

Four Poets on Patriarchy: Levertov, Sexton, Rich, Plath

Philip Williams

Modern American poetry is generally characterized by tones of personal expression and confession. At the same time—and sometimes in the same poets—there has been a strong current of social concern that reminds us of the writers of the 1930s. Protests ranging from opposition to the Vietnam war to outcries against the so-called “Star Wars” program, from the struggle for justice for blacks to Greenpeace action to safeguard the earth’s environment and ecology, have kept many leading poets socially and even politically involved in a fashion not seen in the era of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and T. S. Eliot.

Of the social issues of our time, none has been raised more often or more resoundingly than that of women’s rights: the call for greater justice and equality for women in American society, in the home and in the work place. Increasingly this movement has come to center in protest against the patriarchal traditions that have oppressed women of the West from earliest recorded history, not least the male-centered misdirection of the biblical tradition that is the background of all literary history in the culture of the West.

As these protests move nearer center stage, it has been the women themselves who have played the leading roles: few males have been

eager and ready "to preside"—to paraphrase Winston Churchill—"at the dissolution of our empire." Among the leaders of the movement against the patriarchal assumptions of Western society, a number of fine American women poets have been in the vanguard. Four in particular may be considered in this context; their struggles against the prejudices that handicap women have become crucial—in different ways, of course—for appreciation of their work. Denise Levertov (born 1923), Anne Sexton (1928-74), Adrienne Rich (born 1929), and Sylvia Plath (1932-63) may be seen as outstanding leaders, not only in their achievements in poetry, but also for their protests against the patriarchy.¹

Having named them together, one must immediately admit that there are very striking differences in their response to their situations, and in the outcome of their lives. It is helpful to consider them in pairs, with Sexton and Plath on the one hand and Levertov and Rich on the other, as representing two sides of the subject. Sexton and Plath felt frustration and finally fury, and went to extremes in personal protest—ending as tragic suicides. Levertov and Rich, having won reputations as first-rate poets in the same genre—an intense personal, "confessional" approach—then turned to direct confrontation in social action movements to become leaders in forthright assaults against the wall built by the enemy they defined quite specifically as "patriarchy."

I. The Personal Protests of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath had a number of experiences in common besides the special concerns of their lives as women who worked as poets. Sexton recounted some experiences and ideas which they shared when she wrote in tribute to Plath after the latter's death

at her own hands:

I can add for Sylvia, only a small sketch and two poems—one poem written for her at the news of her death and the other, written a year later, written directly for both of us and for that place where we met. . . “balanced there, suicides sometimes meet.” . . .

I knew her for a while in Boston. We did grow up in the same suburban town, Wellesley, Massachusetts, but she was about four years behind me and we never met. Even if we had, I wonder if we would have become close friends, back then—she was so bright, so precocious and determined to be special while I was only a boy-crazy thing, flunking most subjects, thinking I was never special. We didn’t meet. . . until she was married to Ted Hughes and living in Boston. We met because we were poets. Met, not for protocol, but for truth. She heard. . . that I was auditing a class at Boston University given by Robert Lowell. . . kind of followed me in, joined me there and so we orbited around the class silently. If we talked at all then we were fools. We knew too much about it to talk. Silence was wiser, when we could command it, . . . sometimes letting our own poems come up, as for a butcher, as for a lover. Both went on. We kept as quiet as possible in view of the father.²

Lowell, whom they both called teacher but came to resist as they progressed, is by no means honored here in that image of “father.” As we shall see, both Sexton and Plath wrote bitterly satiric poems about their fathers, whom they held responsible for mental disturbances that marked their lives. Both of them, as biographical studies show, grew up in tensions with parents as children, in unsatisfied marriages with husbands they came to reject, and with children they loved but could not care for.³ Elizabeth Janeway writes of them: “Plath and Sexton function not just as authors but also as exemplary figures for their

readers. . . . Each endeavored to combine a life in the traditional mode with a career as a writer, and each broke down" (Hoffman, p. 372).

