

## *TOWARDS A POETICS OF SELF- REPRESENTATION: ANNE BRADSTREET, EMILY DICKINSON AND SYLVIA PLATH*

MARÍA ANTONIA OLIVER AND MIREIA TRENCHS  
Universidad Pompeu Fabra de Barcelona

The question whether women are and have been able to express their own subjectivity through language has been the cause of much debate amongst feminist critics. They have undermined the notion that women's nature is to account for women's social and literary constraints and have described the cultural forces that account for women's linguistic oppression and expression. As members of a culture, women make use of the same linguistic resources as men. However, such use may be different when they feel or consciously realize that the existing dominant uses of such resources fail to express their subjectivity.

Chris Weedon, Julia Kristeva and Iris Zavala, amongst many others, have appropriated the post-structuralist notion that meaning, though unfixed, is always culturally constructed. They have thus challenged the linguistic determinism of previous critics and in turn produced non-essentialist theories of subjectivity and sexuality. According to their new mode of criticism, «feminine difference» in language involves any kind of resistance—through ambiguity, contradiction or transgression—to the general consensual meanings that prevent the expression of a given female consciousness.

Such consideration has its philosophical origin in the concept of language as discourse as proposed by Bakhtin (Bakhtin; Voloshinov), other literary theorists (Fowler; Kress and Hodge; Pêcheux), language philosophers (Austin; Searle) and linguists and sociolinguists (Halliday; Gumperz and Hymes). By discourse they understand a set of individual utterances whose meaning is shaped by the specific social and cultural conditions of the speaking or writing subject. Words are therefore not monolithic meaning entities, but units that, because constantly exchanged between particular human subjects, acquire different meanings and performative effects.

Taking as our departing point the notion that language is not to be disassociated from the ideological and communicative context in which it is produced, we cannot see the stylistic analysis of literary texts as an aim in itself. We rather view it as a way to identify the ways in which language alters or maintains the ideological parameters of a given historical moment. Thus, the common New England traditional Puritan background of the three American female poets that concern us—Anne Bradstreet (1612-72), Emily Dickinson (1830-86) and Sylvia Plath (1932-63)—should come through with the analysis of their respective poems: «For Deliverance from a Fever,» «I Measure Every Grief/ I Meet,» and «Fever 103<sup>o</sup>» (See Appendixes A, B and C). They all describe the extreme physical or psychical suffering of a female speaker as a result of the tension between the elements of a binary opposition: the flesh and the spirit, or the earthly and the divine, in Bradstreet's; «the Love» and the pain in Dickinson's, and paradise and hell in Plath's. The way the tension between these elements is resolved generates a language some of whose semantic, syntactic, rhetorical and figurative features spring out of the speakers' concept of themselves in relation to an oppressive painful situation. Being the speaker's relation to pain the thematic focus of our analysis, we do not claim to say everything about these texts; we will rather concentrate on those linguistic features that point at our central concern.

First of all, a close look at the common linguistic characteristics, if any, in the presentation of the three female poetic personas should allow us to talk about a «difference» in language. Our use of the term «difference» does not assume the existence of an «écriture féminine» or a biologically-based female culture essentially different from the general culture. It refers to these writers' discursive relationship to the dominant ideology, their «powers of protest and change» (Yaeger 18). Our objective is to look at the possible individual strategies of protest and dissent in these texts unveiling «the system of differences and the repressive powers, as well as the technologies of exclusion» (Zavala 220) (our translation), as well as to establish a dialogue between the texts by exploring how they differ from and resemble each other in such unveiling.

In the first four lines of «For Deliverance from a Fever,» the speaker briefly recapitulates a previous painful plight from which God released her. Already in the first stanza of the poem she presents herself as an object through the reiterative use of the object pronoun 'me': «When sorrows had begirt *me* round» (1), «Then didst Thou rid *me* out» (4) (our italics). Such presentation is reinforced through the personification of «sorrows» and «pains» in the same stanza. The use of the passive voice («no part was found» [3]) together with the reference to her body parts as personified independent entities («My burning flesh in sweat did boil» [50], «My aching head did break» [6]) demonstrate a deliberate avoidance of the subject pronoun and highlight the inaction and objectification of the speaker. Her agony and powerlessness is conveyed through both the intensification of the verbs denoting physical suffering (*boil* and *break*) by means of the preceding auxiliary «did,» and through the textual weakness of the «I.» Whenever the first person subject pronoun is used, it is before verbs of struggle («I

toil») or verbal phrases indicating oppression («So faint I could not speak»[8], «Nor could I read my evidence» [11]). Further weakening the personal pronoun are the syntactic constructions of some lines, where it usually appears embedded after an hyperbaton or an adjective: «From side to side for ease I toil/ So faint I could not speak» (7-8).

