

Dismantling Romantic Utopias: María Beneyto's Poetry Between Tradition and Protest

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“¿Qué es para usted la poesía?” ‘What is poetry for you?’, a young man asks the Valencian poet María Beneyto (1925 -) as part of a set of questions about her artistic work, all written on a piece of paper he hurriedly left at the poet's house.¹ This scenario brings to mind “Rhyme XXI” by Romantic poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. In it, a woman, fixing her blue eyes on the poet's, asks him: “¿Qué es poesía?” ‘What is poetry?’ to which he responds, “Poesía . . . eres tú” ‘Poetry . . . is you.’ As the subject of Bécquer's poem, the speaker in “Rhyme XXI” possesses the authority to answer in a manner that is assured and, at the same time, gallant and flirtatious. The woman, in turn, may already know the answer to her own question and be simply participating in the game of seduction, or may not. Be that as it may, the speaker's assured reply seems to have satisfied her because she makes no further comment. Her silence could be explained by the compliment she has just received: she is poetry, what else could she want?

The situation in María Beneyto's poem is somewhat different and her reply is far from definitive sureness. The young man came to her house with some written questions and informed her of his return the following Saturday for the answers. The reflections of Beneyto's poetic persona on the possible answers she will give begin in the form of ramblings about Saturday, when the young man will return for the answers, as the day associated with witches and their Sabbath. This thought leads her into the connection with Goya and Valle Inclán's “esperpentos” ‘grotesque literature,’ taking her to further ramblings about the generation gap between her and the young man, and about the maternal feelings he has stirred up in her.

This kind of reaction gives the impression of a woman who is somewhat aged, somewhat motherly in attitude and a bit absent-minded, a far cry from the Bécquerian speaker. Instead of one concise line encompassing essence in a brief "Rhyme," Beneyto's speaker provides an answer that is anything but fixed and that spreads over a series of poems entitled "Preguntas" ("Questions"), included in the book *El agua que rodea la isla* (*The Water Surrounding the Island*). The last poem in this series reads as follows:

¿Qué es para mí la poesía? Eso
que sirve para hacer de nuestra voz
algo que quiere ir hacia su origen
¿Luz? ¿Primigenia forma de calor?
¿La distancia más corta entre dos puntos?
¿Un salto entre el vosotros y entre el yo?
En mi manera de decirlo, es una
declaración de amor.

What is poetry for me? That
Which helps make of our voice
A means to go back to the origins:
Light? The primeval form of warmth?
The shortest distance between two points?
A leap between the "you" and the "me"?
In my own way of saying it, it is
A declaration of love. (28)

Bécquer's succinct answer, "poetry . . . is you," offers an essentialist view of woman as an unchanging, immutable identity. Beneyto's, on the other hand, offers different options which, through examination and questioning, in turn open up to further possibilities. She begins by approaching the question in pragmatic terms: "algo que sirve para" 'poetry is that which helps'; and she qualifies her answers with "for me" and "In my own way of saying it," at the outset and at the end, to indicate that she is expressing her own vision and not the last word on the subject. Another difference is that while Bécquer's poem represents the stereotypical situation of the male poet and his passive, female muse, Beneyto's poem reverses roles by placing the female poetic speaker in the active function. Furthermore, Bécquer's "Rhyme" depicts an intimate scene between the poet and his muse, while Beneyto's answers embrace the collectivity, as indicated in "our voice" and the "you." And, while poet and muse look into each other's eyes, Beneyto directs her gaze towards

the first light and towards a "primeval form of warmth" that is permeated with maternal connotations. For both poets, poetry provides a link with an "other." In Bécquer the "other" is woman as muse and an embodiment of the love and cosmic harmony with which the Romantic poet wants to commune. The "other" for Beneyto is shared by a series of feminine models—the utopian image of original plenitude identified with the mother or a series of female types representing the various roles tradition and culture have assigned to women. As such, they are projections of the author herself as she seeks to articulate her own identity. The question regarding the identity or essence of poetry thus becomes a question about female identity and, particularly, Beneyto's own identity as woman and author. The objective of this essay is to explore Beneyto's reflections on her own identity as woman and poet and, through that process, on the nature of poetic language.²

Her birth date and the prevailing themes in her poetry place Beneyto within the generation of social poets of the decade of the 1950s. But despite the fact that Vicente Aleixandre considered her one of the best young poets in that group and that her poetry provides a different perspective from the masculine viewpoint characteristic of the demands for social justice and equality in the fifties poets, Beneyto's writing has been disregarded by critics. As in the case of other female poets, Beneyto's poetry reveals the dilemma of the woman author facing a cultural tradition that espouses pre-established models for her conduct and identity. Her work thus offers a significant contribution to the understanding of Spanish poetry of this century, and particularly to the enterprise of articulating female identity and language to which Spanish women authors have been contributing during the recent decades.