Using their own family crises for poetry of intense and frightening personal revelations, they helped lead that tough new "confessional school" that characterizes American poetry in the late 1950s, foreshadowing the violent social revolts of the '60s. Much of the harsh, vital subjectivity Sexton and Plath expressed was grounded in fighting their memories of being put down by men, and seeing their mothers suffer in their "dutiful" wifely roles. This is symbolized in the way they attacked their "fathers," who in both cases, by all accounts, deserved this special wrath.

Sexton, in "All My Pretty Ones," tells of finding her father's albums after his death:

. . .boxes of pictures of people I do not know,
I touch their cardboard faces. They must go. . . .
I'll never know what these faces are all about,
I lock them in their book and throw them out.⁴

Continuing more bitterly, she says that within weeks after her mother's death, she was given this impression of her father:

. . . solvent but sick, you meant
to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush.
But before you had that second chance, I cried
on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died. (11. 27-30)

In the last two lines she says she will pardon him, but not with a very kindly spirit: "whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,/bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you."

Plath's famous poem "Daddy" boils over with very similar bitterness. She begins her attack on him with a passionate outcry:

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.⁵

After labeling him "panzer-man. . .Fascist," she curses his "boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you. . ." and ends sixteen verses in language of venom, accumulated over twenty years following his death, with what seems to be sadistic glee:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you,
 They are dancing and stamping on you,
 They always *knew* it was you,
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard. I'm through. (SPCP, p. 224)

This poem also touches on her hostility to her husband, who left her with their two tiny children after six years of unstable marriage. (Their wedding had come five months after they first met at Cambridge, where Sylvia—after a brilliant record at Smith College—was studying on a Fulbright fellowship.) Early in the poem she had written, "Daddy, I have had to kill you." But the symbolic act strikes even closer home; now that she and Hughes are separating, she ends by merging figures of husband and father:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
 The vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.
 Daddy, you can lie back now. (SPC², p. 224)

The poem stresses yet another major theme that was a bond between Plath and Sexton: an allusion to her first suicide attempts when she was in high school and college. (After a year in a mental hospital, she returned to graduate *summa cum laude* at Smith and later was called to teach there.) As Sexton wrote,

Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail and in depth. . . . We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. . . . Thus we went on, in our fashion, ignoring. . . the poems left behind. Poems left behind were technique—lasting but, actually, over. We talked death and this was life for us, lasting in spite of us, or better, because of us. . . . I know that such fascination with death sounds strange (one does not argue that it isn't sick—one knows it *is*—there's no excuse), and that people can not understand. They keep, every year, each year, asking me "why, why?" So here is the *Why*-poem, for both of us. . . . I do feel somehow that it's the same answer that Sylvia would have given. (Newman, p. 175)

The poem Sexton then quotes is entitled "Wanting to Die." It assumes the question "Why talk of suicide?"—and responds by saying she (and by implication, Plath) cannot give reasons.

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
 I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
 Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.
 I know well the grass blades you mention,
 the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.
 Life carpenters they want to know *which tools*.
 They never ask *why build*.

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
 have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
 have taken on his craft, his magic. . . .

To thrust all that life under your tongue!—
 that all by itself becomes a passion.
 Death's sad bone; bruised, you'd say.

and yet she waits for me, year after year,
 to so delicately undo an old wound,
 to empty my breath from its bad prison. . . . (NAMP, p. 1202)

Writing on Sexton in his book *Contemporary American Poetry*, Ralph J. Mills, Jr. rightly notes that “this poet’s power lies in her talent for dramatizing *her own* existence in the wide range of its moods, memories, aspirations, desires, and for doing this without evading the necessary consequence of having to face herself squarely in the mirror of her art.”⁶

Sexton, as her statement on Plath has indicated, began her work in poetry rather late in life, “after seeing the critic I.A. Richards lecturing about the sonnet on television,” it is said.⁷ Unlike Plath, however, she won early popularity and critical honor by her writing, publishing many volumes of poetry and being awarded a Pulitzer Prize—perhaps the highest literary award in the United States—for her collection, *Live or Die* (1967). In all her books of poetry (there were ten before her

death, three more later), "her subjects are her own mental breakdown; her strained relationships with parents, husband, children; her amatory experiences; her need for, and inability to find, religious faith" (Hoffman, p. 499). She had married rather young and had two daughters. In 1974, after several hospitalizations, she fulfilled her death-drive with "medications." Just before that she had toured college campuses, giving impressive readings of her poems accompanied by a rock musical group. . . . She was 47 years old when she died; her friend Sylvia Plath had been only 30 when she placed her head in an oven and turned on the gas eleven years before, in 1963.

