as guerrilla skirmishes, "hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (1986b, 318). Ostriker's rhetoric of warfare speaks of the need to overthrow the images, and by extension, the literary canons in which they are inserted. The relevance of this aspect of revisionist mythmaking cannot be dismissed, particularly when we stop to think that the literary images of women have

through different historical periods been constructed by men and put at the service of a misogynist ideology. Since this has been the status quo for many centuries, it is no wonder that the images of woman appearing in the literary tradition might be, as Rich observes, those of the evil seductress, the temptress, or the femme fatale:

> She meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds a Juliet or Tess or Salomé, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (1993, 171)

What remains a common feature of these literary images is that women appear characterized either as passive, eroticized "others" or as the very representation of the evil seductress. Yet the fact that the image of a woman as writer is absent from these mythologies has strong implications that might go unnoticed at first sight. Among other relevant things, these distorted representations of woman in literature, specially the fact that she is denied in those representations the role of creatix, mediate perception and experience in many powerful ways. Just to list some of them, these images, given their sociological ascendance as supreme models of representation, impel all social members to see women from this perspective, to reject modes of self-representation and experiences that do not fit into the dominant images presented in the literary canons. Moreover, if we add to this the fact that it is men and not women who have projected these images, written the stories about others, what we have by implication is that women have been forced to perceive as "their experience" what others have "experienced" in her name. And the permanence of a literary tradition that has been hegemonic through many centuries has a direct responsibility for all this.

In this context, literary revisionism plays a determinant role, since it departs from the assumption that literary constructs are a source of distorted images of women and it sets out, as one of its primary objectives, to seize the word and subvert a large and until recently undisputed tradition of literary myths. As Rich showed in "Diving into the Wreck" "The words are purposes. / The words are maps" and as such they can serve to map new perceptions and experiences in writing, opening unknown directions as others are definitely closed. In the specific context of revisionist mythmaking, the hope that Pandora embodies lies precisely in redeeming with the material of the stolen word the images appearing in these literary myths. Women writers are doing so when they refuse to identify with these myths, when they call into question their validity as models of representation, when they decide to modify these images and create new forms of self-representation. As more and more women writers recast these powerful images, and as these remodelings appear continuously in literature and in other cultural manifestations and constitute a distinctive tradition, many women will have the possibility to read stories conceived by other women, of seeing women represented as writers, of understanding that the traditional myths about them were not the truth. Changing the literary images of representation is a fundamental prerequisite to a mythmaking that wants to be transformative of the inherited literary tradition which, we must all admit, is too anchored in our daily life, in our modes of thinking and perceiving, to say that women shouldn't care about it and concentrate only in inventing new images. If the new mythmaking wants to unsettle the very foundations of that tradition, it must recur to many of the most symbolically powerful and most pervasive literary images, myths and archetypes, and use them, because of their strong social hold, as a springboard to jump beyond these fixed systems of representation and revise the canons of the literary tradition.

ARCHETYPES, SYMBOLS

All the manifestations of patriarchal art, and literature is no exception to this, are a storehouse of archetypes about women. That this might be so shouldn't come as a big surprise, much less if we take into consideration the meanings attached to these archetypes as supreme representations emanating out of the collective unconscious. The strategic lines are clear; every time a literary image of woman is connected to one of these archetypes in one way or another, the representation in question is made to be naturally accepted as preexistent and eternal qualities of the person; qualities that belong to the collective unconscious and are not prejudiced contrivances of the mythologizing mind. Patriarchy found in the archetypes a highly congenial strategy to fix woman's identity –something surpassing men's understanding by far– as single, simplified and unmovable images and thus keep women under control through the power of these myths.

Mythologists of all kinds provide multiple accounts which subtend the notion that myths and archetypes spring from the ancestral need which men have had to account for the inexplicable, the reason why so many myths about women revolve around the mysteries of their sex. Esther Harding in *Women's Mysteries* gives numerous instances of this when she analyzes various moon mythologies, across different cultures, where the female power to give birth was believed to be a direct influence of the moon, which brought fertility during its waxing phase, but sterility and destruction in its waning phase. Women's monthly cycles were obviously not exempt from this chain of associations; as Harding documents, Ishtar, the Babylonian moon goddess, was thought to be menstruating at the full moon, "when the sabattu, or evil day, of Ishtar was observed" (62). Not surprisingly, these same associations were at the basis of a set of taboos related to women's sexuality, wielded to set women apart from the rest of the community during the days she was

affected with the "sickness." Another effect of this association was that, once the changing phases of the moon became fully attached to woman's sexuality and identity, women started to be mistrusted for being as changing, fickle and erratic as the moon, her counterpart.

Revisionist mythmaking has brought special attention to the latent psychological principles beneath these associations showing that men have used them as self-defense mechanisms to guard themselves against their incapacity to explain women's nature; this is something that even prestigious male mythologists have variously acknowledged. As Joseph Campbell concludes in *The Masks of God*, "the fear of woman and the mystery of her motherhood have been for the male no less impressive imprinting forces than the fears and mysteries of the world of nature itself" (60). The study of how these myths were originated, of the psychological fantasies that animated them, has provided revisionist mythmaking with precious information about the patriarchal motivations behind the creation of their myths. The original process starts to make sense as strategies of patriarchal mythmaking begin to surface; as a possible example of this we can analyze how the powerful figure of the pre-patriarchal Great Mother, dominant center of religious devotion, was first deprived of any spiritual ascendance by patriarchal mythmakers, then degraded in many cases as a chthonian goddess mired to nature, and finally obliterated. The sacrosanct powers these goddesses were endowed with were transferred to the gods, who thus assumed their newly-gained power and influence. In *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Camille Paglia reads the Hebrew cosmogony present in the book of Genesis as "a male declaration of independence from the ancient mother-cults" (40). By imagining a mind prior to nature and completely disentangled from her, the book of Genesis, as Paglia states, "remade the world by male dynasty, cancelling the power of mothers" (40). This mythmaking strategy denounces patriarchy's appropriation through transference of the magical powers women were endowed with as

birth givers –the process has a parallel in the religious organization of some tribes where the shaman arrogated for himself the magical powers he saw in women's nature.

In "Mythopoeia, the Moon, and Contemporary Women's Poetry," Dianne Sadoff, drawing heavily upon Harding's book, reasons that whenever a woman writer finds these mythologies, she has no other alternative but to "reinvent, revise and transform them to fit her own female body, her female identity, her unique female experience" (98). This is something Levertov has achieved in many of her erotic poems, readapting the god Eros to her personal conception of sexuality, or her poems devoted to the Muse, reinventing her as an active spiritual force in harmony with the woman poet, or, finally, her poems more directly related with personal identity where she tries to close the gap between her identities as woman and poet. But, though I agree with Sadoff that this is the only possible alternative, one objection can be raised against the way her argument is phrased: the list of priorities has to be reverted; even if it might seem a minor, banal issue, it is not, for without revision there is no reinvention; if a pun is allowed, I would say that the difference between making a new myth and making a myth new makes a big difference. And Levertov's poetics is a testimony of this for we can distinctively hear the direct expression of a woman's "unique experience" only in those cases where we have some revision.

The resort to experience has reasonably come under great attack in our postmodern era. One of the dangers lurking behind the reference to the "unique experience" is exposed by Angela Carter in her "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman*. Carter brings into sharp focus the distortions inherent to the archetypes which, in her view, tend to confuse the experience of reality with what is mere illusion. Archetypes, like the holographs, deceive the eye into a depth/authenticity of experience that is illusive in the end –"that what I know from my experience is true is, in fact, not so" (7). The spuriousness of the archetypes lies in that they fantasize and distort

experiences to such oversized proportions that the archetype ends being no more than "an image that has got too big for its boots" (6). Re-vision would here serve the function of not overlooking the *oppression* –Carter's analogy with the boots makes this a specially suitable word in this context– contained in the archetypal images. The word "experience" rings hollow then to the ears of many revisionist women writers who, like Carter, hold that experience is mediated by the ubiquitousness of the archetypes and that recurring to experience without submitting the archetypes to a thorough examination is speaking in the name of the patriarchal lord. In other words, those women referring to models of experience without first revising where and how they were obtained, to what extent they have been, often subliminally, mediated by the pervasiveness of archetypes, might be acting, without knowing, as mouthpieces of patriarchal strategies of deception and distortion.

DuPlessis, like Carter, postulates that the archetypes, which she equates with the old myths, have as their major goal to distort a woman's true experiences; arguably, this is why a woman lives many of her experiences as false. In her substantial article "The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser," DuPlessis holds the thesis that the old myths, apart from totally dismissing women's experiences of self and the world, are "crippling for women"; her prefiguration of the new myths is founded on two pillars: "the position of the self-as-woman, and the position of the self-as-historical-actor in opposition to the old myths." By way of antagonism to the old ones, "the new myths entail critical perceptions about the nature of the woman in traditional myths, and they recast long-sanctified plots, especially the quest patterns." Insofar as they raise a consciousness and a critical apprehension of the position of the self in history, the new myths are "resolutely nonarchetypal" (212). DuPlessis thus correlates the new myths with prototypes which she privileges over the old ones, the archetypes:

> I would define prototypes as original, model forms on which to base the self and its action –forms open to transformation and forms, unlike archetypes, that offer similar patterns of experience *to* others, rather than imposing these patterns *on* others. A dictionary definition reveals the significant distinction between the words. While both archetype and prototype "denote original models," an archetype "is usually construed as an ideal form that establishes an unchanging pattern for all things of its kind." However, "what develops from a prototype may represent significant modification from the original." A prototype is not a binding, timeless pattern, but one critically open to the possibility, even the necessity, of its own transformation. Thinking in terms of prototypes historicizes myth. (220)

DuPlessis' definition of prototypes summarily encompasses many relevant aspects that are present in women's revisionist writings. First of all, she presents them as pliable, inserted within history yet always susceptible to be changed through different historical periods. She also shows that replicating the model of the archetypes to represent women's identity and worldview is a major mistake mainly because these archetypes, insofar as they are constituted as eternal and unchanging models, are inadequate to represent women as complexly structured and immersed in an ongoing process of self-definition. By opposition, the prototypes, since they operate as dynamic models of representation open to the possibility of new restructurings and new meanings, are definitely more appropriate as aesthetic media of self-representation.

The transformation of the abundant archetypes present in literary tradition into prototypes means nothing short of a complete overhaul of the patriarchal system of representations, one to which many women writers, modern and postmodern alike, have wholeheartedly subscribed. One case that exemplifies this is the reinterpretation and re-creation of the archetype of the mother goddess. Revisionism has conclusively shown that the figure of the Great Mother as life-giving and nurturing had been appropriated

by patriarchal mythmakers to serve their most obscure interests. In the context of the patriarchal framework which interprets these images, this archetype has been read and interpreted as an indication that women are determined by their reproductive capacity. Subsequent ruses were the mastery over the womb, the source of maternal power, and its subjection to the will of patriarchal mythmasters – in St. John's Gospel, for instance, the womb's fertility is usurped by God's Word, which later comes out of the womb under a distinctively masculine form, the figure of Jesus Christ (Homans, 30). The conquest and debasement of nature and the overrating of reason, which was specially prominent after the Enlightment, led to the most extreme form of goddess devaluation. In this framework, women writers who decided to invoke the goddesses as accepted –exclusively under the terms of their roles as incarnations of agriculture and fertile nature– were too close to playing the game of patriarchy, since it might be read as an implicit acceptance that women are nothing more than their sex, predestined by their anatomical configuration, unable to perform other functions with the intellect. Alternatively, invoking in writing the figure of the goddess as an inspiring, protective figure, which doesn't mean dispensing altogether with her role as nurturing mother but rather taking it further,[2] brings a revaluing of the goddess as a

2 As Rich argues in *Of Woman Born* the womb has been appropriated by patriarchs to enslave women; yet if, as she states, the womb "has historically been turned against us and itself made into a source of powerlessness" (68), revisionist mythmakers are now faced with the task of revaluing the womb as a source of power, liberation and inspiration. One of the ways in which this can be done effectively is through the restoration of the pre-patriarchal goddess as a dominating, venerated figure, a center of spiritual strength, –and this is something "central to women's spirituality" as Ostriker claims in Feminist Revision and the Bible– while revising and reinventing her as an inspirational model that women writers can use to create an art that wants to be informed as well by self-recreated, powerful and independent spiritual paradigms.

northern star presiding over women's creations. Levertov apparently seems to have been wisely conscious of this in her poems to the goddess. More than often, she has attempted in many of her poems to transform the archetype of the Great-Mother into the prototype of an inspiring Muse, an active force of the imagination that engages the woman poet in a fruitful exchange. But the list of attributes to be reassigned to the goddess does not end here, for she can assume a far more varied range of beneficial characteristics, as Levertov shows in several of her poems: thus she appears under the various forms of nourishing mother, protectress, benefactress, source of erotic pleasure, demonic catalyst of personal truth, or fountain of spirituality.

Among many other positive results, these prototypes serve to retrieve many aspects of the complex array of attributes the goddesses were endowed with in pre-patriarchal myths, where they appeared characterized as demonic yet benevolent, strength-giving and inspirational, virginal in some cases, sexually promiscuous in others.[3] In *Gyn/ecology*, Daly shows how this complex characterization of the pre-patriarchal goddess can be an advantage, and used with a view to independent mythmaking. The method she proposes to this end consists of recovering the period before the creation of patriarchal myths and connecting with the "Great Hags," those "whom the institutionally powerful but privately impotent patriarchs found too threatening for coexistence, and whom historians erase"

3 Harding provides a separate account of the different moon mythologies depending on whether they arose out of matriarchal or patriarchal cultures: whereas in patriarchal cultures, she documents, the moon goddess is always the archetype of the Great Mother, an incestuous goddess who becomes a lover of her own son, in matriarchal cultures her representation was far more varied: she sometimes appeared as a spinster, unrelated to god or husband, while others as sexually promiscuous, liberating her vestals, with her constant incitations to ritualistic prostitution, from onanistic sexuality. (Harding 88-97; 144-154).

(14). Remembering and identifying with the tradition of the Great Hags means according to Daly becoming "haggard," in the definition of it she finds in the Merrian-Webster dictionary as "intractable, willful, wanton, unchaste" or, in its use as a noun, "an intractable person especially: a woman reluctant to yield to wooing." Insofar as "haggard" women refuse to be wooed by patriarchy into compromise, being both wild and intractable, they more than adequately serve as inspirational figures to be invoked as examples for independent women writers. In other words, Daly is propounding a possible method to transform the archetypes of the demonic goddesses into strength-giving guides towards an independent writing, thus connecting revision with a distinctive literary current. As she states, "haggard writing is by and for haggard women" (15).

The transformation of the goddess into prototypes might appear profane mythmaking to some, or a theoretical ideal to others, given the high status the archetypes have as fixed and pure patterns synthesizing all we must know about nature and human experience. Jungian and post-Jungian theory and its formulation of the archetypes as forms embedded in the collective unconscious has greatly contributed to reinforce this idea and to make it circulate under the guise of a positivist discovery. I would like to analyze some elements in the theory of archetypes as formulated by Carl Jung and Eric Neumann, the two most influential voices in this matter, in order to show that a sound critique of the archetypes as ideologically-biased is possible.

The first indices of the fact that archetypal representations are not as above human prejudices as is commonly thought can be found in some of Jung's publications on the archetypes. Though Jung spearheaded the psychoanalytic studies on the nature of the archetypes and their manifestations in the collective unconscious, he was not the first to theorize on the archetypes. In "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," Jung himself traces the use of the word archetype far back in time, before St. Augustine, when, in

its purely nominalistic Platonic usage, it meant "Idea" (curiously the prototype of something). Jung extracts from the Platonic "Idea" its preexistent and supraordinate character and concludes that the archetypes primarily represent forms present in the collective unconscious. The fact that the archetypes are part and parcel of the collective unconscious comes to explain why these still abstract images have become so powerful and recognizable when they are represented. But whilst Jung acknowledges that archetypes lie behind the mind which makes projections onto the outside world, "the archetype in itself is empty and purely formal, nothing but a *facultas praeformandi*, a possibility of representation which is given *a priori*" (107). This vision of the archetype as a pre-existent form waiting to be filled up by representation leads him to make, what seems to me, one of his most far-reaching discoveries in his theory of archetypes, but one that implicitly comes to contradict the uncontested status which archetypes enjoy. According to Jung, archetypal forms are an "inborn" quality of the human species, whereas the concrete manifestations of these archetypes, which is what the human mind can neatly grasp as representation, are molded by the intentions –read also prejudices– of the individual who makes archetypal projections. For this reason Jung tries so hard to convince us that the primordial archetypes, those still-abstract forms innate to the human species, are not to blame for the distortions produced: "an archetype is in no sense just an annoying prejudice; it becomes so only when it is in the wrong place" (112). Paraphrasing Jung, there is nothing in the nature of an archetype that makes it spurious, repressive, or crippling *per se*; the archetype is a pregiven form that has nothing to do with previously formed intentions; it is rather its projection in the wrong place as an archetypal representation that makes it appear so.

But my own suggestion is that if the archetypes are nothing more than "a possibility for representation" it follows that there can be no critique of the archetypes that is not concerned with how

representation has worked in art and what ideological interests it has served. This is something that has to be taken into account in the transformation of the archetypes into prototypes, a process not as simple and straightforward as it might appear at first sight; it is not simply a question of arbitrarily substituting one image for another image, but rather of thorough revision, analyzing what prejudices and intentions create an archetypal representation, under what forms have these prejudices and intentions crystallized in representation and how to work against them in the production of new images of self-representation.

Also supporting the thesis that archetypes are mediated by human intervention is Neumann's "The Structure of the Archetype," his first chapter in *The Great Mother*, where he distinguishes the "symbolic images, as archetypal representations," from "the archetype *an sich*," the latter being absolutely numinous.[4] Along similar lines, Neumann contrasts the "eternal presence" of the archetype to its "symbolic polyvalence," which is what makes the archetype appear so multifarious. Though he defends that the archetype and the symbols "are spontaneous and independent of consciousness"(10), he makes a partial concession to the mediated structure of the archetypal representations and symbols: "the appearance of archetypal images and symbols is in part determined by a man's individual typological structure, by the situation of the individual, his conscious attitude, his age, and so on" (11). The same does not occur in earlier stages of consciousness when the individual is confronted with what he calls "primordial archetypes." Only in those cases, "the numinosity of the archetype exceeds man's power of representation" (12). What Neumann is succinctly

4 This term Neumann borrows from Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) and he takes it to mean "the action of beings and forces that the consciousness of primitive man experienced as fascinating, terrible, overpowering and that it therefore attributed to an indefinite transpersonal and divine source" (5).

implying is that archetypal images and symbols are predicated, however partially, upon individual intentions, specially in more evolved phases of consciousness when representation can take place. Neuman is hereby defending the mediated character of archetypal representations, sanctioning these archetypal representations as dependent upon a wide spectrum of personal factors such as age, attitude towards life, personal conditions, etc. Yet, in trying to find an impossible equilibrium between the transpersonal and the personal, between mediated and unmediated, Neumann falls into some blatant contradictions. For it sounds rather awkward to hold that the archetype is transpersonal, overpowering, independent of consciousness, and divinely inspired and argue at the same time that the archetypal representations are mediated by many different personal factors. Are archetypes amenable to be revised as forms of representation linked to personal intentions or are they, on the contrary, always transpersonal and beyond the individual's capacity to reformulate them? The only possible answer, I would argue, is that all archetypes, however supreme and numinous, are known through representation, and for this reason they can only be *known anew* through the revision of these archetypal representations.

An example that shows to what extent the non-revision of archetypes can be problematic is Estella Lauter's "Steps Toward a Feminist Archetypal Theory of Mythmaking," her introduction to *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women.* Even though Lauter propounds a redefinition of the archetype that shuns former misconceptions, in the end she falls prey of the same traps she tries to avoid in her theory. What must also be granted, however, is that she makes some remarkable breakthroughs in the definition of the archetypes and the archetypal images derived from them. Thus, for Lauter the archetype is nothing more than the human drive to conjure up images grounded on repeated experiences of the past. The archetypal images, on the other hand, would be the representational models belonging to each archetype.

Yet once she has driven this point home, she errs in the following syllogism: "if we redefine the archetype as a tendency to form images in relation to recurrent experiences and we acknowledge that women as well as men must have this capacity, we need only uncover enough images created by women to discover the patterns in our experiences" (8). Two problems are implicit in Lauter's cause-effect relation; while it seems without question that women as well as men have the capacity to create images mapping their experiences, the fact that this capacity has been historically denied to women shouldn't be so easily left aside of the discourse. Accepting this historical gap means also recognizing that the galaxy of women's experience has been and still is covered with black holes. In the first part of *The Second Sex,* de Beauvoir brings attention to the fact that there are no myths in which woman appears as the subject of those myths. To give a plausible explanation to this, she assumes that myth "always implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears toward a sky of transcendence" (174). Since, according to de Beauvoir, woman represents all the time the position of the "other" with respect to man, always too distant from the subject position that originates myth, she can have no further claim to mythologizing, least of all, in a patriarchal binary system where she will be always enclosed in the position of the "other." Clearly then, the import of de Beauvoir's epistemological analysis of woman's historical role in mythmaking is that woman has not been allowed to create her own myths and, thus, denied the transcendence implicit in any mythologizing endeavor. What other forms of self transcendence remain available for women, then? To this query, de Beauvoir gives an even more abrasive answer: "they still dream through the dreams of men" (174). What lies behind de Beauvoir's epistemological assumption is that women have always had a vicarious experience of their lives as consumers of myths others produce. Nonetheless, Susan Hekman, in her critique of de Beauvoir's dichotomy of subject/object, contests that her theory

helps to put women in a deadlock inasmuch as she cages woman into the position of the other, even if, for that matter, an epistemologically necessary "other" for man who can thus achieve self-realization and transcendence at the sake of her (72). I would say, however, that these critical contentions might well be solved in this way: if we are simply recording what is the historical seclusion of women in mythmaking, de Beauvoir's analysis seems absolutely unquestionable. A very different matter, and Hekman's critique seems to me to point in that direction, is the resigned acceptance of that epistemological condition which results as dangerous as its obliteration in those discourses that talk about tracing women's experiences through their mythmaking. Going back to Lauter's comments, where I think revisionism starts to connect with self-representation, to trace the "patterns of experience" through the images women are inventing, that is, to presuppose a personal and original experience behind these images, is only in those cases in which the writing is set to be transformative of those images of representation put before women as models. Yet, unfortunately again, experience is not always disentangled from the archetypes and the problem with Lauter is that she doesn't seem to be taking this important issue into account. As I argued above, some of these images are so powerfully mediating and masqueraded too as personal experience that, citing Carter again, "what I know from my experience is true is, in fact, not so." Arguably, what this comes to reinforce is the adequacy of the prototypes, for without a radical revision of the archetypes, thinking that experience or aspects of personal identity can be unproblematically threshed out from the archetypal images, even those created by women, is too close to wishful thinking, apart from being flawed from its conception.

Let me reformulate it more clearly; what I think is of key importance in women's writing in general and in women's mythmaking in particular is the revision of all representations, even those created by women themselves, and even those that appear most innocent;

there is a high need of aetiological studies that might attach a list of possible causes and intentions behind each of the images of representation produced in a specific tradition, and that might serve to account for the distortions in representation. Without this, women may be making new images yet transmitting nothing original about their experiences.

The credential to see whether the images of representation in women's writings are conveying personal experiences and personal visions of the world is revision, what they revise and the way it is carried out; a thorough revision always unleashes the kinetic force necessary for new self-representations. As Gina Wisker argues, "rediscovering and reinterpreting the myths is a powerful way to discover why and how women have been misrepresented and constrained, and goes some way towards the development of new representations, dispensing with all the virgin/whore, Eve/Lilith nonsense perpetuated in tale, legend, media, and common parlance" (1994, 109). Unlike Lauter's cause-effect relation, Wisker's association between the reinterpretation of myth and the creation of new representations seems to me more than reasonable. First of all because acknowledging the various ways in which women have been historically misrepresented, discovering the truth about the ideological intentions embedded in myths and archetypes about women, leaves the door open for new images of self-representation that are not caught in the nets of patriarchal deception. For this reason, the demystification of the archetypal images as prejudiced forms of representation and the privileging of prototypes as more aptly suited to widen the possibilities women have for representing themselves are decisive steps in this same direction.

Levertov's poetics of myth might well be taken as a showcase of what I have just argued. In those cases where she is applying a radical revision of the meanings and values attached to a mythic image, the revised image starts to assume proportions of a new, powerful representation –the figures of "waterwoman" "the goddess," "Ishtar"

"The Dragonfly-Mother" are but some few examples. In fact, these recreated images have reached such dimensions that they have gradually been more widely recognized as original icons associated to Levertov. In "'My Name is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition," Sandra Gilbert classifies Levertov's use of mythic self-representations as central to a "self-defining confessional genre, with its persistent assertions of identity and its emphasis on a central mythology of the self" (444). This "self-defining confessional genre" constitutes, according to Sandra Gilbert, a "distinctively female poetic mode" that places Levertov within a numerous group of contemporary women poets trying to openly define the self in their writings. A further proof of this: if the poems that include these recreated images have been variously anthologized in women's texts it is because many readers instantly recognize the images in these poems as speaking very profoundly about something original coming from a woman's experience and worldview.

These various images Levertov invents and reinvents along poems are, however, not presented as eternally fixed models of womanhood emanating from some collective unconscious, a set of essential characteristics all women must necessarily share. Much on the contrary, these images are clearly counterpoised to archetypal representations of women, applying what DuPlessis defined as characteristic of the new myths, that is, "critical perceptions about the nature of the woman in traditional myths" and restructuring the new myths as "original, model forms on which to base the self and its action" (212).

CHAPTER IV

Of Split Selves, Split Imagoes, and Split Mirrors

"A Shadow Drawn out on a Thread of Wonder": The Construction of Gender Identity Through the Images of Self-representation

> What is this unsatisfied duality
> which you can not satisfy?
>
> H.D., "Tribute to the Angels."

In this section, I will focus on the construction of gender identity in a group of poems, some of them clearly interrelated, spanning more than three decades in the life of Levertov. My method is to track down the poet's process of gender construction and her gradual definition of personal identity through the images of self-representation contained in these poems. These images of self-representation are never static or definitive in Levertov's identity poems, but just the opposite, they are continuously evolving, poem after poem, and apparently becoming more complexly interrelated as the poet advances in her negotiation of split parts of her identity.

Deciphering the cryptic allegorism of "Two Voices," one of Levertov's first published poems, from *The Double Image* (1946), is less arduous only in retrospect, and only after a careful study of Levertov's definition and negotiation of dualism in later poems. In fact the poem, in its dense allegorical atmosphere, is so hermetic to one clear critical interpretation, that one cannot but blindly risk a number of divergent interpretations. Deborah Pope lists some of these: the poem, as she says, "could be read as a conventional dialogue

poem between personifications of life and death or dynamic and static aspects of nature, or more interestingly, as a poem in which the woman speaker is trying to tell her lover what her inner self is truly like" (1990, 76). However much one may subscribe to one interpretation over the other, it is true that none of these readings can be dismissed outright.

> What can I give you? I am the unseizable
> indigo and wandering sea. I give
> no love but music, cold and terrible airs
> to darken on your heart as albatross
> obscures the gleaming water with a wing.
>
> *Be silent. You are beautiful; I hear*
> *only the summer whisper on the shore.*
>
> What can I give you? I am that great tree,
> the green penumbra of forgotten dreams.
> I send a leaf to greet you, but no more;
> my branches rustle in the wind of death.
>
> *Be still; I hear no menace in the wind;*
> *the tree is mine, and grows about my heart.*
>
> I am the wind. *I hold you*, I am gone,
> shade of no substance. What is it you hold?
>
> *Shadow, I love you.*
>
> Free me, I am death.

One of the things that is most notorious in the poem is the shrilling discord between the two voices in dialogue. For instance,

'the male voice,' deaf to the ominous self-representations of the woman's voice (an "albatross" shadowing "the gleaming water with a wing") sings his routine strain: "*Be silent. You are beautiful*"; instead of "[her] branches rustle in the wind of death," he hears "no menace in the wind"; and, as if this song of the absurd couldn't but end in this way, the adagio, "I give / no love but music," gets from the other part a incongruently grotesque response: "*Shadow, I love you,*" which also seems to echo Ben Jonson's song, "That Women Are but Men's Shadows," and its demeaning couplet refrain: "say, are not women truly, then, / styled but the shadows of us men?" Dismissing the beloved's self-representations as elusiveness ("unseizable," "a shade of no substance"), the lover is determined to hold her in one single image and to disavow her shifting self-representations.