Why the reference to Bécquer, not only to "Rhyme XXI," but to Bécquer's aesthetics, in general, as in Beneyto's recent book *Para desconocer la primavera* (*To Disregard Spring*), in which Bécquer's Romanticism is the main point of reference? Social poets share with their Romantic counterparts a feeling of alienation from a social context whose mediocrity and coarseness they attempt to surpass by the creation of utopias. For Juan Cano Ballesta, this neoromantic device revolves around the myth of a primeval golden age (129). Beneyto shares in this mythic quest by glancing nostalgically back on childhood and on the centrality of the mother figure at that age.³ The presence of the primeval mother figure is predominant among social poets, many of whom have dedicated poems and/or books to

their mothers in an attempt to recover the utopian plenitude implied in her figure and so lacking in their present state. Beneyto's attempt to recover that utopian origin offers special interest because of her distinctive female approach. By adopting the identity of Eve, as the embodiment of instinctual and primitive life that culture has suppressed, or, in Virginia Woolf's terms, by addressing the role of the mother or angel of the hearth, or the identity of Ophelia, George Sand, or Madame Bovary, Beneyto's poetic speaker hopes to make audible their silenced voices and to contest the rigidity that cultural convention imposes on those roles. Her often lengthy and usually narrative poems attempt to establish a dialogue with those female types in order to ascertain their identity beyond the iconic image they have been forced to represent. A review of Beneyto's books will show that this author's approach to those prototypes destabilizes the essentialism implied in the Bécquerian "Poetry . . . is you" by introducing the possibility of change from pre-established norms and mobility among different roles.

From her first book *Canción olvidada* (*Forgotten Song*), Beneyto challenges the notion of a unified subject by approaching female identity from different angles. The simplicity of the poem "Una vida" ("A Life," *Forgotten* 52-53) is tainted by irony because the woman's "life" in the title lacks the attributes normally considered "vital." The tripartite structure—corresponding to the woman's youth, maturity, and old age—gives the poem a triptych-like format representing the paradigm of a woman's life. Sitting behind the window or balcony and detached from her surroundings in the private world of daydreaming, the woman sees life passing by.⁴ As prototype of the "angel of the hearth," this woman has opted—or the choice has been made implicitly for her—to live within her self in a world protected from the activity outside. As Martín Gaité notes, the identity of this "ventanera" 'woman looking out the window' is determined by remaining where she is, a position which excludes the possibility of becoming something else (68). The end of the poem is a brief dialogue between the speaker and a fictitious interlocutor discussing the woman as a non-participant third person. This simple communication relegates the life of the woman to the realm of non-being. In exchange for a "sweet and trivial" life devoid of risks, this woman has renounced her own identity and a role in the historical and social process.

"La niña violinista" ("The Girl Violinist," *Forgotten* 24) addresses the Romantic model of the genius and his/her innate access

to a level of knowledge denied to mere mortals. While the woman of "A Life" has reduced her possible artistic ability to "sweet" and "trivial" daydreaming, the child violinist gives her whole being to art, for which she, like her opposite in "A Life," also pays a high price. Instead of losing herself in romantic fantasies, her "immense, visionary" eyes reflect the "funereal candles" of death as the ultimate goal for her all-consuming dedication to music. If Bécquer wished to pluck out the music of the universe—or of a higher level of being—from the harp which human mediocrity kept hidden and forgotten ("Rhyme VII"), this child artist, and the woman of "A Life," seem to reach Beneyto as echoes from that same hidden harp of unsung melodies. Beneyto's terms for such a "harp" are "forgotten song," flashes and dreams from an "intangible antenna" or from some "secret chest." While Beneyto's poems give voice to two types of female existence, the author seems to be more concerned with pondering on their meaning in terms of woman's fulfillment. If the woman of "A Life" remains detached from the community of human beings while the child violinist gives her self to art, these different ways of life both end up in self-annulment and isolation. Beneyto seems to be evaluating various ways of being for women and of dealing with creativity and the surrounding world.

Through the image of the snail, the poem "Caracol" ("Snail," *Forgotten* 47) elaborates further on the relationship of the speaker with the outside world. The snail shell invites the exploration of the artist's subjectivity and of art as a private, intimate enterprise. However, as an echo chamber, the shell has the capacity to receive the response from the outside world:

En mí parece vibrar
 Todo el ajeno penar.
 ¿Seré como el caracol
 que recoge bajo el sol
 el gran sollozo del mar?

All the outside pain
 Resonates within me.
 Am I like the snail
 Who under the sun
 Gathers the great lament of the sea?

The function of the snail shell is double: it protects and isolates the snail from the outside world, but it is also an echo chamber where

the outside world resounds. Just as the snail shell gathers "the great lament of the sea," the poet's being vibrates with "all the outside pain." The snail image serves to exemplify the reciprocity between the artist and language for, like the word, the snail shell resonates with the outside pain while remaining separate from it. The poet's responsibility—since that seems to be the focus of her questioning "Y esta antigua canción que hoy he escuchado / . . . / viene a reprocharme algo olvidado" 'And this ancient song I heard today / . . . / comes back to reproach me for something forgotten' (10)—is to find a language that will bridge the distance between the inner and outer realms, and to establish an identity that will allow the passage between subjectivity and otherness. In this sense, "Snail" signals a new direction from the two previous poems. The dramatization implicit in the rhetorical question, "Am I like the snail . . .?" opens up the poem to a dialogue with an interlocutor outside of itself, thus achieving what the poem describes. Just as the shell allows the snail to remain within itself and echo the outside world at the same time, the poem, as a verbal construct, allows the link between the artist's subjectivity and the otherness of the outside world.