In the third stanza (9-12) the speaker introduces the soul, the second element of the dichotomy around which the poem evolves. The first and only enjambment of the poem («Beclouded was my soul with fear/ of Thy displeasure sore» [9-10]), serves to emphasize the object of her soul's fear and to indicate a moment of crisis. «My soul» can be read as a metonymy for the speaker's «I,» her self, but since it is mentioned right after «My burning flesh» and «My aching head» for contrast, it also acquires certain autonomy. The fragmentation of the speaker into different parts, her inner conflict between the physical and the spiritual, the human and the divine, is reproduced in the structure of the stanza: the poetic persona experiences fear as a consequence of the physical pain an angry God puts her through, while she also questions the existence of the divinity: «Nor could I read my evidence/ Which oft I read before» (11-12). In the context of Puritanism the «evidence» can be interpreted as the «visible proof of the existence of God» through creation (Stanford 50). The speaker loses faith momentarily and therefore questions the prevailing Calvinist dogmas.

In the fourth stanza of the poem (lines 13-16) the mood changes from self-deprecation to imprecation. So far the speaker has been addressing God as «Thou,» a pronoun commonly used for intimacy with God in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Ronberg 76), but the use of imperatives («Hide not,» «From burnings keep my soul») make her address more outspoken, and her desperation more acute. In spite of the intensity of her physical suffering, she finally tries to depersonalize it: she ceases to refer to her own body and uses the general «flesh» (18). In objectifying «flesh» she returns to the Puritan interpretation that suffering is God's trial of her spiritual endurance. In the last lines of the stanza she reasserts her faith with an acknowledgment of her absolute dependance on the deity: «I on Thy mercies roll» (16)

The process of bringing herself back to God continues with the speaker's recognition of the insignificance of her body and of the infinitely superior worth of her soul («What though in dust it shall be laid/ To glory t'shall be brought» [19-20]). Such recognition is concomitant to her release from pain by God. In the last stanza of the poem the speaker goes back to the institutionalized, more unpersonalized rhetoric of Puritan hymns. The apostrophe or invocation before liturgical phrases («O, praises to my mighty God» [25]) and the use of the third person to refer to God signal a more indirect communication style with the deity, as well as the poetic persona's return to a religious community from which she had been temporarily detached.

Bradstreet does not believe herself to be in possession of free will, and therefore sees God as the ultimate cause of both her suffering and her spiritual redemption. In contrast, in «I measure every Grief/ I meet» Emily Dickinson does not seek God as her

source of consolation. While Bradstreet begins her poem as an address to God, Dickinson does so with the «I» so often eluded or weakened in Bradstreet. The poetic persona is active, curious and eager to probe into the nature of suffering by looking closely at it. She notes, measures and wonders. As the abounding lexicon related to knowledge and perception indicates, her scientific method is inductive: she hopes to reach some conclusion out of the empirical observation of facts. Her analysis is qualitative, as shown in the first two stanzas, in which she wonders about the weight, size and duration of the grief she observes in others in order to be able to compare them to her own:

I wonder if It weighs  
like Mine—  
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long—  
Or did it just begin— (4-8)

Like Bradstreet's speaker, she is an observer of the natural world. While Bradstreet's persona presents a single moment of doubt when she cannot read «the evidence» often read before and then brings herself home to God, Dickinson's curiosity seems to have no boundaries: the recurrent use of the verb «wonder» and of the historic present indicates that her mood is permanently interrogating. In the third stanza her inquisitiveness centers around how others experience life:

I wonder if it hurts to live—  
And if they have to try—  
And whether—could They—  
choose between—  
It would not be—to die— (12-16)

By means of her self-interrogation about other people's experiences the speaker dwells on three characteristics of life according to the Calvinist dogma: life as pain (12), resignation (13), and inevitable human fate (14-16). The use of the conditional («could they» [14]) indicates the impossibility to change things, but it also implies a wish to do so. Through her empathic curiosity about whether others find it hard to accept life as it is, the speaker indirectly presents her own existential predicament. Such an attitude is contrary to the Calvinist faithful's exclusively individual dealings with God.