Sexton, though born earlier and living longer, always looked upon Plath as her senior, though at the time Plath died, a number of Sexton's books had been published, while only one of Plath's collections of poems appeared before her suicide. Sexton said that after Plath's death, in reading a book of her last poems, she found that Sylvia pointed to her as having influenced her work. "She gave me and Robert Lowell. . . credit for our breakthrough into the personal in poetry. I suppose we might have shown her something about daring—daring to tell it true." Stressing Plath's originality, however, Sexton says, "Maybe I did give her a sort of daring, but that's all she should have said. . . . What matters is her poems. These last poems stun me. They eat time" (Newman, pp. 178-9).

Critics agree that in the brief years of her development, Plath moved from early works of genius, proving her technical mastery of traditional and modern verse forms, to even finer experimental work that showed her own way of seeing and saying things. She reached a culmination when poetic hallucinations—often of terror and cruelty—found uniquely

personal expression in original poems seldom if ever matched. . . . But her early work ought not be neglected; one fine sonnet from her college days well expresses tensions she felt as a "Female Author."

All day she plays at chess with the bones of the world;
Favored (while suddenly the rains begin
Beyond the window) she lies on cushions curled
And nibbles an occasional bourbon of sin.

Prim, pink-breasted, feminine, she nurses
Chocolate fancies in rose-papered rooms
Where polished highboys whisper creaking curses
And hothouse roses shed immoral blooms.

The garnets on her fingers twinkle quick
And blood reflects across the manuscript:
She muses on the odor, sweet and sick.
Of festering gardenias in a crypt.

And lost in subtle metaphor, retreats
From gray child faces crying in the streets.

(from "Juvenilia," SPCP, p. 301)

The subjects of her later work maintain concerns of being a woman writer, but there is a recognition of other sufferers from time to time, as seen in her attack in "Daddy" on Fascism—abuses of power in politics as well as in the family. There are a few references of social concern in parts of "Three Women," the long "Poem for Three Voices" she produced for BBC in her last year. But each of the three women, in a maternity ward, is basically—and naturally enough—most absorbed in the personal prospect of her baby's birth, and changes it must bring for a troubled new mother. One woman recalls the men of her office,

and the "male" impression they made on her as she thought of motherhood—"something about them like cardboard."

That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks
Endlessly proceed—and the cold angels, the abstractions.

(SPCP, p. 177)

Here are the images by which men are often portrayed in the women's movement, showing slavery to rational "scientific" values from which comes violence against human life and nature itself—a "head-centeredness" that needs the balance of female "heart."

Sexton, who had faced her marital failure after bearing two daughters, agonizes on the same theme, but talks even more about her breakdowns and inward alienation. There is no radical shift in later work, unlike Plath's. Mills underscores the strong marks of spiritual searching in Sexton, who had been brought up as a Catholic, and therein been troubled as a woman. He cites a set of poems "prefaced by the following statement of the Catholic theologian Romano Guardini: 'I want no pallid humanitarianism—if Christ be not God. I want none of him. I will hack my way through existence alone. . .'" (Mills, p. 231).

Like similar probing by Eugene O'Neill (and so many of the Meiji period writers of Japan), from a human viewpoint this was a search that failed. We feel her pain and consternation in a verse she dedicated to "my friend, Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment for the Sacrament of Confession"—a poem she called "With Mercy for the Greedy."