In the book *Eva en el tiempo* (*Eve Through Time*), the reflection on a viable female identity and creative language revolves around the figure of Eve. This is a fitting choice, for Eve represents the instinctual and primordial life that culture suppresses, as well as the voice of the species rising up against social, existential, and divine injustice. This prototype embodies for Beneyto's female speaker the dilemma between the isolation within her personal and subjective being and the immersion in the surrounding world and life's suffering. The speaker in "Colmena" ("Beehive," *Poesía* 45-46), describes herself as "other" and "estranged" from her own being as she feels invaded by the "suma de muchos llantos" 'sum of so many laments.' The model of the poet in the ivory tower does not apply to this speaker who feels accosted by the "urgencia humana" 'human urgency' from the surrounding context (*Poesía* 45). The poem "La que está en sombra" ("The One in the Shadows," *Poesía* 56-57), opens up a series of four poems about the figure of Eve entitled "Aspectos" ("Aspects"). Inverting Bécquer's model in "Rhyme XXI," the female speaker takes control of language to address the male "you" and offer him "La palabra fiel, clara, / fragante, inmarcitable. / La palabra" 'The faithful, clear, / fragrant, unwithering word, / the word' that will give him "su luz salvada en vilo" 'a light saved in the air,' a "hope."

pates, he wants even more: "Pero no ha de bastarte, lo sé bien. / Y aún quisieras saber qué voces alza / lo rojo de mi vida. / Qué latidos, qué brotes, qué mareas / se te esconden extraños" "But it will not be sufficient for you, I know it well. / And you will even want to know which voices are raised by the red (passion, blood) in my life. / Which pulsations, which buds, which tides / remain other and hiding from you" (*Poesía* 57). The speaker's "otherness" inspires fear and apprehension in the man, as well as a desire to control. Knowing that, she tries to appease his anxiety by describing herself as a companion, as the man's silenced and ignored side. In this sense, the speaker's resolution of her position becomes problematic and ambivalent. Not wanting to upset the prevailing order, she insists on simply being man's silent and hidden companion. At the same time, however, she is the one taking control of the word and offering it to him as a torch of light and hope in the existential journey they both must travel.⁵

As in "Beehive," "La cansada" ("The Tired One"), and "La penitente" ("The Penitent," *Poesía* 58, 60), articulate the dissolution of the female subject in "los nombres / y existencias ajenas" 'the names / and lives of others.' The dismay of these poems is surpassed, however, in "La peregrina" ("The Pilgrim," *Poesía* 61), the fourth poem in the "Aspects" series. The opening lines, "Yo era la mujer que se alzó de la tierra / para mirar las luces siderales" 'I was the woman who rose up from the earth / to look at the astral lights,' establish from the outset the dichotomies between earth and sky, roots and wings, hearth and the outside world. The poem tells the story of a woman who became tired of being the typical angel of the hearth and decided to go in search of new directions and "high dawns." The poem associates her resolution with moving in a "vertical" direction, in the sense of ascending the social ladder in order to achieve the power on the top that men have monopolized throughout history. This direction promises fulfillment in the sense of personal and individual interest and self-promotion. However, in the middle of her path the woman protagonist encounters human pain urging her to redirect herself toward the "horizontal" gesture of providing help. While the "vertical" ascent is commonly identified with the masculine, the horizontal direction is associated with behavior described as feminine. Since she is intent in progressing forward and away from her limiting situation, the woman overcomes her "feminine" inclination to help the other, as well as the call to continue the species through procreation. The message, then, is

that in order to move ahead in the “vertical” direction valued by society and endowed with power, the two functions traditionally identified with women, concern for the other and motherhood, have to be denied. However, when the pilgrim reaches her goal at the mountaintop, she finds all the men gathered together who, echoing the fury of the biblical God, reject her words: “y me dijeron Eva una y mil veces, / . . . / hembra evadida del rincón oscuro / . . . / desertora / de la orilla del fuego / y el hogar apagado” ‘and they called me Eve one and a thousand times, / . . . / the female evading the dark corner / . . . / deserting / the fireside / and the extinguished hearth’ (*Poesía* 63). As a symbol of the phallic power attributed to political, social, and religious structures, the mountaintop makes the woman feel ashamed of her own sex and of her attempt to fly away from the confines established for her kind. Nor does she find support “en otras altas asambleas / . . . / a pesar de su hoz interrogante” ‘in other high assemblies / . . . / in spite of their questioning sickle.’ The possible allusion to Marxism in the previous lines indicates the distance between women’s appeals and official discourses of any type. Such discourses, including those defending the rights of the most underprivileged social groups, call for a kind of general human liberation which ignores or forgets the specific plea of the woman.⁶

“Aspects” concludes with the speaker announcing defiantly that she will drop her obsession with traveling (with the roads) only if and when the Eve she carries inside “pida perdón al alba” ‘will ask dawn for forgiveness.’ “To ask or make a request to the morning star” is the colloquial expression which Beneyto’s line echoes, an ironic one at that since the implicit understanding is that such a request will go unheard. While the speaker in “The One in the Shadows” was trying to appease the man’s fear by reassuring him of her intention to remain “in the shadows,” now she asserts her right to raise her voice denouncing male culture’s continuous attempt to silence her. Her defiant tone emerges from a feeling of betrayal and near desperation. In this sense, she confirms Lawrence Lipking’s assertion that women write “for the pain of not being seen, of belonging to no one, of not being heard” (212).