The end line "Free me. I am death" is, in consonance with the abstract tones in the rest of the poem, highly cryptic in its enunciation; who is death? Who is it must set her free? Is death a literal death or is it, in tune with the allegorist character of the poem, just a symbolic death-in-life, one more allegorical mask? Or is the male voice and his stereotyped definitions of her (silent, beautiful, shadow) that 'are killing her softly' as the song goes? Is she saying, after his words, that she is only a dead construct? Or why not go beyond these interpretations and bet for more radical ones in which "I am death" reads 'I bring death,' the demise of your representations? This reading would make of this poem a tellingly visionary poem. I say this because the challenge to the patriarchal system of representations will constitute one of the key issues in Levertov's poetry in later years. More specifically, and as I will try to elaborate in the ensuing lines, Levertov's poems on personal identity, where she includes many and varied images of self-representation, come to destabilize the stereotypic iconography about women around the mid-century, an iconography that was regulated by a fixed system of gender and role representations.

There is something in "Two Voices," however, that is highly revealing and that is seen in the poet's detachment from the theme, in her choice of poetic masks instead of detailing the identity of those voices, instead of making it more explicit that this as a role-conflict poem, a poem about "all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 17). The title of the poem is self-evident and it does not help throw any light on the foggy abstractedness of the poem. One hypothesis that might account for all this is that her process of gender construction is still in its beginnings (this is one of her first poems in which gender, albeit timidly, becomes a primary concern of the poet) and that it needs more time to identify the nature of the conflict and the agents involved in it.

To this effect, "The Dogwood," a poem included in *Overland to the Islands* (1958), already her second book published in the U.S., is definitely clearer about the nature of the conflict, the context in which it takes place, and the actors involved.

> The sink is full of dishes. Oh well.
> Ten o'clock, there's no
> hot water.
> The kitchen floor is unswept, the broom
> has been shedding straws. Oh well.
>
> The cat is sleeping, Nikolai is sleeping,
> Mitch is sleeping, early to bed,
> aspirin for a cold. Oh well.
>
> No school tomorrow, someone for lunch,
> 4 dollars left from the 10– how did that go?
> Mostly on food. Oh well.
>
> I could decide
> to hear some chamber music

and today I saw–what?
Well, some huge soft deep
blackly gazing purple
and red (and pale)
anemones. Does that
take my mind off the dishes?
And dogwood besides.
Oh well. Early to bed, and I'll get up
early and put
a shine on everything and write
a letter to Duncan later that will shine too
with moonshine. Can I make it? Oh well.

The poem, specially in its first stanzas, has a slow, weary cadence, made even slower by a repetitive rhythm ("The cat is sleeping, Nikolai is sleeping, / Mitch is sleeping.") and by the repetition of a resigned "Oh well" in some strategical lines. Rather curiously, lines such as "Ten o' clock, there's no / hot water" sound like an echo of T.S. Eliot's "The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four," his own parody of routine life in a married couple included in *The Wasteland.*

A woman alone, at a time when everybody around her is sleeping (cat included) opens up expectations of a more introspective analysis, which is precisely what we don't get in the first stanzas in which the only theme is the routine drudgeries. Those expectations start to be met only in the second part and after the dramatic break announced by "and today I saw–what?"; it is only now the poet presents a more interesting line of inner thoughts, a dialectics between her safe "inner weather" (the protective house, the routine drudgeries), and her "outer weather," "the blackly gazing purple / and red (and pale) / anemones." From this moment onwards, the poet's interior monologue becomes a continuing dialectics between routine, a break in the routine, and the pull of routine again; an indication of this in the poem being the rhetorical question about

whether her "outer weather" takes her mind off the dishes, a question inserted between the reference to the anemones and the dogwood. Yet all too suddenly this dialectics is abruptly suspended, the anemones and the dogwood are surreptitiously left behind, evaded, as the poet is vanquished by routine and drudgery again. Her list of actions for the next day include a domestic polish on everything and writing a letter to Robert Duncan. The letter to Robert Duncan is strangely juxtaposed to the shining polish, even if it is clear that the letter means a shining of another kind, a shining with "moonshine." But the way it is phrased in the poem, and coming immediately after the reference to household obligations, the mention to the letter seems to carry some hints about her sense of herself as a mother and poet, about the possibility of developing both roles ("Can I make it?") in a world that does not allow for both to develop naturally. Her repeated comment, "Oh well," reminds us that she realizes that this is her reality, and however difficult or improbable, it is the life she has chosen to live. It might be relevant to note here that many of the letters that Levertov sent to Duncan enclosed manuscripts of her new poems and that she anxiously waited for his approval of the poems. Levertov herself acknowledged years later that these letter poems were always sent to him with associated expectations of a paternal validation: "For years no praise and approval from anyone else, however pleasant, could have reassured me until I had Robert's approval of a poem" (Levertov 1992, 208-209). Against this background, the repetitive pun "Oh well" could also be connotative not only of an attitude of resignation on the part of the poet but, also, of a mournful imprecation to the well, which Levertov associates in her essays and poems with a "place of origin" and a source of inspiration.[1]

1 In "Denise Levertov: Her Illustrious Ancestry," Virginia Kouidis examines in depth Levertov's poems on the well and gathers that "the well symbolizes the poet's essential center, its waters connecting her to the mystery of origins and to the final surety of the sea" (263). Even more so, the well in poems such

Nonetheless, at the end of the poem what is still left unknown is whether the poet can really make it, that is, whether she can live up to her two roles as a shining mother and shining poet at the same time. Whatever the case may be, her interior monologue shows her even more aware of which are the existing boundaries of her small world as a woman poet. The final "Can I make it?" is left hanging there as if it were a challenge to start to negotiate an identity which might include her different facets.

"The Earthwoman and The Waterwoman," published two years before "The Dogwood," is one of the first poems in which Levertov starts to develop a saga of images of self-representation with which to define her identities as mother and poet. In this case, she represents those identities in the folk *personae* of an earthbound earthwoman and a mercurial waterwoman.

> The earthwoman by her oven
> tends her cakes of good grain.
> The waterwoman's children
> are spindle thin.
> The earthwoman
> has oaktree arms. Her children

as "The Well" and "The Illustration" from *The Jacobs' Ladder*, suggests Kouidis, in the end comes to represent Levertov's yearning to merge back into her maternal placenta. Both poems accordingly "mythologize the nature-mother-daughter/poet relationship that is Levertov's well of origin.

The well is located in the dream-remembered lake of Valentines Park of her childhood: 'mistaken directions, forgotten signs / all bringing the soul's travels to a place / of origin, a well / under the Lake where the Muse moves,' but most relevant to the case of the well in "The Dogwood," Kouidis refers to another well image included in *To Stay Alive* and reminds us how "in the midst of her political/spiritual crisis Levertov is advised by a friend to plumb her own well: 'Get down in your well, / it's your well / go deep into it / into your own depths as into a poem" (264).

full of blood and milk
stamp through the woods shouting.
The waterwoman
sings gay songs in a sad voice
with her moonshine children.
When the earthwoman
has had her fill of the good day
she curls to sleep in her warm hut
a dark fruitcake sleep
but the waterwoman
goes dancing in the misty lit-up town
in dragonfly dresses and blue shoes.

The two women of the poem are represented in terms of opposite roles, the earthwoman acting as the nurturing mother and the waterwoman as the unconventional, yet highly imaginative, woman.[2] The oppositions are so neatly defined that one is the exact reversal of the other. The earthwoman, unlike her counterpart, is neither up-rooted nor un-rooted, but firmly rooted to her soil (read social roles), since she is well adjusted to the construct of the motherly[3] woman, and her children are well-fed, "full of blood and

2 Levertov gave further hints as to the nature of the split-self in "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman" with her later recognition that "Poets owe to Poetry itself a loyalty which may at times be in conflict with the demands of domestic or other aspects of life. Out of those conflicts, sometimes, poetry itself re-emerges" (1992, 263).

3 The sociological dimension of the poem is present all throughout, specially in the strict role differentiation between these two women. The earthwoman for instance looks too much like middleclass white women in the fifties, who, as Rich recalls, were "in reaction to the earlier wave of feminism, [...] making careers of domestic perfection, working to send their husbands through professional schools, then retiring to raise large families. [...]; the family was in its glory. Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage" (Rich 1993, 173).

milk." It is no wonder then that she has a "dark fruitcake sleep" after curling "to sleep in her warm hut" for she is the very embodiment the sugary mother, and her tranquilized domesticity seems to echo how women were expected to behave in the 50's.

On the other hand, the mercurial waterwoman does not fit into the role of the nourishing mother; her "spindle thin" children are fed not with "blood and milk" but with the imaginative shine of moonbeams ("moonshine children"); at the fall of dusk, the waterwoman, instead of "curling into" a sedated calm, like her counterpart, "goes dancing in the misty lit-up town / in dragonfly dresses and blue shoes." The waterwoman is not only more extravagant, being lavishly dressed as a dragonfly and singing in a sad tone what is supposed to be sang more joyously, but also potentially more creative because she has the power to sing and dance, qualities that are nonexistent in the earthwoman.

Yet is this, strictly speaking, a split-self poem? Even though Levertov presents two women so neatly differentiated, there is no tension, no imbalance in the poem, and, as Sandra Gilbert puts it, "both are exuberant, both celebrate 'the authentic' in its different manifestations" (Gilbert 1993, 208). Gilbert's reading of the poem is fully at odds with what many other critics writing on Levertov's identity poetics, Deborah Pope not exempted, have been perhaps too quick to see as too obvious in the poem. Pope, for instance, sustains that in the poem the split-self remains unhealed if only because "Levertov still distances herself from the split by projecting it onto these folk forms and by using two women rather than a single woman divided against herself" (81). But Pope's argument cannot be taken as undisputable for, even if evidently less suspicious, using a single divided woman is in itself no more guarantee of integration.

> There's in my mind a woman
> of innocence, unadorned but

fair-featured, and smelling of
apples or grass. She wears

a utopian smock or shift, her hair
is light brown and smooth, and she
is kind and very clean without
ostentation–
                    but she has
no imagination.
                         And there's a
turbulent moon-ridden girl

or old woman, or both,
dressed in opals and rags, feathers

and torn taffeta,
who knows strange songs–

but she is not kind.

As was the case of "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman," role opposition is again one of the overriding issues in the poem; in this case the opposition is between the socially accepted woman, who belongs to a stereotypical paradigm of representations, and the extravagant woman, who does not fit into these paradigms. The first woman, innocent, and dressed in utopian fashion, is characterized as the symbol of the *femme naive*. In every single element of her characterization she nicely suits the beauty canons of her day: "unadorned," "fair-featured," smooth haired, nice-smelling, and wearing a simple dress[4] of the epoch. But, though she conforms to

4 Helane Levine-Keating's derivations from her costumes and features, I would say unironically, verge on a practical lesson on deductive psychology: "her

canons for being "kind and very clean without / ostentation," "she has / no imagination." This perhaps because, as Adrienne Rich comments, "to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination" (1993, 174).

In the second section, however, the allusion to a "turbulent, moon-ridden girl / or old woman, or both," ruptures the expected dualism, negotiating a multiplicity of subject positions,[5] a complex array of identities beyond the binary logics: girl, crone, or –why not?– both. In this way, by calling a third woman onto the stage, when the expectations were about two women again, the poem puts in question the binary grid used in representation. This makes of "In Mind" a highly subversive poem. Going beyond the oppositional two present in "Two Voices" or "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman" means, on a larger scale, going beyond the epistemological foundations of Western metaphysics, an epistemology that neatly compartmentalizes and represents difference in pigeonholes of hierarchies and, more importantly, of dualities. The second element, the imaginative woman that would seem more allied with her identity as a woman poet, is defended because the "eccentricity" of the girl is not attributable to her "youth" and "turbulence"; an

simple utopian costume is not meant for decoration but for ease just as her face remains 'unadorned but / fair-featured.' We can see her before us, in tune with nature and the earth, bearing children, scrubbing her face so it shines, giving, never complaining, being 'sweet,' peaceful and uncomplicated –the antithesis of the temptress" (246).

5 This multiplicity of selves found along self-definition maps onto Sandra Gilbert's vision of the woman poet's process of self-definition, a process in which "as she struggles to define herself, to reconcile male myths about her with her own sense of herself, to find some connection between the name the world has given her and the secret name she has given herself, the woman poet inevitably postulates that perhaps she has not one but two (or more) selves, making her task of self-definition bewilderingly complex" (1977, 451).

older woman could also be like her. Accepting different identities within her mind, however different they may be, allows Levertov to inflect difference within nonexclusive terms. As Levertov was moving more deeply into her construction of a woman poet identity, she intuitively saw the danger implicit in dualistic fragmentation, what she coined in an essay as "shrinking oppositions": "when we split ourselves up into opposing factions, fragments –intellect and emotions, body and spirit, private and public, etc.– we destroy ourselves" (Levertov 1972b, 44). Both the term and the definition she gives of it are adequately descriptive of the reductionism implicit in the logic of dualisms, a logics she was attempting to leave behind her.

What I find so compelling about this poem is that it does not present a splitting up of her identities in mind, but a gathering up, a stitching together of her mind constructs. One evidence of this is that Levertov is never ashamed of any of these women. Not ashamed of the woman extravagantly ornamented ("opals and rags, feathers / and torn taffeta") and not ashamed of the one that is not imaginative. Both the title of the poem and its reinforcement in the very first line ("There's in my mind") suggest that these identities are not taken as determined by biology, but instead as the constructs of the mind. Thus, they are always amenable to be rearranged, and reconstructed anew in the poet's psyche, a roomy place for sheltering more than two subject positions and also as incomplete or imperfect, on their own.

After the publication of "In Mind," Levertov's identity poetry becomes more self-assured and more celebratory of her identity as a woman poet and "Stepping Westward," from *The Sorrow Dance* (1967), is a first example of this. This poem was inspired by another pilgrimage poem written by Wordsworth and bearing the same title. In fact, it wouldn't be too far from poetic justice to categorize Levertov's "Stepping Westward" as a variation on the "pilgrim way" theme if it were not for a substantial shift she operates in the

poem which results in a transformation of the original model into a woman-centered poem. The reason for this change stems from the perception that gender, however much silenced in Wordsworth's poem, was there from the start. The expression 'stepping westward' captivated Wordsworth's imagination when he was greeted with it by "a woman" during one of his tours around Scotland. Dorothy Wordsworth reminisces in her *Recollections* the "affecting" episode that would "long after" move Wordsworth to write the poem:

> The sun had been set for some time, when, being within a quarter of a mile from the ferryman's hut, our path having led us close to the shore of the calm lake, we met two neatly dressed women, without hats, who had probably been taking their Sunday evening's walk. One of them said to us in a friendly, soft tone of voice, 'What! you are stepping westward?' I cannot describe how affecting this simple expression was in the remote place, with the western sky in front, *yet* glowing with the departed sun. William wrote this poem long after in remembrance of his feelings and mine. (Wordsworth, 1010)

I have reproduced in full her account of the anecdote because it serves to provide a contextual framework for Levertov's poem. This framework is all the more needed here since the poem from the first line to the last gives an eerie impression of wanting to rescue from oblivion its original inspiration, which is not so much Wordsworth himself (though he is certainly a presence in the poem) but rather more the sweetness and softness of the woman's voice. I say this because the woman's sweet, "soft tone of voice" that mentions such endless journey is echoed in the lines of Levertov's poem as distinctively a woman's voice instead of being silenced.[6] In other words, Levertov gives gender a categorical status in her poem even though gender was not an issue in the original:

6 The fact that it was a woman that uttered this awkward yet highly original phrase is absent in Wordsworth's poem.

What is green in me
darkens, muscadine.

If woman is inconstant,
good, I am faithful to
ebb and flow, I fall
in season and now

is a time of ripening.
If her part

is to be true,
a north star,

good, I hold steady
in the black sky

and vanish by day,
yet burn there

in blue or above
quilts of cloud.

There is no savor
more sweet, more salt

than to be glad to be
what, woman,

and who, myself,
I am, a shadow

that grows longer as the sun
moves, drawn out

on a thread of wonder.
If I bear burdens

they begin to be remembered
as gifts, goods, a basket

of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me
in fragrance. I can
eat as I go.

What Linda A. Kinnahan refers to as an "expanding or connecting outward" (133) in Levertov's poetry is best exemplified in the first couplets where the poet connects with several accepted representations of women, both on the grounds of a common "inconstancy" (whatever that ambiguous 'ebb and flow" might stand for) and a common "truthfulness" ("a north star"). Because of their abstractedness, the first lines gain by being compared with the original model so as to make more sense of them; it is only in this way that the intentions of Levertov's poem are clarified to a great extent. The feelings of exultation brought about by the "*human* sweetness" (emphasis mine) of that voice in Wordsworth's text mixed with "[...] the thought / Of travelling through the world that lay / Before me in my endless way" are modified into an exultation of a different kind in Levertov: the "sweet" and "salt" taste of being a woman, and whereas in Wordsworth's poem 'stepping westward' is a "[...] sound / Of something without place or bound," Levertov's 'stepping westward' invites other women and herself to accept change in personal life without limits, to relentlessly go beyond the

limits set by the horizon: "I am, a shadow / that grows longer as the sun / moves, drawn out / on a thread of wonder."

The poet's personal pilgrimage as a mother, housewife, political activist –Levertov was fully involved in protest activism at the time the poem was published–, and woman poet could be construed as her "burdens," but these burdens are seen in retrospect "as gifts, goods, a basket / of bread that hurts / my shoulder but closes me / in fragrance." Finally, the punch phrase "I can / eat as I go" seems to imply that Levertov is fully convinced, despite the presence of these burdens, "Of travelling through the world that lay / Before [her] in an endless way" (Wordsworth's poem), never yielding to any pressures in her stepping westward as a woman, in the sense of accepting no limits in her personal pilgrimage as a woman. As she herself acknowledges, life as pilgrimage, "the theme of a journey that would lead one from one state of being to another" (1973, 63), is one of the major motifs of her poetry, and one that, I would suggest now, is of relevance for her identity poetics inasmuch as this acceptance of life as a continuous journey with no set limits in the horizon implies the acceptance of change in personal life too.

"The Woman," from *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975), is another step forward in her process of integration of 'split' identities. Now she explicitly acknowledges that the women of "In Mind" are one (much in the sense of inseparable) and, not unwittily, she decides to put the ball of dualism onto the roof of the other gender.

Levertov again gives a hairpin turn to her identity poetry and this with no flaw of logics for the unification of "the one in homespun" and "the one in crazy feathers" is but the natural consequence of accepting her different identities in preceding poems. What seems to result from the poem is that the process of change and expansion of "the one in crazy feathers" will continue no matter how wearing sometimes.

It is the one in homespun
you hunger for
when you are lonesome;

the one in crazy feathers
dragging opal chains in dust
wearies you

wearies herself perhaps
but has to drive on
clattering rattletrap into

fiery skies for trophies,
into the blue that is bluer
because of the lamps,
the silence keener because it is solitude
moving through multitude on the night streets.

But the one in homespun
whom you want is weary
too, wants to sit down

beside you neither silent
nor singing, in quietness. Alas,
they are not two but one,

pierce the flesh of one, the other
halfway across the world, will shriek,
her blood will run. Can you endure
life with two brides, bridegroom?

It needs, on the other hand, very little exegesis to surmise in "the one in homespun" the innocent woman of "In Mind." Levine-Keating's argument supporting this idea is just one valid

argument among many others: "'the one in homespun' corresponds to the innocent, kind, and clean 'Good Mother' of the first half of 'In Mind,' for her unpretentious 'utopian smock or shift' is undoubtedly homemade" (252). Significantly so, I would add, the other one, "the one in crazy feathers," seems to pick up on the woman "dressed in opals and rags, feathers, / and torn taffeta" of "In Mind."

Yet the rag-clothed woman of "In Mind" has now an even more worn-out, phantasmagoric appearance with brittle wheels rattling shriekingly as they drag opal chains in the dust; the poet nonetheless "juxtaposes its worn out, rickety state –onomatopoeically 'clattering rattletrap'– with the places it aims for; the sky toward which it heads represents transcendence and infinity, height, and the heavens" (Levine-Keating, 254). The journeying self will thus continue to seek for modes of self-realization, "trophies," in the intense, lamp-lit, bluish light of the fiery skies. Though "the one in crazy feathers" wearies the bridegroom and even wearies herself, the latter seems to have interiorized it not as a contingency but as necessary for integration. In spite of their differences, the one in homespun and the one in crazy feathers are at one in the mind of a poet who, now, self-assured of her amphibian[7] configuration, passes the pressure onto the husband asking him whether he can endure to live with two brides.

Published in the same volume, the poem "Cancion" is an amalgam bringing together the multifarious self-representations appearing in former poems.

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7 B. Tymorski August often uses this adjective as a taxonomic label for Denise Levertov's poetic corpus. According to August, poets of the amphibian rubric believe "in some sense of wholeness, in the existence of a larger configuration in which each separate element contributes to meaning and purpose" (229). I use the term here for its appropriateness and descriptiveness in helping to think about the earthwoman and the waterwoman ("the one in homespun" and "the one in crzy feathers") as parts of a whole.

When I am the sky
a glittering bird
slashes at me with the knives of song.

When I am the sea
fiery clouds plunge into my mirrors,
fracture my smooth breath with crimson sobbing.

When I am the earth
I feel my flesh of rock wearing down:
pebbles, grit, finest dust, nothing.

When I am a woman–O, when I am
a woman,
my wells of salt brim and brim,
poems force the lock of my throat.

In the three first stanzas, the 'I' of the poem impersonates three of the primal elements –air, water, and earth respectively– as mirror images respectively of the woman that ranges "fiery skies for trophies," the waterwoman, and the earthwoman. But the surrealist imagery that comes after each of the archetypal elements is only filtered into concretion in the last one, not surprisingly, just when the poetic persona fully indulges on her self-representation as a woman; the self-representations heading the three first stanzas, lead to destruction by way of cuts, fracture, and erosion; it is only when the poem reaches the last stanza that the destructive sequence is inverted for the 'I woman' representation of the last stanza announces no destruction but the creative powers derived from aligning herself with her woman identity; the foregrounded two-word line "a woman," the allusion, in the next line, to a well –"the poet's essential center," as Virginia Kouidis stated–, now in full vigor, and finally the explicit connection between her acceptance of

her identity as a woman and poems breaking "the lock" (the impediments, the pressures, the frustrations imposed on women) of her personal voice speak clearly of what I have just argued; and the way the logics of the poem is arranged, this last self-representation seems to be posited against the rest of the previous self-representations which instead of creation bring destruction. This is nothing short of a complete overturning of traditional discourses that enunciate woman and poet as contradictory subject positions. If what characterizes the double bind condition in women's writing is "a situation of conflict and strain," which means more concretely that "if she is a 'woman' she must fail as a 'poet'; 'poet' she must fail as 'woman" (Jushasz, 3), the poem takes in the last stanza the opposite direction; no failure, no conflict, no strain are derived from her woman poet identity but, quite the opposite, a full celebration of her creative powers; thus, the poem works on both sides to an unlocking not only of the poetic throat ("poems force the lock of my throat") but of the constraining dualism woman poet. The housewife's wondering "can I make it? Oh well" in "The Dogwood," Levertov's conflict between her role as housewife and her role as a woman poet, had to wait seventeen years to be answered with some self-assuredness.

In a later poem, "The Dragonfly-Mother," from *Candles in Babylon* (1982), the poet, very much in terms of self-reflection, deals with a new version of the double-bind; in this occasion the double-bind does not revolve around the conflict between woman and poet but it is presented now as a dialectics between her social commitments as political activist and her woman poet identity.

As she is about to leave her house to give a speech at a rally, the Dragonfly-Mother makes her appearance known to the poet and defers her from her social tryst. Indifferent to the poet's imperative commitments, the Dragonfly-Mother listens only to the alliterative coming alive of her natural surroundings –"the creak of / stretching tissue, / tense hum of leaves unfurling."

I was setting out from my house
to keep my promise

but the Dragonfly-Mother stopped me.

I was to speak to a multitude
for a good cause, but at home

the Dragonfly-Mother was listening
not to a speech but to the creak of
                    stretching tissue,
tense hum of leaves unfurling.

[. . .]

Not only does the Dragonfly-Mother distract the poet's attention away from her social commitment, but she also expands the poet's visionary imagination. Levertov continues:

Who is the Dragonfly-Mother?
What does she do?

She is the one who hovers
on stairways of air,
                    sometimes almost
grazing your cheekbone,
she is the one who darts unforeseeably
into unsuspected dimensions,

who sees in water
her own blue fire zigzag, and lifts
her self in laughter
into the tearful pale sky

that sails blurred clouds in the stream.

•

The Dragonfly-Mother is the one who "darts unforeseeably into / unsuspected dimensions," thus instructing her neophytes in the dauntless dashes of the imagination. While the Dragonfly-Mother ranges "stairways of air," she sees reflected in the water below "the clear mirror" of "her own blue fire zigzags" in the sky. But even more significative than these clear reflections is the fact that the dragonfly can laugh at her own reflected image which is, I think, no less an apt metaphor for a self-consciousness of split images or selves.

Since not an overpowering Muse but an old friend of the poet, the Dragonfly Mother sits at her table as they engage on a friendly chat about their own dreams.

> She sat at my round table,
> we told one another dreams,
> I stayed home breaking my promise.
>
> When she left I slept
> three hours, and arose
>
> and wrote. I remember the cold
> Waterwoman, in dragonfly dresses
>
> and blue shoes, long ago.
> She is the same,
>
> whose children were thin,
> left at home when she went out dancing.
> She is the Dragonfly-Mother,
>
> [. . .]

The poet's identification of the "Dragonfly-Mother" with the waterwoman in "dragonfly dresses and blue shoes" sounds no unexpected note so far in the poem, recovering, as she does, that facet of herself she spoke about in the earlier poem. She remembers her old self and accepts it as present in the Dragonfly-Mother.

[...]

I too,
a creature, grow among reeds,
in mud, in air,
in sunbright cold, in fever
of blue-gold zenith, winds
of passage.

[...]

Having reached this point, and to track down more clearly the changes in the images of self-representation and the internal connections they establish among themselves, I would like to approach them taking Diane Elam's model of infinite regression. In her book *Feminism and Deconstruction. Ms. en abyme*, Elam uses a representational analog to exemplify her idea of women as undetermined, a locus constantly creating many and varied meanings. Elam compares each attempt to define women with the visual and psychological effects produced on the viewer of objects represented in structures of infinite deferral, *mise en abyme*, in which the " whole' image is itself represented in part of the image" (27). Rather illustratively, Elam puts the example of the image on the Quaker oats box. As we know, the picture on the box shows a Quaker oats Puritan holding a smaller box, which shows the Quaker oats Puritan holding an even smaller box with the same Quaker oats man depicted on it, yet on a smaller scale, and so on *ad infinitum* in

a regressive spiral of self-representation. Far from having a point of closure, the process of self-representation is continuously open to a new regressions. As Elam states, "representation can never come to an end, since greater accuracy and detail only allow us to see even more Quaker Oats boxes (27).

My own suggestion here is that Levertov's poems on personal identity also represent the whole image (woman) in part of the image; as in the case of the Quaker Oats box, Levertov's identity as a woman is represented in the various poems as if in imitation of this regressive spiral of self-representations: the image of the Dragonfly-Mother also appeared in a previous poem, "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman," as a waterwoman in dragonfly dresses ("I remember the cold / Waterwoman, in dragonfly dresses / and blue shoes, long ago. / She is the same"), but the regressive spiral does not stop here; these images of self-representation (Dragonfly-Mother and waterwoman in dragonfly dresses) recede further if only to show behind these images the figure of the poet herself: in "The Dragonfly-Mother," the woman poet acknowledges her identification with these previous images of self-representation ("I too / a creature, grow among reeds, / in mud, in air / in sunbright cold, in fever"). This is not an isolated case in these poems, more examples can be found of a receding spiral connecting self-representations. For instance, the "one in homespun" from "The Woman" recedes into that innocent woman of "In Mind" (the latter's "'utopian smock or shift' is undoubtedly homemade") whereas "the one in crazy feathers" from the former poem is respectively shown in the woman "dressed in opals and rags, feathers, and torn taffeta." And yet again the figure of the poet is shown behind these images of self-representation; as it was the case with the dragonfly image, the poet claims again her identification with these images of self-representation by titling the poem "In Mind" and by opening it with a confessional "There's in my mind." But this regressive mosaic of self-representations is further complicated by slight

variations in some of these self-representations; for example, even if the woman dressed in "crazy feathers" of "The Woman" points retrogressively to the similarly characterized woman of "In Mind," the woman "in feathers and torn taffeta," the characterization of the woman dressed in "crazy feathers" is not exactly the same, that is, she appears now more phantasmagoric, "dragging opal chains" and ranging the lamp-lit blue skies much in the fashion of the waterwoman "dancing in the misty lit-up town / in dragonfly dresses and blue shoes." The interconnectedness between this extravagantly dressed woman of "The Woman" and the Dragonfly-Mother –an image of self-representation that, as I argued above, also recedes into other images and suffers some changes too– makes the spiral of self-representation seem more complexly-structured than it was first expected to be.