Concerning your letter in which you ask

me to call a priest and in which you ask
me to wear The Cross that you enclose. . .
I pray to its shadow,
that gray place
where it lies on your letter. . .deep deep.
I detest my sins and I try to believe
in The Cross.⁸

But then Sexton, as a lapsed Roman Catholic, makes an unusual “confession”—not one to take to a priestly “father’s booth”:

My friend, my friend, I was born
doing reference work in sin, and born
confessing it. This is what poems are;
with mecry for the greedy,
they are the tongue’s wrangle.
the world’s pottage, the rat’s star. (ll. 26-32)

Although Sexton—and Plath—like authors of the Romantic movement earlier, thus regarded art with a religious devotion, they were not “saved.” Their poetry, however, rising out of their despair and their inward alienation mirroring the world around them, has brought striking revelations of human “entrapments”—not least of women in patriarchal society—in our time. Of course it is not proper to attribute all their expressions of personal protest to their sense of special suffering as women. As we have seen, both had experiences of mental breakdown while still very young. Both, however, attributed much of their illness to early family relations; Plath made very explicit charges against both

her father and her mother, as we have seen.

Plath's marital failure took an even greater toll, as her friend, the scholar and author A. Alvarez, has shown in a book that became a bestseller.⁹ Yet like all the other extensive studies of Plath, his observations would stop short of labeling her "feminist."¹⁰ Like Sexton she is a witness in a different manner. Janeway writes in her essay on "Women's Literature":

Plath's poetry, and her life, were completed before the new feminist consciousness had begun to find expression, but her work has become a touchstone for the women's movement and is best considered in this context. She and Anne Sexton represent a poetic current that is central to the cultural identity of the first phase of the movement. (Hoffman, p. 371)

Adrienne Rich also wrote of these two in relation to the work of their "revolution," saying, "Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, in their very different voices, began to speak of the quarrel with themselves—which was found to be also the quarrel with others." In Sexton and Plath "a subjective, personal rage blazes forth, never before seen in women's poetry."¹¹

II. The Protest against Patriarchy: Levertov and Rich

Adrienne Rich wrote one of her early poems "for Denise Levertov," to whom it is dedicated. She gave it the title "The Roofwalker," and uses a mode in which a new "feminist awareness" mingles myth with the "every-dayness of women's lives" (Hoffman, p. 359).

Over the half-finished houses

night comes. The builders
stand on the roof. It is
quiet after the hammers,
the pulleys hang slack.
Giants, the roofwalkers,
on a listing deck, the wave
of darkness about to break
on their heads. The sky
is a torn sail where figures
pass magnified, shadows
on a burning deck.

I feel like them up there;
exposed, larger than life,
and due to break my neck.

Was it worth while to lay—
with infinite exertion—
a roof I can't live under?
—All those blueprints,
closings of gaps,
measurements, calculations?
A life I didn't choose
chose me: even
my tools are the wrong ones
for what I have to do.
I'm naked, ignorant,
a naked man fleeing
across the roofs
who could with a shade of difference
be sitting in the lamp light
against the cream wallpaper

reading—not with indifference—
about a naked man
fleeing across the roofs. (ARP. pp. 19-20)

One could never be sure of all meanings intended here, and indeed some of the very special nuances may only be known to the two poets, who—each having won a high reputation for a respected body of writings—are drawing together in their feminist protest. Difficult as it is, however, “The Roofwalker” is comprised of images not hard to comprehend; it also gives clear indication that these two women feel closely related as walkers and workers in a scene of awesome complexity and uncertainty. Levertov and Rich, indeed, have felt many of the tensions that led to personal tragedy for Sexton and Plath. But there is this very significant difference: they have allied themselves with organized movements for social change, advancing beyond their individual sense of outrage at the injustices that the “oppressed”—and not least the women of the world—have had to endure. This change is symbolized in the action of the poem, moving from questioning—“Was it worth while to lay. . . a roof I can’t live under?” (marriage, home, and family?)—to involvement, with “indifference” named and rejected.