The poem “La lejana” (“The Distant One,” *Poesía* 68) from the book *Criatura múltiple* (*Plural Being*, 1954) explores the speaker’s sense of loss and alienation, which tinges her voice with a distinctive elegiac tone. With evident Platonic undertones, she identifies the origin of that loss in the primeval tearing between the I and the you. The irreparable division of the mythic androgynous unity, or of

the mother/daughter dyad, is the origin of her voice, a voice that resounds like a "melopea brutal" 'brutal melopea,' like "pájaro mudo y apresado, que da contra la angustia / con sus alas inmensas" 'a mute and imprisoned bird hitting its immense wings / against anguish' (*Poesía* 69). The voice of this female speaker sings the song of fragmentation and division because, like the snake biting its own tail, woman's anguished call finds no outlet. The poem "Transeúnte" ("Transient," *Poesía* 72), is an attempt to deal with the dilemma between personal fulfillment—or the "vertical" kind of advancement identified with the male order—and solidarity as the "horizontal" movement towards the other. In "Mujer de sal" ("Woman of Salt," *Poesía* 72), the choice is made in favor of the "horizontal" movement. The poem identifies this movement with "staying behind" because it replicates the gesture of Lot's wife in the Bible, who was changed into salt for turning her gaze toward her former life. That "former life" is also the "feminine time" which the poem associates with a primitive type of life in close contact with the earth. However, the gesture to turn the gaze back on an earlier life cost Lot's wife to be changed into salt. By using the terms "disobedient" and "unequal," which is how conventional order describes that type of behavior in women, Beneyto suggests that God's disapproval in the biblical story is still very much alive today. Discouraged, the speaker in "Sonámbula" ("Sleepwalker," *Poesía* 75), calls that return to a more genuine, former life an "absurd melody," which she identifies with "the first voice of the water" or the unconscious flow of life. In spite of prevailing opposition, she proclaims: "Estoy recuperando del olvido / el nombre primitivo de la vida" 'From oblivion I am recovering / the primitive name of life' (*Poesía* 76).

Gradually, the voice of Beneyto's poetic speaker "se afila" 'sharpens' (*Poesía* 84), as she openly rejects the model of the submissive woman that culture wants to impose on her. She asserts her intention to recover that former life, with the primeval light and maternal warmth of which she spoke in her reply to the young man asking about her poetry. She expresses her doubt and skepticism about the structures of power, including religion and God, and defines herself as a female, "alto interrogante hacia la nada" 'a question raised up high toward nothingness.' By giving herself to man in order to procreate the species, she defies Yahweh's condemnation of humankind to death (*Poesía* 82). This Eve defender of the instinctual emerges in opposition to the conventional Romantic representation of female identity as an ideal, fragile figure. The "moonstruck

maiden," who populate Romantic poems while dancing around and playing angel-like music on their harps, are a far cry from Eve, who, like a "monstrous plant," moves in a blind, trance-like, subterranean fashion. Beneyto's defense of the instinctive Eve implies an affirmation of female sexuality that an over-idealized Romanticism and Christian Western tradition tend to sublimate or suppress.

If Eve embodies the fallen woman because she defied God's prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge, female sterility is the most extreme way to annul woman's ability to create life because of the defiance of God that such power entails. The speaker in "Mujer estéril" ("Sterile Woman," *Poesía* 83-86) is well aware of her punishment, but it does not stop her from denouncing God's designs. God may be the creator, but his creation is far from perfect: "Yo alzaría mi canto, si estuviera / bien hecha tu creación" 'I would raise my song, if your creation / were well done,' the woman affirms toward the end of the poem. Contrary to Guillén's well-adjusted speaker of "Beato sillón" ("Blessed Armchair") for whom "The world is well done," for Beneyto's speaker God's creation is so marred by injustice that it does not deserve to be encouraged by the creative powers of women.

This assertive tone is not sustained, however, and Beneyto's poetic speaker oscillates between the submissive, silent role of previous poems, as made evident in "La última mujer" ("The Last Woman," *Poesía* 89), and more defiant plans. Hesitant about her chances of succeeding alone, she tries to convince the man to work with her in mending the original tear that separated them into two different sexes. While the tone is conciliatory, there is a veiled subversion in her plan to counteract Yahweh's design of death by uniting forces with the man. As she proposes to him, the basis for that plan is her wish to "learn"—the same wish that led her to disobey the divine prohibition in the biblical story. She states her proposal as follows:

Aprenderemos bien hojas y plumas
antes de decir árbol, nombrar ave,
hasta saber todas las cosas vivas
por tacto nuestro y no recuerdo antiguo.

