

## A ROSE IS A ...: MATERNAL DEBT IN ANIA WALWICZ'S *RED ROSES*

*Alison Bartlett - University of Southern Queensland*

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Ania Walwicz's texts are tantalisingly open to theoretical debate and, as a signifier, "Ania Walwicz" is also often read variously as a migrant, multicultural, feminist, modernist and postmodernist writer, categories which she frequently contests. Like her writing, she occupies multiple positions and just as easily slips out of them, refusing them. In contributing to these debates in this paper, and as part of my theoretical framework, I want to add the category of theorist to those positions that Walwicz can be constructed as occupying, and in doing so, I include Walwicz's (theoretically) dissenting voice beside mine by using parts of an interview I recorded with her in 1992.

Interestingly enough, a writer is never seen as an expert on their work. Someone else has to approve of them, talk about them. I should turn the tables. Professor Walwicz speaks about herself! (Ania Walwicz)

Indeed, Walwicz shares with French psychoanalytic theorists an interest in the operations of the unconscious, or the semiotic. In particular, I want to suggest that her 1992 novel, *red roses*, performs a kind of maternal debt in the production of its textuality. It is necessary here to briefly invoke some theoretical "mothers" from whom I draw my theoretical framework. According to Kristeva, the symbolic sphere of language is predicated on its debt to the maternal, which it must deny and repress. She proposes that the body of the mother represents the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, that space which is never really ordered but operates according to drives, rhythms and primal desires. As a pre-linguistic phase it also pre-dates any distinction between subject and object:

The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora* (Kristeva 1984:27).

For Kristeva, however, the maternal body is and must remain mute and maternity is overwhelmingly passive. She describes it as a process in which:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism (1980:237).

"No one is present", so maternity cannot be an act of a speaking subject: it is unspoken and unspeakable, merely a function within Kristeva's framework. As a function, maternity serves as "an excursion to the limits of primal regression ... as the reunion of a woman-mother with the body of *her* mother" (Kristeva 1980:239).

Walwicz's novel, *redroses*, seems to epitomise the position which Kristeva would deny could be spoken. In writing into being not only the speaking subject but also her mother, *redroses* becomes a mother (as) text. It is done with the audacity of Cixous's desire for literary parthenogenesis:

Write? I was dying of desire for it, of love, dying to give writing what it had given to me. What ambition! What impossible happiness. To nourish my own mother. Give her, in turn, my milk? Wild imprudence (1991:12).

Walwicz's literary birthing of her mother is full with the power of writing to create, and with the power of creation associated with the maternal.

The death of my mother prompted the book. I actually started writing it nine months after her death. It's very curious. Like having a baby (Ania Walwicz).

*redroses* begins with the speaker's mother singing to her "in her dark mum say i'm swim in her adark cavern a station" (1). From this fluid and darkened state the speaker is then born: "here i come out a tunnel a dark tunnel i was being born into my cry in light room in earth" (2). This ultimate site of semiotic life is where Walwicz begins a sustained two hundred and fourteen pages of broken language without syntax or punctuation until "she is gone" (214). In some ways quoting a line to support my statement that the speaker is born gives both too much meaning to that line and too little. The speaker is born over and over again in a variety of ways — stillborn, by forceps, pushing — as meaning floods from the barely distinguishable phrases.

Walwicz introduces her fictionalised self through her mother — "little ania I'll tell you my secret" (11) — and continues to make appearances throughout the narrative. Mother and baby alternatively take up the speaking position, weaving one after another:

just throws me you open your legs and push me all out my head comes out  
... nine months to have a grow my baby at first i was all shock now she  
comes out of me what does you just waits why did you just do she is  
singing my lulla lullabye for baby (4).

Similarly, Walwicz's polymorphous mother/child speaker draws into its world a variety of other texts which become enmeshed in their life-text. In an interview with Jenny Digby, Walwicz states that:

*redroses* is all about suggesting a relationship with the mother, becoming all images, becoming all things, projected onto all images, and all the images become imbued with her. So other images can be perceived as forming an attachment to the mother. It is like a collage (Walwicz 1992b:826).

Cixous regards women's stories or histories as continually intersecting and overlapping in this way:

Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and

channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women (Cixous 1976:882).

How do we read? Maybe all kinds of reading are a form of absorption. One is forever like a sponge. Well I think everything that I have read has entered into me and I can recollect it in some way (Ania Walwicz).