In “The Roofwalker” Rich has followed a free “organic” form that Levertov had already used effectively, and for which she is known—because of her wide influence—as “the voice of the 1960s” (Hoffman, p. 536). Here Rich uses an image pattern to create a dark, insecure situation, mirroring the hostile world which both writers address with their poetry of protest. The narrator is speaking as one “exposed” to dangers, like the carpenter who is obliged to work high up on a roof. All things appear “slack, dark, torn,” and the roof itself is like a

"listing, burning deck," threatening all who would try to pass there.

The third long stanza expresses the nagging doubts and frustration directly, as the mythic mode moves the narrator into the mind of the roof-walking carpenter. Now the speaker really is "due to break my neck/. . . my tools. . . the wrong ones/for what I have to do/. . . I'm naked, ignorant." The implication is that nothing of the past—family nurture, education, all the later experiences—has prepared one to meet the challenges faced. Is this not awareness of a condition often true for women in a culture they feel to be shaped by and for men?

But a sense of vocation has intervened: "A life I didn't choose/chose me." Now the commitment to work for reforms arises, contrasted with the observer who ironically denies "indifference" while playing a role of passiveness in the face of evil. After recognizing the basic existential choice that every person must confront between a participant's dangerous involvement and the outsider's safe observation, the speaker chooses not to be simply "reading" about things. As to the interesting problem of why a masculine image—"a naked man fleeing across the roofs," twice evoked—is made the center of the action, I believe it parallels Emily Dickinson's occasional use of a boy's or man's figure for her poetic persona. Whenever her speakers attempt things thought to be unwomanly—to go barefoot, for example—male "masks" allow instant credibility. But then thinking further, as we must with good poems, we feel the poet's irony in uncovering our prejudiced stereotype of passivity for type-casting women. The assumptions of "unwomanly" vis-a-vis a roofwalker/builder role, are wrong at the very core. . . . *Banzai* for "The Roofwalker" on this point too! (Women poets of the past made such protests in different ways: Amy Lowell smoked cigars,

Marianne Moore was a baseball fanatic. In their time, perhaps no better channels were open to undermine the "feminine images" men had imposed upon society.)

Leverlov—brilliant, home-educated—was widely honored for her achievements long before she embarked on a radical political course in the mid-1960s. Her first book, *The Double Image*, appeared in 1946 when she was only 23. The next year she was married to the American novelist, Mitchell Goodman. Her husband was a protestor, prosecuted—together with a group that included the well-known medical doctor and author, Benjamin Spock—for outspoken opposition to the Vietnam war. Leverlov wrote poems about this, and went to North Vietnam to dramatize the protest, reporting about this in essays collected in *The Poet in the World* (1973). Her poems and articles focus on many such social issues.

Although she was born in England, Leverlov had very early felt strong influences from across the Atlantic, especially the poetry of Hilda Doolittle and William Carlos Williams. Kenneth Rexroth was among the first to study her poems, giving her very enthusiastic acclaim as one of the wisest and most humane minds in modern poetry.¹² Not long after moving to York with her husband, she began to call herself an American poet. Her British ancestry, however, was very influential, as she writes in one of her autobiographical poems, "Illustrious Ancestors." We see how her biblically-modeled prophetic role had its roots in her family heritage; her mother was descended from the Welsh mystic, Angel Jones, "whose meditations/were sewn into. . . coats and britches," as her poem says.¹³ An illustrious ancestor of her father was a respected leader of the Jewish mystical movement, Hasidism: he

understood “the language of the birds” (ll. 3-4). Her own father, while preparing to be a rabbi, became a zealous Christian. After being ordained an Anglican priest, he wrote books boldly calling for the unification of Christianity and Judaism (Wagner, p. 24). Her older sister, who died when Denise was 40, was also an activist in many causes. Levertov writes often of her, as in “A Note to Olga,” where the feminist notes are clearly sounded against the tough but comic “cops”:

On the Times Square sidewalk
 We shuffle along, cardboard signs
 —Stop the War—
 clung around our necks.

The cops
 hurry about,
 shoulder to shoulder,
 comic.