We will learn well about leaves and feathers
Before we can say tree, name the bird,
Until we know about all living things

By our own touch and not by ancient memory. (*Poesía* 91)

Her words assert the need to regain the primeval state preceding the fall into consciousness by recovering the direct contact with the thing itself before its mediation by language. They also indicate the desire to reappropriate the original knowledge of the world before memory (in the form of history, religion, and society) shaped it in the way best suited to their designs.

The section entitled "Voz terrestre" ("Terrestrial Voice") in *Tierra viva* (*Living Earth*, 1956) commits to that plan by dedicating the first poem, "Vida anterior" ("Former Life") to the mother. The opening expression in the first two stanzas, "Cuando aún" 'When still . . . ,' recreates the context when the daughter existed in the mother's womb in a state outside of time, "cuando el amor más hondo y mejor nos unía" 'when the deepest and better love united us' (*Poesía* 148). As the poem continues, its language articulates the speaker's love in an attempt, as Barthes explains, to embrace or envelop with words the mother as the object of love.⁷ The speaker wonders about the existence of the mother before she became pregnant: "El tiempo que era tuyo, / el vivido en ti sola, en tu prieto capullo, / ¿en qué salmo se nombra?" 'The time that was your time, / the one lived within you alone, inside your contained bud, / in which psalm is it sung?' (*Poesía* 149). Contrary to the glorification of motherhood by official religion, the "contained bud" of the mother's being, before giving her own self in procreation, is not praised in any psalm. Only the language of nature with its trees and rivers speaks of the mother's ancestral and primordial life. The final lines of the poem express an ardent desire to "traducir sin limo" 'translate without slime' the "agua pura" 'pure water' characteristic of the mother's being. Beneyto's speaker is calling for a kind of language that, free from the "slime" with which tradition and social conventions have tainted the mother figure, will return to her the purity of her image. The amorous embracing of the mother that the words of the poem sustain is, in itself, an attempt to re-enact that language free from "slime" that will rescue the pre-oedipal mother whom culture has silenced.

The section "Tres tiempos o poemas de mi madre" 'Three Tempos or Poems About My Mother' include "Interior," "Cataratas" 'Cataracts,' and "Un hombre iba a morir" 'A Man Was Going to Die' (*Poesía* 184-90). "Interior" revolves around the polarity between the Spain of the post civil war period—"Y eran los tiempos duros. Y era el hambre" 'And those were hard times. The times of hunger'—and the inner space of the house with the mother as the central figure. Each stanza establishes the opposition between the

horror in the outside world and the harmony inside the house where the mother is a “vibrante corazón sonoro” ‘vibrant and sonorous heart.’ The very nature of her occupation as seamstress transforms her into a domestic Parca dedicated to mending the split from original plenitude. However, in “Cataracts,” the mother’s ability to flow over the boundaries of her own being in the essential functions of procreation, mothering, and solidarity, becomes “agua pétrea” ‘petrified water’ or “esqueleto del agua” ‘skeleton of water’ because of the cataracts blocking her sight. As the poem explains, it was her boundless giving of herself to others that turned the mother into “catarata terrible de sí misma / o mujer sin mirada” ‘a terrible cataract of herself / or a woman with no gaze.’ By always mirroring the other, the mother lost her own gaze or the image of her own identity. The giving of herself is equally unsuccessful in “A Man Was Going to Die,” the last poem of this triptych, where the father’s slow agony is described as a shipwreck that the mother is unable to salvage. The homage to the mother in this triptych reveals the hidden side of the “angel of the hearth” model. Contrary to the sentimentality and absurdly idealistic gloss with which that model is conveyed, Beneyto reveals the fortitude and physical endurance of a woman committed to supporting and nurturing life in the face of adversity.

With a markedly female tone, *Biografía breve del silencio* (Brief Biography of Silence, 1975) offers an example of poetry as historical record and social denunciation. The “biography of silence” refers to the mother of whom the book seeks to leave an account. The identification of the mother figure with love in the first poem takes us back to Beneyto’s earlier definition of poetry as “a declaration of love,” in *The Water Surrounding the Island*. In this sense, poetry, love, and the mother become a unity. These poems are elegies lamenting the absence of the mother’s love that the speaker would like to recover through language. “Yo te hablo a ti misma” ‘I speak to you alone’ (11), she tells her mother, so that she will not forget her, nor will she forget herself. As stated earlier, the poet’s goal is to bring forth the primeval and maternal way of life through language. For that purpose, she resorts to the use of two alternating discourses, the discourse of official and external history and the discourse from the private space of the mother. The speaker in these poems comments with the mother about different historical events—the Cuban and the 1914 wars, the Spanish Republic, and the Civil War, among others. Through the mother’s pain in witnessing the destruction of so many lives, these events cease to be facts glori-

fied by the official version of history and instead assume a more human dimension.