Beginning with the songs her mother sings (her) in the womb, the novel weaves into its fabric scripts for film, television, theatre, cartoon bubbles, formal letters, formulaic romances, Jewish history, Art, rose mythology, nursery rhymes, advertising hard-sell, recipes, fashion-speak, French, song lyrics, heroic narratives, fairytales and literary theory.

By including so many different texts [it is] opening itself to different ways of actually questioning itself or having a conversation with itself (Ania Walwicz).

The speaker happily inserts herself into all of these narratives and the proliferating texts also start to envelop her mother in new stories, changing the patterns and inventing new possibilities: "i didn't have a mother i am making one up here to full a fill to fill a gap a void i am making up i am making mum talk" (32). "Keeping mum" colloquially signifies keeping silent, so when Walwicz begins making room for the maternal to speak it means weaving new maternal stories: "i am making up a mother a biography out of what's said" (79).

Erupting through this mesh of texts and speaking positions comes a desire to create not only the speaker's mother but all mothers:

i want to write about everybody's mother everything is becoming my mother everyone is becoming my mother all texts speak about her she is in them she is talking to me through them (21).

Compare this to Cixous' desire to write, to nourish my own mother, give her in turn my milk. For Cixous, writing is nourishment and a source of creativity which she can happily mix with metaphors of birthing:

She gives birth. With the force of a lioness. Of a plant. Of a cosmogony. Of a woman. She has her source. She draws deeply. She releases. Laughing. And in the wake of the child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! Confusion! What's come over her? A child! Paper! Intoxications! I'm brimming over! My breasts are overflowing! Milk. Ink. Nursing time. And me? I'm hungry, too. The milky taste of ink! (1991:31)

Cixous' figurative mingling of milk and ink in her writing is part of her vision which enacts what Kristeva theorises for poetic language. Cixous is actively engaged in sourcing writing (as maternal debt) in her body. She writes:

Now, listen to what your body hadn't dared let surface. Mine tells me: I am

the daughter of milk and honey. If you give me the breast, I am your child, without ceasing to be mother to those that I nourish, and you are my mother. Metaphor? Yes. No. If everything is metaphor, then nothing is metaphor (Cixous 1991:50).

In *red roses*, the act of creating the mother(s) is inherently linked to the form of the writing as both continuous and fragmented, constantly shifting and overflowing with ambiguity: "a text is breaking away it is doing a text is multiplying i am carrying a text is making mum me i am cutting" (28). The narrator is like a chameleon, or a subject always already in process. She is at times inventor (32), chef ("of wordy salads" (77) "cooking my text" (32)), reader (116), critic (46), signwriter (120), joker (120) and magician (119, 186). Always shifting in form and viewpoint, a maker of fictions, the narrator is an inextricable part of the style and multiplicity of this semiotext.

In a manner similar to Cixous' description of a woman talking in public, the body of this text is also performative:

"i am scattering words linoleum yo yo and a zipper" (143)  
"this is my performance a speech about my work making a text how to do a long story how to keep it up" (80).

Conscious of crafting this form, Walwicz leaves signs for the reader to "read my theory". As if the reader might be relearning a language, or entering into a new linguistic landscape, the speaker suggests a different reading process after positioning herself as a reader:

she is coming out my syntax the pluperfect i don't understand every word  
but i get the tone i can read and the general tone the outline (167).

This relation between reader and writer also extends to the self-conscious use of theoretical concepts. In this way, the prior links between the speaking self and her mother are constructed:

i am doing literary theory a symbiotic relationship with the mother's body  
the self merges with other objects a polymorphous work all statements are performative (119).

The symbiotic relationship mentioned here connects Walwicz's work with research Luce Irigaray has found on placental relations which challenges the representation of the foetus and mother (by psychoanalysis, for example) as in a state of fusion. In an interview with Irigaray, biologist H  l  ne Rouch constructs the placenta as a mediating tissue between mother and foetus which, although formed by the embryo, works not only to regulate supply to the foetus but also to ensure the mother is not depleted in the process, and to take on the production of certain hormones for the mother (1993:39). The implications of revising maternal relations as symbiotic, rather than as fused, mean a radical re-evaluation of psychoanalytic theory in terms of the speaking subject when Rouch proposes that the separation

between mother and child initiated by the mirror stage is merely a replication of an earlier event. As she explains,

the differentiation between the mother's self and the other of the child, and vice versa, is in place well before it's given meaning in and by language, and the forms it takes don't necessarily accord with those our cultural imaginary relays: loss of paradise, traumatizing expulsion or exclusion, etc. (in Irigaray 1993:42).