There are nonetheless some noticeable variations with respect to Elam's model. Whereas in Elam's model the Quaker oats box contains always the same image of self-representation, the Quaker oats puritan, and its characterization remains the same throughout the smaller pictures, in Levertov's poems the images of self-representation change, and even when she refers in different poems to a similar image, be it the dragonfly or the woman in feathers, its characterization varies. It is, using a near analog, as if the figure of the woman poet decided to wear different dresses and different masks, not just one, changing into this dress now or changing into that mask at her own will, and applying, when necessary, some little readjustments to the same dress if she decides to wear it a second time. The changes are so that each attempt on the part of the subject to fully grasp the object is ensued by a new failure to do so, by a new receding into another image which is not exactly the same, the represented images slipping away as if *ad infinitum*. In retrospect now, the beloved's words to her lover in "Two Voices" ("I am gone / shade of no substance. What is it you *hold*?") (emphasis mine) seemed to point to this slippage in the stability of representation.

In poetry, however, the dimensions in time and space of the regressive spiral depend exclusively upon the number of poems produced, upon the images of self-representation they contain, and upon the nature of the interconnections they establish among themselves. More Quaker Oats boxes (poems) means obviously more holographs of self-representation. Another relevant variation with respect to Elam's model is that in the case of poetry it is not greater accuracy and detail which allows us to see even more Quaker Oats boxes but vice versa, since more Quaker Oats boxes (poems) will always allow us to see with greater accuracy, in the sense that more images of self-representation constitute a more detailed, more multifaceted vision of the object. Above the particular differences with respect to Elam's model, I would conclude that Levertov's saga of self-representations undermines the assumptions about the possibility of holding woman in representation. As in the Quaker oats picture, the whole image (woman) is only represented though many and varied images of self-representation that "slip away into infinity," as it were. In Elam's words, "what could make us more aware of the infinite possibilities" women poets have for self-representation?

What is really significative about some Levertov's poems on personal identity is that there comes a point where they start to work on a larger scale, as a global aesthetic model of gender representation in which various images are juxtaposed and interrelated, sketching out a personal iconography, i.e., a series of personal images associated to meaning. Extending this to a pictorial analogy, the poems selected in this section, even though they work separately as self-contained poems, when interrelated they become like a mural painting: the images of self-representation, like colors and figures on a large canvass, interact among themselves according to rules of internal coherence set by the artist. In the case of these poems, however, the object represented gets proportionally more complex and elusive not specifically in spatial dimensions, as happens

in painting, but rather following a chronological line (not necessarily a strict chronological table yet a discernible one). This chronological development and the corresponding images of self-representation can be tracked down in more than one direction: forth, tracing the frames of self-representation as they evolve in time, and backwards, seeing how these images of self-representation do also work retroactively, partially modifying, adjusting, and enriching previous representational frames. Among the practical effects which this continuously-evolving model has are those of challenging the role constructs of women, so prominent in the years these poems were being published, whilst allowing Levertov to close in her work the sociological gap between woman and poet.

Another salient feature of the poems selected in this section is that through them Levertov tries to explore split aspects of her identity, to discern which values she recognizes as forming part of her identity and which other values (passive, submissive, controllable) belong to a patriarchal system that has been trying to control and manipulate women's identity for centuries. From a very early stage, this introspective analysis and negotiation of split facets related to personal identity has been a recurrent theme in Levertov's poetry. As Deborah Pope states, "from the beginning, Levertov's poetry demonstrates a continuity of theme and expression concerning central divisions in the self" (1990, 76). The "continuity of theme" present in some of Levertov's identity poems could be used as an argument to consider the possibility of classifying and grouping together Levertov's identity poems according to their thematic content. In this way, we can gain a more adequate perspective to track down the running thread of her themes: how Levertov gradually negotiates split aspects of her personal identity, how she progressively exposes the spuriousness of strict role divisions, and, finally, how she celebrates her identity as woman poet.

This is what the portrait says.
But there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement, and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
That is the tune but there are no words.
The words are only speculation
(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.

John Ashbery, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.”

“Appropriations: Women and the San Francisco Renaissance,” a chapter included in Michael Davidson’s *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (1991), opens with a reference to Levertov’s first visit to the highly influential poetic arena of the San Francisco Bay Area at the end of the 50’s. To celebrate such an occasion, her long-time friend and poetic mentor, Robert Duncan, had arranged a meeting of local poets in his house at Mill Valley. With this formal gesture, Duncan wanted to introduce Levertov to the poetic circles of what came to be known later as the San

Francisco Renaissance. Jack Spicer was among the local poets invited and, while there, took advantage of the situation to read "For Joe," one of the poems from his new series, *Admonitions*. Though apparently intended for the illustrious guest of honor, the content of the poem Spicer read, Davidson says ironically, "was anything but honorific" (172):

[. . .]

> People who don't like the smell of faggot vomit
> Will never understand why men don't like women
> Won't see why those never to be forgotten thighs
> of Helen (say) will move us into screams of laughter,
> Parody (what we don't want) is the whole thing.
> Don't deliver us any mail today, mailman.
> Send us no letters. The female genital organ is hideous, We
> Do not want to be moved.
> Forgive us. Give us
> A single example of the fact that nature is imperfect.
> Men ought to love men
> (And do)
> As the man said
> It's
> Rosemary for remembrance.

[. . .]

It was partly in response to this representation of women as a "hideous sex" –said to have been read by Spicer with "extraordinary venom"– that Levertov wrote some years later her virulent poem, "Hypocrite Women" (1964). Few Levertov poems are so overtly and radically feminist in diction and tone. From beginning to end Levertov achieves the conversion of the poem into a radical speech act, a vehicle to verbalize what has been kept secluded and

secret, but, and this is I think one of the biggest achievements of the poem, Levertov appropriates it for specular introspection, to see for herself what image woman reflects on the mirror:

> Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak
> of our own doubts, while dubiously
> we mother man in his doubt!
>
> And if at Mill Valley perched in the trees
> the sweet rain drifting through western air
> a white sweating bull of a poet told us
>
> our cunts are ugly–why didn't we
> admit we have thought so too? (And
> what shame? They are not for the eye!)
>
> No, they are dark and wrinkled and hairy,
> caves of the Moon...   And when a
> dark humming fills us, a
>
> coldness towards life,
> we are too much women to
> own to such unwomanliness.
>
> Whorishly with the psychopomp
> we play and plead –and say
>   nothing of this later.   And our dreams,
>
> with what frivolity we have pared them
> like toenails, clipped them like ends of
> split hair.

What is clear in every line of the poem is that Levertov is not using the introspective mirror for self-indulgence: "Hypocrite Women" is anything but a self-condescending title. What the poem does above all is to overtly criticize and condemn those complicitous conceits that have, whether consciously or unconsciously, abetted the immanence of patriarchal discourses of power concerning the social representation of women's bodies and sex, and, most destructively, acted against themselves as women, against their capacity to explore their intimate relation with their bodies, and against personal forms of spiritual development.

One of the key ideas of the poem is the repression of sex in language, a phenomenon that, as Foucault argues, departs with the repressive strategies of the seventeenth century, an era which, as he himself acknowledges, "perhaps we still have not completely left behind." The overruling principle of this repressive mechanism was, according to Foucault, to censure sex in reality, to "subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present." More specifically, this repressive mechanism was enforced through an intranet of prohibitions to inhibit the use of sex in language: "an interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship" (1981, 17).

"Hypocrite Women" shows that even in the liberal 60's the days of repression were not "completely left behind." The effects of censorship are aptly rendered in the poem as a crisis of language, i.e., a denial to verbalize what they feel in their bodies, what they see in their sexes. This dissociation from truthful confession, the split of women from language, is exposed in the profusion of *verba dicendi* negatively modified in the poem –"how seldom we *speak*," "why didn't we *admit* / we have thought so too?" "to / *own* to such..." "and *say* nothing of this later" (emphasis mine). These verbs of language are an attempt, on Levertov's part, to draw attention

to the devastating effects censorship has had at the level of women's speech; the most notorious one is the refusal to verbalize what they feel and see in their bodies and sexes.

But, as the title well indicates, the poem is addressed to women, (it is not so much concerned with men despite the side reference to Spicer's poem) and tries to raise an awareness among women of the hypocrisy implicit in acting as if sex didn't exist, in the tactics to avoid referring to it, and in the strategies of compliance with sexual stereotypes. The poem, almost stanza by stanza, works a deconstruction of some of these servile strategies: one of them is displacement, exemplified in her accusation against those women who "mother" the male's doubt, however "dubiously," to avoid 'mothering' (in the sense of listening to and caring for) self-doubts; another strategy is self-repression in language, never calling sex by its name (to this effect the explicitly taboo "cunt" sounds as an angry defiance of the rules); the references to the cunt as "ugly," "not for the eye!," "caves of the Moon," subsumed as they are in the social mirror for representing and interpreting women's genitals, show to what extent these ideologies have naturalized their prejudices. For who will doubt now that these representations of the female genitals have been almost exclusively the work of patriarchal religion, philosophy, literature and visual arts. In primitive myths, for instance, women's sex was recurrently represented as tenebrous, even witch-crazed, conditioning woman's nature and destiny above anything else. Thus Sybil's cave was a synecdoche for her sex, and, inversely, her sex, the cave she was forced to inhabit for eternity, a synecdoche for her unalterable destiny. Many centuries later, once the bourgeois aesthetics was commonly accepted as the norm, new layers of devaluation were attached to the female sex, which was finally dismissed as base and unclean, "not for the eye."

A third servile strategy could be best summarized in Irigaray's words as a "masquerade of femininity" i.e., an eagerness to be accepted in man's economy of desire even if at the expense of

renouncing to the body (see Irigaray, 134); since the menopause,"a coldness towards life," stigmatizes women as less attractive in man's economy of desire, one of the ways to continue admitted in these economies of desire is to censure the biological in language; the lines "we are too much women to / own to such unwomanliness" must be read precisely in this context of a fear to be excluded from man-defined economies of desire, a threat that by itself acts as a repressive mechanism censoring again the circulation of sex into speech.

Nevertheless, in the final stanza a cosmetic analog, the "clipping" and "paring" of dreams, expresses with full dramatic force how some forms of physical self-care hide a carelessness for other metaphysical concerns (dreams in the poem); this bodily self-care, the clipping of "split ends of hair" and the pedicure, is ritualistically cosmetic, a boudoir scene, with women as makeshift vestals at the service and observation of beauty canons. Here Levertov touches upon what is a recurrent theme in women's writings: the aesthetic pressures acting upon the female body. As if departing from the lines in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" where Rich depicts with wry irony a woman that "shaves her legs until they gleam / like petrified mammoth-tusk" (1963), Levertov stresses in her poem how this obsessive compliance with man-defined canons of beauty brings with it the obliteration of personal growth at more enriching levels.This might also explain why the cosmetic analogs included in the two last stanzas are immediately set in counterpoint to other terms more metaphysically charged: the "psychopomp" and the "dreams." The former carries the metaphysical weight of the whole poem, and is a key to understanding what is at stake in the game of cosmetics. DuPlessis comments on the mythological and spiritual allusions contained in the term "psychopomp":

> This guide of souls, possibly Hermes, the traditional psychopomp of Greek mythology, is waiting to lead the women forward to mystery or

> to transformation. The god, of great importance to spiritual development, playing a key role in the myth of Psyche, is assailed by a teasing display of charm, which the women use as a deliberate strategy of refusal. They refuse to acknowledge their own capacity for growth, and they refuse to be faithful to their deepest selves. (1975, 201)

Given the importance the psychopomp has not only for women's development but for a loyalty to themselves, the indicting modifier "whorishly" to refer to the game of seduction with the psychopomp must be taken as Levertov's venting out her cholera in epithets. One must see also that for a woman with such a mystic make-up, this frivolous flirting with the psychopomp, the guidance into spiritual initiation and mystery, is anathema.

Nonetheless, just as Virginia Woolf strove, as she herself once wrote in "Professions for Women," to tell "the truth about my own experience as a body" (1980, 62), so did Levertov struggle to substitute truth-telling for shameful self-censorship thus hoping that she would create, as Rich would have it, "the possibility for more truth around her" (1980, 191). This need for truthful confession, which is so evident in "Hypocrite Women," had been the theme of an earlier poem, "The Goddess," from *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1960), whereby the poet, who lies half asleep in Lie Castle, is awakened to truth by the impetuous apparition of an unnamed Ur-goddess.

> She in whose lipservice
> I passed my time,
> whose name I knew, but not her face,
> came upon me where I lay in Lie Castle!
>
> Flung me across the room, and
> room after room (hitting the walls, re-
> bounding –to the last

sticky wall– wrenching away from it
pulled hair out!)
till I lay
outside the outer walls!

There in cold air
lying still where her hand had thrown me,
I tasted the mud that splattered my lips:
the seeds of a forest were in it,
asleep and growing! I tasted
her power!

The silence was answering my silence,
a forest was pushing itself
out of sleep between my submerged fingers.

I bit on a seed and it spoke on my tongue
of day that shone already among stars
in the water-mirror of low ground,
and a wind rising ruffled the lights:
she passed near me returning from the encounter,
she who plucked me from the close rooms,

without whom nothing
flowers, fruits, sleeps in season,
without whom nothing
speaks in its own tongue, but returns
lie for lie!

The goddess makes her presence known to a poet *lying* in Lie Castle in the most disruptive of manners: ricocheting from the walls of one room to the next, the poet is flung by the goddess outside the safe walls of her castle; the violence of this encounter with the

goddess announces a radical change to a new way of experiencing things; out of her protective enclosure as she now finds herself, she must "taste and see" nature in her own flesh. The effects of her encounter with the goddess start to be visible everywhere, above all, what she has gleaned[8] from her is the power to speak in her own tongue telling the truth about how and what she experiences on her body: "without whom nothing / speaks in its own tongue, but returns / lie for lie!" Rather than simply paying "lipservice" to a supreme idea of truthfulness, the poet must actually "taste the power" of telling the truth about what she experiences on her body. This, so the poem goes, must be clearly spoken on her own tongue and not in a stereotypical fashion. The decisiveness of such a mighty revelation can be perceived in later poems in which the poet strives to inflect her views of the body within a truthful language.

A similar muddy scenario appears in a later poem, "Song for Ishtar," from *O Taste and See* (1964), and interestingly enough the mud in "Song for Ishtar" is also a seedbed of shininess, as was the case with "The Goddess." This choice of a muddy landscape in both poems seems to point to a less contrived way of representing what surrounds a woman's body, a representational aesthetics disruptive of the bourgeois aesthetics of hygienic bodies. Equally disruptive in this poem is her treatment of the stereotypes on female sex and the female body, stereotypes which she subverts in the poem by using a shockingly "unaesthetic" imagery for both her and the goddess. Thus, the poet takes on the identity of a pig, an animal said to have been sacred to Ishtar, the Babylonian moon goddess, so as to fornicate with her in a shining encounter. On the

8 I am indebted to Mary K. DeShazer for the particular use of this verb with the meaning of learning to be at one with the female divinity and deriving sustenance from this alignment with the Muse in her spiritual manifestation as the goddess (1986b,164).

other hand, the moon goddess is reimagined as a sow to allow for a level-to-level intercourse between poet/pig and moon/sow. This at-one-ness of the sexual encounter is seen in the divinity's shining through the hollow of the poet/pig who, in correspondence, breaks into an orgasm of "silver bubbles."

> The moon is a sow
> and grunts in my throat
> Her great shining shines through me
> so the mud of my hollow gleams
> and breaks in silver bubbles
> She is a sow
> and I a pig and a poet
> When she opens her white
> lips to devour me I bite back
> and laughter rocks the moon
>
> In the black of desire
> we rock and grunt, grunt and
> shine

A pig and a sow, as poet and goddess, fornicating and rolling in the dirty mud is a representation far beyond the genteel aesthetics of the clean female body; further still, the pig's body is depicted very much in similar terms to what Janet Wolff called the "grotesque body," with its "orifices, genitals, protuberances." This grotesqueness is opposed to the "classical body," which "has no orifices and engages into no base bodily functions" (124). The poet as pig does not only have hollow genitals, but they are caked with mud. In opposition to what Wolff calls "the classical body," both pig and sow engage in the most "base bodily functions." Even the phrasing of the sexual encounter between pig and sow is fully at odds with the romantic mystification of sexual intercourse as a

clean and pure act of love: far from repressing pleasure in speech, their grunting is repeated twice as an uninhibited expression of their pleasure reinforcing too the primitivism of the fornication between pig and sow.

"Abel's Bride," from *The Sorrow Dance* (1967), is another important variation in Levertov's poems on sex and body. But to really understand the way in which the poem shifts to an even more introspective discourse on sex and gender, it must be set back against "Adam's Curse," a companion poem by W.B. Yeats that served as a basis of inspiration for Levertov's poem. Both poems do actually share something more than the Biblical allusions in their titles, for they both deal (though this is a more diluted concern in Yeats' poem) with how what Irigaray calls the "specular economy" (134), that is, the way the body has been historically represented in the philosophical mirror, affects women in ways it does not affect men.

The origin of "Adam's Curse," as Maud Gonne records in her autobiography, was a conversation between Yeats, herself, and her sister Kathleen, who had said during the conversation that "it was hard work being beautiful" for woman. In the poem it is the "sweet and low" voice of "a beautiful mild woman" that echoes Kathleen's comment: "[...] To be born woman is to know– / Although they not talk of it at school– / That we must labour to be beautiful." These lines, however, are flanked by the poet's words about the hard discipline of writing poetry which is what gives the cue to the woman's passing, highly banal, comment given the poetic frame of the discussion. Astounding is the response her comment gets from him, more appropriate, if anything, for a Church minister, condescending and preaching resignation for the Biblical curse on her gender: "It's certain there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring."

Levertov remodeled Yeats' poem, specially the lines concerning the woman, into a less cosmetic and more truthful discourse on sex

and gender. Even the title of the poem, "Abel's Bride," is tellingly allusive, as if the poet wanted now to shift attention to how that curse has affected Eve's daughters.

> Woman fears for man, he goes
> out alone to his labors. No mirror
> nests in his pocket. His face
> opens and shuts with his hopes.
> His sex hangs unhidden
> or rises before him
> blind and questing.
>
> She thinks herself
> lucky. But sad. When she goes out
> she looks in the glass, she remembers
> herself. Stones, coal,
> the hiss of water upon the kindled
> branches –her being
> is a cave, there are bones at the hearth.

As in "Hypocrite Women," the female sex stands for that which is "not for the eye," and so must stay hidden from view. The poem shows a woman who "fears for man [because] he goes / out alone to his labors," i.e., a woman "mothering man" in his fears. This time, however, the bride, if only momentarily, pauses to mother herself in her own doubts facing her image in the mirror.

Rather discouragingly, however, the poem stands too dangerously close to the "anatomy is destiny" motto. Thus, the man needs no speculum to look with ("no mirror nests / in his pocket") since his sex is an evidence beyond concealment, either it hangs "unhidden" or it is erect "before him / blind and questing." The woman, instead, has to use that mirror, because her sex is a hidden wound,

or a mystified grotto – "her being / is a cave"– and not a hanging, therefore evident, protuberance.

Yet Levertov wanted to go further than this with this poem and so the mirror scene must be seen as another *tour de force* in her poems on body and sex. There is nothing, so it seems at face value, that makes of this woman essentially a case apart from any other woman "whose caveshaped anatomy is her destiny" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 94). As Abel's bride, her home is indeed a cave, and as housewife her social destiny is the home, the hearth, and the cave itself. As Abel's bride her sadness is a continuing reminder of the curse on Eve and her daughters: "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3: 17-19). So there is no denying that the poem, initially, is essentialist and determinist in that it points to the anatomical disposition alone as accountable for different ways of being, for fearing or not fearing, for having or not having a dependence upon mirrors. Yet, and here comes the notable variation, this bride's glance towards the mirror before she goes out is not another boudoir ritual, but a ritual of retrospective self-recognition: "she remembers / herself." The mirror seems to reflect more metaphysical concerns, and points, however minimally, to a consciousness of her own self. This was an intention that Levertov herself explicitly recognized in an interview, when she confessed that she wanted to introduce this woman's gesture of looking at the mirror as symbolic of an archetypal self-consciousness: "women's self-consciousness is sort of exemplified in the poem by the fact that she looks in the glass before she goes out: she has that sort of continuing consciousness of herself" (1998a, 63). This being the case, what can we make of the final lines? Does the erotic fire at the hearth hiss because the speculum reflects her cave-shaped anatomy as her only destiny? Are "the bones at the hearth" the remnants of her sacrificial, burnt out flesh? It seems that they stand there as an indication that she is not alive at the hearth, only her bones. Just as fire at the hearth hisses only after water is thrown to extinguish it, her

hearth, a synecdoche for her cave, her sex, and her destiny, is also controlled by others, and this explains why we can only find her dead bones at the hearth.

This theme of a self-consciousness about the social representation of women's bodies, is present again in "Fantasiestrück," a later poem from *Life in the Forest* (1978). In correspondence with the title, the poet imagines in her fancy that Caliban, the earthbound brute of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, had an imaginary half-sibling, a bastard born to Prospero and the "blue-eyed hag" Sycorax. Like Caliban, who was confined by his master Prospero to a rock, and the airbound Ariel, imprisoned by Sycorax in a pine and freed later by Prospero's art ("[...] it was mine art, / when I arrived and heard thee, that made gape / The pine, and let thee out" (II, 291)), Caliban's imaginary half-sibling is also imprisoned yet "that tree being / no cloven pine but the sturdy wood / her body seemed to her."

> 'My delicate Ariel'–
> can you imagine,
> Caliban had a sister?
> Not ugly, brutish, wracked with malice,
> but nevertheless
> earthbound half-sibling to him,
> and, as you once were,
> prisoned within a tree–
> but that tree being
> no cloven pine but the sturdy wood
> her body seemed to her,
>
> [...]
>
> Spirit whose feet touch earth
> only as spirit moves them,

imagine
this rootbound woman
Prospero's bastard daughter,
his untold secret, hidden from Miranda's
gentle wonder.
                    Her intelligent eyes
watch you, her mind
can match your own, she loves
your grace of intellect.
But she knows
what weight of body is, knows her flesh
(her cells, her magic cell)
mutters its own dark songs.

[. . .]

The sister is self-conscious that she is imprisoned in the "sturdy wood" which is her body, and that her only destiny is to be earth-bound, as if to suggest "the restrictive association traditionally and derogatorily made between woman and nature" (Kinnahan, 139). Given such restrictive visions of the female body, little wonder that Ariel's body might look, to her eyes, an instrument of a graceful freedom while she knows that her body must remain fixed in the role of being Ariel's rootbound mirror.

Self-mourning is exemplified now by her body's "dark songs" which echo, as it were, the "dark hummings" of "Hypocrite Women," and the hisses of "Abel's Bride." As was too the case with "Abel's Bride," the sister is continuously self-conscious about her mind and her body. Thus, though she sees herself as fit for intelligent reasoning as Ariel, the image of her body in the mirror is much less stimulating to her; for it does not escape her that her body is the degraded underside of Ariel's body, destined to remain a passive mirror of Ariel's graceful pirouettes in the air. A word

on the syllogism behind this: it is not so much that woman, in self-denying her bodily needs, acts as her own Prospero in the incarceration of her body ("Hypocrite Women") but rather that, confined by a culture of biological reductionism, and biological determinism, she is haunted by a consciousness of the repressive weight that is her body. Since, according to historical constructs on the body, a woman's body is her destiny, it follows that, in reverse correspondence, her destiny is to remain imprisoned in the "sturdy wood" that she has been assigned as body, like a Sybil in her cage. But how can Caliban's half-sibling unravel the syllogism, undo the spell? Here the poem sounds a note of yielding to resignation, a note that is even sadder as the poem moves to its closing verses:

[...]

She loves
to see you pass by,
grieves that she cannot hold you,
knows it is so and *must* be;
offers the circle of her shade,
silvery Ariel,
for your brief rest.

These closing lines are a real letdown for what one would always expect of a Caliban half-sibling is active rebellion. But far from this, the verse "knows it is so and *must* be" verges too much on resigned acceptance of her seclusion (this not to speak of her self-invitation to act as Ariel's shadow). However, the reference to *The Tempest* invites the reader to think about an artificial world and about the convincing powers of representation. One evidence of this: Prospero uses his magic powers to raise a makeshift storm that nevertheless looks to the boatswain as a real threat of imminent shipwreck. When this happens the audience knows that, like the

boatswain, it cannot escape this game of representations; as Bloom puts it, "if the overwhelming storm –which totally convinced the experienced Boatswain of its menace– is unreal, then what in the play can be accepted when it appears?" (1999, 675). The collateral effect this has on the audience is that it gets so caught in a continuing game of representations contrived by an almighty magus, that each of these is taken as natural and real. Is this not, I wonder, the effect the patriarchal technology of gender representation has had on us and on how we get to see the female body in our culture? What seems no fantasy in the poem is that she is a real woman with a body and an intelligent mind. Although this possibility might appear a fantasy in the patriarchal world, Caliban's half-sister is sure of her potential as a "real woman" –neither fantasy nor spirit– with a capacity for reasoning yet imprisoned in her body by a patriarchal framework of representations that has been always prone to represent women as determined by their bodies, unable to transcend their physicality. Ending in a sad note, the sister's "magic cell," probably a reference to her sex, must continue its song of lament, continue mumbling "its own dark songs."

More is to be expected of another poem included in the same volume and with a with a highly suggestive title: "A Woman Alone." Unlike "Abel's Bride," where the woman remained alone in her home fearing for man, this woman does no longer fear for man nor for her own loneliness. Her fear is quite of a different kind:

> [. . .]
>
> She has fears, but not about loneliness;
> fears about how to deal with the aging
> of her body –how to deal
> with photographs and the mirror. She feels
> so much younger and more beautiful
> than she looks. [. . .]

She has fears about how to negotiate her imagoes in photographs and mirrors, because they reflect her body as old, which in the dominant specular economy means ugly, "not for the eye"; but this woman, as Deborah Pope glosses over, wants to grow wise as she grows old, "moving into age with joy and inner beauty, even though –perhaps even because– men no longer figure centrally in [her life]" (96). Thus, the woman of the poem, by negating the mirror image ("she feels / so much younger and more beautiful / than she looks") concomitantly negates her condition as Caliban's imaginary half-sibling, forever restricted to the representation of her body in social mirrors. And unlike Caliban's half-sibling, the poet gives unmistakable signs of resisting her body's incarceration in those overarching mirror representations. Put rather figuratively, what she does is confront the mirror for her own purposes, to say that there are areas of personal identity that the mirrors either do not reflect or distort.

Levertov's confrontation of the mirror marks a point of no return in how the body is perceived. Once the mirror is denied and contradicted, there is no going back to the innocence of believing in mirror representations. For one thing, refusing the image on the mirror means breaking through to the other side of its representations, unveiling the mirror as an ideological, social and historical construct for the representation of the female body. If, as Foucault showed in both *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punishment*, sexuality and the body are privileged loci of power investments, women's confrontation of the mirror can lay bare once and for all the specific ways in which discourses of power have determined the representation of women's bodies. Whenever this is done in women's discourse, the sociological mirror cracks into pieces, unlegitimized as source of faithful representations.

What is a characteristic feature of all the poems selected in this last section is that they invite readers to a profound reflection about how women's bodies and sexualities have been artificially constructed

by patriarchy in order to make them fit their best interests. Levertov openly warns women against the negative consequences the acceptance of these constructs has for them. Where Levertov is most effective, and where I see that her poems on the body and sex might help many women to change their perception of themselves, is in her capacity to move consciences through an absolute personal honesty in her poetic discourse. For not only does she show in these poems a strong determination to denounce various forms of patriarchal oppression acting against women's sexes and bodies but she also has the courage to criticize women's compliance with them. Such acts of honesty and personal commitment, specially when we know that this is not precisely the easy way to win general applause among men and women, is something that must always be highly valued in a woman poet.

These poems demand a personal reconsideration of the damaging immanence of these constructs in our cultural systems, and the dangers implicit in not adequately thinking about them as discourses of power invented by men to subject women. Finally, these poems also constitute a serious reminder that change is possible and real if women decide once and for all to break with the patriarchal mirror projecting these distortions.