A similar technique of juxtaposing and contrasting discourses takes place between, on one hand, the personal experience of the mother and other female characters and, on the other, the Romantic guidelines directing the validation of marriage, motherhood, family, and the sublimation of passion within the confines of well-established institutions in official discourse. The simultaneous presence of both discourses reveals the falsity behind the appearance of objectivity in the official discourse and the down-to-earth veracity of the subjective and very personal discourse of the mother and of women in general. As illustrated in "Romance de unas bodas reales" ("Ballad of Some Royal Wedding" 23-25), the dreams of the young seamstresses working laboriously on what could very well be their trousseau are contrasted with the disappointing reality they are forced to face in their real lives. Through their zealously hidden dreams and desires, which their "real" sweethearts will never suspect they entertain, these young women escape from their oppressive reality while raising their needles as if they were weapons fighting for their secret fantasies. In the case of "Las sufragistas" ("The Suffragists" 34), the example of these women publicly claiming their rights contrasts with the quiet existence of the mother. Beneyto, however, does not favor one direction over the other. Instead, she persists in her sustained struggle between expression and repression, voice and silence, and, in that line, she offers both directions as options. Just as the mother gave biological life to the daughter, the daughter offers her words as another way of giving life and identity. In this sense, procreation and artistic creation become identified in their function of creating life. Gradually, Beneyto is coming to an understanding of subjectivity in terms of the individual woman's decisions and exchanges with the surrounding context.

The importance of the mother figure in Beneyto is in direct correspondence with her particular understanding of language and poetic writing. In "¿Desde cuándo escribe? ¿Por qué?" "Since When Do You Write? Why?" (*The Water Surrounding the Island* 21), another poem providing answers to the young man's questions, the speaker asserts the direct link between her poetry and feelings and defines writing as an activity that is consanguineous with the poet and a way to achieve self-knowledge. This understanding of poetry favors the spoken over the written word and identifies life with writing. In *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (217), Margaret Homans

discusses the difference between the central role of female subjectivity in poetry and the subjectivity of the male Romantic poet. While the latter poet affirms the creative power of his subjective persona, the woman poet seeks to close the gap between her subjectivity and the poem and between the written word and spoken communication. The type of non-mediated language that female writing tries to achieve and that, for Beneyto, the mother represents, is silenced by a cultural system and aesthetic code which favor distance from direct experience, the expression of emotion and life. Beneyto's attempt to rescue the mother is thus identified with salvaging life. However, like Romantic poets before her, Beneyto has to accept the insufficiency of language to fill the absence left by plenitude, whether it be in terms of nature's harmony or the mother.

In Beneyto's last poetry collections, the shifting back and forth between an identity located in the inner or outer spaces, between asserting oneself publicly or remaining in silence, is decided in favor of identifying with the repressed and hidden. As the 1993 title *Nocturnidad y alevosía* (*Nocturnity and Treachery*) indicates, these poems stray from the sweet Romanticism of previous books. The pervading atmosphere is the treacherous night where Baudelairean, black, and carnivorous flowers bloom, a nocturnal setting populated by noctambulists and "viciosas niñas drogadictas" 'vicious and drug addicted young women' (16) dancing in circles with the moon in the middle (19). The epic-narrative poem becomes a monologue "sin voz en la alta noche" 'voiceless in the high night,' as exemplified by "Mujer y hombre dormido" ("Woman and Sleeping Man"), where the female speaker thinks out loud while observing the man sleep. With the opening line, "Me quiere maternal" 'He wants me to be maternal,' the woman recognizes the man's need to be addressed with "una palabra enterneceida / que diga a cuanto él pida, amén" 'the tender word / that will say "amen" to everything he asks' (28). However at the end she asserts: "Quiere una madre cerca de su vida. / Yo también" 'He wants a mother close by. / So do I' (28). Contrary to the woman's subservient role of companion and mother-like figure for the male in earlier poems, she is now open and direct in the expression of her desires.

This more assertive position continues in *Hojas para algún día de noviembre* (*Leaves/Pages for Some November Day*, 1993). The 13 poems comprising the section called "Mujer" 'Woman' depict female characters whose frustration stems from the silencing culture has imposed on them. "La indecisa" ("The Undecided") drama-

tizes a woman's conflict between her desire to fly away from the imprisoning domestic environment and her obligation to stay as dictated by social conventions. "Mujer aherrojada" ("Shackled Woman" 44-45) articulates a similar dilemma in relation to love as an imprisoning passion for women. In "Mujer vieja" ("Old Woman" 46-47), the stereotyped representation of the woman looking at herself in the mirror is reversed into the image of the old woman whose beautiful face has become the face of death inscribed on all her features. The book concludes with two possible models for women: Greta Garbo in "Greta I de Suecia" ("Greta I of Sweden") and "Greta se ha ido" ("Greta is Gone") and Eve again. Greta is the prototype of the woman who, returning from the world of dreams where culture has relegated women, voices her desire to reach a type of love that will not be controlled. In "La inesperada" ("The Unexpected" 53) Eve is portrayed as a child-like figure carrying the message of renewal for women. She is called "new," in the sense of "unpublished" [*inédita*], because she has not yet been constrained by culture imposing expectations on her. This new Eve will come at the end of times carrying the message of the earth before its exploitation by technological progress.