This contests the way in which psychoanalysis constructs itself on a desire/fear of the maternal as engulfing. If the foetus is always in symbiotic relation to the mother then entry to the symbolic is not so much a severance from the other but an acquisition of an-other language. This metaphor would also allow for the effects of migration (as an-other's entry into another language) to be more easily accommodated in the theorisation of subjectivity.

A similar sense of symbiosis is evident in the relations between reader and writer in Walwicz's novel, which are brought into dialogue:

addressing a reader who do you write for mainly myself and herself this is talking to someone then to her and to me a relationship now of more than one or lonely this is a talk about my mother i am giving a talk about my work about me (206).

The reader is often incorporated into Walwicz's novel. Interpellated into the narrative world, we are rendered part of the process:

you never reveal her completely or yourself why do should i you have to make her up i'm just giving suggestions i don't want to say completely and fully i'm just hinting at a story then you just read me carefully the reader participates the reader reads the reader makes me (116).

I found each time I read it was a different reading for me even. So I become the reader of my own work too, which is a fascinating thing (Ania Walwicz).

Acknowledging the demands placed on this active reader – "i can never understand ania but you'll get used to me" (102) – the speaker also flatters those who reach half way:

she is saying that i need an interpreter if she will say that this is a so available to the reader accessible then but why should i when it's all about her and me mine and not mine i am looking for an intelligent reader (94).

This interpellation of the reader into the text disturbs the scission between self and other, reader and text, drawing us into the vortex of the narrative's world.

Ania: Well I wanted the book to be the mirror too, so that the reader could project their own mother onto it. Do you have a good relationship with your mother?

Alison: Aah, it's ambivalent.

Ania: I feel the relationship with the mother always has ambivalence, but it's a good one?

Alison: Well, I guess we get on, but, you know, there's things that need working out still.

Ania: But it's strange, the person [I know] who liked the book has a good relationship, the one who found it harrowing doesn't. So I am suggesting areas of experience in the reader which are not fully conscious for them. (Ania Walwicz and Alison Bartlett)

Walwicz similarly interpellates and interrogates literary theory into and onto her text:

literary theory invents all ideas you can apply to this a way of seeing the text the reception i'll get but does it apply at all and did i plan it like that a thesis about a thesis words all about words while i'm doing (117).

The credibility of any generic convention is, in fact, undermined. There is a "complicated romance that goes all wrong the chasing and the running heathcliff is beating her and she is hitting him with a whip how can i write" (56). The fairytale her mother tells her that goes terribly wrong when the dog eats the king, the cat eats the pageboy and the mouse eats the princess is revealed to be a gastronomic feast: the king is a sacher torte, the pageboy a gingerbread man and the princess made of marzipan.

The breakdown of characters into consumable food is an apt point at which to reflect on the extent to which Walwicz's textual buffet is available for consumption by the body of theorists like myself. The sheer difficulty in digesting *red roses* suggests some problems with reading it as akin to a playful semiotic *jouissance*. And yet it is playful. How much seriousness can I ascribe to a text when "elvis comes and says i'm your brother now someone shouting say my brother professor elephant does this to you i will clear your head if you rest a bit oh charlie chaplin help me" (34)? And if it is so playful, what is the point of co-opting such a text back into the symbolic arena of critical theory? Speaking once again with Jenny Digby, Walwicz addresses contradictions such as this in edible terms when she says:

It is a dilemma of literary studies, because theory invites complexity and an intelligent reading, whereas literary works are supposed to invite, well, a sort of form of eating candy — all very nice, cosy. But I want to be treacherous for the reader (Walwicz 1992b:821).

Maybe that treachery is part of its theoretical attraction from our position in the symbolic order; its "herding of contradictions into a single battlefield" is certainly what attracts me to reading it through the frame of *écriture féminine*, which, Irigaray suggests,

is not [an issue] of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of

suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal (1985:78).

I've never been happy about anything that's ever been written about me if I were to be totally honest because I would like to write it myself.  
(Ania Walwicz)

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