CHAPTER V

What is Blocking the Altar? Levertov's Erotic Poetics

> I have uncovered Diotima's absence rather than her presence: that very absence, moreover, has proven to be the empty center around which my entire discussion has revolved. Diotima has turned out to be not so much a woman as a "woman," a necessary female absence –occupied by a male signifier– against which Plato defines his new erotic philosophy. (295)

Plato, Halperin argues, has appropriated a feminine point of view with the aim of finding some legitimation for his own personal viewpoint on the erotic. Socrates, having heard Diotima speak on the benefits of a correct relationship to Eros, becomes Diotima's mouthpiece at Agathon's Symposium and speaks in "what he expects his audience to recognize as a woman's voice"[1] (263). Diotima's absence from a Symposium where the nature of Eros was being discussed, plus Socrates' role as a qualified oracle of her markedly complying thoughts on the erotic, appears symptomatic of two things: first and foremost, that women must remain absent from the construction of the erotic; secondly, if they must refer to the erotic at all it is to countenance the functions that men have assigned them in their sexuality. Small wonder then that Diotima's viewpoint, as echoed by Socrates in the Symposium, is that for women erotism remains exclusively restricted to procreativity. As Halperin more than appropriately comments, "Diotima speaks as if erotic desire consisted of an excitation brought on by pregnancy and climaxing in the ejaculation of a baby" (281).

1 As Halperin suggests, Plato intended his audience to understand that Diotima's discourse is a product of her gender. Thus,

> Diotima underscores the specifically "feminine" character of her purchase on the subject of erotic desire by means of the emphatically gender-polarized vocabulary and conceptual apparatus that she employs in discussing it. She speaks of *eros* as no male does, striking a previously unsounded "feminine" note and drawing on a previously untapped source of "feminine" erotic and reproductive experience. (262)

The reason why I have selected this episode of Plato's *Symposium*, together with Halperin's gloss, is because I take Diotima's role in the *Symposium*, an absence that speaks only through and under the supervision of a male oracle, to be tellingly illustrative of how women have, from very ancient times, been left out from the construction of the erotic discourse. If and when they are allowed a minimal voice in relation to the erotic, it is only to claim their willed submission to the rules of desire and pleasure that have been delineated for them, yet against them.

This forced absence of women from the definition of erotism, their subjection to the rules of desire imposed by men has –and it couldn't be otherwise– been the object of primary critical attention in feminist debates on the female body, sexuality, and erotism. Feminist scholars writing on women's sexuality and the body have in the last decades embarked upon extensive research concentrated on investigating the roots of these historical constructs of woman's desire and pleasure. To a great extent, their theoretical studies have managed to expose the various ways in which patriarchal hegemony in defining the erotic has affected women's perceptions of their own bodies, conditioning their capacity to relate freely with –and exploit– the erotic potential subsumed in the flesh, and censuring in language the expression of personal desire and pleasure.

If as Irigaray asserts "woman's desire has doubtless being submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks" (25), that this might have remained the *status quo* for so many centuries, with very little contestation until recently, has had more than serious consequences for women's erotism. First of all, being immersed in that logic means for women a "clitoridectomy" of their desires, having their desires excised by a patriarchal system whose first rule is to deny women's access to desire. This makes the erotic discourse not only a source of oppression but also a source of constant suffering. As Ostriker argues in *Stealing the Language*, "we have know to look at a quite different form of female desire

and to delineate an alternative portrait of female pleasure. For it is not only woman's aggressive impulses which have been thwarted and made taboo in her past life and literature. Her erotism has suffered equally" (165). Against this background, one of the few possibilities women have of making the balance swing to their side is the complete redefinition of erotism. It is only through uninhibitedly speaking about what and how they desire, only through the couching of erotic pleasure in straightforward language –contravening verbal taboos and laws of silence imposed upon them– that women can redefine a personal form of erotism not subordinated to men's vested interests in these matters.

For a man writing on the erotic poetry of a woman poet, as is now my case, there is always, I fear, the great risk of "masculinizing" in criticism a woman's discourse on the erotic, thus appropriating a "feminine" voice to find legitimation for whatever ethos I might sustain on this issue. In that case, Levertov's erotic poetry would not stand for itself here but it would rather be a "necessary female absence occupied by a male signifier," as was the case with Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. This hypothesis is plausible, specially if we bear in mind that the awareness of the risks involved –though it truly helps– does not make one immune to them whatsoever. Yet at the same time I say this I feebly hope that these words might serve as a sort of exorcism of these dangers or, at least, as a fragile form of legitimation for my discourse.

To trace in criticism Levertov's poetic discourse on the erotic from her first to her later poems is equal to covering the distance between two distant and opposite poles. Levertov's erotic poetics travels the great distance that separates abject silence, a complete absence of desire in her first poems, to overt verbalization of the erotic experience encompassing desire, pleasure, and joy. The transition from complete absence to an all-pervading presence of erotic desire and pleasure, giving way to a joy that is celebrated in and through the poem, makes of Levertov's erotic poetry an interesting

case study since it maps out the great distance and the winding pathways some women poets have had to take sometimes in order to redefine their personal relation with the erotic.

"Eros," a poem published in *The Sorrow Dance*, stands out mainly for the absence of comments on desire, pleasure, and erotic joy. Most probably, what Levertov wanted to highlight with this absence is that many love constructs embodied by this patriarchal god have no relation with the reality of human erotism.

> The flowerlike
> animal perfume
> in the god's curly
> hair–
>
> don't assume
> that like a flower's
> his attributes
> are there to tempt
>
> you or
> direct the moth's
> hunger–
> simply he is
> the temple of himself,
>
> hair and hide
> a sacrifice of blood and flowers
> on his altar
>
> if any worshipper
> kneel or not.

Levertov echoes in the poem some of the Neoplatonic and ascetic elements that traditionally have been associated to the god of love. In its Neoplatonic vein, the terms used to describe Eros are very similar to those employed in Plato's *Symposium* where the god of love was constantly idealized as an extremely powerful divinity, a god far above humans, and a symbol of absolute beauty; given that this is how the myth of Eros has being inexorably designed within the patriarchal mythic framework, Levertov warns the reader against interpreting Eros as a god related with human desire. Further still, Levertov leaves clear that he is so above humans that his standing as a supreme god is irrespective of his cult: "if any worshipper / kneel or not." A further proof indicating that Levertov is drawing on classical myths related to Eros is that the depiction of this god in the poem is done in imitation of the sculptured images of Eros around the Hellenistic period, when the god of love was recurrently represented as a young, robust *curly-haired* god.

The poem also exposes the cleavage at the basis of love constructs transmitted by the myth of Eros, a cleavage produced between the material body which, however imperfect, is, we shouldn't forget, the source of erotic desire and pleasure, and an idealized world of perfect forms beyond the "corruptible" flesh. These oppositions clearly permeate the references to Eros and his body. First, the body of the god is not described as a material body but an ideal "Body," a symbol of his sacredness, an extension of his temple: "simply he is / the temple of himself." Moreover, the poem's first verse, "The flowerlike /animal perfume," gives away more clues to interpret this poem in the light of a split between the material body and the world of pure and idealized forms. The line contains a veiled reference to Psyche's concubinage with Eros in a bed of "sweet and fragrant flowers" and to Psyche's being deceived by her envious sisters into thinking that she was lying with a snake. Coincidentally enough, Apuleius' story of love between Eros and

Psyche is, more than anything else, a fable of love informed by the constant opposition between the mortal flesh and the possibility of eternal love beyond the flesh. For as long as Psyche complies with the rules, accepting a blind concubinage with her beloved, she will be rewarded with the capacity to transcend her mortal body and ascend to the eternal world of pure forms. Accepting these constructive oppositions, Levertov seems to warn us, means the denial of the body, from which human erotism arises.

In its ascetic vein, Eros is further depicted in the poem not as a seductor god but as a chaste god whose physical attributes are not meant to lure the desiring gaze, but rather put there as if for ritualistic sacrifice; the rigorous ascetism in the perception of flesh, in consonance with the stereotypes of mystic poetry where the body was held in contempt as a burdensome prison of the soul, leads to a sacrifice of what is most precious and pleasurable in the erotic act: the body; regrettably so, just as hair and hide are sacrificed in the poem, so is the desire of the flesh charred *ad majorem gloriam* of the god; as a result of this, the "moth's hunger" must remain unsatisfied.

By introducing in the poem some Platonic constructs on Eros and mixing them with ascetic elements, Levertov shows that love constructs, traditionally associated to Eros, are so idealized and unreal that they cannot be made of this world; instead of human erotism what we have is an erotism devoid of human agency, absent from human desire, transfixed by the same Platonic oppositions between matter and spirit that have been governing the general principles behind love and erotic discourses in the West for many centuries now.

In "Hymn to Eros," a poem coming just after "Eros" in the same volume, Levertov grapples hard to redesign a mental image of Eros as a more humanized divinity, a god descending to this human world and instilling the lovers with human desire; in the

fashion and protocol of a religious ritual, the lover prays to the god Eros to enfold her and her beloved with the power of his love.

> O Eros, silently smiling one, hear me.
> Let the shadow of thy wings
> brush me.
> Let thy presence
> enfold me, as if darkness
> were swandown.
> Let me see that darkness
> lamp in hand,
> this country become
> the other country
> sacred to desire.
>
> Drowsy god,
> slow the wheels of my thought
> so that I listen only
> to the snowfall hush of
> thy circling.
> Close my beloved with me
> in the smoke ring of thy power,
> that we may be, each to the other,
> figures of flame,
> figures of smoke,
> figures of flesh
> newly seen in the dusk.

Levertov decides to transfer to human desire the sacrosanct qualities Eros was endowed with in the patriarchal system. Desire, non-existent in the previous poem, is now made of this "country," that is human, just as the figure of the God is also more humanized, brought down to earth from the Olympus and associated with

warm, pleasant sensations felt in the body: the all-enfolding warmth of erotic swandown caressing the body. Adequately enough, desire becomes a desire of here and now, a desire of this country that can also be made a part and parcel of the sacred.

In "Hymn to Eros," Levertov enacts a repairing of the dissociation of Eros vs. Logos present in the literary and philosophical tradition. For one thing, the line that reads "Slow the wheels of my thought" does not ultimately invalidate thinking in the erotic act; even if temporarily slowed to listen to the god's circling down, the wheel of thought is not totally arrested, only slowed, thus connoting that thinking still prevails. The reference to the wheel and its association to Logos also reverses the imagery surrounding Eros, so pervasive in Greek mythology, where the force of Eros was often represented as the "inx," "the magic wheel of love that seizes its victim" (Thornton 1997, 20). As if in counterpoint to the constant association of Eros with irrational impulses "overthrowing the mind and orders of civilization" (Thornton 1997, 12), Levertov uses the wheel of the poem not as symbol of bewitchment of the rational mind, but rather as a subtle indication that Eros and Logos are spokes of the same wheel.

On the other hand, and as happened in "Eros," there is a side reference again to the love between Eros and Psyche: "let me see that darkness / lamp in hand." While in Apuleius's story Psyche is punished by Venus, forced to perils and travails, for wanting to know, for bringing a candle near the figure of her beloved so that he might be revealed to her under a new light, the lamp of the poem announces no punishment at all. Far from it, the flaming bodies of the erotic embrace aspire to be "newly seen in the dusk," seen anew under the firelight, both sexual excitement and revelation, proper to the erotic endeavor. This, juxtaposed to the "lamp in hand" and to the alertness to sensations that suffuses the whole poem, points to a notion of the erotic act as a revelation of the

other, a passionate light reflecting in the midst of the sexual embrace what is most unknown about the sexual partner.

In "Hymn to Eros" Levertov recreates Eros as a god more concerned with human love and recasts the erotic as "the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another," (Foucault 1981, 61), a seeing anew of, or perhaps more correctly in this context, a learning something new from the sexual partner through the encounter of the bodies. The end line "newly seen in the dusk" seems to indicate Levertov's understanding of the erotic act as a pleasurable and pedagogical form of communion with the other. Put rather metaphorically, in this poem the flesh is not burnt by the erotic flames but rather enlightened by them.

In subsequent poems, Levertov continues exploring the erotic act as a source of revelation, a way to know more and better. In a poem titled "Love Poem" and later published in *Life in the Forest*, the feelings of exultation brought about by the erotic mingling are conjoined with a conception of Eros as revelation of what is an intricate and obscure secret about the beloved: "you give me / the flash of golden daylight / in the body's / midnight." In choosing an imagery of light to refer to the ecstatic moments of erotic encounter, Levertov is, whether deliberately or not, countering commonplace views on Eros and Logos held in philosophy and psychoanalysis. Jung for example always presented Eros and Logos in his writings as irreconcilable, as can seen be clearly in his essay "The Shadow and the Syzygy" included in *Aspects of the Feminine*. Yet Jung went even further by finally deciding to associate Eros with women's consciousness whilst presenting it in confrontation with Logos: "in women, on the other hand, Eros is an expression of their true nature, while their Logos is often only a regrettable accident. It gives rise to misunderstandings and annoying interpretations in the family circle and among friends" (171). Jung's words are an example of the patriarchal vision of erotism in woman and men's supposed monopoly of intelligence, a degrading vision for

women that is the reason why they have had to counterbalance these splits and wrong attributions in their erotic discourse, and to reweave Eros and Logos into a seamless cloth. As her poem above shows, Levertov had gradually started to do so, and in another poem belonging to the same volume, "Psyche in Somerville," Levertov justified Psyche's yearning to *know* his beloved under the light of her lamp using these words:

[. . .]

If I were Psyche how could I not
bring the lamp to our bedside?
I would have known in advance
all the travails my gazing
would bring, more than Psyche
ever imagined,
and even so, how could I not have raised
the amber flame to see
the human person I knew
was to be revealed.
She did not even know! She dreaded
a beast and discovered
a god. But I
know, and hunger
to witness again the form
of mortal love itself.

[. . .]

What we finally have in this poem is a thorough revision of the story of love between Eros and Psyche. The poet confesses in strong affirmative terms her eagerness to *know* the other in the erotic communion, her wanting to see here and now the "form /

of mortal love itself." I wonder whether this might not be also contradicting the moral inside Apuleius' story for it seems to me that what Levertov is rejecting here is the notion that a blind faith in idealized forms of immortal love beyond the body serves well to completely satisfy human desire.

From between the end of the 60's to the end of the 70's (the two poems just commented belong to this period), and each time in a more overt and more matter-of-fact way, Levertov's poems on the erotic aim at reconstructing a vision of the material body as a source of true knowledge which would end in pleasure. Adequately enough, in poems such as "What She Could Not Tell Him," from *The Freeing of the Dust*, the geography of the body is explored in its full dimensions: the multiple sensory organs of the body are presented as erogenous, while the whole skin is revealed as a parchment "imprinted" through the erotic act with what is unknown from the beloved.

> I wanted
> to know all the bones of your spine, all
> the pores of your skin,
> tendrils of body hair.
> To let
> all of my skin, my hands,
> ankles, shoulders, breasts,
> even my shadow,
> be forever imprinted
> with whatever of you
> is forever unknown to me.
> To cradle your sleep.

This clear presentation of the body as a way to knowledge serves as disclaimer of the dichotomizing of body and mind, of Eros and knowledge, making her erotic poetry definitely more in

harmony with contemporary erotic poetry written by women, since a characteristic trait of modern and postmodern women's poetry on the erotic (and we could consider Mina Loy, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich or Muriel Rukeyser as clear examples) is this rejoining of attributes of the flesh and the mind which have traditionally been separated in patriarchal erotic discourse. Levertov touches in this poem issues that were present in the feminist debates on the body. Feminist analyses of the body have thrown new light on the many forms of ideological intervention and manipulation the female body has suffered throughout history. In *Of Woman Born* Rich argues that the female body "has been made so problematic for women," its physicality has been so debased and minimized, that "it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit." Yet, at the same time, she also expresses her determination to "heal –insofar as an individual woman can and as much as possible with other women– the separation between mind and body" (40). In poems such as "What She Could Not Tell Him" Levertov seems to be echoing these needs, healing the split between the female body and the mind through a reassessment of the former as an exquisite pedagogy, a way to know, or, in Rich's words, "the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (40).

This connection with views on erotism generally present in women's poetry or feminist texts does not appear for the first time in Levertov's erotic poetry. In fact, if we go as far back in time as to a very early erotic text, "Eros a the Temple Stream" from *O Taste and See*, we can discern the first signs of this poet's personal perspective and understanding of erotism. The poem also shows her extensive command of poetic resources and her capacity to invest the erotic encounter with a mysterious aura, traits which, I think, contribute to make of Levertov one of the most talented erotic poets of her generation. These poetic gifts can be clearly perceived in the poem: in the choice of a serenely bucolic yet highly mysterious atmosphere, in the exploitation of compositional resources such as

variable rhythm to mark the variable pulses of erotic desire, or an artful use of line-breaks and indentation to suggest a smooth continuum of embraces. In this way, the act of soaping and rubbing in the midst of the flow of the river Temple in Maine (a favorite visiting place for Levertov and Mitch Goodman, who had their summer house in the middle of the woods near this river) is turned into an intensely erotic act.

> The river in its abundance
> many-voiced
> all about us as we stood
> on a warm rock to wash
> slowly
> smoothing in long
>   sliding strokes
> our soapy hands along each other's
> slippery cool bodies
>
> quiet and slow in the midst of
> the quick of the
> sounding river
>
> our hands were
> flames
> stealing upon quickened flesh until
>
> no part of us but was
> sleek and
> on fire

If, as Bataille asserts in *Erotism, Death* & *Sensuality*, "all eroticism has a sacramental character" (15), what cannot be denied after an attentive reading of the poem is that this sacramental character

suffuses each and every line of it; so much so that what is at first sight nothing more than a run-of-the-mill soaping in the banks of the river is converted by Levertov into an erotic ritual; caresses are performed "quiet and slow" as if in strict observance of the nature and process proper to a courtship ritual; the couple's concentration in and devotion to their ritualistic caresses is rendered even more evident in the sharp contrast between the swift flow of the river and the their self-controlled and suave gestures. Further still, the profusion of the sibilants in the poem suggests the image of a river that reverberates with whispering voices –echoed by the lovers' soft murmurings– thus adding to the intensely magical quality of this bucolic landscape and to the lovers' abandonment to the ritual since they manage to never be distracted from their erotic rubbing and soaping.

But it is, above anything else, both the rhythm and compositional arrangement of the poem that serve to score out and measure more than aptly the smooth continuity of the contacts between the bodies: the modifying adjunct "slowly" is foregrounded and reechoed again in the "quiet and slow" of the next stanza, marking the right pace for the erotic caresses. The vision of the erotic as a continuum is adequately scored in compositional patterns of line-length, line-break and line indentation. Thus, the "length" and "slidingness" of the strokes on the slippery bodies is accentuated by the line break in "long" and the abrupt indentation of the next line in "sliding" which, given its visual proximity to the immediately preceding "long," suggests a smooth continuity of the caresses, a continuum between the bodies. All its compositional parameters (rhythm, line-break, line length) together with the intense erotism of the images and action make of the poem a privileged site of an *ars erotica*, a place where all the constitutive elements of what the Greeks called *aphrodisia*, "the acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure" (Foucault 1992, 40), can be gathered together and reinforced in these lines, accompanied by their own

proper music. Also the composition of the poem serves to adequately convey a vision of the erotic act as a sharing of sexual energy, a communal commitment to desire and pleasure, an attempt to reach a continuum between the bodies by, in Rich's words, "blurring the boundary between body and body" (Rich 1995, 63).

In the last stanzas of "Eros at the Temple Stream" the slow tempo of the poem changes into a staccato rhythm; while she presents "fire imagery as an emblem of energy-discharge" (Gitzen, 128), the pace of the poem is suddenly accelerated, in counterpoint to the slow cadence of the second stanza, with predominance of only one stress per line. An apt translation into rhythm of the sexual climax in humans.

In her later poems on the erotic Levertov shows that she has left behind many impediments barring women's access to language in their sexual discourse by starting to use taboo words–something traditionally prohibited to women, even generally thought "unwomanly"– in an outspoken fashion. This is the logical outcome of her recasting of the erotic in her poetry as a way to express her desire and pleasure. Another reason was her strong determination to make the poem flourish with precisely that which women had been historically forbidden to speak about, leaning heavily now on a straightforward and outspoken use of the verbal taboo in the poem, and rejoicing over her transgression of these barriers. "The Poem Unwritten" and "The Good Dream," two poems from her 1972 volume *Footprints*, are indicative of this change and show the positive effects it had on Levertov's erotic poems.

"The Poem Unwritten" constitutes one of the most significative turns of the screw in Levertov's erotic poetry up to this point; throughout it, the poet adopts an openly confessional tone, commenting on how this erotic poem had been withheld in her mind "for weeks"; yet what had been previously repressed finds its way out with such overwhelming force in the poem that it becomes a

paean to her verbalization of the erotic, its lines celebrating how the word is finally made real in the poem, "the written poem":

> For weeks the poem of your body,
> of my hands upon your body
>   stroking, sweeping, in the rite of
>   worship, going
>   their way of wonder down
>   from neck-pulse to breast-hair to level
>   belly to cock–
> for weeks that poem, that prayer,
> unwritten.
>   The poem unwritten, the act
> left in the mind, undone. The years
> a forest of giant stones, of fossil stumps,
> blocking the altar.

Erotic pleasure appears here more expansive than in any other previous poem, encompassing not only the pleasure induced by the erotic encounter, but a new form of pleasure, the supreme pleasure of verbalizing what had been repressed, what Foucault defined as "the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure" (1981, 71).

The poet continues with her personal redefinition of the erotic; in this specific case, the sacrosanct qualities attributed to Eros in mythology and echoed in her first poems are now transferred from the god to the material body; thus, the rite of god worship present in former poems changes into a rite of body worship where her hands must map out the parts of the beloved's body in a sort of magical tour: the geography of desire, the first stirrings of sexual desire in the body, are by this act explored and discovered anew. The indented lines grouped closely together aptly score the downward movement of her hands unhindered now by no taboo barriers,

"going / their way of wonder down" all the way through from "neck pulse" to the "cock."

The temple of Eros which had remained an idealized, abstract form in her poem of the same title is now replaced by the temple of the material body, the place where the "rite of worship" is accomplished; I am not trying to imply with this, however, that "The Poem Unwritten" constitutes, strictly speaking, a complete secularization of Levertov's erotic discourse; far from it, this poem is as sacramental as some of her previous erotic poems and this can be seen in her choice of such terms as "rite," "worship," "prayer," "altar"... Yet what must be observed and reconsidered is the transference from the sacrosanct attributes formerly assigned to the god of love to the sacrosanct qualities now attributed to the concrete body her hands have rediscovered.

In a similar line of transferences and shifts, the shrine that is ever-recurring in her erotic poetry is not devoted now to Eros, but to the erotic poem itself, to the verbalization and celebration of the erotic in the poem. The final lines, even if densely symbolic, point to those myriad forms of censure against female erotism which under the form of prohibitions and impediments have accrued and fossilized in Western culture. All of them have for centuries barred women from expressing and celebrating the erotic experience in discourse and Levertov's final lines comment on this.

Paradoxically, when one reaches the last line of the poem one finds that the title of the poem is countered by her overt verbalization of her erotic experience in the lines. In doing so, Levertov is finally making of the poem a site where erotism can find its full verbal expression, and this is indeed another good cause for joy and celebration.

My own suggestion is that with "The Poem Unwritten" Levertov joins a select group of contemporary women poets who explore erotism in their work. To draw so intimately together her

erotism and her poetry and to do it with such sheer frankness must be viewed, in the case of a woman poet, as a notable achievement. The relation between erotism and different forms of artistic expression is obviously not something new in the history of art. Poetry, as well as painting and sculpture, has served as a special vehicle for the transmission of erotic art right from the time the first civilizations developed their particular forms of art. In *La llama doble*, his long essay analyzing and interpreting the various forms erotic art has taken throughout history and across different cultures, Octavio Paz explains some of the reasons why poetry has been historically so closely related to erotism. He contends that, just as erotism questions reproduction as the ultimate goal of sexuality, so poetry, with it dispersion of meanings, questions direct communication as a poetic objective. Also, both erotism and poetry are induced by the power of human imagination: whereas poetry, he argues, is language turned into exuberant rhythm and metaphor, erotism is sexuality transfigured. Paz synthesizes the relation between poetry and erotism with another poetic aphorism: "la relación entre erotismo y poesía es tal que puede decirse, sin afectación, que el primero es una poética corporal y que la segunda es una erótica verbal" (10). Although it is true that strong connections between erotism and poetry have always existed, to forget that women have been marginalized from enjoying not only erotism itself but also the fruits of this connection is to forget an important chapter in the history of the relation between erotism and poetry.

"The Good Dream," from the same volume, is another poem in which Levertov gives indications of having surmounted many historical repressions in her reconstruction of the erotic as joy expressed in and through the poem.

> Rejoicing
> because we had met again

we rolled laughing
over and over upon the big bed.

The joy was
not in a narrow sense
erotic– not
narrow in any sense.
It was

that all impediments,
every barrier, of history,
of learn'd anxiety,
wrong place and wrong time,

had gone down,
vanished.
It was the joy

of two rivers
meeting in depths of the sea.

The two lovers rolling and laughing "over and over upon a big bed" become an appropriate symbol of the crumbling down of barriers and the disappearance of constrictions; pleasure and joy find their own unobstructed expression in the poem after having surpassed former anxieties; small wonder, the joy is ever more expansive: "not in a narrow sense / erotic-not narrow in any sense."

Even the very imagery she uses in the last verses, with the two lovers metamorphosed into rivers and relishing their encounter under the sea, reveals to what extent Levertov has grown in her poetics to a richer and more woman-identified notion of the erotic. Both the sea and river have been recurrently used by women poets

as either metaphors for, or proper landscape of, the erotic act since both of them exemplify the merging of separate fluids into the smooth, dissolute –not by chance, as Bataille says, has this word been always associated to erotism– continuum that women tend to associate with the erotic. The woman diver of Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" recognizes full of awe that "the sea is another story / the sea is not a question of power." In "Leda," another sea/river poem, H.D. offers an alternative version to the mythical rape of Leda by transforming what had been brutal rape, spasmodic thrusting by force, and hierarchical relations of power and submission into a smooth and sensual encounter between swan and lily just at the point "Where the slow lifting /of the tide, / floats into the river."

> Where the slow river
> meets the tide,
> a red swan lifts red wings
> and darker beak,
> and underneath the purple down
> of his soft breast
> uncurls his coral feet.
>
> Through the deep purple
> of the dying heat
> of sun and mist,
> the level ray of sun-beam
> has caressed
> the lily with dark breast,
> and flecked with richer gold
> its golden crest.
>
> Where the slow lifting
> of the tide,
> floats into the river

and slowly drifts
among the reeds,
and lifts the yellow flags,
he floats
where tide and river meet.

Ah kingly kiss–
no more regret
nor old deep memories
to mar the bliss;
were the low sedge is thick,
the gold day-lily
outspreads and rests
beneath soft fluttering
of red swan wings
and the warm quivering
of the red swan's breast.

The overtones of erotic desire and bliss that suffuse the verses of the poem are rendered most clearly visible in the spreading and resting of an ecstatic golden day-lily under the "warm quivering" of the swan. The erotic encounter is described throughout as a smooth continuum, a soft intermingling of the sexual partners that is faithfully replicated by the revisionary gentle mounting of the tide into the river. H.D. thus transforms an act of brutal rape into a smooth and soft pan-erotism: the softness of the swan's breast, the dying heat of the sun, the lily gently stroked by the sun beam, the slow meeting of the tide and the river (drifting slowly and gently lifting the yellow flags) and the soft flapping of swan's wings. Like a buoy marking the point of intersection between currents, the swan floats just "where tide and river meet," as if allying himself with this conception of the erotic as a smooth and continuous merging of fluids. Even if, as Helen Sword acknowledges in "Leda

and the Modernists," "as the bird of Apollo, the god of poetry, the swan evokes order, reason, and grace" (310), in this poem the swan is depicted more as the bird of Dionysus:

> Dionysus was identified with liquids –blood, sap, milk, wine. The Dionysian is nature's chthonian fluidity. Apollo, on the other hand, gives form and shape, marking off one being from another. All artifacts are Apollonian. Melting and union are Dionysian; separation and individuation, Apollonian. (Paglia, 30)

Similarly, Levertov tends to the Dionysian in poems such as "Eros at the Temple Stream" or "The Good Dream" where she presents the erotic act as equal melting, a fluid intercourse of the bodies. Levertov's later erotic poems further extend this view of the erotic as a Dionysian ritual of celebration. In a poem tellingly titled "Holiday," from *Candles in Babylon,* Levertov portrays the erotic as a Dionysian festival of food and wide, thus integrating erotic desire with the pleasure of satisfying the flesh.