Also antagonistic with regard to Calvinism is her occasionally unconventional use of Biblical references. In the fourth stanza of the poem the speaker uses a mixed metaphor to refer to the restoration of faith: a renewed smile (19), characterized as light with the Biblical image of the lamp-light. The traditional image of the lamp full of oil

symbolizing the blazing light of Christian faith (Matt. 5, 14-16; Matt. 25, 1-13) is slightly transformed through modifiers («*An imitation of a light/ That has so little oil*» [20-21] [our italics]) that diminish its effect and draw attention to the temporariness of «the smile» symbolizing joy, faith and hope.

One of Dickinson's life-long efforts was to express her indignation at a God that gave human beings a life of constant deprivation and pain. Because Dickinson never saw God's mercy on earth, she refused to believe in the pleasures of an after-life. «Unlike her sentimental poetess-peers she could not erase this pain in gratitude for life-everlasting—nor, like the Puritans, could she accept it as deserved punishment for sin» (Bennet 71). The only words in the text that could be associated to God's benign power («Light,» «Enlightened» and «Love») are used ambiguously despite their clear Biblical implications. The reader is faced with the gap between the positive Biblical connotations of the word «Enlightened»—conventionally referring to the experience of divine spiritual insight—and the negative connotations of its object, «a larger Pain.» Dickinson clarifies the origin of such increase in pain by merely saying that it emerges out of the «contrast with the Love» (32). However, the nature of such love remains unspecified and open for interpretation. The definite article would indicate that «the Love» is common knowledge for both the speaker and the reader, but the reader still does not know whether it is earthly or divine. Be it one or the other, «Love» is not a «Balm»; it intensifies pain. The speaker is either demythifying divine love by diminishing its power to relieve her pain, or pointing at the uselessness and insignificance of an earthly love when in pain.

Charles R. Anderson interprets the dual meaning of Dickinson's words as the result of the tension of two powerful opposites («love and death, ecstasy and despair») and sheds some light on the particular value of love and pain in «I Measure Every Grief I Meet»: «... in place of the Puritan view that earthly suffering is the ordained path to a heavenly reward of bliss, she makes the momentary glimpse of ecstasy both measure and cause of the despair that is the essence of the human condition» (Anderson, «Despair» 33). The frequent allusions to suffering in contrast with the scarcity of those to pleasure and relief certainly confirms the supremacy of despair over ecstasy in the text and shows, as Anderson has also noted, that the correlation between ecstasy and despair is not exact. The preeminence of death over love is also shown in the speaker's grim view of death. Death, mentioned as one of the causes of suffering (36), «is but one—And comes but once» (36-37). The speaker uses several resources to emphasize the distinctiveness of Death: first, the choice of two similar-sounding words which denote singularity («one» and «once»); second, their placement at the end of the lines, which makes them more prominent—the same effect is achieved in the third stanza with the isolation of the verb «to Die» placed between dashes at the end of both a line and a stanza—; and third, the repetition of the adverb «but» before those two words. The effect of these poetic strategies is to present Death as a rotund event as well as to point at its finality: it «only nails the Eyes» (38). Out of her wide catalog of references to pain drawn out of Biblical terminology, the speaker uses the nail, a Christian symbol of

sacrifice, to present a concept of Death which differs from the Christian one: death does not bring salvation but only paralysis and mutilation. With death the speaker would lose the «analytic eyes» that enable her to scrutinize the mysteries of nature, that is, her power to observe.

Despair, another cause of grief, is also given an idiosyncratic meaning. Anderson says that in Dickinson's poetry despair may be understood, in the Christian sense, as the «loss of hope in the mercy of God,» or, in a more secular way, as «the extremest form of mortal suffering» (15). Through the inverted commas and the use of reported speech the speaker creates a distancing effect and, therefore, disclaims any familiarity with the feeling of «Despair» as others may define and perceive it. In this case, Dickinson's persona could be implying that she does not experience «Despair» in a Christian, but rather in a secular sense. Although she detaches herself from the prevailing notion of despair, she resorts to the common Christian religious image of the Calvary to refer to life as suffering. Calvinists would find relief from their grief in God, but the speaker finds comfort in noting «the fashions—of the/ Cross—/ And how they're mostly worn» (46-48), that is, in knowing that others may be experiencing the same Grief as hers.