Your high soprano
 sings out from just
 in back of me—

We shall—I turn
 you’re, I very well know,
 not there,

And your voice, they say,
 grew hoarse
 from shouting at crowds. . .

yet *overcome*

sounds then hoarsely
from somewhere in front,

the paddywagon
gapes.—It seems
- you that is lifted

limp and ardent
off the dark snow
and shoved in, and
driven away.¹⁴

In 1970, revisiting Italy after many years, Leverlov felt demeaned by rude men who “still prowl as they used to.” Here she writes as a woman challenging the chauvinist sexist stance of the men who look upon women simply as sex objects. Her fine satiric poem is stronger for the deftness of tone and the humor she can bring to bear on a subject that, in a woman’s view, must be quite disgusting.

. . .No sexual revolution here. no Women’s Lib.

That’s the third car to slow down.

(The difference is, more cars,
new ones too, I see.) . . .

Evidently

I must give up my slow stroll.

(And in me the difference
is, I’m not scared,

I find them only foolish, they’re
in my way.

But do they spend every evening
cruising?. . .)

(from “Staying Alive.” Part III, v; TSA, pp. 62-3)

In her Preface to the volume *To Stay Alive*, Levertov sums up some of her later poems—and her social views—in one profoundly powerful sentence, which relates women's concerns to wider issues of social evil, especially militarism and imperialism and war.

. . . The personal response that moves from the identification of my lost sister, as a worker for human rights, with the pacifists "going limp" as they are dragged to the paddywagon in Times Square in 1966, to the understanding by 1970 that "there comes a time when only anger/is love," is one shared by many of us who have come bit by bit to the knowledge that opposition to war, whose foul air we have breathed so long that by now we are almost choked forever by it, cannot be separated from opposition to the whole system of insane greed, of racism and imperialism, of which war is only the inevitable expression. . . (TSA, p. viii)

Adrienne Rich voiced her feelings against sexism at an early age: in the course of time, she came to leadership in protests on what she terms the "patriarchal" abomination of Western society. When Rich visited Japan some years back, she made points that she often stresses: people who name things have the power, and men have so far done all the naming. Even definitions of feminine character, femininity, femaleness have come from males. She writes that it has been "A man's world. But finished./They themselves have sold it to the machines."

Rich's first book, *A Change of World* (1951)—published in the Yale Series of Younger Poets—developed, she said, from the conflict in her between the girl who defined herself in making poems and the girl who had to define herself by her relations with men. Writing to a friend in 1972 she called her later work "a coming-home to the darkest

and richest source of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds, sexual identity, sexual politics, many names for pieces of one whole" (NAMP, p. 1220).

An honors student at college, with a book of poems published at age 22, Rich was married and had three sons before she was 30. Her husband, a Harvard University professor, and she joined in Vietnam war protest marches. They also fought against sexual and racial injustice in the radical 1960s. She left him in 1970, 17 years after their marriage, and began to place the pieces of her life in a new "whole." She was soon more deeply involved in special activities that have earned her recognition as a leader of the feminist movement.

Rich's realistic sense of the complexities of her cause as well as her confident sense of mission are shown in a poem of 1970, her year of personal crisis and decision.

I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers
and those powers severely limited
by authorities whose faces I rarely see. . . .
A woman with a certain mission
which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact.¹⁵

Though she had clearly not been a man-hater, she has found implications of an evil patriarchal domination in all of the assumptions that are bound up with heterosexuality, and she has lectured widely and written provocative essays about these main links of women's bondage.¹⁶ Suggestions of this appear even in one her earliest poems, showing how a woman's role has too often been defined as that of pleasing and serving her man: she must be the dutiful wife, never distracting her

husband from his work—which of course is taken to be far more important than raising the children and caring for the home.

She who has the power to call her man
 From that estranged intensity
 Where his mind forages alone,
 Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
 And when his thoughts to her return
 Stands where he left her, still his own,
 Knows this the hardest thing to learn.