[. . .]

iii To Eros
Eros, O Eros, hail
thy palate, god who knows
good pasta,
good bread,
good Brie.
The beauty
of freckled squid, flowers of the sea
fresh off the boat, graces
thy altar, Eros, which is in
our eyes. And on our lips
the blood of berries

before we kiss, before we
stumble to bed.
                    Our bed
must be, in thy service, earth–
as the strawberry bed
is earth, a ground
for miracles.
                The flesh
is delicate, we must nourish it:
desire hungers
for wine, for clear plain water,
good strong coffee,
as well as for hard cock and
throbbing clitoris and the
glide and thrust of
sentence and paragraph in and up to the
last sweet sigh of a
chapter's ending.

In ancient Greece, Foucault documents in "Dietetics," part two of his second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, an appropriate dietetics was recommended for a good erotic life, since sexual desire was often related to other appetites of the flesh. Some centuries later, in the Roman era, the sexual pleasures were finally "associated in moral thought and social ritual with the delights of eating and drinking" (1990, 141). This correlation between relishing food and drink and a satisfactory sexual life becomes the thematic object of Levertov's poem. In the poem, sexual appetite is compared to hunger and thirst; the flesh is described as fragile, and must therefore be taken care of through the complete satisfaction of its desires. The only good remedy, the poems seems to suggest, for a healthy flesh.

The difference between this Eros, now a dilettante god who indulges in all sorts of dietetic pleasures, and her ascetic depiction of Eros in former poems shows to what extent Levertov has moved from a criticism of erotism devoid of desire and pleasure to an erotism that is suffused with the sensual appetites, with the pleasure derived from satisfying what the flesh desires. The erotic act is re-imagined now as a learned choreography of the bodies ending in remorseless pleasure –nothing is repressed in the poem, neither the reference to the "hard cock" nor the reference to the "throbbing clitoris"– just as the counterpointed "glide and thrust of / sentence and paragraph" finishes in the orgasmic end of a "chapter's ending." The association of the erotic act with the verbal tells of Levertov's understanding of erotism and language as intimately intertwined; so much so, that the text, through which the erotic is overtly expressed, turns into another form of orgasmic pleasure, or, paraphrasing Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "another site of bliss," as I commented in relation to "The Poem Unwritten."

Levertov extends the pleasures arising from the body –so often condemned as belonging to our animal nature– to the realm of the animal and, picking up on the image of the sow and the pig she used in "Song for Ishtar," she explores sexuality and erotism in *Pig Dreams*, a series of poems devoted to Sylvia, a female pig taken away from her maternal sty to be given in adoption to a human family. Levertov presents in these poems an unexplored version of the erotic by expressing Sylvia's relation with the maternal in terms of intense erotism. "Her Destiny," the very first poem of the series, shows a Sylvia remembering with acute nostalgia her forlorn days of maternal bondage when she, a "piglet among piglets," would suckle form her mother's teats with accompanying 'sweetsquealings' and blissful 'grunts.'

The beginning: piglet among piglets,
the soft mud caking
our mother's teats.
Sweetsqueal, grunt:
her stiff white lashes, the sleepy
glint of her precious
tiny eyes.

•

Even if it concerns the relation between mother pig and piglet, some of the lines of the poem reach erotic overtones. Both the sweetsquealings and the grunts convey Sylvia's pleasure in suckling from her mother's teats, mud-caked as if they were a tasty dessert; the grunts, on the other hand, seem to pick up on the homologous 'grunts' of the poet/pig in "Song for Ishtar." In "Her Destiny" there seems to be little doubt that Sylvia is nostalgically remembering her feeding episodes with her mother not only as nourishing but also as moments of erotic sublimation.

Levertov goes further in her revaluing of the mother-offspring bond as erotic, by presenting it later in the sequence as an alternative form of intimate pleasure for Sylvia, after she has separated from a mating encounter. In "The Bride," Sylvia is "trucked away" to a nearby barn in Vermont to be inseminated by an imperious boar:

They sent me away to be bred.
I was afraid, going down the ramp
from the truck to the strange barn,
I tried to run for the farmyard –strangers
shouted, they drove me inside.

In the barn a beautiful, imperious boar
dwelt in majesty. They brought me to him.

In the hot smell of him, I who was delicate,
Sylvia the pet,
who smelled of
acorns and the windscoured pasture,
I, Sylvia the Dreamer,
was brought low,
was brought
into the depths
of desire.
I steeped my soul
in the sweet dirt,
the stench of
My Lord Boar

•

Using animal life in an allegorical fashion, Levertov denounces in this poem the sexual hypocrisy of human civilization, which forces Sylvia to copulate with the single aim of breeding while punishing her for indulging in desire and pleasure, natural instincts of her animal condition, and the sexual stereotypes present in human culture; for example, Sylvia must show herself "delicate" and submissive before her male coupling partner, "My Lord Board," who appears both majestic and domineering. Sexual stereotypes are also present in the different smells: whereas the boar has a smell that marks him as powerful and sexually desiring, "the hot smell of him," Sylvia's smell is of a suave pastoral fragrance, in consonance with her delicate nature. Yet despite the pervasive presence of these sexual stereotypes, Sylvia is learning to accept the abyss of her own desire, unknown to her until now, and to unite attributes of the flesh and the soul in her erotic experience. But after having being ridden "down" and "into" the very "depths of desire," the "sensuous dark" of the erotic encounters, "the week of passion and feasting," brings a forced separation. As was the

case when she was taken "out" and "away" from the maternal sty, Sylvia is again forced by the human strangers and, against her will, dragged "out" and "away" to the truck.

Terrible, after the sensuous dark,
the week of passion and feasting,
–terrible my return.
I screamed when they dragged me
outdoors to the truck. Harsh light
jumped at my eyes. My body's weight
sagged on my slender legs.

In the house of My Lord Boar
I had eaten rich swill.

Back home, I headed for my
private house, the house of Sylvia–
and my swill-swollen body
would not enter,
could not fit.

In shame I lay
many nights
on the ground outside of my Humans' window
and passed my days silent and humble
in the bare pasture, until I was lean again,
until I could enter
my maiden chamber once more.

But now I carried in me
the fruit of my mating.

Sylvia renders her sexual intercourse with the boar in terms of superlative pleasure, and she even extends this pleasure to her overindulgence in other pleasures such as eating "rich swill." Sylvia's week of erotic pleasure has been so intense and life-changing that she cannot but consider "terrible" her return with humans. As a sort of allegorical reference to how women's erotism has been always curtailed and repressed in our culture, Sylvia is forced to contrition for her erotic pleasure. Having lost her virginal condition, she is not fit for her "maiden chamber" and must stay outside, acting as she is expected to act: "silent and humble." "Erotic pleasure, in this narrative," Kinnahan rightly apposes, "allows only shame and repentance" (176). Yet as in sharp contrast to this abasement, in the last two verses Sylvia secretly and intimately comforts herself with her knowledge of her own motherhood: "But now I carried in me / the fruit of my mating.! In "Her Task," the next poem of the series, Sylvia's maternal role allows her to experience the pleasure of being a mother without shame or regret, something utterly impossible on those occasions in which she was at the mercy of humans, when her erotic pleasure was so brusquely stopped and she was forced to submit to a harsh discipline of fasting and contrition.

> My piglets cling to me,
> perfect, quickbreathing, plump–
> kernels of pearly sweetcorn,
> milky with my milk.
>
> [. . .]

As an animal disclaimer of Freudian and Lacanian myths, which interpret woman's mature sexuality, and her access to the Symbolic, as being based on the continuous repression of the erotic bond between mother and daughter, Sylvia reenacts with her piglets the

erotic bond she preserved with her mother and which she remembered with such nostalgia. Sylvia's experience in the act of suckling is rendered in terms of joy and pleasure. Levertov allegorically expands the wide range of possibilities women have to enjoy the sensual pleasures of their bodies, suckling not exempted. She seems to be echoing Adrienne Rich's argument: "the act of suckling a child, like a sexual act, may be tense, physically painful, charged with cultural feelings of inadequacy and guilt; or, like a sexual act, it can be a physically delicious, elementally soothing experience, filled with a tender sensuality" (1985, 36).

In general terms, Levertov's erotic poetics both connects with and expands many of the viewpoints present in women's poems on the erotic; in fact, most of the perspectives Levertov adopts in her erotic poetry reflect those used by some of her forerunners, showing that Levertov drew heavily upon a chronologically short, yet very powerful, tradition of female erotic poetics. Clear examples are Levertov's recurrent depiction of the erotic act as a smooth continuum between the bodies, used by, among others, H.D. and which became a characteristic contribution of women to the revision and reconstruction of erotism in literature. The use of what had been considered taboo words in relation to the erotic, the transgression of verbal barriers, and the explicit quality of her images, so notorious in Levertov's later poetry had been, for instance, a recurrent feature in Mina Loy's "Songs to Joannes" at the beginning of the twentieth century; though we must admit that Levertov never goes as far as Loy in the latter's corrosive mockery of Victorian manners in love-making, or in her satiric demythicization of Eros as "Pig Cupid his rosy snout / Rooting erotic garbage." The infinite pleasure embedded in the recognition of female sexuality is something that Anne Sexton joyfully and explicitly used in landmark poems such as "In Celebration of My Uterus," and the attempt to repair the split between body and mind was also present in contemporary women's poetry. In her "Twenty-one Love Poems" Rich revises the splitting

of the female body from the female mind because, as she says, "we still have to reckon with Swift / loathing the woman's flesh while praising her mind" (1978).

Though Levertov, as I have commented, works with materials that had already been used by other women poets writing on the erotic, what remains a salient and original feature of Levertov's erotic poetics is the revision and transference to the human body of the sacrosanct and mysterious qualities which the god Eros was bestowed with in mythology. Levertov's erotic poetry excels precisely when she is confident enough to reject the mystic notion of an idealized body and accept the material body as the only source of erotic pleasure; or when she brings desire down from a world of idealized forms and converts it into a desire of this reality, a desire of here and now, a desire to know more about the other through the sexual contact of bodies, and a desire to satisfy the hunger of the flesh; or when she learns how to do away with former anxieties and repressions, to push aside the walls barring the way to the verbalization of the erotic, thus opening the space of the poem to the full expression of desire, joy, and pleasure (both physical pleasure and "the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure").

This relevant aspect of Levertov's erotic poetry has sometimes been misunderstood by critics writing on Levertov's erotic discourse. In an essay titled " 'In the Black of Desire': Eros in the Poetry of Denise Levertov," James Gallant perceives a "gradual darkening of the erotic vision" in Levertov's erotic poems "from the late 1960s onward" (56). Among the poems he cites as descriptive of this blurring of Levertov's erotic vision are "What She Could not Tell Him" and "The Poem Unwritten," two poems I discussed above. About "The Poem Unwritten" Gallant argues that "although this poem is, in fact, written, the feelings remain unwritten, left in the mind. The years create a debris field, 'a forest of giant stones, of fossil stumps / blocking the altar' to Eros" (57). In sharp contrast to Gallant's contentions, I would argue that what

Levertov does in the poem is precisely to revive "the act," the sexual encounter, in "the act" of writing about it. So I don't see how the feelings can be said to "remain unwritten." I have chosen this example of a misreading of Levertov's later erotic poems because what I hope to have made clear throughout this chapter is that Levertov's erotic poetics, far from progressively "darkening" in her erotic vision, as Gallant sustains, conveys, each time more transparently, a personal vision of the erotic act which is the natural consequence of her strong determination to reach a crossover between the erotic and the verbal. It is only then that her poems turn into that symbolic altar where the communion between the verbal and the erotic is celebrated at last.

The warm bodies
    shine together
in the darkness,
    the hand moves
to the center
    of the flesh,
the skin trembles
    in happiness
and the soul comes
    joyful to the eye–

yes, yes,
    that's what
I wanted,
    I always wanted,
I always wanted,
    to return
to the body
    where I was born
Allen Ginsberg, "Song."

In his article "Why is Diotima a Woman? Platonic Eros and the Figuration of Gender," which thoroughly studies Diotima's role in Plato's *Symposium*, David M. Halperin categorically concludes:

CHAPTER VI

"She and the Muse": Of Muses, Seeing, and the Art of Writing

I look and look.
Looking's a way of being: one becomes,
sometimes, a pair of eyes walking.
Walking wherever looking takes one.

The eyes
dig and burrow into the world.
They touch
fanfare, howl, madrigal, clamor.
World and the past of it,
not only
visible present, solid and shadow
that looks at one looking.

And language? Rhythms
of echo and interruption?
That's
a way of breathing,

breathing to sustain
looking,
walking and looking,
through the world,
in it.

Levertov, "Looking, Walking, Being."

In the ensuing lines I propose to explore the themes of inspiration, vision and the art of writing in Levertov's poetry. All these themes, as I will try to show, are inextricably intertwined with how she developed her perception of herself as a woman writer and how she positioned herself with respect to the literary tradition.

In Levertov's case, as in the case of many other women poets too, the process of redefining her inspirational influences and inventing forms of self-representation associated with writing is never straightforward. Levertov was from a very early age educated in the poetic tradition of British Romanticism; the shelves of her parents' library were brimming with books by Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Yeats, among many other male poets, from which her mother would often read to a very young Levertov, just a schoolgirl at the time. These inspirational sources determined her views of self and world for a long time but also added more value to her later determination to search for new inspirational alliances and project images of herself as a self-realized woman writer.

It is also relevant to note in this same context that at the outset of her poetic career Levertov, a woman poet gravitating around literary groups composed of men, was more than often assigned the role of Muse. Creeley for instance recalls in his posthumous appraisal, "Remembering Denise," how the very first time Kennneth Rexroth met Levertov he proclaimed her to be the incarnation of Beatrice, Dante's Muse (81). It wouldn't be long before Levertov fully realized to what extent these associations did affect her identity as a woman poet; among other things, it affected both the possibility of being taken seriously as a woman poet, and the integral respect she expected from male companions towards her creative gifts, something difficult to achieve indeed had she accepted the role of Muse in her literary career since, irrespective of the many forms the Muse assumes in patriarchal myths, in all of them she stands basically as a source of inspiration for the poet yet is never associated with any personal writing herself.

Deeply conscious[1] then of how disabling these tags were for her poetic career just at a time she very intensely felt the need to assert her own poetic voice, Levertov worked hard in her poetry to reconstruct her relation with the Muse as both intimate and creative. Yet redefining alternative sources of inspiration is never a minor issue for a woman poet; the project ahead is more than complex; it means negotiating a passage between the dangers of perpetuating the same myths on inspiration and creativity that literary tradition is studded with.

1 Another curious anecdote related to Levertov being associated with the Muse has to do with a letter poem Duncan enclosed in an envelope and addressed to Levertov around 1952; the ambiguous title of the poem in question, "Letters for Denise Levertov: an A Muse meant," and its hermetic content led Levertov, who had just started her personal correspondence with Duncan, to misread the poem as a personal attack of her work, "apparently accusing it of brewing poems, like 'stinking coffee' in a 'staind pot'" (1992, 200):

[. . .]

a flavor stinking coffee
(how to brew another cup
in that Marianne Moore–
E.P.–Williams–H.D.–Stein–
Zukofsky–Stevens–Perse–
surrealist–dada–staind
pot)   by yrs R.D.   (1993)

Though Duncan was simply trying to share with Levertov his vision of creativity as a poetic meadow where borrowings and imitations were acts of poetic communion with other poets belonging to the same literary tradition, Levertov, oversensitive with Muse associations, interpreted the double-entendre of the title as one more personal association with the Muse accompanied in this case by derisive misjudgment of her work.

In *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse*, DeShazer advocates a complete revision of the myths related to inspiration if women poets want to overcome barriers and have access to an independent creativity: "if woman is to transcend her role as muse and assume that of poet, of powerful yet independent creator, she must revise those myths, substituting for them stories and metaphors true to her female experience." (44). Some of Levertov's poems on the Muse and the creative process work precisely in this way, thoroughly revising many of the literary myths on the Muse and rewriting them in consonance with the inspirational motifs in her life.

The stakes are high in this process of redefinition and, as I hope to make clear, her revision and reinvention of some of those inspirational motifs within the inspirational canon allowed her to find the Muse within her and to feel a strong confidence in herself as a woman writer.

THE WELL

Even if "The Well," from *The Jacob's Ladder*, is, chronologically speaking, not the first poem on inspiration and the Muse, it is the first one in which Levertov explicitly names the Muse, and a poem where she manages to fuse many of the elements that in her life have always been intimately linked to inspiration and the creative process. Because it contains such revealing information about underlying sources of inspiration recurring in several poems, "The Well" is a key poem to start to analyze Levertov's inspirational poetics on a more comprehensive basis. In "The Well," Levertov presents a Muse wading in the deep of a lake at what she calls "the baroque park" of her vision. The Muse carries a pitcher under her arm and fills it completely by dipping it in the water which arises from "deep enough" beneath the lake; linked to the Muse, this simple act evokes other mythic motifs related to inspiration, such as a veiled allusion to the spring of Hippocrene, which Levertov herself

later referred to in her essay "Horses with Wings" as "the fountain of poetic inspiration sacred to the Muses" (1992, 112).

> The Muse
>   in her dark habit,
> trim-waisted,
>   wades into deep water.
>
> The spring where she
>   will fill her pitcher to the brim
> wells out
>   below the lake's surface, among
> papyrus, where a stream
>   enters the lake and is crossed
> by the bridge on which I stand.
>
> She stoops
>   to gently dip and deep enough.
> Her face resembles
>   the face of the young actress who played
> Miss Annie Sullivan, she who
>   spelled the word 'water' into the palm
> of Helen Keller, opening
>   the doors of the world.
>
> [. . .]

Levertov's association of the Muse with Annie Sullivan and the "miracle" she performs in the play *The Miracle Worker*, spelling "water" on the palm of her blind student, and thus "opening / the doors of the world" for her, also serves to announce the magic powers of this wading Muse.

As the poet approaches the fountain in this "baroque park," the latter transforms itself, in her dream-imagined vision, into Valentines Park, a park located near London, in the Ilford countryside, and a favorite visiting place for her and her dead sister Olga in the remote days of their childhood.

[. . .]

In the baroque park,
    transformed as I neared the water
    to Valentines, a place of origin,
I stand on a bridge of one span
and see this calm act, this gathering up
     of life, of spring water

[. . .]

Valentines Park is the site of the real well, which is transformed into a recurrent inspirational motif in Levertov's poetry. As MacGowan argues in "Valentines Park: 'A Place of Origins,'" the well becomes, in poem after poem, "a rich metaphor embodying multiple levels of time, exploration, self-discovery, and understanding" (5). The poet witnesses the Muse's "calm" filling of her pitcher and recognizes this act as life-giving, a "gathering up / of life." The stream passing below the bridge, on which she stands, to flow into the lake which connects with the river Roding prompts in her a mythical allusion to the god Alpheus:

[. . .]

and the Muse gliding then
    in her barge without sails, without
oars or motor, across

the dark lake, and I know
no interpretation of these mysteries
although I know she is the Muse
and that the humble
tributary of Roding is
one with Alpheus, the god who as a river
flowed through the salt sea to his love's well

so that my heart leaps
in wonder.
Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word 'water'
spelled in my left palm.

The mythical story of Alpheus, the god who metamorphosed into a river in his pursuit of his beloved Arethusa, who had been turned into a spring by the goddess Arthemis, marks this well, and by extension the water the Muse takes out from it, as blessed with love. The final stanza, though strangely ignored in criticisms of the poem, contains, I think, the first clues to understand the poet's involvement in the mystery. Sullivan's spelling of "water" on the palm of her blind student is reproduced by the Muse on the poet, who feels now how "the word 'water'" is spelled on *her* hand.

What makes this poem such an interesting case in Levertov's poetry on inspiration is how her mythological references to the Muse are intermingled with the most intimately personal. What seems, at first sight, an apparently fanciful episode (Sullivan's spelling of the word "water") has, however, a strong connection with the personal. In Levertov's youth, her mother acted as her own personal Muse initiating her in the mysteries of Nature and instilling in her a fascination for the attentive seeing and naming of natural objects. In "The 90th Year," a poem from *Life in the Forest*, Levertov overtly honors the influence her mother had on her way of looking and her naming of things in nature:

[. . .]

(It was she
who taught me to look;
to name the flowers when I was still close to the ground,
my face level with theirs;
or to watch the sublime metamorphoses
unfold and unfold
over the walled back gardens of our street . . .

[. . .]

Just as she reclaimed the maternal as a source of erotic pleasure, here she also revalues the mother as an active and determinant source of creativity. In "Beatrice Levertoff," a memoir essay written in homage to her mother only a few months after her death, Levertov explicitly states the extent of the maternal influence: "I could not ever have been a poet without that vision she imparted" (1981b, 243). Levertov owes much of her gift for recognizing the mysterious in Nature, certainly a characteristic trait of her poetry, to what she learned from her mother in her childhood excursions with her to the countryside; the mother's keen eye for recognizing the extraordinary in common natural objects, and the daughter's witnessing of her fresh Welsh language to name them, is translated into the poem as a form of miracle in the representation of nature, the writing on the hand of the blind student echoing her own awe at the connection between language and nature, the mysterious connection derived from the magical powers of the Muse which she perceives in the spring waters.[2]

2 In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves presents the legend surrounding the Hippocrene spring on Helicon and recounts how poets used to cherish its waters: "the legend was that it had been struck by the hoof of the horse Pegasus, whose name means 'of the springs of water.' Poets were said to drink from Hippocrene for inspiration" (383).

The image of the well as a fountain of inspiration and imaginative power recurs in several later volumes. Another poem of the same title, "The Well," from *Breathing the Water*, exemplifies Levertov's conception of the imaginative power as a mystery, in her own words, "a form of grace, unmerited, unattainable, amazing, and freely given" (1992, 119).

> At sixteen I believed the moonlight
> could change me if it would.
>   I moved my head
> on the pillow, even moved by bed
> as the moon slowly
> crossed the open lattice.
>
> I wanted beauty, a dangerous
> gleam of steel, my body thinner,
> my pale face paler.
>   I moonbathed
> diligently, as others sunbathe.
> But the moon's unsmiling stare
> kept me awake. Mornings,
> I was flushed and cross.
>
> It was on dark nights of deep sleep
> that I dreamed the most, sunk in the well,
> and woke rested, and if not beautiful,
> filled with some other power.

The poet's repeated efforts, as a young girl, to drench her full body in moonlight as the moon entered her room prove to no avail. However "diligently" done, the moon beams don't have the effect required (a special kind of moon-based beauty), only sleeplessness. However, the abrupt change introduced in the last stanza clearly

counterpoints the previous lines. Instead of sleeplessness, we have a profound sleep, instead of alert consciousness, a whole night's dream, and instead of being "flushed and cross" in the mornings, a waking "rested" and "filled with some other power." The well is clearly presented as a supreme symbol of inspiration, instilling in those who have "sunk" in it a mysterious –"some other"– power. But this mysterious power is never achieved under one's will: it comes from a volition that is external to the poet ("could change me if it would") and she only achieves it when she is immersed in a profound dream, i.e., when she is unconscious. As in the case of the previous poem of the same title, where the Muse had to enter into "deep water" and dip from "deep enough" beneath the lake, in this case a deep submersion in this mystic force is the only way for the mysterious to happen. This "acknowledgment" and "celebration" of the mysterious is present in many of her poems and in several of her essays on the art of writing. In "A Poet's View," Levertov stated that

> [it] probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry from its very beginnings. Because it is a matter of which I am conscious, it is possible, however imprecisely, to call it an intellectual position; but it is one which emphasizes the incapacity of reason alone (much though I delight in elegant logic) to comprehend experience, and considers Imagination the chief of human faculties (1992, 246).

This notion of the imagination as a strange form of power acting on her, independent of her will, also forms part of Levertov's mystic conception of poetry as a mysterious force and of poets as "the servers of that Mystery" (1992, 202), a vision of poetry which she shared with Robert Duncan and which consolidated itself as one of the strongest knots uniting them.

Another poem from the same volume and also related to the well motif is "The Stricken Children." The poet returns to the

beloved well of her childhood and confesses the key role it has played in her life as a magic purveyor of new wanderings.

[. . .]

> This was the place from which
> year after year in childhood I demanded my departure,
> my journeying forth into the world of magical
> cities, mountains, otherness –the place which gave
> what I asked, and more; to which
> still wandering, I returned this year, as if
> to gaze once more at the face
> of an ancient grandmother.

[. . .]

The well is not only invoked as a site of pilgrimage, constantly visited during her childhood and which she revisits even now, but as a sort of wishing well granting her all her childhood desires of personal wanderings to other magical places and transformation of the self: "otherness." Strikingly enough, the poet now personifies the well, identifying it with an old woman, "the face / of an ancient grandmother" who has been spoiled "with debris of a culture's sickness."

[. . .]

> And I found the well
> filled to the shallow brim
> with debris of a culture's sickness–
> with bottles, tins, paper, plastic–
> the soiled bandages
> of its aching unconsciousness.

[. . .]

I move away, walking fast, the impetus
of so many journeys pushes me on,
but where are the stricken children of this time, this place,
to travel to, in Time if not in Place,
the grandmother wellspring choked, and themselves not aware
of all they are doing-without?

The image of the well as a catalyst of pilgrimage connects with "Stepping Westward," in which this phrase invited the poet to accept life as a constant journey and to be open to change in personal life. Just as in "Stepping Westward" the poet expressed her conviction to continue with her pilgrim life despite the many "burdens," in this poem she also announces her determination to continue her many wanderings despite the damages produced by "a culture's sickness." Her grief is not so much for herself but for future generations, for without the well, without that grandmother who can initiate them into new wanderings, the "stricken children" will never feel the call of the magical, of the mysterious.

In "Sands of the Well," the title poem of the last volume published in Levertov's lifetime, the poet's perception of the sand grains circling down to the bottom of the well, clouding its water, leads her to question the nature of transparency, of the invisible, one of the mysteries of perception.

The golden particles
descend, descend,
traverse the water's
depth and come to rest
on the level bed
of the well until,

the full descent
accomplished, water's
absolute transparence
is complete, unclouded
by constellations
of bright sand.
Is this
the place where you
are brought in meditation?
Transparency
seen for itself–
as if its quality
were not, after all,
to enable
perception *not* of itself?
With a wand
of willow I again
trouble the envisioned pool,
the cloudy nebulae
form and disperse,
the separate
grains again
slowly, slowly
perform their descent,
and again
stillness ensues,
and the mystery
of that sheer
clarity, is it water indeed,
or air, or light?

"Sands of the Well" exemplifies the poet's gifts for acute vision, something which, as we saw in "The Well," she had learned from

her mother; her special vision allows her to see beyond the ordinary and contemplate the mysterious embodied in something so apparently banal as the transparent quality of the water. Since she had been instructed from a very early age on knowing how to look, her attentive eyes are apt to recognize even that which cannot be seen for itself, thus opening the doors of her mind to the mystery taking place behind common reality.

Having observed with keen eye and detected, even checked once more, the process that makes the mysterious happen, she proceeds to name that mystery in the process of writing. In this case, however, nature is not magically spelled on her hand by the influence of the Muse but it is rather the poet herself who must spell the words in her mind and in the poem: "is it water indeed, / or air, or light?"

This link between perception and naming constitutes a fundamental aspect in Levertov's personal understanding of the art of writing. In her essay "Some Notes on Organic Form," Levertov stated that "faithful attention to the experience from the first moment to crystallization" (1973, 9) is the basis of poetic composition. As she argues further, this absolute fidelity to the experience is what allows the first words to spring up naturally to the poem, "those first or those forerunning words to come to the surface" (1973, 9). In this way, Levertov constructs a theory of writing around perception and naming, and in which perception acts as a form of natural, self-induced inspiration giving origin to the first words of the poem. "Sands of the Well" shows that if perception is acute, beyond the ordinary, and the words are rendered in absolute faithfulness to that mysterious vision, the poem can also be made a site of the mystery, "that sheer / clarity."

Whether invoked as a source of magical inspiration related to seeing and naming, or as a mysterious power or, finally, as a catalyst of journey and self-transformation, the well always appears as a key

element informing Levertov's recognition of the mysterious and the translation of that vision into writing.

THE GODDESS AS MUSE

One of the ways in which Levertov's poems on the creative process start to detach themselves from the inspirational canons is by rescuing and realigning herself with pre-patriarchal goddesses as strong Muses who empower the poet's creative capacity, thus moving toward a new aesthetics of creativity reconstructed upon new relations between poet and Muse and recreating a proper atmosphere for the spiritual and creative transactions between them. In doing so, Levertov's inspirational poetics begins to map out a distinctive psycho-geography of her creative powers as a woman, uncontaminated by strict notions of poetic authority as exclusively male.