In the last stanza of the poem the word «Cross,» isolated in line 47 after an enjambment, provides the vehicle of a metaphor whose tenor is «grief.» Initiated in the first stanza (I wonder if *It weighs!* like mine [our italics] [4- 5]), it is extended through the second (I wonder if They *bore it* long [our italics] [7]), and finally specified in «fashions—of the Cross—and how they're mostly worn.» «Cross» is apparently used as a conventional metaphor for pain and sacrifice previous to heavenly glory and redemption. Yet, it is in open conflict with the afore-mentioned ambivalent use of religious references and with the poetic persona's self-interrogation about the Calvinist dogmas. The usual connotations of religious concepts intermingle with the personal meanings she wants to infuse them with, which alters their significance within the prevailing ideology that produced such terms: «instead of surface borrowings she plundered them outright, stealing the secrets by which they gave life and power to words, but transvaluating them so as to create an idiom of her own» (Anderson, «Words» 145).

Sylvia Plath also attempts to create an idiom of her own at the expense of a religious tradition. Yet her thematic focus is not a general concept, but a particular experience. Dickinson's creative engine is the «Heavenly Hurt» that the natural world brings upon her, the lack of harmony between inside and outside. The idea of deprivation in general with no particular attention to a given object or person is central to her poetry, whereas Plath's is specific and personal. Dickinson's mood reflects one of curiosity while Plath's one of agony. If Dickinson's persona interrogates herself but never questions things openly, Plath's begins «Fever 103<sup>o</sup>» by directly questioning the existence of purity («Pure? What does it mean?»). The directness and simplicity of these initial rhetorical questions draw the reader's attention to «pure» to which the poet proceeds to juxtapose contrasting, penetrating images.

Sickness, hell, physical aggression as well as psychological agony are all set off against purity (1) and love (11). Plath uses the technique of metaphor by juxtaposition: she places images drawn out of mythology (Cerberus keeping Hades' gate) and Puritan-Calvinist imagery («hell,» «the tinder cries»), besides images of modern life (Isadora Duncan's death, Hiroshima ash, radiation) and physical sensations («indelible smell»), letting their connotations have their effect on the reader. Evil haunts the tormented consciousness of the delirious speaker that crams together scattered impressions and blends various sensitive perceptions («smell,» «snuffed,» «licking,» «tongue,» «wheeze»). The connection by visual analogy between the images drawn from different sources works to build a cohesive whole out of them all («tongue,» «tendon,» «rolls» of «smoke,» «scarf»).

The sense of agony is prolonged through the extension of the metaphor of Isadora's scarf which chokes «the aged,» «the meek,» «the weak hothouse baby» and «the ghostly orchid» whose weakness the speaker shares. Through a simultaneous metaphor and simile (25-27) she merges the idea of adultery and the horror of Hiroshima's atomic bomb while still extending the image of hell («radiation,» kill, «ash»). The association of images (Hiroshima/ adultery) culminates in another reference to «The sin» (27), which characterizes them all. The repetition of this noun phrase signals a major syntactic break and cataphorically refers to the sources of her agony. The speaker's troubled consciousness has been revealed through vivid images, but the reasons for her psychological agony are not yet definite. Helen McNeil argues that the function of the subjective lyric voice of Plath's later poems is «to mask the acts of a deeper self while simultaneously tracing their presence by an otherwise inexplicable vehemence» (471). Since the facts underlying the speaker's emotional outpourings are taken for granted, the interaction of the connotations of the multiple images has a piercing effect on the reader, but makes it still difficult to guess what the poem is exactly about.

Like Dickinson, Plath conceals whatever it is that is hurting her, but her motives to do so are very different. Bennet argues that «providing a center (whether or not from her own biography) should have restricted [Dickinson's] poem's meaning and thus reduced the range of applicability it could have» (130). If Dickinson's language is riddle-like, if the meaning of «Cross» and «Love» is ambivalent, it is because, as Axelrod says, she «explores the capacity of language to represent and disguise the world.» In contrast, «Plath explores its capacity to reveal and conceal a self» (Axelrod 144). A tormented self lies behind the impersonal rhetoric of emotion and the powerful images of the first part of the poem (1-33), but the speaker does not lay bare the reasons for her own private agony until the last two stanzas of this first part (28-33), where she makes recurrent allusions to adultery. In spite of her addressing a «Love,» a «Darling,» she never points directly at that person as the agent of such an offence. A generalizing plural («adulterers») and an indefinite article («a lecher's kiss») evidence her reluctance to direct her reproach to her loved one.