(“An Unsaid Word.” ARP, p. 3)

Later, in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” the view is more strained, and a far more aggressive tone is sounded, as we can recognize from the following selections taken from the ten startling verses of that poem:

Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake.
 heavy with useless experience, rich
 with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
 crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
 of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
 wipes the teaspoons, grows another way. (Part 1)

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.
 The beak that grips her, she becomes. . . . (Part 3)

“To have in this uncertain world some stay [Rich’s note:
which cannot be undermined, is these words from
of the utmost consequence.” Mary Wollstonecraft]

Thus wrote
 a woman, partly brave and partly good,
 who fought with what she partly understood.
 Few men about her would or could do more,
 hence she was labeled harpy, shrew, and whore. (Part 7)

Sigh no more, ladies.

Time is male
 And in his cups drinks to the fair.
 Bemused by gallantry, we hear
 our mediocrities over-praised,
 indolence read as abnegation,
 slattern thought styled intuition,
 every lapse forgiven, our crime
 only to cast too bold a shadow
 or smash the mold straight off. (Part 9; ARP. pp. 12-15)

In her latest work there are poems frankly affirming love for another woman; her more recent—and most radical—writing openly supports lesbianism as the ultimate course to women's liberation. This position, of course, aligns her with a very small group who are in controversy with almost all of the "sisters"—at least in America—for whom they have been doing battle. Nevertheless, at least one respected scholar has written a book placing Rich at the pinnacle of women's advances in poetry. Wendy Martin, in studying *An American Triptych*, compares Rich with Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson, and infers that she must be ranked with her two great predecessors.¹⁷ In leadership for women's rights, Rich has faced a more open world and thus has achieved more for women. Martin seems to support Rich in her lesbian stance. At the outset of her study, Martin gives this summary:

Adrienne Rich has a many-faceted life: she has been a student, wife, mother, teacher, radical feminist and lesbian, political activist, and public speaker as well as an internationally known poet. Each of these dimensions of her experience has contributed to her vision. As a contemporary poet who is active in the public sphere, Rich has not accepted the choices necessitated by Bradstreet's piety and Dickinson's privatism. As a modern woman, she has insisted on a fusion of her private and public experience. Her poetry is concerned with war, urban poverty, sexism, and racism as well as with private emotion and the appreciation of nature. (Martin, p. 5)

Rich's thought in bringing together the aspects of both the personal love and the social statement of her present lesbian perspective is effectively expressed in a recent poem.

. . . we have different voices, even in sleep,
 and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different
 and the past echoing through our bloodstreams
 is freighted with different language, different meanings—
 though in any chronicle of the world we share
 it could be written with new meaning
 we were two lovers of one gender,
 we were two women of one generation.¹⁸

When Rich was nominated for the National Book Award for her book of poems *Diving into the Wreck*, she said she could not receive the award "as an individual, but accepted it, in a statement written with Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, two other nominees, in the name of all women:

". . . whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal

world. . .who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain. . . . We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification, or derived class. . . the women who will understand what we are doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work.”
 (ARP, p. 204)

Though not cited by name with the other voices joining in this historic statement, Levertov, Plath, and Sexton belong with the “articulate women” honored through these words. Rich sees Denise Levertov today as a co-builder of the new “roofs” above our world of culture, which shelter a greater human liberation for all people—male and female—because of the activity Levertov shares with Rich, though they have had to face great handicaps and even dangers, and often work with what seemed “the wrong tools,” as imaged in “The Roofwalker.” But less direct action has spoken too; the spirits of the too-early “destroyed but not defeated” Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton—who are living powerfully through their poems—share the triumph as they shared the agonies of the long and difficult battle against patriarchy in American society and the world.

NOTES

- 1 It may seem arbitrary to choose these four authors, when many others might be named. In justification of my choices, I must say I have found these four to be most “popular” in important anthologies and textbooks of USA today that are sources on which one must depend. The works and awards of the chosen poets, of course, are vindication for us, as for “the makers of the canon.” . . .