This meta-aesthetics of inspiration is grounded on a thorough work of revision which is both effective and compelling. An illustrative example of this is "Song for Ishtar," in which, as Levertov commented, "Ishtar is here equated with the Muse –not improperly, I think, for Ishtar is a Moon Goddess and symbolic of change, transformation, regeneration; [. . .] and surely the moon can be regarded as an aspect of such a power" (1973, 78).

As if the poem were constructed on the basis of a palimpsest, layer after layer of revisionist intentions can be peeled off as the multiple meanings of the poem are reinterpreted in criticism. I have already commented on some but more revisionist aims can be perceived elsewhere in the poem: in the choice of Ishtar, a goddess fusing together a complex array of androgynous attributes, in the characterization of Muse as sow and poet as pig, which clearly subverts the genteel aesthetics of poet and gentle Muse, and in her original treatment of the relations between Muse and poet.

The moon is a sow
and grunts in my throat
Her great shining shines through me
so the mud of my hollow gleams
and breaks in silver bubbles

She is a sow
and I a pig and a poet

When she opens her white
lips to devour me I bite back
and laughter rocks the moon

In the black of desire
we rock and grunt, grunt and
shine

The selection of Ishtar as Muse is highly revealing of what she had in mind when the poem was being composed; in the goddess Ishtar crystallize the attributes of two earlier deities, Inanna, the Sumerian earth goddess and Mother goddess, and Ishtar, a "Semitic goddess of battle and the morning star" (Lévy, 603). Ishtar is finally reconfigured, after ages of cultural intermingling between tribes, as a syncretic goddess reuniting in her character many attributes of former pre-patriarchal goddesses. An example of her multifaceted identity is that whereas in Assyria she was represented bearing weapons and was worshipped as the goddess of battle, in Carthage she was celebrated with orgiastic rites as moon goddess. Sometimes a virginal goddess, other times sexually promiscuous, in occasions represented as a bearded warrior, in other cases worshipped as moon goddess, emblem of the feminine, Ishtar is one of the goddesses that best exemplifies the merging of opposite sexualities, something that, as I will argue below, suited

Levertov's purposes in this poem, among them the relativization of strict gender sites in her poem and her subversion of the role the Muse was given in the inspirational canon.

Many of the literary constructs which deal with the relation between Muse and poet are completely overturned in the poem; one of them is the romantic idealization of the creative transactions from Muse to poet as a moment of pure spirituality in which a divine figure hovers around the poet and sings through him. As DeShazer documents, this notion of a "divine inspirer" can be traced back to the Greek hymns whose first lines began in invocation to them: "'Sing, O Muse'; 'Sing me, O Muse'; 'Sing, Goddess'; 'Sing, begin, tell me the story'" (DeShazer 1986a, 7). In this case, however, the Muse is not the genteel nymph of classical literature but a sow, and instead of singing, because of her animal condition, what she does is grunt in the poet pig's throat. In this way, Levertov subverts traditional representations of the Muse and literary conventions related to inspiration; as she herself confessed in a personal interview: "I don't really subscribe to the 'muse' idea. I've used the word more or less playfully in the past. But I've never entertained the sense that I had a more or less embodied figure dictating to me or whispering in my ear" (1998a, 184). In sharp contrast to that traditional image of the Muse, what we have here is a purely physical intercourse between Muse and poet, an unromanticized rolling and grunting. The poet assumes the unmaidenly identity of a pig, an animal sacred to the goddess, while the Muse is invoked under the ungenteel form of a sow. Also in outright defiance of the inspirational canon, the creative transactions between Muse and poet are presented here as non-hierarchical: there is neither an absolute dependence upon the Muse nor superiority over her, but an interdependence between poet and Muse. The Muse first tries to "devour" the poet, to make her disappear, but the poet counterattacks biting her. After the initial battle, they are reconciled in a relation of interdependence in which both pig

and sow appear desiring, overtly grunting and laughing in celebration of their inspirational communion.

Another relevant aspect of "Song for Ishtar," one that renders it a representative poem for other women poets grappling to reinvent their inspirational sources, is that its shows ways to reconnect with the Muse without falling into the traps set by inspirational clichés. One of these ready-made traps is the "norm" that receptivity to creative infusion must be always a feminine position, a direct translation to the realm of literature of all the myths projecting images of the female body as a passive receptacle.

That Levertov might have been able to successfully rework in this poem many of the fixed notions of poetic authority implicit in Williams' "The Wanderer" –a poem Levertov knew very pretty well and that could have served as one of her sources of inspiration at the time she was composing this poem (see her essay "Williams and the Duende" (1992, 43))– is tellingly significative of how she managed to circumvent inspirational clichés in her poetry on the Muse.

A comparative analysis of both poems shows for instance that the grand narratives of initiation and creative infusion are treated in a totally different way in both poems. In presenting the relation with the Muse as interdependent and androgynous, rather than gender-polarized, "Song for Ishtar" sounds a different note on the conflicts of gender appearing in creative transactions between poet and Muse.

In Williams' "The Wanderer," a crone, a "high wanderer of by-ways / Walking imperious in beggary!" decides to take the poet by the hand and initiate him into new wanderings, but soon the central conflict between gendered notions of creative transactions appears, stemming from the literary constructs which establish creative authority as a male site and inspiration as a female site, the former being a receptacle that must stay open to inspirational impregnation. At the end of the poem, in the "last day" of her encounter with him, the old, tattered hag seizes her neophyte and

takes him for a ritual baptism to the banks of the river where she voices her decree out loud: "Enter, youth, into this bulk! / Enter, river, into this young man!". "As the poet enters the river," argues Kinnahan, "he himself is entered, and his receptivity evoked as feminine" (34):

[. . .]

Then the river began to enter my heart
Eddying back cool and limpid
Clear to the beginning of days!
But with the rebound it leaped again forward–
Muddy then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its filthiness,
The vile breath of its degradation,
And sank down knowing this was me now.

Under the crone's command, the river enters by force into the body of a poet who obtains self-revelation just at the moment when he strikes against its bottom and becomes one with the river: "And I knew all –it became me." Yet awakening and self-revelation come only after the simulation of a rape is finally consummated. In what is somewhat a replication of mythical constructs, biological receptivity to creative infusions is once again identified as a feminine norm. "As dangerously," Kinnahan takes it further, the poem "plays into romances of rape fantasy, those myths claiming that all women really want to be raped, an experience that can transform them into 'real' women. The poem's allusion to these ideas of rape reveal the tenacity of sexual stereotypes in Williams' thinking " (34). Though Williams has adopted a feminine position to be wholly impregnated by the inspiration coming from his Muse, thus replicating conventional stereotypes related to inspiration, it is

also true that such acts of sex change in order to receive the inflow of inspiration are uncommon in traditional relations between male poet and female Muse insofar as male poets do not accept losing the "privileges" of their gender, among them, an undisputed authorial creativity.

In "Song for Ishtar," Levertov applies a substantial variation to these "sexual stereotypes" appearing in "The Wanderer" by dislodging strict notions of authority related to one gender and by reinventing more balanced forms of creative transactions between poet and Muse. Contrarily to the case in Williams' "The Wanderer," in Levertov's poem there is no entering by force, nor power relations, no sacrificing of the feminine position. Thus whereas, as Kinnahan well argues, "The Wanderer" "imagines an empowerment that calls for a diminishment of masculine identity," "Song for Ishtar" conveys "not loss but valuable gain for the woman as poet" (136).

It is precisely by a dislodging of strict gender sites in the interactions between poet and Muse that Levertov avoids replicating what Kinnahan called "gendered notions of poetic authority" (20). More concretely, Levertov rather subtly introduces a notion of receptivity as neither exclusively feminine nor exclusively masculine, but rather as something androgynous; thus even though the poet is characterized as a pig and the Muse as a sow, contrarily to what we might expect, it is the pig that has his "hollow" fertilized by the moon beams issuing from the moon goddess. In shining through the poet's hollow, Ishtar, who bore the titles of "Opener of the Womb," and "Silver-Shining," bestows the poet with creative powers –from her first poems Levertov has constantly associated the moonshine with the imaginative power– as the mud caking it is finally transformed into silver bubbles.

In sum, both the blurring of gender identities and the smooth creative transactions between poet and Muse allow Levertov to undercut hierarchical relations of power between poet and Muse, and to show that there are antidotes against any "anxiety of

authorship"[3] that might affect those women trying to create a personal writing; to this effect, the androgynous identities of the poetic personae in "Song for Ishtar," the mutual "grunt and shine," exempt the woman poet from any anxiety they might feel if they do not revise traditional notions of creative authority.

The Old Woman

Whereas in Williams' "The Wanderer," the crone assumed the role of an empowering agent initiating the poet into new visions and new writings, showing him how to be "a mirror to this modernity," as the young poet desired, some of Levertov's poems on the art of writing present old women not as inspirational forces external to the poet but rather as expert voices coming from within and expressing personal views on the art of writing.

In "The Soothsayer," from *Candles in Babylon*, Levertov seems to present an old woman as a prophetic voice of writing forewarning her literary daughters of the immensity of the task ahead of them.

> My daughters, the old woman says, the weaver
> of fictions, tapestries
> from which she pulls
> only a single thread each day, pursuing
> the theme at night–
> my daughters? Delicate bloom
> of polished stone. Their hair
> ripples and shines like water, and mine
> is dry and crisp as moss in fall.

3 A term coined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, punning on the Bloomian "anxiety of influence."

Trunk, limbs, bark; roots under all of it:
the tree I am, she says, blossoms year after year,
random, euphoric;

[. . .]

This old woman works at the loom of fiction, pulling "a single thread" every day, and returning to spin it industriously during the night, a veiled allusion to the creative process, which Levertov conceived, relatively late in her life, as an obsessive returning to the same theme in order to "get it right."

The heavily indented lines in the first stanza, however, set this woman apart from her inexperienced literary daughters, which are shining yet artificially fragile: "Delicate bloom / of polished stone." In contrast with her daughters, the old woman continues to blossom joyously "year after year." This old woman continues, as robust tree complete in herself, firmly rooted to her soil after her many years of serious dedication to creativity. The final stanza sounds as a forewarning to her literary daughters that the task ahead is immense, that it requires both devotion and sacrifice to produce the fruit and stand the weight.

[. . .]

My daughters
have yet to bear
their fruit,
they have not imagined
the weight of it.

The soothsayer's legacy to her literary daughters is not an initiation into new, unsuspected dimensions of vision, or the inspiration that leads directly into writing, but rather her personal honesty, telling

the truth about her experience as "a weaver / of fictions," and hiding nothing from them. As a voice of experience on the matter of writing, self-assured of her mastery, she can prophesize the difficulties fledgling female writers will have to face in their career. But what might seem mere prophecy is also an implicit declaration of her personal achievements because what can be gleaned from her words is that this old woman has surmounted those very same difficulties she announces. She is so sure about the inevitability of that "weight" because she herself has had to stand it in order to produce the fruit of writing. In this sense, this woman serves to aptly represent how Levertov viewed herself now as a woman writer, reexamining the difficulties she has had to overcome in order to consolidate her position in writing and finally occupy her own space in the literary scene.

As a sort of disclaimer of those literary myths which present prophetic old Sibyls as decrepit in their old age and without authority, and perhaps as a hint too, on the part of the poet, that she is still serenely active in her literary production, this soothsayer is shown as invigorated by her life's dedication to the poetic language, the metaphorical sap that keeps her strong, rooted to her soil, and blossoming, that is, producing new works. Asked whether she considered imagination as creative or purely cognitive, based on the recognition of the mysterious, Levertov expressed her idea of the imagination as creative insofar as it is not only based on the perception of the mysteries in nature but it also "fashions from them new works" through poetic language, the "words, syntax, sounds, rhythms" (1998a, 185), which the poet uses as his medium to create. In a similar fashion, I would suggest, if this tree, being old as she is, can blossom so euphorically it is because she is rooted in her natural medium, having spread her "roots under all of it."

In "Dream Instruction," a poem from *Evening Train*, Levertov presents an old woman who also dwells in the "language-root

place" and with whom the poet maintains an intimate conversation on life and writing.

> In the language-root place (a wooden
> hall, homestead; warm, Homeric, Beowulfian shelter)
> candles are glowing, shadows in rhythm
> rise and fall. Into this haven have swept,
> blown by gusting winds, figures whose drama
> makes a stage, for a while, of place and time,
> enthralling attention, prompting action,
> so that my mind meshes itself in their story
> until with promises, tears, laughter, they sweep
> out once more into night. Ruefully,
> 'Life!' I stammer, as the wake of their passage
> ebbs and vanishes, 'It rushes and rushes toward me
> like Niagara –I don't have time
> to write it, to write it down, to hold it, it never
> pauses!'   And she whom I address,
> the old mother sitting in bed, cheerful, spritely,
> cushions behind her, saucer in one hand,
> porcelain cup in the other, sipping her fragrant tea,
> smiles in wisdom and tells me
> that need will pass; she herself
> has come to live in what happens, not in the telling.
> She quotes to me what a woman
> born in slavery said, when she was free and ancient:
> *I sits here, in my rocker, evenin's,*
> *and just*
> *purely*
> *be's.*

[. . .]

This old woman is far from being the imaginative old woman of "In Mind," whose eccentricity the poet felt she had to defend in order to safeguard her identity as a writer, but rather she stands as an *autoritas* herself in the art of writing. Even the image of the other "free and ancient" woman rocking in her chair, with the one-word line "*be's*" swinging from the edge of the first stanza, reflects this old woman's self-consciousness of having attained a state of spiritual liberation.

Yet instead of symbolizing maternal inspiration, as is the case of the "Dragonfly-Mother," this "Old Mother" represents the exact reversal of the Muse; whereas in "The Dragonfly-Mother," the Muse appeared to the poet, infused her with imaginative vision and urged her to sit down immediately and write, this old woman teaches her that the task is not to live "in the telling" but just "to *be*." Surprisingly, the phrase "write, write or die," the Muse's persistent injunction to H.D. in *Hermetic Definition*, turns into an opposite version: "live in what happens, not in the telling."

What the poet seems to have learned from this "Old Mother" is to keep faith in serene contemplation, not to rush into telling, into completing work, but rather to contemplate the experience before her eyes until the words come naturally and "give life" to that perception, as happened in "Sands of the Well." Levertov ends the poem with these words:

[. . .]

I think of the travellers
gone into dark. 'They were only
passing through,' I say, surprised,
to her, to myself,
relieved and in awe, learning to know
those oncoming waters rushed through the aeons

before me, and rush on beyond me,
and I have now, as the task before me, to *be,*
to arrive at being,
as she the Old Mother has done
in the root place, the hewn
wooden cave, home
of shadow and flame, of
language, gradual stillness,
blessing.

The poet is now convinced of what is the job ahead: "to *be*, / to arrive at being," and to do so in imitation of the "Old Mother" who resides in the roots of language, who has finally converted her language into a primary and natural abode. Life can go on with its passing Platonic shadows, with its characters and dramas inviting to swift telling, but the poet seems to prefer developing a stronger, and more patient, connection with the "language-root place": a "gradual stillness."

The need for the Muse has been left behind in these last volumes as the poet self-confidently prepares herself to stay forever rooted in language, to maintain a natural and organic relation with writing. The image of this old woman, living in the "language-root place" and just being, allows the poet to explicit through her what seems to be the perception of herself as a mature woman writer, when she has already published more than twenty volumes of poetry. Levertov seems to project through this old woman, and through the image of the soothsayer too, a complete and serene self-recognition of herself as an experienced writer, an old woman who does not have to write compulsively in order to prove to herself and to others that she *is* a poet. Moreover, by presenting this old woman as an example of wisdom in life and writing, she is also defying a long-standing literary tradition that denies women any form of intimate cohabitation with language and the art of

writing. Finally, as happens in many other Levertov poems, serene observation and language appear as the two pillars of her art of writing.[4]

In a later poem titled "The Great Black Heron," from *Sands of the Well*, something as apparently trivial as an old woman fishing on the banks of the river is elevated by the poet to the category of symbol for an "entire culture."

[. . .]

> This woman engaged in her pleasure evokes
> an entire culture, tenacious field-flower
> growing itself among rows of cotton
> in read-earth country, under the feet
> of mules and masters. I see her
> a barefoot child by a muddy river
> learning her skill with the pole. What battles
> has she survived, what labors?
> She's gathered up all the time in the world
> –nothing else– and waits for scanty trophies,
> complete in herself as a heron.

The poet imagines this woman devoted from a very early age to the learning of her skill, flourishing even in the most uncongenial grounds –"among rows of cotton / in red-earth country"– and against all sorts of pressures – "under the feet / of mules and masters." Is not this woman, I wonder, an adequate model to imitate

4 A later poem titled "Looking, Walking, Being," included in *Sands of the Well*, serves to throw new light into some of the concepts recurring in "Dream Instruction." In it, Levertov stresses "looking" as her way of life as a poet in the world and language as a vital force to make it possible to continue her seeing "through the world, / in it."

in the learning of a discipline? It is with this view in mind, I think, that the poet wants to share with the reader her self-visualized image of her as someone who has dedicated her whole life to develop her skill, experiencing, at the same time and against all odds, personal growth, condensing all possible time in her experience, and expecting nothing more than her "scanty trophies," nothing more than a calm immersion in her pleasures, whether it be fishing or writing. In this sense, the image of this old woman and the values she stands for are also valid to represent the poet's life and career. Like this old woman, Levertov's unbreakable tenacity in her devotion has made of her another survivor, in the company of other woman writers, that has developed despite many repressions which, as I analyzed in the chapters on her poetry of self-definition and the erotic, Levertov had to surmount in order to finally redefine her own self and sexuality in her poems, or to celebrate her condition as a woman poet. Levertov knows well that this woman has "gathered up all the time of the world" in her own person, after a long historical struggle for self-expression, and perhaps for this same reason, she is now "complete in herself as a heron."[5]

With these invented images of old women, which function mainly as projections of the poet's *alter ego*, Levertov reasserts her personal voice as a woman writer who is not at the expense of external factors in order to write, and who continues strengthened by her devotion to her art even though she doesn't feel the continuous pressure to write in order to maintain a place in the literary tradition.

5 In his essay "Presence and Transparency: A Reading of Levertov's *Sands of the Well*," Edward Zlotkowski signals the importance of the word "being" in this volume and aptly points to the curious fact that both " 'heron' and 'lake' imagery embody it" (144). In a very subtle way, I would suggest, this woman, as an embodiment of being, might be connected with the "Old Mother" of "Dream Instruction," all of them images that function as projections of the poet's self in writing.

The Muse Rediscovered

One of the conventional representations of the Muse is that of an ethereal apparition which makes her presence known to the poet in the most mysterious ways, when the poet less expects her. "To the Muse," from *O Taste and See*, adjusts to these traditional representations of the Muse as mysterious presence that manifests herself only when *she* decides.

In the first section of the poem, the poet echoes a "wise" man's comments on the Muse as a hiding presence in the house, even though she might seem to be absent.

[. . .]
And all the while

You are indwelling,
A gold ring lost in the house.
A gold ring lost in the house.
You are in the house!

[. . .]

Wanting to discover her, the poet desperately asks the "wise man" how to proceed, what rules must be observed to find her hiding place.

[. . .]

Then what to do to find the room where you are?
Deep cave of obsidian glowing with red, with green,
with black light,
high room in the lost tower where you sit spinning,

crack in the floor where the gold ring
waits to be found?

No more rage but a calm face,
trim the fire, lay the table, find some
flowers for it: is that the way?
Be ready with quick sight to catch
a gleam between the floorboards,

there, where he had looked
a thousand times and seen nothing?

[. . .]

These stanzas seem to state that the Muse is not to be found, either in baroque ostentation or in the high rooms of a tower. It seems more likely that the Muse might be found hidden in the most commonplace, "there where he had looked / a thousand times and seen nothing?", but phrasing it as a question dispels any illusion of certainty about where and how to find her.

Finally, the poet decides to disclaim the voice of the wise man assuming, eventually, that inspiration obeys no rules of procedure, even if it is a wise man who designs them.

[. . .]

Not even a wise man
can say, do thus and thus, that presence
will be restored.
Perhaps

a becoming aware a door is swinging, as if
someone had passed through the room a moment ago– perhaps

looking down, the sight
of the ring back on its finger?

"Perhaps," a word suspended in the air as if the validity of the sentence were still under suspicion, a "becoming aware" of some movement around the room might help, if it does, to identify the presence of the Muse. But it is clear that the poet does not generate that movement in the door, that it does not take place because of her will. The only thing the poet can do is wait patiently for the Muse, since she is the one who always has the final say, the only one who can make the mysterious happen, so that finally one can perceive "the sight / of the old ring back on its finger." This last stanza, however, conveys no feelings of anxiety, as if the poet had come to terms with how inspiration works, as if she knew from her experience as a writer that the magic ring will go back to her writing finger; she only has to relax and let it happen, when it happens.

"She and the Muse," a poem included in *Candles in Babylon*, reinvents more intimate and less conventional forms of the relationship between poet and Muse than those present in "To the Muse."

> Away he goes, the hour's delightful hero,
> *arrivederci:* and his horse clatters
> out of the courtyard, raising
> a flurry of straw and scattering hens.
>
> He turns in the saddle waving a plumed hat,
> his saddlebags are filled with talismans,
> mirrors, parchment histories, gifts and stones,
> indecipherable clues to destiny.
>
> He rides off in the dustcloud of his own
> story, and when he has vanished she

who has stood firm to wave and watch
from the top step, goes in to the cool

flagstoned kitchen, clears honey and milk and bread
off the table, sweeps from the hearth
ashes of last night's fire, and climbs the stairs
to strip tumbled sheets from her wide bed.

Now the long-desired
visit is over. The heroine
is a scribe. Returned to solitude,
eagerly she re-enters the third room,

the room hung with tapestries, scenes that change
whenever she looks away. Here is her lectern,
here her writing desk. She picks a quill,
dips it, begins to write. But not of him.

"She and the Muse" strikes first of all for what is has of a mock-heroic, of satire against those chivalric myths animating many of the inspirational clichés in the courtly love traditions. Thus, the hero is characterized in wry humor as grotesquely plumed-hat, his saddlebags filled with useless trinkets, "indecipherable clues to destiny." Like Don Quixote, insanely immersed in his fantasies about chivalric legends, this hero rides off "in the dustcloud of his own / story"; the heroine, in turn, is no longer the virginal damsel of courtly love literature: the "wide bed" and the "tumbled sheets" tell clearly that the object of the "long desired" visit was not precisely the fulfillment of a vow of chastity, but rather an unromantic "rolling and tumbling" with someone who, far from being an emblem of Platonic infatuation, represents nothing more that the "hour's delightful hero."

As soon as he disappears out of sight, she hurriedly does away with the memories of his visit, clearing the table at the kitchen, brushing the dust from the hearth, and taking the sheets off the bed. Back to cherished solitude, the heroine becomes a scribe as she "eagerly" goes back to her "third room." Whether the room of a third dimension, or the magical number three of cabalistic lore, this is certainly "a room of her own," a favorite working place for the woman scribe. So magical a room that even the scenes the soothsayer zealously wove in the tapestries now appear hanging on her wall, and "change / whenever she looks away." The tapestries mark this room not only as a place of mystery, openness to other inspirational infusions, but as a place to reconnect with the self. Notice, however, that the inspirational motifs are radically different in both cases: whereas the hero has always the same "dustcloud" of his own story, perhaps his own quest myths, in his wake, the heroine scribe is surrounded by scenes that are constantly changing.

Both in her actions and in the way she carries them out, it seems that this woman has very clear notions about the different roles she must play in her life as both heroine and scribe. Her accepted social role as a damsel makes her comply with all the functions and activities which are proper to her social condition, such as expecting the visit of her "hero," and performing boring household tasks with efficiency but, since she is also self-conscious of her condition as a writer, she arranges everything in the house as swiftly as possible in order to do what she knows is her real pleasure: to sit down and write.

A clear parallelism can be drawn between this poem and "The Dogwood," in which the poet also reveals the roles present in her life: her social role as mother and housewife, on the one hand, and her condition as a woman poet, on the other. But whereas in "The Dogwood" the woman poet expresses the strain which the acceptance of the different roles puts on her (the pressure of acting as a housewife and also having to be creative as a writer), in this poem

there is no such anxiety, no feelings of having to "shine" for a male readership, and this is probably why the writing, not necessarily about him, seems to present itself so naturally.

The two last verses present staccato notes that seem to suggest determination and the workings of inspiration on her; the process is almost automatic: "Here is her lectern, / here her writing desk. She picks a quill, / dips it, begins to write." This scribe is the exact reversal of the woman Woolf depicted as being socially alienated from writing: "I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot" (1980, 61). No "anxiety of authorship" is perceived in the poem; on the contrary, if there is any anxiety in this poem it is the anxiety of sitting down in her room and writing her own story. In this context, "But not of him" sounds with acute climatic force, yet one coherent with the tones of satire suffusing the whole poem.

After a silence, induced by the final punch phrase, or perhaps a repressed giggle, a series of questions begin to emerge: but who is the Muse in this poem, mentioned in the title? If we say that the Muse is "the hour's delightful hero," it is clear that Levertov presents a harsh caricature of his influence on woman's creative process. He shouldn't be identified as the representation of the Muse because it is crystal clear that creative infusion doesn't come from the hero *per se* and because the scribe does not have him in mind when she sits down to write. In this context, one possible interpretation to account for the real origin of inspiration in this woman is that it is her sexual encounter with this hero (whose presence, as Levertov foregrounds with a marked use of indentation, has been "long-desired"), together with everything that surrounds her (room, tapestries, scenes) what brings about the inspiration and sets the writing process in motion. This last being the most plausible alternative, what can we then make of the title of the poem? Why "She and the Muse"? Is the heroine scribe who picks a pen her own Muse then?

It seems that the erotic encounter and her arrangement of everything around her have put her in a state of mind which allows this woman to find the Muse within her. She has learned to connect her erotic pleasure with her intellectual pleasure thus preserving some agency in creating her own inspirational atmosphere. For this same reason, this woman, unlike the woman of "The Dogwood," does not have to resignedly keep invoking the well ("Oh well") for inspiration.

This line of interpretation would also serve to restore authorial capacity to the Muse, inasmuch as her mythical representations associated to the art of writing (Calliope, the mythical Muse of writing, was sometimes represented with a stylus in her hand) have been erased in the patriarchal literary tradition.

In conclusion, for all they contain, for their notable achievements, Levertov's poems on inspiration, vision and the art of writing may be said to stand as a clear referent for those other women poets who have to deal in their writing with similar problems when trying to access creativity. Some of Levertov's most solid poems on inspiration show that there are ways to circumvent the authoritative appropriations of creativity abounding in the inspirational canon. Her poems on the well show to what extent her personal creative process has been molded by the maternal influence. Her poems on the old women are a clear demonstration that women poets are inventing their own, woman-identified models of writing. The poems "Song for Ishtar" and "She and the Muse" allow her to find the Muse within herself, not having to depend on external factors in order to gain access to creativity. Levertov has shown it possible to circumvent the authoritative appropriations of creativity by allying herself with feminine sources of inspiration and using them as active catalysts of her writing. She has also revised strict gendered notions in creative transactions between poet and Muse by recreating androgynous relations between them, and by reinventing them as non-hierarchical forms of interaction. Since the interactions

between poet and Muse present in "Song for Ishtar" do not produce any "anxiety of authorship" but a creative extasis, Levertov is stating that it is feasible for women poets to lay claim to their creativity without being intimidated by any male influences. Other poems, as is the case of "She and the Muse," are an example that the woman poet can perfectly rewrite literary constructs on the Muse and inspiration and discover the Muse within her by reconnecting her erotic pleasure with her intellectual pleasure and recreating her own proper inspirational atmosphere, "a room of her own," where she can finally have a more intimate and undisturbed relation with her sources of inspiration.

Finally, in her poems on the old women, Levertov positions herself as an experienced woman writer who still remains active in her creative process but who is not at the expense of any transactions with the Muse in order to establish her continuity as a writer. Through these projections of her literary *alter ego*, Levertov confidently reasserts her natural relationship with her medium, poetic language, and her mastery over her art, the art of writing.

CONCLUSIONS

If as Adrienne Rich asserts "every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of a dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs an art which can resist it" (1993, 244), what I think makes Levertov's poetics on identity and myth so solid is precisely her capacity to overtly verbalize aspects the self and to recreate new images of representation. In other words, constant naming and renaming and an adequate use of her image-making power are two strong pillars on which Levertov's art rests.