Axelrod says that Plath saw herself and her husband Ted Hughes «as doubles in



order to create grounds for marriage and then in order to save their marriage (or to evade it)» (15). Sylvia's myth of the double vanished when her marriage collapsed, but she continued to use it in her literary productions in order to illustrate her inner divisions through language (196-197). She was torn between the side of her that wanted to be the perfect submissive wife and the side that wanted to be free. In the first part of the poem the yellow smokes rolling «From me like Isadora's scarves...» (12) which will then «... catch and anchor in the wheel» (13) evoke the image of somebody who is being prevented from speaking. In the context of Plath's life, the poem can be interpreted as her struggle to cut the ties with her old choking domestic life, with her husband and with her silence. The second part of the poem enacts the creation of a new self with a new language and could be said to correspond to what Axelrod sees as an attempt to reaffirm and recreate herself through words after her husband's desertion and the humiliation it involved.

In the last seven stanzas of «Fever 103°» (34-54) the tone ceases to be denunciatory or lamenting and becomes powerfully self-assertive. If in the first lines of the poem the speaker denies the existence of purity through antithetical, apocalyptic images, she now finds a source of purity in herself. The new «I,» addressing an unknown «you,» is «too pure for him or anyone» (25). She does not diminish the significance of her suffering as Anne Bradstreet does before God, but magnifies it to the point of comparing her pain to divine suffering:

Your Body

Hurts me as the world hurts God... (35-36)

The new persona of the poem emerges out of Plath's private myths and images. Her metaphoric self-representation as permanent light, splendor and heat, contrasting with previous images («I have been flickering off, on, off, on» [29]) signals her sudden transformation into an increasingly powerful, valuable and beautiful being. The reiteration of present participles linked by polysyndeton (42) emphasizes the rising of her energy. The rhetorical question, in fact an assertion, «Does not my heat astound you. And my light» (40) is a proof of her self-confidence, reinforced with the recurrent references to the first person («I am,» «my,» «myself»).

Concerning the origin of Plath's images, Susan Bassnet has said that she found inspiration for her language and her art in the myths she appropriated and recreated to suit her personal vision (47). However, as Louis Simpson argues, Plath's images are surrealist. «They make an impression that cannot be accounted for by looking to their sources of mythology or the life of the poet. The image is itself, a new thing» (126). This is certainly true of most of the images in this last section, drawn out of different mythological sources and merged to produce innovative surprising effects. Exotic images like «A lantern» (36), «a moon/ of Japanese paper» (37-38), «my gold beaten skin» (38), are in deep contrast with Christian references: «Virgin/ Attended by roses» (47-



48). The icons of different traditions coalesce and result in the emergence of a personal mythology, in which personal idiosyncratic associations also have a place: «acetylene/Virgin» (46-47).

The rising momentum and ecstatic tone of the poem («I think I am going up—/ I think I may rise» [43-44]), culminate in the ascent of the poetic persona, who draws on the image of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to illustrate her own spiritual grace. Depending on whether we consider Plath's persona's ascent an «Assumption» or an «Ascension» we will see her as a more or less autonomous being. Following the tenets of Catholicism, the former, applied to the Virgin Mary, involves God's intervention, whereas the latter, applied to Christ, involves ascent by one's own divine power. It is never explicitly stated that the speaker rises on her own, but she emerges as powerful and autonomous («All by myself» [41]). The mythical figure of the Virgin is used to emphasize the purity of the new self and to reject the victimized, repulsive old self, her «old whore petticoats» (53). The speaker reconstructs herself through the image of the rising Virgin as pure and fragile, but also as a single entity, independent from the «you» and the «hims» (51-52).

According to Judith Kroll, Graves's *The White Goddess* inspired Plath in the creation of her poetic self:

...the White Goddess, the source of all poetry and of all life, the sublime use, stands in direct contrast to the male fatherly God of Christianity and rationalism. She is not constant and fixed but fluid and in perpetual movement, symbolized by the phases of the moon. The moon goddess is, simultaneously, goddess of three stages of female existence— she is the virgin huntress of the new moon, the pregnant mother of the full moon and the wild hag of the new moon (Bassnett 48).

The first two phases of the White Goddess correspond to the two sides of Plath's poetic persona in the second part of the poem. She is both pure and delicate, but also strong enough to produce her own rebirth through her poetic language. She is therefore both poet and muse.