As mentioned earlier, the frame of reference in *Para desconocer la primavera* (*In Order to Disregard Spring*, 1994) is Romanticism as articulated by poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and, particularly, by his "Rhyme LIII," "Volverán las oscuras golondrinas" ("Dark Swallows Shall Return"), from which Beneyto borrows the main images as background to her own book. The annual return of swallows and honeysuckle in Bécquer's poem echoes the swallows and honeysuckle that in the past witnessed the love of poet and woman, even though they are not the same ones. As images of the recurring nature of time, the swallows also refer to the functioning of language as a system of inscribing the world without ever becoming identical with the experience it purports to recreate. Applying to language what Barthes says about photography, the nature of language is not found in representing but rather in memorializing (229). The repetition and difference in the cycle of time are the same ones involved in language, for words capture or "replicate" experience while never being the experience. In the mere action of repeating the experience or object in reality, language, like the photograph or slide (about which Beneyto writes several poems), confirms their absence at the same time. It is perhaps this realization which underlines the elegiac

tone in Beneyto's poetry. Her voice is the lament of language in its inability to capture the plenitude of life.

This book resumes the task of rescuing female figures made to adjust to the heavy weight of models and expectations designed according to Romantic, idealized models. In "Museo romántico" ("Romantic Museum" 30-31), the lady in one of Esquivel's paintings, described as "extraña / forma de lo imposible" 'strange / form of the impossible,' embodies the tragedy of annulling the living person in the name of the unreachable figure of the idealized woman. "Lluvia mediterránea" ("Mediterranean Rain" 32-33) evokes George Sand's loneliness, with her body fully corseted under the guise of the rigid, masculine suit, and her female identity repressed under the masculine pseudonym. In "Madame Bovary" (36), a series of nightmarish images suggest the failure of Emma Bovary's Romantic dreams, while the speaker offers Flaubert's heroine her hand to help her come out of her delirium and join in life. In most of these cases, romantic expectations get in the way of the character's ability to fulfill her life in a productive way. In other poems, such as "La niña del violín y la tristeza" ("The Little Violinist Girl and Sadness" 38), which is a follow-up to "The Girl Violinist" from *Forgotten Song*, the high demands of art get in the way of life. The protagonist's childhood and happiness remain locked up in a room with the violin, while outside freedom can only invite her to join in through the window. "Doncella fluvial" ("Fluvial Maiden" 47-48) refers to the character of Ophelia and her quiet death in the water just as "Ellos la amaban / así, perfecta, así flotante, angélica / y helada" 'They loved her, / just so perfect there, so floating, angel-like, / and frozen' (47). "They," conveyed in the masculine form in the Spanish original "ellos," represents masculine culture in general. Later in the poem the "ellos" is particularized in the "he" watching her "desde detrás del tiempo / sobre su líquida verdad errante, / y sueña en alcanzarla" 'from behind time / over her liquid and wandering truth, / dreaming about reaching her.' As Elizabeth Bronfen's research makes evident, woman's identification with death in Western artistic tradition is indisputable. Beneyto's poem acknowledges that cultural fascination with the representation of the dead woman in the water, her voice definitely relegated to silence.

In "Hombre en la gran parada militar" ("Man in the Great Military Parade"), the very physical presence of the parade with horses, feathers and shoulder flashes (epaulettes) on the shiny uniforms, and the ceremonious salutes frames the poem at the beginning and

end. But the strength and fullness of the scene are dismantled by a set of images belonging to another world: the sad, agonizing red of the rose that the crowds step on; love becoming a cryptic word; a proliferation of images of dead or distant things, of avenues going nowhere, of life devoid of presence, of a girl child whose arrival is placed in a "futuro imperfectísimo" 'most imperfect future' because it does not seem to become a reality. By juxtaposing both levels, the text seeks to mesh and cross boundaries, to reveal the absence that presence contains, the emptiness that official reality and the material presence of language try to hide.

Like Scheherazade's story-telling, Beneyto's long epic and narrative poems are testimonies to the author's faith in language as the means to abolish death and in the proliferation of words in order to express emotions more directly. But the breach of faith in the sufficiency of language in "Golondrinas ausentes" ("Absent Swallows," 66) reveals the indissoluble nature of the conflict between language and life, art, and emotion, which, like her Romantic predecessors, Beneyto is forced to confront. In "Absent Swallows" the elegiac tone of the *ubi sunt?* motif permeates the whole poem: "¿En dónde están ahora? 'Where are they now?' reads the opening line. Like the swallows, the word wished to fly away and share freedom with the air, but instead of providing the escape from the constraints of language and culture, the air can only offer a cemetery of empty forms signifying the failure of language to supplant life. The city, in turn, appears "vestida de aves blancas" 'dressed in white birds,' as if it were a spectral setting awaiting the dark swallows that will give it definition. The whiteness that permeates the context is, like the blank page, a suggestion of the emptiness that language fails to fill. Beneyto's poem refers to the "he" of Bécquer, the poet who, by proclaiming the return of the swallows, tried to find refuge from the loss of love, the loneliness of death and the absence of hands extracting from the strings of the harp the lost music of cosmic harmony. The silence Bécquer hoped to fill with language is the same silence Beneyto finds in the Romantic ideals. These ideals turn into skeletons in the "cold lap" of "sad, lonely old women," replacing what was earlier filled by the "heartbeat" and "hope" of new life. The mother's lap is now the dry womb of the woman aged by time and disappointment. As Lipking notes with regard to women's writing (228), Beneyto is well aware of this bleak reality and raises her voice against God's design of death and in order to recall the lives

of all men and women relegated to oblivion because they chose to reject the roles assigned to them by social conventions.