A proof of this resistance is that, overall, Levertov's poems on self-definition are constructed to protect herself against the risk of "mental fragmentation" women poets are forced to experience whenever they try to define themselves as both. She avoids this risk in two ways, the first related to naming and, the second, to image-making: Levertov continually strives to name the various identities in her mind, defending them, however extravagant, and celebrating them in her poetic discourse as fully allied with the self; Levertov's various poems on self-definition destabilize fixed cultural frameworks for representing women by sketching out a complex iconography of self-representation, a web of associated images that are constantly changing and receding one into another, as if in imitation of a regressive spiral of representation. Thus she dispels the illusion of capturing her identity in one single representation.

Levertov's poetics on the body is another clear example of her direct naming. In her overt verbalization of the body and sexuality,

and by unambiguously positioning herself against the repression of women's language, Levertov has shown her strong faith in the transformative power of the word, in its capacity to move human consciences and promote change. Firmly convinced of this, instead of yielding to verbal taboos imposed on women and resigning herself to silence, Levertov counterattacks by using a strong, unconventional diction in some of her poems on the body and sexuality. Her objective is double-fold: on the one had, these poems are in outright defiance of male-designed strategies of silence while, on the other, she is showing women that naming is a step in the road to consciousness.

Levertov has no doubt spoken with her own voice inasmuch as she has been bold enough to openly celebrate her personal identity as a woman poet, and to redefine her personal vision of her sexuality through a full poetic expression of the erotic contained in her body. But not only has she explored her own personal voice and used it in her poetic discourse, she has also confronted in her poems some women's concerns of her time, inviting women of her generation to reflect upon the need to revise important aspects of identity such as the self, the body and sexuality. Levertov does not evade her responsibilities as a woman poet fully committed to her own kind. In her poems on identity and myth she warns other women against the serious effects of subjecting themselves to patriarchal frameworks of representation, against the destructiveness implicit to accepting imposed splits on personal identity, or, finally, against yielding to any form of censorship on the discourse on body and sex. Yet in showing through her poetry that women can destabilize these cultural frameworks, that they can reconstruct their identities, that they can redefine their sexuality, Levertov has offered other women the real possibility of approaching their identities, their bodies and their sexes from a very different angle, and of overtly verbalizing that unique experience. Nancy Gish's assertion that Levertov "has written not simply as the voice of a woman

but as a voice and perspective for women" (253) seems to make sense in the context of her confessional and mythmaking poetry.

As I hope to have made clear throughout this work, Levertov's poetics on identity and myth is revisionist and subversive, often defiantly challenging cultural norms and coded systems of representation. One of the recognizable ways through which she has carried out her subversion is precisely by reinventing new forms of representation women can identify with. Levertov evokes a whole set of maternal figures –Dragonfly-Mother, Great Mother, wise old woman and haggard goddess– as examples of a new culture, an independent civilization which offers new spaces for women's development at all levels, writing and spirituality included. In her inspirational poetry, Levertov revises mythic constructs present in the inspirational canon in order to find the Muse within herself and gain full access to an independent creativity. By challenging authoritative appropriations of creativity and rewriting literary constructs on the Muse, Levertov reaches a position from which she can reassert her voice as an autonomous writer in constant harmony with her sources of inspiration and with her medium, poetic language.

On the other hand, Levertov's powerful image-making renders with all the more force what Ostriker calls "the promise of alternative vision" (1985, 3). The new values she attaches to her self-created or revised representations –waterwoman, Dragonfly-Mother, The Goddess, Ishtar, Sylvia, the well, old woman, Old Mother–show that women can redefine their vision of self and world by allying themselves with these open images of representation, truthful models of experience set in opposition to eternal images of the feminine.

In conclusion, if Levertov can be chosen as an example of a representative figure in women's writings, and I firmly believe that she can, it is because of her dexterous rewriting of such themes as identity and myth. Her adequate rewriting of these issues, a central

concern in women's writings, modern and postmodern alike, places an important section of her poetry right in the center of the development of contemporary women's poetry.

Though many different rubrics[1] have been used to catalogue Levertov's poetry, a comparative study of how her poetics on identity and myth evolves in time indicates a thematic approach, progressively clear, with other women poets writing on similar issues. The origins of this chronological line can be approximately traced back to the years immediately following her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, when she grew aware of the dangers implicit in separating the private from the public, the personal from the political. From this time onwards, and volume after volume, Levertov's poetry becomes more woman-centered and revisionist. To such an extent that one can discern in her work how her poems on self-definition, the body, the erotic and inspiration gradually develop in full harmony with other women poets and critics writing on similar issues. As a result, to place Levertov in the company of male poets without specifying where she departs from them, what elements she assimilates from them and what other thematic and compositional elements she reworks, is, I think, to construct a highly partial portrait of Levertov as a woman poet.

What I also hope to have left clear along this work is that it is thanks to her reworking of identity and myth that Levertov can be placed alongside other revisionist women of her literary tradition.

1 It is difficult to find a poet with such a long list of descriptive labels. After leaving behind the Postromantic incursion of her first volume, *The Double Image*, Levertov has been variably associated with the Black Mountain poets (Berke, 25), the Beats (Knight), the Objectivists (Hatlen 1999, 33), the Trancendentalists (Hallisey, 186; Waggoner, 91-92), and the Neoromantics (Gelpi 1990, 540). All this is an index of her intellectual curiosity and her enthusiastic permeability to all influences, but what needs to be highlighted in every specific case is how she reabsorbed and remodelled all these influences in order to adapt them to her own voice.

Both her overt naming of self and world and the engaging power of her image-making have served to buttress the solidity of her poetic discourse as a woman, and, by extension, that of a whole generational group of women poets coming of age after World War II.

In one of his first letters to Denise Levertov, William Carlos Williams praised the virtues of Sappho setting the quality of her work against the pressures of her time: "Sappho must have been a powerful wench to stand what would have torn a woman apart otherwise. The tensions she must have withstood without yielding have made her poems forever memorable" (Levertov 1998b, 10). Likewise, I would like to suggest, Levertov's literary achievements must be considered in the light of the burdens she had to stand as a mother, housewife and woman poet making her career amidst male-dominated poetic circles and against a literary legacy that was defined by male values. Throughout this work, I have tried to discuss how some of these wrenching forces acted on Levertov and how she opposed them in her writing. Mainly, as we have seen, she reacts against the pressures on her by gradually moving away from her position as a literary daughter, conditioned in many cases by the approval and recognition of her poetic fathers, by negotiating central splits between the position of woman and the position of poet, by rejecting identification with dominant representations of woman's body and sex, or, finally, by surmounting long-standing impediments against women's redefinition of erotism in their discourse.

Resumen en español

Capítulo 1: Planteamiento y Objetivos de Investigación

Un desplazamiento centrífugo: Denise Levertov en su contexto

Transcurridos apenas unos años tras su muerte en 1999, no es aventurado afirmar que el legado literario de Denise Levertov, la influencia de toda su obra, principalmente en el contexto de la literatura estadounidense, es inestimable. La producción literaria de Levertov, además de prolífica –ha publicado más de veinte volúmenes de poesía, tres libros de ensayos, una correspondencia literaria voluminosa con algunos de los poetas más influyentes de su generación...– se caracteriza por una constante dedicación al perfeccionamiento del arte poético.

Toda su obra ha suscitado una gran atención por parte de la crítica literaria; desde hace décadas, la producción crítica dedicada al estudio de su obra no ha hecho más que aumentar: numerosas reseñas de todos sus libros, múltiples ensayos sobre su obra publicados en las más prestigiosas revistas literarias norteamericanas e internacionales, y diversos volúmenes monográficos dedicados al análisis de algunos de los temas más relevantes de su poética. Todo esto es indicativo de la creciente relevancia que Levertov ha ido adquiriendo como figura poética prominente de la literatura norteamericana. Cualquier estudio totalizador sobre la poesía norteamericana tiene necesariamente que incluir la poesía de Levertov entre sus páginas.

Levertov comenzó su carrera poética en Estados Unidos en años de gran efervescencia poética. Nacida en Essex, Inglaterra, en 1923, de madre galesa y padre ruso judío, muy joven se trasladó a vivir a Estados Unidos tras su matrimonio con Mitch Goodman, escritor norteamericano. Los nuevos ritmos poéticos que se empezaban a usar en Estados Unidos supusieron toda una revolución para una mujer poeta educada en el ritmo poético del pentámetro yámbico y en la lírica del Romanticismo inglés. La nueva concepción de la poesía estaba abanderada principalmente por William Carlos Williams, quien popularizó su poesía basada en los ritmos y medidas de la lengua vernácula. Tal y como Williams teorizaba en sus ensayos sobre composición poética, en una era que había sido testigo de revolucionarios descubrimientos que afectan a nuestra propia concepción del universo, el metrónomo no podía seguir siendo válido para medir las experiencias de la vida moderna. Como alternativa Williams abogaba por traducir a la medida del verso la relatividad inherente a la condición moderna. Los poetas que empezaron a componer su poesía en la estela de Williams, Levertov entre ellos, no tardaron en comprobar que estos nuevos ritmos y medidas servían como herramientas de trabajo mucho más flexibles. Levertov resumió la influencia de Williams en su generación con estas palabras: "nos enseñó la poesía que estaba escondida tras los ritmos del habla".

A comienzos de la década de los cincuenta, Charles Olson trasladó algunas de los principios de Williams a su revolucionario ensayo "Projective Verse". En parte movido por el descubrimiento de la poesía vernácula, Olson propugnaba en su ensayo una concepción fisiológica de la poesía, es decir, una poesía en la que el oído y la respiración sirvieran como únicos medios para trasladar al verso el proceso de las experiencias poéticas.

A pesar de que un buen número de poetas de ambos extremos de la costa de Estados Unidos habían estado aplicando a sus versos los nuevos principios poéticos, sus obras no empezaron a ser conocidas por el público hasta principios de la década de los sesenta,

cuando Donald Allen los recogió en su antología *The New American Poetry* (*La Nueva Poesía Norteamericana*). No se puede decir, estrictamente hablando, que estos poetas fueran meros advenedizos ya que muchos de ellos llevaban años publicando sus poemas en revistas de pequeña tirada, o ediciones limitadas –Levertov había publicado ya dos libros de poemas *Aquí y ahora* (*Here and Now*) editado por Lawrence Ferlinghetti, y *Por tierra hasta las islas* (*Overland to the Islands*) editado por Jonathan Williams. La antología de Allen incluía diversas secciones, cada una de ellas dedicada a los grupos poéticos más relevantes de la época. La Sección I de la antología incluía a las figuras poéticas más relevantes del Black Mountain School (escuela poética situada en Carolina del Norte): Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, y Denise Levertov. El criterio de clasificación era que todos habían publicado algunos de sus poemas más conocidos en dos revistas poéticas *Origin* y *Black Mountain Review*. En el caso específico de Levertov, Allen añade correctamente en su nota que ésta no "tenía conexión con la escuela".

Aunque la influencia de "Projective Verse" sobre Levertov no ha tenido la suficiente atención crítica, su asimilación y traducción al verso de las teorías de Olson dio un gran impulso a su carrera poética. Levertov pasó de ser una poeta posromántica, de pentámetro yámbico y denso lirismo, a ser una poeta posmoderna, en sintonía con las nuevas formulaciones poéticas de la época. La ley de Olson, "UNA PERCEPCIÓN DEBE INMEDIATA Y DIRECTAMENTE LLEVAR A OTRA PERCEPCIÓN", influyó en su idea de la poesía como proceso de exploración de la forma inherente a cada percepción, proceso que ha de quedar registrado en cada uno los versos del poema como fiel anotación de la experiencia creadora.

Cuando una mujer poeta consigue abrirse paso en los círculos poéticos de la literatura norteamericana de los años cincuenta y sesenta, su evolución como poeta hay que analizarla en el contexto de su realidad sociocultural, en el caso concreto de Levertov su posición marginal en la cosmología poética alrededor de la cual

gravitaba su figura. Se puede apreciar en la trayectoria poética que Levertov describe a lo largo de su carrera la influencia de varias fuerzas gravitatorias que inciden constantemente sobre su posición, unas centrífugas y otras centrípetas. Por un lado, Levertov permaneció durante años orbitando alrededor de puntos focales de actividad poética. De estos focos creativos derivó un conocimiento muy directo de lo que estaba ocurriendo en poesía además de la técnica adecuada para modular su verso de manera más flexible. Por otro lado, también se observa en su carrera poética un rumbo centrífugo, la necesidad de trazar una órbita independiente, una poesía propia que intentaba traducir al verso su voz personal como mujer poeta nacida en Inglaterra y con una herencia multicultural. Esta posición marginal le permitió la posibilidad de moverse libremente en varias direcciones, tanto en forma como en contenido, sin ver comprometidas sus convicciones poéticas o personales. Levertov reconoció en más de una ocasión las grandes ventajas de movimiento inherentes a su posición marginal: "siempre tuve la gran ventaja de no estar relacionada con ningún 'mundo literario' en particular".

Procederé, no obstante, a detallar más concretamente cómo se traduce esa fuerza centrífuga a la experimentación formal. Desde sus comienzos poéticos en Estados Unidos, Levertov dio claras muestras de tener sus propios criterios en materia de composición, técnica y voz. De hecho, mantuvo discrepancias con respecto a algunas de las formulaciones poéticas ideadas por Olson; mientras que Olson daba prioridad a la fisiología y capacidad pulmonar como metrónomo del verso, Levertov sostenía que la longitud del verso no debía estar en función de la fisiología del poeta (veía en ello un símbolo más del machismo de Olson) sino más bien en función de lo que ella denominaba "cadencias de percepción", es decir, cada línea del poema debía representar la anotación del proceso del sentir y el pensar en el momento de la composición.

Otra evidencia de su rumbo centrífugo fue su constante búsqueda de una voz poética propia. Una anécdota incluida en su correspondencia con Williams habla bien a las claras de su buen oído para captar la música del verso, algo que sin duda le sería de gran ayuda en su empresa personal. En una de sus primeras cartas a Williams, Levertov había adjuntado un grupo de poemas que acababa de componer con la intención de que Williams los leyera y le diera su opinión. Williams había solicitado a su mujer Flossie que se los leyera y pronto advirtió que mientras que dos de ellos, "Canticle" y "Corazon" (sic), se ajustaban al habla norteamericana, el tercero, "The Jacob's Ladder" ("La escalera de Jacobo") conservaba restos de un ritmo muy cercano al pentámetro yámbico de la tradición inglesa. Williams no tardó en indicarle a Levertov dónde estaba el error y, con clara intención instructiva, adjuntó en la misma misiva su famoso ensayo sobre el habla americana. Levertov, no obstante, se mostró reticente a cambiar la medida del poema; más bien al contrario, en una carta de respuesta insistía en el hecho de que el poema "suena tal y como lo pienso y siento" y añadía en la misma carta que "retocar la estructura del poema y poner otra sería una traición a lo que considero que debo hacer". En lo concerniente al ensayo sobre el habla americana que Williams le había adjuntado, Levertov reconocía la validez que tenía para un gran número de poetas que no estaban entroncados con su cultura vernácula, pero consideraba que su caso era bien distinto.

Justo cuando muchos poetas norteamericanos, provenientes de las tendencias más diversas, se estaban uniendo al carro de la poesía basada en el habla americana, Levertov se desmarcaba personalmente de lo que se había convertido en aquel entonces en una verdadera moda poética. Y lo hacía para poder afirmar con más fuerza que su prioridad era "el tono y la medida" de sus sentimientos. Tal y como escribía en la misma carta a Williams, "el poeta se debe por encima de todo a su propia voz –debe saber encontrarla y usarla". Levertov vio con cierta claridad que la búsqueda de su propia voz no debía

estar, en su caso específico, vinculada al habla americana (entre otras razones porque no “era del todo americana” y porque contaba con el privilegio de tener una herencia multicultural).

Hasta ahora me he limitado a esbozar algunas de las desviaciones formales más destacadas en la poética de Levertov, algunas de ellas claramente contrapuestas a formulaciones poéticas muy relevantes de su tiempo. Dichas desviaciones no constituyen, sin embargo, el objeto principal de mi discurso. Se precisaría para ello de un trabajo más profundo, aún por hacer, sobre la aportación de Levertov a la poesía experimental de mediados del siglo pasado. Sólo tangencialmente, cuando sea necesario, haré referencia a ellas en el presente trabajo. Mi ámbito de estudio se circunscribe a toda una serie de innovaciones más estrictamente relacionadas con en el contenido: imágenes poéticas, temática, y vocabulario. Sin embargo, las innovaciones formales anteriormente esbozadas me sirven de base para sustentar la hipótesis de que la poesía de Levertov pueda suponer una innovación también en el contenido. Más concretamente, mi investigación sobre el contenido de su discurso poético se centra en el estudio de su poesía sobre la identidad, en su redefinición de su identidad personal como mujer poeta, madre y esposa, a través de una serie de imágenes que evolucionan con el devenir del tiempo. ¿Cuál es su visión del cuerpo y la sexualidad? ¿Cómo cambia esta visión a medida que iba afianzando más su identidad? Su poética erótica e inspiracional constituyen también objeto de estudio prioritario. ¿Consigue subvertir en su poesía erótica la alienación histórica que separa a la mujer del discurso erótico, de la definición personal del deseo y el placer? Por otro lado, ¿Cómo negocia los constructos sobre la Musa, tan abundantes en el canon inspiracional?

Mi principal objetivo investigador reside en investigar si Levertov crea en su dialéctica con estos temas un arte que no sólo pueda resistir con firmeza la fuerza centrípeta del arte patriarcal, su tendencia a la fragmentación y fagocitación de todo arte creado por mujeres, sino que también valga para conformar modelos estéticos

y éticos nuevos e independientes. ¿Qué modelos estéticos emplea en su poesía? ¿Cuál es el proceso de construcción del género en su poesía? ¿Cómo evoluciona cronológicamente? ¿Qué imágenes de representación crea? ¿En qué medida están estas imágenes interrelacionadas? ¿Cómo negocia la representación histórica y social del cuerpo femenino? ¿Consigue crear un sistema mitológico propio a fin de contrarrestar los mitos sobre la mujer que han ido fosilizándose en la tradición literaria? ¿Cómo reinventa en su poesía las relaciones entre la mujer poeta y su Musa? ¿Qué modelos deconstructivos y constructivos operan en este proceso de revisión y reinvención?

Capítulo 2: Posición Crítica y Metodología

¿Dónde puedo encontrar el mapa del género y cuál es mi lugar en él?

El presente capítulo contiene una serie de reflexiones personales sobre el proceso de investigación, la posición que he decidido finalmente adoptar como crítico, y la metodología a emplear. En él se detallan los puntos de partida, las premisas, los planteamientos de hipótesis, y sobre todo los errores que me forzaron, llegado un cierto punto, a considerar de nuevo muchas de estas hipótesis iniciales y a replantearme totalmente la metodología más adecuada para elaborar mi discurso sobre la identidad en la poesía de Denise Levertov.

Aunque desde un principio estaba interesado en abordar el tema de la identidad en la poesía de Denise Levertov, la propia elección del tema ha sido causa de dificultades casi inimaginables que han ido surgiendo a lo largo del proceso de investigación. Cada vez de manera más evidente, la identidad se iba mostrando ante mí como un concepto de compleja articulación en el que se entrecruzan factores muy diversos tales como la raza, clase social, condiciones

culturales, género, etc. Por estas mismas razones desde un principio tuve la intuición de que sería muy difícil conservar una posición cómoda en lo concerniente a la metodología que debía usarse.

Desde mis comienzos investigadores me mostré reacio a aceptar la posibilidad de que el género pudiese ser relevante en el proceso artístico. La mejor manera de aproximarse a la obra de una mujer poeta era, pensaba en un principio, hacer abstracción del género para que, de esta forma, el carácter artístico de la obra resaltara por encima de otras consideraciones de menor relevancia.

Esta posición afectó de manera muy notable la coherencia interna de mis primeros ensayos sobre Levertov, trabajos inconclusos en los que los estereotipos sobre la mujer, y las discrepancias entre mi análisis crítico y la realidad que mostraba la obra de Levertov eran ciertamente abundantes. Se aprecia también en estos primeros trabajos una constante obsesión por mostrar el "split-self" (ego escindido) como marca permanente de la poesía de Levertov. En uno de mis muchos diálogos personales con el Profesor John Amador Bedford, mi director de investigación, éste me indicó los problemas inherentes a mi discurso. Uno de estos problemas era mi insistencia en realizar un análisis cerrado del proceso de identidad en Levertov mientras que lo que Levertov estaba haciendo en su discurso poético era justamente lo contrario, es decir, integrando las partes escindidas de su identidad y mostrando su identidad como algo cada vez más complejo y abierto, inmerso en un constante devenir. Levertov demostraba así en su discurso poético que el fenómeno del "split-self" no es necesariamente una cualidad permanente en las mujeres sino más bien una herencia socialmente impuesta, producto de los discursos del poder que pretenden delimitar el concepto de mujer, y como tal susceptibles de ser negado y reestructurado discursivamente.

Desde las primeras fases de mi investigación, el Profesor John Amador Bedford me advirtió de los riesgos implícitos en la decisión de dividir el género, la vida, y la obra de un autor en compartimentos

estancos. Estos riesgos pronto se presentaron ante mí como múltiples paradojas. Concretamente, una de las mayores paradojas que subyacían a mi discurso era consecuencia de mi posición demasiado estática con respecto a los poemas de Levertov. Mi discurso se había convertido en una serie inconexa de comentarios sobre cómo se manifestaba el fenómeno del "split-self" en sus poemas, sin considerar un factor fundamental en la poesía de Levertov: su uso de la poesía como proceso de descubrimiento y del discurso poético como el locus donde se puede reformular el concepto de mujer, algo que yo consideraba como universal y estático.

La segunda gran paradoja en mi investigación estaba directamente relacionada con mi decisión de obviar las referencias al género en mi análisis de estos poemas. A medida que iba avanzando en mi investigación sobre la poética de Levertov, el género, la necesidad de redefinir y afirmar su concepción personal del género, se iban revelando como leitmotiv de toda su poesía sobre la identidad, el cuerpo, el erotismo, y la espiritualidad. Por razones obvias, cualquier discurso construido sobre premisas tan contradictorias se derrumba al primer examen y eso fue justo lo que me ocurrió a mí.

La magnitud de estas paradojas era tal, tales eran las fracturas de mi discurso, que tuve que replantearme mi punto de partida, mi metodología, mi enfoque, o sea, absolutamente todo. Pero la cuestión entonces era aceptar que tenía que recomenzar puesto que pocos eran los argumentos que podía reciclar. Por otro lado, los pocos argumentos que pasaron a formar parte del nuevo discurso resultaron incluso más problemáticos.

Pero lo que más aprecio de los muchos diálogos que he mantenido con mi director de investigación es haber aprendido que la crítica literaria no está disociada de otros actos de la vida y que, salvo que se sometan a revisión nuestras estrategias críticas, éstas seguirán anquilosadas en un entorno claramente cambiante. Esta convicción personal me dio la fuerza necesaria para afrontar la cuestión del género. Para que un proceso crítico sea verdaderamente

compacto hay que tener la valentía de no suprimir ninguna pregunta a lo largo del mismo. La pregunta que yo había decidido suprimir desde un principio era la relativa al género. No se puede obviar que cuando se toma la decisión de contemplar la incidencia del género en cualquier obra una primera pregunta obliga una serie sucesiva de ulteriores preguntas. ¿Qué es el género? ¿Cómo interactúa el género con la identidad? ¿Cómo encontrar una aproximación adecuada al género en la crítica literaria? ¿Existe una metodología sobre el género a prueba de errores?

La corriente crítica del esencialismo y su concepción del género como uno de esos parámetros que vienen determinados por el sexo –por tanto, estables– es sumamente atractiva para todo hombre que se disponga a hacer crítica literaria sobre una mujer escritora. Sus ventajas prácticas son innumerables.

La adscripción inicial al esencialismo me permitió resolver de manera muy rápida todas las complejidades inherentes a la diferencia de género. Dado que el recurso a lo biológico podía utilizarse siempre como justificación de todo, en aquellos casos más problemáticos bastaba con recurrir al argumento del cuerpo para simplificar en gran medida la metodología a emplear.

Sin embargo, mis argumentos esencialistas hacían que mi análisis de la poesía de Levertov fuera cada vez más reduccionista. Los componentes sociológicos e ideológicos presentes en la poesía sobre el género y el cuerpo permanecían, incomprensiblemente, exentos de mi estudio. Mientras que Levertov evolucionaba hacia una representación del género y del cuerpo como constructos mediados por discursos sociales, mi crítica de estos poemas estaba cada vez más estancada en los mismos puntos. El esencialismo no me permitía analizar aspectos tales como la actuación de los discursos del poder sobre el cuerpo, o las formas en las que el cuerpo de la mujer es representado en nuestra cultura, entre otros.

Si quería analizar los múltiples componentes del discurso poético sobre la identidad –cómo las imágenes de autorepresentación se

articulaban de manera cada vez más compleja, cómo se iban interrelacionando a través de varios poemas, cómo se iban inscribiendo en una dinámica de cambios constantes, cómo su visión del cuerpo femenino era cada vez más consciente de los elementos que influían en la representación e interpretación del cuerpo en nuestra cultura– necesitaba otros aliados metodológicos. El esencialismo, huelga decirlo, era completamente ineficaz para tratar todos estos factores no directamente relacionados con lo biológico.

Influido por todas estas consideraciones, y sobre todo, por la dinámica de cambios constantes a la que estaban sujetas las imágenes de autorepresentación, decidí abandonar el esencialismo y optar por la teoría constructiva. Las aportaciones teóricas de Teresa de Lauretis marcaron mi nueva apreciación del género y me enseñaron a entender la construcción del género dentro del marco de los sistemas de representación y autorepresentación. Su máxima "la construcción del género es el producto y el proceso de la representación y de la autorepresentación" me pareció bastante adecuada para iniciar el análisis de los cambios en las representaciones poéticas.

Mi lectura de Michel Foucault y su *Historia de la sexualidad* influyó también de manera determinante en mi cambio de posición como investigador. La tesis foucaultiana de que la sexualidad es algo regulado y determinado históricamente por la intervención de una tecnología al servicio de la ideología y el poder marcó profundamente mi visión de la sexualidad. La nueva definición de la sexualidad como "el conjunto de efectos producidos en los cuerpos, los comportamientos, las relaciones sociales debido a la actuación de tecnologías políticas muy complejas" me permitió una perspectiva más amplia de la sexualidad. De manera colateral, la teoría foucaultiana incidió también en mi nueva perspectiva del género, de cómo había que aproximarse al estudio del mismo. Si lo que Foucault había descubierto era extrapolable al género, mi análisis tendría que considerar la mediación de éste en el análisis de la sexualidad. En otras palabras, el género, como de Lauretis argumenta, tendría que

ser considerado también como un locus de intervención discursiva al mismo nivel que la sexualidad. El género por tanto podría definirse también con las mismas palabras que Foucault utilizó para referirse a la sexualidad. Se concluye de todo lo anterior que la crítica literaria relacionada con el género tiene unas particularidades que le son propias y que hacen que la teoría de Foucault sobre el sexo requiera de ciertas enmiendas. El discurso sobre la sexualidad y el cuerpo en la escritura de mujeres ha de tener en cuenta, por ejemplo, que la acción del poder y la ideología no es idéntica para ambos géneros, por la sencilla razón de que las mujeres han sido objeto histórico de regulación e intervención opresiva.

Aunque el enfoque histórico constructivista servía de gran utilidad para el análisis de la poesía de Levertov sobre el género, el cuerpo, la sexualidad, y el erotismo, aún quedaban muchos agujeros negros en mi visión de algunos fenómenos que se producían en su discurso poético. Por ejemplo, sus imágenes de autorepresentación no sólo se construían, un poema tras otro, cada vez de forma más compleja y articulada, sino que también parecían dotarse de un carácter retroactivo que, como resultado, hacía que se modificaran imágenes que aparecían en poemas anteriores.

La situación a la que me enfrentaba era la siguiente: por un lado, la idea del género como una construcción discursiva y por otro lado, la idea del género como algo susceptible de ser contínuamente deconstruido a través del discurso. La teoría constructivista no satisfacía todas mis necesidades puesto que carecía de las herramientas metodológicas para incluir este elemento deconstructivo. Necesitaba una corriente crítica que hiciera factible mi análisis de funcionamientos tales como la revisión, deconstrucción o reinvención de representaciones culturales.

En las teorías de Judith Butler y Diane Elam encontré ese aliado teórico-metodológico que necesitaba para analizar también la deconstrucción del género y la sexualidad en la poesía de Levertov desde una perspectiva más abierta. Tanto Butler como Elam ven el

género como algo abierto a contínuas redefiniciones, una categoría que no puede delimitarse a un campo semántico específico ni agotarse en una serie de significados. El género para ambas críticas feministas es un concepto aún indeterminado y que está contínuamente generando múltiples significados a través de su deconstrucción.