Frazer's *The Golden Bough* also helped Plath constitute her poetic philosophy. The work familiarized Plath with the notion of the inward soul as understood by pre-industrialized communities, «'a bird ready to take flight'.» For her it became her own real creative self whose absence meant death, an inner self that was the double of her outer self. Were she to lose the capacity to look at the world from this double lense, which might have happened right before her suicide, she would die (Axelrod 205). This interpretation of Plath's old/new self as a «modern variant of Frazer's God who annually died and rose again from the dead» (205), is in line with Judith Kroll's idea that Plath «was always trying to 'transcend' the life she actually had» (Simpson 106), and with the final images of «Fever 103°.» Creative power, not conventional religious faith,

allows for self-regeneration and reenactment of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which gives the whole creative process the value of a spiritual uplifting. Although she draws on the Puritan dichotomy between body and soul, flesh and spirit, and leaves behind her abused body and her sexuality as she ascends, she never mentions God as her savior, and therefore does not rise to the Biblical paradise where she will reunite with God, but to the paradise of self-fulfillment that literary creation affords.

Because of her response to patriarchal power within a very specific situation and her ability to create a satisfying self-image some critics like Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would inscribe Plath within a whole tradition of female writing in which they have seen women imagining themselves as powerful masters of language, capable of endowing words with alternative meanings shaped by their own consciousness and imaginative power. Gilbert and Gubar consider Emily Dickinson to be «the foremother who articulates a fantasy about female linguistic power that empowers not only her verse, but—magically— the voices of both her precursors and her successors» (85). Following an evolutionist perspective akin to that of these scholars, we have closely looked at how the individual languages of these three female poets illuminate each other without embracing the idea of a single female tradition. Our primary aim has been to analyse the discursive response of these three women to pain: the difference and contradictions through which they address the culture, religion and power structure of their time, and the position they adopt with regards to them.

By challenging the Puritan theocracy that Bradstreet questions only momentarily, Dickinson's poetic discourse makes us see the conventionality and nullified individuality of her predecessor's language. The weakness of Bradstreet's poetic persona and her acknowledgment of the dichotomy flesh-spirit imposed by Calvinism shows an acceptance of her role within a theocracy whereas Dickinson's active «I» attempts to express her own intuitions with relative independence from Calvinist dogmas. The capacity to question the prevailing religious ideology of her time and, in Emerson's words, to «believe [*her*] own thought,» to «speak [*her*] latent conviction» (956) (our emphasis), gives her poetry a transcendentalist strain. Her use of religious language places «I measure every Grief/ I meet» within the context of Christianity and proves Dickinson's own Calvinist leanings. Yet the very personal idiosyncratic meaning her words acquire is demonstrative of her attempt to subvert the prevailing dogmas. The poem does not lend itself to a single interpretation, which evidences Dickinson's «distinctly modern» deliberate playfulness with meaning (Bennet 127). The contemplation and exploration of the slipperiness and arbitrariness of meaning, a central concern in the twentieth century, places Dickinson ahead of her time as a poet.

However, Plath's ultimate self-regeneration through a bolder, less inhibited, more emotional and personal language sheds some light on the evasiveness of Dickinson's strategies. As Axelrod has observed, «whereas Dickinson's language suggests limitation and failure... Plath's asserts success...» (128): Dickinson says «I wonder,» «I could not tell,» «I am told,» «I may not,» «presume,» whereas Plath says, «I am,» «my heat,»

«my light,» «all by myself,» «I am going up,» «I may rise.» Dickinson's is only a timid subversion since she never represents herself in open confrontation with Calvinist thought. She only suggests such confrontation by trying to «measure» and by expressing curiosity about the experiences of others, but never by being outspoken about her own personal grief. Dickinson avoids self-exposition, laying bare her true subjectivity, her true grief, as Plath does through her confessional poetry. «It is no accident,» argues Steven G. Axelrod, «that the most frequently occurring active verb in Plath's poetic vocabulary is 'to love', while in Dickinson's it is 'to know'... [I]n Plath's poems of parting, the pain is unmitigated and the damage uncontrolled» (150).

In spite of these differences, Axelrod considers Dickinson to have been the major influence on Plath's poetry. He quotes Charles Newman saying that «Emily is in many ways the beginning, and Sylvia the culmination of the movement whereby the imagination is driven back to the concrete» (29). Both Dickinson and Plath can be said to have used precise images in order to convey a given emotion with intensity. However, Plath unleashes her anger—especially in her last poems—with more vehemence than Dickinson ever did. They are «an attempt to complete Dickinson antithetically... They read Dickinson in such a way as to suggest that the precursor did not dare enough» (Axelrod 128).