Two other distinguished women poets, among many considered, are Diane Wakoski (born 1937) and Gwendolyn Brooks (born 1917), the first black woman poet to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Wakoski, who makes a powerful personal protest, dedicated *The Motorcycle Betrayer Poems* (her tenth volume of verse, written before she was 34) "to all those men who betrayed me at one time or another, in hopes they will fall off their motorcycles and break their necks." She writes of her father in much the same tone. . . . Brooks was in her 50s when she first allied herself with the Afro-American movement and became a militant activist. As a *black woman* poet, she considers the women's movement not very helpful for one who suffers as a *black woman*; while the so-called Black Power Movement is male-centered, thus overlooking the needs of the black *woman*. Needless to say, the implications of these issues call for special awareness.

- 2 From "The Barfly Ought to Sing," cited in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 174. . . . Ted Hughes is Poet Laureate of Great Britain; his editorial work on Plath's "collected poems" after her suicide (in which he was a factor) is strongly challenged by critics.
- 3 Elizabeth Janeway, commenting on the "Gothic horrors" that seem to mark the works of Sexton and Plath in particular, makes the wise observation that the pain expressed in their poetry is more than catharsis: "it could not have been written at all" unless such pain and degradation "*could now be perceived as ending*." The ability to look openly at humiliation. . . depends on a sense that such a state need not continue. . . . When a life. . . without the traditional form of patriarchal marriage became socially and emotionally feasible what had been hidden began to emerge." ("Women's Literature," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. by Daniel Hoffman [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979], p. 372.) Basic biographies of the poets considered here are yet to be written, but Linda Wagner has written of Levertov, Wendy Martin and the Gelpis on Rich, and Newman (and others) on Plath (references given below). Plath and Sexton (see J McClatchy, *Aunt Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, 1976) suffered greatest family turmoil. Plath has told much of her own story about the domineering German biology professor who was her father; he died when she was nine, leaving her and her hard-working, sacrificing mother

- feeling abandoned. Rich has authored a study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) which "sees the current mother-role as . . . collaborator and co-conspirator with patriarchal society."
- 4 *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (hereafter cited in the text as NAMF), edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), pp. 1198-9; 11. 9-10, 19-20).
 - 5 *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems* (hereafter cited in the text as SPCP), edited by Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 222. It is interesting that Hughes fails to list "Daddy," her most noted poem, in the Index of this book.
 - 6 Ralph J. Mills, Jr. *Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 231.
 - 7 *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Ronald Gottesman et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), Vol. II, p. 2501.
 - 8 *The American Tradition in Literature*, edited by Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: Random House, 1981--fifth edition), Vol. II, p. 2060.
 - 9 A. Alvarez, *The Savage God* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 24-39. He indicates the loneliness and depression the poet suffered as she struggled with writing and children up to the time of her death. From his own evidence, however, he believes that Plath was half hoping that a new maid, coming to her home at a time soon after the poet opened the gas pipe, might find her and save her life. Doors were locked, so "calculations went wrong and she lost" (p. 38).
 - 10 Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 3-22, shows the "misconception" of treating Plath as a "feminist." He also argues, less convincingly, against classifying Plath as a "confessional poet."
 - 11 *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* (hereafter cited in the text as ARP) edited by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. xii.
 - 12 Linda W. Wagner, *Denise Levertov* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 23.
 - 13 Denise Levertov, *The Jacob's Ladder* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 87; 11. 11-2.
 - 14 Denise Levertov, *To Stay Alive* (hereafter cited in the text as TSA—New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 11. Note that the words in italics give the

- title of the marching hymn of the black revolution, "We Shall Overcome."
- 15 Adrienne Rich, *The Will to Change: Poems, 1968-70* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), Poem 19.
 - 16 See, for example, her very influential essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Signs* 5, No. 4 (Summer, 1980). Erica Jong, writing in *Ms.* magazine (July, 1973), had noted that one of Rich's great pioneer achievements was the envisioning of the androgynous person, a theme present in several of the poems including "Diving into the Wreck," the title poem of her 1973 volume which was honored with the National Book Award (see below).
 - 17 Wendy Martin, *An American Triptych: Ann Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), is a splendid comparative study, well documented for interpretation of all three poets. Its bibliography and other crucial notes from interviews are of special help for study of Adrienne Rich, whose work quite naturally has been given less study in research up to this time.
 - 18 Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-77* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), Poem 30.