Desde esta posición crítica, la ilusión crítica de sistematicidad y delimitación de todos los posibles significados pronto se desvanece. Cualquier ambición de agotar en mi discurso todos los significados presentes en la representación del género aparecía contradictoria y absurda. Pero, por otro lado, esta posición me permitía analizar todo el proceso dialéctico en el que estaban inmersas las imágenes de autorepresentación, además del carácter deconstructivo de éstas.

La fusión de postulados constructivistas y deconstructivistas me dotó de las herramientas metodológicas que consideraba necesarias para referirme a la reconstrucción del género en la poesía de Levertov y hacerlo utilizando estructuras abiertas y herramientas flexibles. De este modo aprendí a interpretar mejor las imágenes de autorepresentación, a seguir su proceso de evolución en el tiempo, a indagar en la dialéctica interna a la que eran sometidas dichas imágenes, y, finalmente, a entender que esta dialéctica interna era lo que permitía a la poeta expandir las posibilidades de la autorepresentación y ofrecer una visión personal de la identidad más enriquecedora.

Capítulo 3

Los Prototipos: Ajustando las lentes de la revisión

En este capítulo intento analizar los puntos de relación entre el fenómeno de la revisión literaria y la reinvención de nuevas imágenes de autorepresentación. Mi objetivo al analizar estas interconexiones es mostrar que la obra de Levertov se sitúa dentro de la tradición

revisionista consolidada en la poesía de escritoras contemporáneas. Gracias a su labor revisionista, Levertov consigue no ser fagocitada por la tradición literaria patriarcal, además de contribuir con nuevas imágenes a la construcción de la literatura de mujeres.

El término revisión ha sido una de los términos bandera más utilizados por la crítica feminista. Tal es así que la necesidad de revisar la herencia cultural de las sociedades patriarcales(normas culturales, historiografía, ciencia, literatura, política, mitología y pintura) ha sido una de las pocas reivindicaciones que ha conseguido unir a la crítica feminista a ambos lados del Atlántico. Cuando se habla de revisión, el ámbito de la literatura se configura siempre como objeto de atención preferente, dada su trascendencia social como medio transmisor de representaciones míticas. Si consideramos que la mayoría de los mitos que forman parte de nuestra cultura han sido transmitidos a través de la lengua literaria, y que por tanto ésta es patrón de creencias, modos de experiencia, y modelos de identificación, la relevancia que tiene el fenómeno de la revisión queda más que patente.

La idea principal que intento sostener a lo largo del capítulo es que la revisión, para ser efectiva, debe pasar por dos fases. Una primera fase es la deconstrucción de las estrategias de persuasión y engaño encriptadas en los mitos que la literatura patriarcal ha propagado. La segunda fase consiste en redefinir, con la información obtenida del proceso de revisión, una tradición literaria que no caiga en el error de reproducir o perpetuar modelos de la tradición patriarcal, una tradición literaria que debe constituirse de manera independiente, creada con reglas y modelos propios. La poesía de Levertov se caracteriza por su labor tanto deconstuctiva como reconstructiva. Por un lado, Levertov deconstruye muchas de las imágenes estereotipadas sobre la mujer transmitidas por los mitos, y, por otro, consigue reinventar nuevas imágenes míticas de representación en clara oposición a las representaciones dominantes.

La pregunta sigue siendo, no obstante, cómo conseguir disociarse de una tradición literaria que ha estado siempre tan presente en nuestras vidas. ¿Cuál es el método adecuado para la revisión? ¿Cuáles son los términos exactos de la revisión? ¿Cómo debe procederse?

Dado que la literatura es reserva de imágenes que se transmiten a través de miles de mitos y arquetipos, para que la revisión de estos mitos y arquetipos pueda ser efectiva ésta debe concentrarse en revolucionar el ámbito literario, proyector histórico de muchas imágenes distorsionadas de la mujer.

Si consideramos que la literatura ha estado durante siglos en manos patriarcales, no resulta extraño, en este contexto histórico, que las imágenes de la mujer más comunes en la literatura sean las de la mujer como objeto erótico o como mujer destructora, *femme fatale*, o como madre. La representación de la mujer como creadora brilla por su ausencia. Lo más preocupante de estos modelos de imitación es que no sólo se circunscriben al ámbito de la literatura sino que inciden también en el terreno de lo sociológico. Todas aquellas experiencias o formas de autorepresentación que no coincidan con las imágenes transmitidas por la literatura son rechazadas de plano por los agentes sociales consumidores de tales modelos. Y puesto que esas imágenes han sido históricamente producto de la invención de los hombres, lo que resulta de todo esto es que las mujeres han sido obligadas a vivir modelos de experiencia vicarios. La posición histórica de la mujer como receptora de experiencias representadas de forma ajena, añadido al fenómeno de contaminación de la experiencia personal que estos modelos producen, fuerza a las mujeres reinventoras de estas imágenes a atravesar un arduo proceso de introspección en el que tienen que discriminar entre lo que es genuina experiencia personal y aquella otra experiencia personal que ha sido contaminada por los mitos. Este proceso debe ser previo a la invención de nuevas imágenes de autorepresentación en la literatura pues de lo contrario se correría el riesgo de confundir ambas

cosas, de crear modelos similares que no transmiten nada nuevo acerca de la experiencia.

Según sostengo, la modificación de los mitos y arquetipos literarios de mujeres es un requisito fundamental en el proceso de reconstrucción de una nueva tradición literaria. Pero la pregunta es cómo se puede cambiar algo tan supuestamente inmodificable como es el arquetipo. La razón principal por la que las representaciones de las mujeres en la literatura están íntimamente asociadas a los arquetipos es porque cada vez que una de estas imágenes queda fijada a alguno de los arquetipos, éstas se configuran como cualidad preexistente de la mujer, suprema representación que emana del inconsciente colectivo.

El estudio del origen de los mitos y de los arquetipos, de los factores psicológicos que han animado la invención de los mismos, de las intenciones latentes, ha dotado a la crítica revisionista de una información muy válida para su proceso de reinvención de modelos alternativos. Rachel Blau DuPlessis propugna la sustitución de los arquetipos, transmisores de experiencias falsificadas, por lo que ella define como prototipos "formas de representación abiertas a la posibilidad de ser transformadas". Toda revisión de los arquetipos ha de hacerse, sin embargo, siempre teniendo en cuenta las intenciones que el sistema patriarcal tenía al establecer un arquetipo determinado. Sólo así se podrá proceder a la creación de nuevas representaciones simbólicas no contaminadas por la influencia de las representaciones arquetípicas de la mujer que los hombres han inventado a lo largo de los siglos.

CAPÍTULO 4

Sobre egos, imágenes y espejos escindidos

El presente capítulo se centra en el estudio de las imágenes de autorepresentación en la poesía de Denise Levertov a través de una serie de poemas que están claramente interrelacionados entre sí. El análisis de estas imágenes de autorepresentación, de cómo evolucionan en el tiempo, de cómo se van estructurando de manera cada vez más compleja y abierta, permite un mejor conocimiento de cómo Levertov consigue reconstruir su identidad personal reafirmando el género en su discurso poético.

En sus primeros poemas sobre la identidad personal, Levertov recurre a cierto hermetismo como si no quisiera confrontar directamente el conflicto central que ya se vislumbra en estos primeros poemas. De manera genérica, el conflicto en ciernes está causado por la discrepancia entre la definición personal y las definiciones que la sociedad ha impuesto sobre la mujer. Estos primeros poemas se articulan en torno al choque entre los constructos sociales sobre la mujer y la visión que Levertov tiene de sí misma como mujer. En "The Dogwood" ("El cornejo") se esboza el "conflicto" entre la madre, ama de casa, y la mujer poeta que sabe que tiene que superar un gran número de barreras y prejuicios culturales antes de conseguir consagrarse como tal. El poema "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman" ("La mujer-agua y la mujer-tierra") dramatiza esta especie de esquizofrenia a través de las figuras folclóricas de una madre convencional y una madre bohemia. Mientras que la mujer-tierra es la representación viva de la buena madre que atiende a sus hijos y los mantiene fuertes y robustos, la mujer-agua encarna la mujer creativa, la que se viste con trajes de libélula y baila por ciudades cubiertas de niebla. Parámetros de representación similares se repiten en "In Mind" ("En la mente"),

poema en el que de nuevo se define por un lado a la mujer bella e inocente, ajustada a los cánones sociales, y, quizás por ello, carente de imaginación y, por otro lado, se presenta a la otra mujer, la que viste de forma extravagante, con plumas, harapos, y tafetán raído. Esta otra mujer sí está, al contrario que la primera, directamente emparentada con la imaginación, aunque, apostilla Levertov, no es vista con agrado. Pero lo que hace de este un poema esencial para entender los nuevos rumbos que toma Levertov en su poesía sobre la identidad es su intención explícita de integrar a todas estas mujeres en su mente, entendiéndolas como aspectos diversos de su identidad que no tienen por qué convivir en perpetuo conflicto, y a las que se pueden sumar otras identidades, otras representaciones. El ánimo de integración que mueve estos poemas queda plenamente confirmado en posteriores poemas. En el poema titulado "The Woman" ("La mujer") Levertov termina confesando expresamente que las dos mujeres de "In Mind" son en realidad una misma mujer. En otro poema posterior, "Cancion", Levertov amalgama todas sus representaciones anteriores y las relaciona a todas con su capacidad creadora como mujer. Curiosamente, en aquellas estrofas en las que las representaciones se explicitan de manera independiente a su condición de mujer el resultado es la fractura, la erosión. Pero cuando todas estas representaciones se integran dentro del calidoscopio que es ser mujer, el resultado es la realización del acto creativo, la armoniosa conjunción de la mujer y la poeta. Continuando en su línea de exploración de las interconexiones entre las imágenes de autorepresentación, en "The Dragonfly-Mother" ("La madre-libélula")Levertov vuelve a representar a la mujer vestida con traje de libélula del poema "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman", sólo que la que ahora Levertov denomina "madre-libélula" actúa, y sin ambages, como Musa, instando a la poeta a que se detraiga de sus responsabilidades públicas, y se dedique a escribir. La asociación de la madre libélula, la Musa, con la mujer-agua no resulta nada extraña dado que ambas representaciones participan de un mismo carácter

imaginativo, lo que resulta más novedoso es ver cómo Levertov se identifica explícitamente con todas estas representaciones.

Una de las aportaciones originales al estudio de estos poemas consiste en probar que el modelo de regresión infinita que Diane Elam propugna puede ser de aplicabilidad a este conjunto de poemas. Lo que propongo es que en estos poemas la imagen de la mujer se representa de manera compleja a través de múltiples imágenes. La analogía, propuesta por Elam, de la caja de cereales en la que aparece la figura de un cuáquero puede servir como ilustración del modelo poético objeto de estudio. Elam recurre a ella para demostrar de forma ilustrativa que la categoría de mujer está inmersa en una espiral regresiva de similares características (en la caja de cereales se representa a un cuáquero que sostiene una caja en la que se contiene a su vez otra imagen de un cuáquero sosteniendo otra caja, y así sucesivamente *ad infinitum* en una espiral regresiva de representaciones). Los poemas de Levertov sobre identidad pueden leerse, según mi criterio, como si fueran una imitación de este modelo. Por ejemplo, la madre-libélula aparece representada en la imagen de la madre-agua vestida con traje de libélula. Pero la espiral de recesiones no se detiene aquí, pues detrás de estas imágenes se halla la imagen de la propia poeta quien confiesa en su poema "La madre-libélula" su total identificación personal con estas imágenes. Este es simplemente uno de los múltiples ejemplos de espiral regresiva que pueden citarse. Otro ejemplo sería el de la mujer que aparece vestida con trajes de plumas locas en el poema "La mujer". Detrás de esta representación se encuentra la figura de la mujer vestida con ópalos y harapos, plumas y tafetán raído del poema titulado ("En mi mente"). También en esta ocasión la poeta vuelve a identificarse personalmente con estas representaciones al titular el poema "En mi mente". El hecho de que este modelo complejo y regresivo de representaciones pueda ser de aplicabilidad a la poesía de Levertov demuestra que Levertov consigue reconstruir la identidad personal como algo no sólo cada vez más rico y abierto, sino también como

una complejidad que es imposible aprehender instantáneamente en un conjunto de definiciones fijas (la ilusión de que la mujer se puede definir dentro de un sistema fijo y simple de representaciones ha estado siempre presente en todos los sistemas de representación patriarcal). Levertov presenta así una muestra de las infinitas posibilidades que los sistemas abiertos de autorepresentación pueden ofrecer a las mujeres.

Lo que resulta también destacable de este método es que llegado un cierto punto empieza a funcionar como modelo estético a gran escala en el que las imágenes se yuxtaponen para conformar una iconografía personal, es decir, todo un conjunto de imágenes personales asociadas a una serie de significados concretos. Estas imágenes se interrelacionan a través de un hilo cronológico que es tanto progresivo como regresivo. En otras palabras, para que el estudio pueda ser completo hay que analizar no sólo cómo estas imágenes evolucionan en el tiempo, cómo cada vez se van haciendo más complejas, sino también su carácter retroactivo que hace que modifiquen y reajusten las imágenes aparecidas en poemas anteriores. Finalmente, las interrelaciones que se establecen entre las imágenes contenidas en estos poemas avalan la tesis de un análisis en conjunto de estos poemas para así poder desvelar cómo la poeta va evolucionando en su proceso de construcción de la identidad personal.

En la segunda sección de este mismo capítulo abordo el estudio temático de la visión del cuerpo y el sexo en un conjunto de poemas significativos. El punto de partida de esta sección es el análisis de un poema titulado "Hypocrite Women" ("Mujeres hipócritas") y escrito en respuesta a otro poema que Jack Spicer había leído en una reunión de poetas en casa de Robert Duncan. En "Hypocrite Women" Levertov denuncia abiertamente la hipocresía de algunas mujeres que han aceptado las valoraciones y descripciones peyorativas que los hombres han hecho de ellas. El poema constituye todo un alegato feminista contra la, en ciertos casos, frivolidad femenina, contra el sometimiento del cuerpo femenino a los cánones de belleza

ideados por los hombres, y contra la aceptación de la ley del silencio que impide a las mujeres decir lo que realmente sienten y cómo perciben sus cuerpos. El tema de la necesidad de hablar con sinceridad sobre el cuerpo es de hecho una constante temática en la poesía de Denise Levertov. En un poema titulado "The Goddess" ("La diosa") una diosa implacable de la verdad despierta a la poeta que estaba dormida en el "Castillo de la Mentira" y la saca a la fuerza al bosque exterior para que pueda experimentar en su propio cuerpo, y de manera directa, todo lo que sucede a su alrededor. En "Song for Ishtar", ("Un canto a Ishtar") un poema que guarda cierta relación temática con el anterior, la poeta se encarna en un cerdo para copular y revolcarse en el barro en un encuentro sexual con la diosa Ishtar, invocada por aquella y representada en el poema en la figura de una cerda. Lo atípico de esta escena sugiere una inversión de los cánones de belleza por un lado y una desmitificación de los ideales del amor romántico por el otro.

En "Fantasiestrück" la poeta reinventa una hermanastra para Calibán, el espíritu terrenal de Shakespeare en *La Tempestad*. Como le ocurría a Calibán, quien había sido encerrado en una roca por Próspero, o a Ariel, que había sido confinado a un pino y luego liberado por el propio Próspero, en el poema de Levertov la hermana imaginaria de Calibán también aparece encerrada, pero no en un pino o una roca, sino en su propio cuerpo. Mientras que la hermana bastarda de Calibán sabe que su sino es resignarse a vivir dentro de ese cuerpo pesado y poco grácil, Ariel se puede permitir la libertad de usar su cuerpo para volar dando piruetas alrededor de ella. Es esta una metáfora más que adecuada para representar la degradación sociocultural del cuerpo de la mujer frente al cuerpo del hombre. Pero la confusión entre lo irreal y lo real que acontece de manera muy particular en *La Tempestad* parece invitar a una reflexión sobre el carácter ilusorio de lo que se representa. Muy probablemente, a través de esta referencia intertextual Levertov nos invita a reflexionar sobre los efectos que la tecnología de las representación

ha tenido sobre nosotros, aceptando que estas representaciones del cuerpo femenino eran ajustadas a la realidad anatómica en lugar de darnos cuenta de que eran invenciones beneficiosas para el patriarcado.

En un último poema titulado "A Woman Alone" ("Una mujer sola") Levertov presenta a una mujer mayor mirándose al espejo, pero no reconociéndose en la imagen que aquél refleja: se ve más guapa y más joven de lo que aparece en la imagen. Este simple episodio está dotado, según mi criterio, de una cierta trascendencia cultural y sociológica. De manera muy nítida, Levertov rechaza de plano las representaciones del cuerpo femenino en nuestra cultura, es decir contradice al espejo social (la mujer mayor está necesariamente fuera de los cánones de belleza en nuestra sociedad) para reinventarse su propio espejo en el que reflejar sin distorsiones su visión de sí misma. El denominador común de todos estos poemas sobre el cuerpo y el sexo es que están diseñados como una propuesta de reflexión, una invitación a las mujeres para que confronten estos constructos y, finalmente, se decidan a revisarlos radicalmente.

CAPÍTULO 5

¿Qué bloquea al altar? El erotismo en la poética de Denise Levertov

En este cuarto capítulo analizo el discurso erótico en la poesía de Levertov. Lo que pretendo demostrar es que la poesía erótica de Levertov es un ejemplo de las dificultades a las que deben enfrentarse las mujeres escritoras que intentan escribir sobre su visión personal del erotismo. En el poema "Eros", las referencias a Eros están transidas de elementos neoplatónicos y ascéticos. En cuanto a sus reminiscencias neoplatónicas, Eros aparece idealizado como

cualidad suprema de poder y belleza, una fiel imitación de las diversas alusiones a Eros en *El Banquete* de Platón. En consonancia con sus connotaciones ascéticas, Eros figura como un dios casto cuyos atributos, lejos de pretender la atracción de la mirada lasciva, sólo llaman a la adoración ritual. Levertov presenta de manera muy sutil una visión crítica de los mitos patriarcales sobre el amor, exponiendo la naturaleza irreal e idealizada de estos constructos que nada tienen que ver con la realidad del erotismo humano.

En un siguiente poema "Hymn to Eros" ("Himno a Eros") Levertov revisa el mito de Eros y presenta una divinidad más humanizada, más involucrada con el deseo humano. Por primera vez se hace mención al deseo, reinsertado en el poema como un deseo de aquí y ahora y no un deseo lejano que habita en el más allá. En este poema, Levertov retrata el erotismo como una pedagogía de los cuerpos, un proceso de aprendizaje del otro a través del acto erótico.

Entre finales de los años 60 y principios de los 70, y luego a lo largo de esta última década, Levertov incide de manera especial en la reconstrucción del cuerpo como fuente de conocimiento y placer. En un poema titulado "What She Could Not Tell Him" ("Lo que no pudo decirle") Levertov explora la geografía del cuerpo en todas sus dimensiones: la piel se redescubre como un pergamino en el que quedan restos de los trazos del acto erótico y a través del cual se puede llegar a conocer todo aquello que no conocemos sobre el amado.

Finalmente, uno de los poemas en los que Levertov trata la ruptura de las ataduras que han impedido a las mujeres moverse libremente en el terreno del erotismo es "The Poem Unwritten" ("El poema no escrito"). Posee un tono abiertamente confesional en el que Levertov lamenta que su poema erótico haya estado tanto tiempo reprimido en su mente. Paradójicamente, lo que antes había sido reprimido, emerge ahora con fuerza inusitada. El poema se convierte en una consagración del placer que proporciona el poder

hablar, abierta y sinceramente, sobre el placer. Las cualidades sacrosantas atribuidas a Eros en los primeros poemas se transfieren ahora al cuerpo, la adoración del dios se convierte ahora en adoración del cuerpo humano que es redescubierto por las manos de la poeta. La verbalización y celebración del erotismo en el poema hacen que éste se pueda convertir en el altar de lo erótico. Con este poema, un poema en el que se muestra una íntima relación entre erotismo y poesía, Levertov se une a un grupo selecto de mujeres poetas contemporáneas que han sabido explorar y expresar libremente el erotismo en sus obras.

En su poema titulado "Holiday" ("Día de fiesta"), Levertov presenta el erotismo como un festival dionisiaco. El poema establece una correlación entre el disfrute de la comida y bebida y una vida sexual satisfactoria. La representación de este Eros es ahora bien distinta a la de los primeros poemas. Lejos de mostrarnos a Eros como un dios del amor idealizado (representación patriarcal), Levertov acentúa sus rasgos más sensuales, su cualidad diletante, sus ansias por disfrutar de los placeres dietéticos. Finalmente, en la serie *Pig Dreams* (*Sueños de una cerda*) Levertov representa alegóricamente el erotismo como algo físico, propio de nuestra naturaleza animal, aunque reprimido por las normas de nuestra civilización.

CAPÍTULO 6

"Ella y la Musa": De las Musas, la visión y el arte de la escritura

En este último capítulo exploro la poesía inspiracional de Levertov a través del análisis de sus poemas sobre la Musa, la percepción del misterio en la naturaleza y el arte de la escritura. El análisis de estos temas es, como propongo, un factor clave para

entender su proceso de maduración poética y su búsqueda constante de una voz propia.

Su condición de mujer poeta orbitando alrededor de grupos poéticos compuestos mayoritariamente por hombres fue la causa de que en más de una ocasión se le asignara el papel de Musa del grupo poético. Dicha asociación, y esto fue algo que Levertov pronto intuyó, iba en detrimento de su dignidad creadora como mujer poeta en tanto en cuanto la Musa siempre ha sido tenida en la tradición literaria y filosófica como fuente de inspiración para otros, pero por sí misma incapaz de cualquier creación propia.

Levertov trata de revertir los efectos perniciosos de estas asociaciones mediante la reconstrucción de su relación con la Musa, cosa nada fácil ya que para ello es necesario revisar y reinventar muchos de los mitos inspiracionales del canon literario. El objetivo es demostrar que puede haber formas de relación con ella mucho más armoniosas y creativas.

En "The Well" ("El pozo"), uno de los primeros poemas en los que Levertov menciona explícitamente a la Musa, se integran muchos de los elementos que la poeta siempre ha relacionado en su vida con la inspiración y el proceso creativo. Por esta razón, es un poema esencial para empezar a investigar en la poética inspiracional de Levertov. En este poema una Musa del lago situado en un parque conocido como Valentines Park (un lugar de su infancia al que Levertov recurre varias veces a lo largo de su extensa obra poética) opera un milagro que hace que la propia poeta, encarnada como personaje, pueda, alegóricamente, sentir cómo la naturaleza se plasma en la palma de su mano. La clave para descifrar este poema es verlo como un homenaje personal que Levertov hace a su madre, que fue precisamente quien la instruyó para que aprendiese a ver y nombrar los elementos que integraban la naturaleza que la rodeaba. Tras este poema Levertov vuelve a utilizar de manera recurrente una serie de poemas sobre el pozo, invocado siempre símbolo de inspiración y poder imaginativo.

"Song for Ishtar" ("Canto a Ishtar") es otro poema representativo de su poética revisionista sobre la Musa. Esta intención se pueda apreciar prácticamente en todas los versos del poema: en la elección de Ishtar, diosa de la luna que une en su figura muchos atributos andróginos y en una curiosa caracterización de la poeta y la diosa (cerdo y cerda respectivamente) que desmantela la idealizada visión de la relación entre poeta y Musa. El poema revisa muchos de los constructos literarios acerca de la Musa, especialmente las relaciones jerárquicas entre Musa y poeta y los estereotipos sexuales que abundan en la representación literaria de estas relaciones. Quizás por esta razón en el poema no existe una relación jerárquica entre Musa y poeta, sino, al contrario, una relación de igual a igual que queda manifiesta en la copulación porcina, en el deseo y el placer que los dos muestran, en su celebración de la comunión espiritual.

En posteriores poemas como "She and the Muse" ("Ella y la Musa") Levertov va aún más allá en su revisión de los principios de autoridad y en su redefinición de su Musa personal. En este poema, Levertov integra el proceso de inspiración en una vida sexual plena. Después de su breve encuentro, sobre todo sexual, con su "héroe", y tras despedirse de él con un irónico "arrivederci", la heroína se va corriendo a su tercera habitación, se sienta, coge la pluma y comienza a escribir, pero no sobre él. La satisfacción del deseo sexual actúa como catalizador del proceso creativo.

CONCLUSIONES

Si como afirma Adrienne Rich "todo grupo que vive bajo el poder de lenguaje y representación de una cultura dominante corre el peligro de la fragmentación y necesita crear un arte que pueda contrarrestar esta tendencia", la poesía de Levertov sobre identidad y mito es un ejemplo de ese arte tanto por su capacidad de verbalización como por las representaciones que crea. De hecho, estos

dos aspectos constituyen los pilares sobre los que se sustenta la poesía de Levertov relacionada con la identidad y el mito.

En su poética de identidad, Levertov nombra y define los diversos aspectos de su identidad, aceptándolos finalmente, incluso los más extravagantes, y celebrándolos como facetas inalienables de su identidad como mujer poeta. Levertov también consigue desestabilizar los sistemas de representación patriarcales a través de la invención de una compleja iconografía cuyas imágenes están en contínuo proceso de cambio. Así destruye la ilusión de poder captar el concepto "mujer" en una sola representación universal.

Por otro lado, en su discurso poético Levertov verbaliza abiertamente su relación con su cuerpo y su sexualidad, desafiando las normas culturales que impiden a las mujeres referirse a ellos explícitamente. Levertov muestra así su fe en la capacidad que tiene la palabra para mover las conciencias y promover el cambio. Como poeta comprometida con las mujeres de su generación, Levertov desafía las convenciones de su tiempo utilizando un vocabulario directo para referirse al cuerpo y al sexo. Su objetivo es doble: por un lado sus poemas desafían las estrategias de silencio impuestas por el sistema patriarcal a fin de que las mujeres no tengan el derecho de definir su cuerpo y su sexualidad; por otro lado, Levertov consigue demostrar a las mujeres que el uso de un lenguaje directo y claro para nombrar lo más íntimo de su identidad, para nombrar el cuerpo y el sexo, es la antesala de la conciencia. En su poesía sobre el cuerpo Levertov invita a las mujeres a una seria reflexión sobre la necesidad de revisar aspectos importantes de la identidad, el cuerpo y la sexualidad al tiempo que advierte contra los efectos perniciosos que pueden sobrevenir a las mujeres cuando se someten a los sistemas patriarcales de representación. En su poesía, Levertov ha mostrado que se puede desestabilizar los sistemas de representación, reconstruir la identidad de forma abierta y aproximarse al cuerpo y al sexo desde una perspectiva distinta.

En conclusión, Levertov es una poeta con voz propia, de gran capacidad para la definición de la identidad personal y para la plena expresión del cuerpo, la sexualidad y el erotismo en su discurso poético. En segundo lugar, la poesía de Levertov sobre identidad y mito es claramente revisionista. Levertov estructura estos temas en claro desafío a las normas culturales y modelos de representación patriarcales. Esto lo consigue a través de la creación de imágenes de representación que sirven como modelos de identificación para muchas mujeres. En tercer lugar, estas imágenes se configuran como modelos abiertos, visiones alternativas de representación en clara oposición a los arquetipos sobre la mujer.

Finalmente, y a pesar de haber sido relacionada con grupos poéticos compuestos mayoritariamente por hombres, la poesía de Levertov sobre identidad y mito está claramente entroncada con la poesía contemporánea de mujeres. Se puede observar en los poemas seleccionados en este trabajo que Levertov redefine estos temas en su poesía de manera similar a otras mujeres escritoras que tratan temas similares. Por esta razón, y a pesar de su sincretismo literario y su interés por tendencias poéticas muy dispares, Levertov debiera catalogarse sobre todo como una mujer poeta que ha sabido renegociar la enorme influencia de toda una tradición literaria.

En una de sus primeras cartas a Levertov, William Carlos Williams alababa las virtudes de Safo y valoraba la calidad de su obra en el contexto de las presiones que tuvo que soportar. De igual forma, los logros literarios de Levertov han de considerarse a la luz de las presiones que ella supo resistir a lo largo de su carrera poética. En este trabajo he intentado explicitar cómo algunas de estas presiones se manifestaron en la obra de Levertov y cómo consiguió superarlas. Levertov consigue resistir estas presiones, entre otras formas, alejándose de su posición como hija poética, sujeta a la aprobación y reconocimiento de sus padres poéticos, y resolviendo el conflicto central entre sus posiciones como madre y poeta.

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