Plath also shares with Dickinson the transgression of language to confront what produces suffering. Yet she goes a step further than Dickinson in that she does not simply confront, but rebels. At the end of «I measure every Grief/ I meet» Dickinson shows resignation before pain, finding «a piercing comfort» (48) in the sense of kinship with other human beings after the discovery that their suffering is like her own. Dickinson manages to partially overcome her limitations by transvaluating Bradstreet's Puritan concept of pain through a language that refuses to admit the notion of God's «tender love» into its semantic possibilities. However, the exclusively descriptive quality of such language shuts off the entrance to the imaginative power that allows Plath to escape pain at least momentarily. Plath did not actually succeed in applying the self-sufficiency of her poetic persona to her life, but her language consummates Dickinson's effort to subvert the language of a theocracy and an ideology on which Bradstreet's sense of identity was dependent. The boldness and empowerment of language seen through the textual analysis of the poems by these three women evidences that female writers have found individual discursive means to represent themselves in expressing their «difference» from a dominant ideology hindering the full expression of their subjectivity.

## WORKS CITED

- ANDERSON, CHARLES. «Despair.» *Modern Critical Views: Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985. 9-35.

- ANDERSON, CHARLES. «Words.» *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Richard B. Sewall. New York: Prentice Hall, 1960. 144-149.
- AUSTIN, J. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- AXELROD, STEVEN GOULD. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- BAKHTIN, MICHEL and P. N. MEDVEDEV. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- BASSNETT, SUSAN. *Sylvia Plath*. London: Macmillan, 1987.
- BAYM, NINA, et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Vol 1. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989. 2 vols.
- BENNET, PAULA. *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*, 1990.
- BRADSTREET, ANNE. *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*. Ed. Jeannine Hensley. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967.
- DICKINSON, EMILY. «I measure every Grief I meet.» *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas Johnson, 1979.
- EMERSON, RALPH WALDO. «Self-Reliance.» Baym 956-972.
- FOWLER, ROGER. *Literature as Social Discourse*. London: Batsford Academic and Education Ltd., 1981.
- GILBERT, SANDRAM. and SUSAN GUBAR. «Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality.» *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1989.
- GUMPERZ, J. J. and D.H. HYMES (eds.). *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. *Language as a Social Semiotics: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold, 1978.
- KRESS, GUNTHER and ROBERT HODGE. *Language as Ideology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- KRESS, GUNTHER and ROBERT HODGE. «Women's language.» *Language and Style* 10 (1977): 222- 247.
- KRISTEVA, JULIA. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- MCNEIL, HELEN. «Sylvia Plath.» *Voices & Visions: The Poet in America*. Ed. Helen Vendler. New York: Random House, 1987: 469-495
- PAGLIA, CAMILE. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decandence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. London: Yale University Press, 1990.
- PÊCHEUX, MICHEL. *Language, Semantics and Ideology*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.
- PLATH, SYLVIA. «Fever 103°.» *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973. 1301-1302.
- RONBERG, GERT. *A Way with Words: The Language of English Renaissance Literature*. London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

- SEARLE, JOHN R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- SHOWALTER, ELAINE. «Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness.» *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 179-206
- SEARLE, JOHN R. «Towards a Feminist Poetics.» *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- SIMPSON, LUIS. *A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell*. New York: Macmillan, 1978.
- STANFORD, ANNE. *Anne Bradstreet: The Wordly Puritan; an Introduction to Her Poetry*, 1974.
- VOLOSHINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.
- WEEDOM, CHRIS. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987 .
- YAEGER, PATRICIA. *Honey, Mad Women. Emancipatory Strategies in women's Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- ZAVALA, IRIS M. «Los hombres feministas y la crítica literaria.» *Tropelías*, 2 (1991): 219-227.

## APPENDIX A

*'For deliverance from a fever'* by Anne Bradstreet

1 When sorrows had begirt me round,  
2 And pains within and out,  
3 When in my flesh no part was found,  
4 Then didst Thou rid me out.  
5 My burning flesh in sweat did boil,  
6 My aching head did break,  
7 From side to side for ease I toil,  
8 So faint I could not speak.  
9 Beclouded was my soul with fear  
10 Of Thy displeasure sore,  
11 Nor could I read my evidence  
12 Which oft I read before.  
13 «Hide not Thy face from me!» I cried,  
14 «From burnings keep my soul.  
15 Thou know'st my heart, and hast me tried;  
16 I on Thy mercies roll.»  
17 «O heal my soul,» Thou know'st I said,  
18 «Though flesh consume to nought,  
19 What though in dust it shall be laid,  
20 To glory t'shall be brought.»  
21 Thou heard'st, Thy rod Thou didst remove  
22 And spared my body frail,  
23 Thou show'st to me Thy tender love,  
24 My heart no more might quail.  
25 Praises to my mighty God,  
26 Praise to my Lord, I say,  
27 Who hath redeemed my soul from pit,  
28 Praises to Him for aye.

## APPENDIX B

*'I measure every Grief / I meet'*, by Emily Dickinson

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1 I measure every Grief          | 28 Or would they go on                  |
| 2 I meet - analytic eyes-        | 29 aching still                         |
| 3 With - narrow, probing, Eyes-  | 30 Through Centuries of Nerve-          |
| 4 I wonder if It weighs          | 31 Enlightened to a larger Pain-        |
| 5 like Mine-                     | 32 In Contrast with the Love-           |
| 6 Or has an Easier size.         |   |
|                                  | 33 The Grieved-are many-                |
| 7 I wonder if They bore it long- | 34 I am told-                           |
| 8 Or did it just begin-          | 35 There is the various Cause-          |
| 9 I could not tell the Date      | 36 Death-is but one                     |
| 10 of Mine-                      | 37 And comes but once                   |
| 11 It feels so old a pain-       | 38 And only nails the Eyes-             |
|                                  |   |
| 12 I wonder if it hurts to live  | 39 There's Grief of Want-and            |
| 13 And if They have to try-      | 40 Grief of Cold-                       |
| 14 and whether-could They-       | 41 A sort they call «Despair»-          |
| 15 choose between-               | 42 There's Banishment from native Eyes- |
| 16 It would not be-to die-       | 43 In sight of Native Air-              |
|                                  |   |
| 17 I note that Some-gone         | 44 And though I may not                 |
| 18 patient long-                 | 45 guess the kind-                      |
| 19 At length, renew their smile- | 46 Correctly-yet to me                  |
| 20 An imitation of a Light       | 47 A piercing Comfort it                |
| 21 That has so little Oil-       | 48 Affords                              |
|                                  | 49 In passing Calvary-                  |
| 22 I wonder if when Years        |   |
| 23 have piled-                   | 50 To note the fashions-of the          |
| 24 Some thousands-on the Harm-   | 51 Cross-                               |
| 25 That hurt them early-         | 52 And how they're mostly worn-         |
| 26 such a lapse                  | 53 Still fascinated to presume          |
| 27 Could give them any Balm-     | 54 That Some-are alike My Own-          |



## APPENDIX C

## 'Fever 103°', by Sylvia Plath

- 1 Pure? What does it mean?  
2 The tongues of hell  
3 Are dull, dull as the triple
- 4 Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus  
5 Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable  
6 Of licking clean
- 7 The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.  
8 The tinder cries.  
9 The indelible smell
- 10 Of a snuffed candle  
11 Love, love, the low smokes roll  
12 From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright
- 13 One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.  
14 Such yellow sullen smokes  
15 Make their own element. They will not rise,
- 16 But trundle round the globe  
17 Choking the aged and the meek,  
18 The weak
- 19 Hothouse baby in its crib,  
20 The ghastly orchid  
21 Hanging its hanging garden in the air,
- 22 Devilish leopard  
23 Radiation turned it white  
24 And killed it in an hour.
- 25 Greasing the bodies of adulterers  
26 Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.  
27 The sin. The sin.

- 28 Darling, all night  
29 I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.  
30 The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.
- 31 Three days. Three nights.  
32 Lemon water, chicken  
33 Water, water make me retch.
- 34 I am too pure for you or anyone.  
35 Your body  
36 Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern–
- 37 My head a moon  
38 Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin  
39 Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.
- 40 Does not my heat astound you. And my light.  
41 All by myself I am a huge camellia  
42 Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.
- 43 I think I am going up,  
44 I think I may rise–  
45 The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I
- 46 Am a pure acetylene  
47 Virgin  
48 Attended by roses,
- 49 By kisses, by cherubim,  
50 By whatever these pink things mean.  
51 Not you, nor him
- 52 Not him, nor him  
53 (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)–  
54 To Paradise.