The question of difference, which Beneyto confronts in terms of language and of the symbolic system of Romanticism, as well as in terms of existence and, in particular, of female identity, is what she chooses to describe as the “*líquida verdad errante*” ‘liquid, wandering truth.’ Difference is something “liquid” and “wandering” because it resists fixedness and the attempt to abide by a set of pre-established and static rules. The “angel of the hearth” or the ideal “She” are paradigms that impede women’s personal fulfillment or, in the case of art, they are obstacles to the spontaneity and fluidity that life entails. Beneyto explores the boundaries between the direct expression of emotions and the system of signs that facilitate such an expression, as well as the relationship between language and the world; the passage of time and the plenitude of the instant; artistic demands and spontaneous life; desire and reality. The repeated line “*volverán*” ‘they shall return’ in Bécquer’s poem marks the dilemma between the eternal return of life and the impossibility of recovering the original experience. The swallows will certainly return, but at the same time they will not. Just as the fluvial maiden Ophelia, making and undoing herself over the surface of the water, or Madame Bovary trying to catch a train that never stops, or George Sand running as if she were trying to escape from her own self, these female prototypes are unable to abide by accepted models of being and behavior because of their “liquid, wandering truth.” Behind their appearance of fullness of being, Romantic ideals reveal the emptiness they try so hard to hide.

Beneyto’s speaker confronts the undeniable fact that the word “love,” which she attempted to articulate in the language of her poems, slips away between the interstices of its cryptic name (57). In spite of the impenetrable nature of love, what remains is the insistent affirmation of its existence: “*este dolor amado que no cesa*” ‘this beloved pain that never ceases’ (57). Barthes speaks of the “truth” of the lover’s discourse, not so much in the sense of the perfect fitness between word and thing, but rather in the insistent need to believe in love’s deceit or charm: “un ‘leurre’ affirmé infiniment, envers et contre tout, devient une vérité. (A savoir s’il n’y a pas, en fin de compte, dans l’amour-passion, un bout de vérité . . . vraie.)” ‘A “lure” that is infinitely affirmed, and against all odds, becomes true. (And who knows if in the long run there is not in

case, writing is placed between the essentialism of Bécquer's line "poetry . . . is you," of the promise of a fullness of being, and the lure of the reiterated desire enclosed in the expression "the dark swallows shall return." Moreover, Beneyto reveals the conflict of the female author seeking another way of being and giving life through her art. Although language is neither able to recuperate the generating mother nor the fullness of her discourse, what remains is its lure to continue playing the make-believe game of trusting the power of words to keep bringing her and the swallows back. Equally, the "liquid, wandering truth" of female identity describes Beneyto's understanding of the need for women to keep redefining themselves through a fluid and constant exchange with their surrounding.⁸ The mother figure may remain Beneyto's desire for a utopic plenitude, but its identity will disperse in the many different roles women will have to delineate for themselves in exchange with their corresponding context.

Notes

1. María Beneyto Cunyat has written novels, short stories, literary criticism, and especially poetry. Her poetry output begins with the publication of *Canción olvidada* (*Forgotten Song*) in 1947, and continues until the present time. Not included in this study is her most recent poetry collection, *Días para soñar que hemos vivido* (*Days to Dream that We Have Lived*) (Castellón: ALCAP, 1996).

2. As this reading will reveal, Beneyto's probing into female identity oscillates between a nostalgic desire to return to the unchangeable female essence of the mother figure and the need to keep "constructing" her identity in view of ever-changing social and historical demands. See Fuss for a discussion of the essentialist/constructionist opposition in the constitution of the subject. I recently came across Diane R. Fisher's analysis of the subject-position notion and its relationship with identity in María Beneyto. Her illuminating article reaffirms some aspects of my own essay and confirms the importance of "negotiating" subjectivity in the Valencian poet.

3. As García Hortelano points out, the first victim of war was childhood (10), and since men were fighting, the mother, or women in general, took care of these poets when they were children (28).

4. Martín Gaité discusses the image of the "ventanera" as the woman behind a window looking out on an outside world in which she plays no part: "La ventana es el punto de referencia de que dispone para soñar desde

dentro el mundo que bulle fuera" 'the window is the reference point she has to dream from the inside the bustling world outside' (36).

5. For Susan Kirkpatrick (242) the fundamental element in the constitution of Romantic female subjectivity, easily applicable to Beneyto as well, is the tension between two forces, the force that impelled the woman artist to experiment, to acquire knowledge and to achieve, and social restrictions imposed on her desire for emancipation.

6. This situation echoes what women had to face with the so-called liberal revolution during the Romantic period (see Kirkpatrick 50-56). While the revolution defended "human" rights against all odds, women's rights were left untouched.

7. "To accost" the love object through language is the "round about" or "declaration" Barthes discusses in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*Fragments of A Lover's Discourse*). The French critic resorts to a kind of primary language in order to "simulate," instead of describe, the lover's discourse (7). The declaration (87-88) describes the lover's need to talk constantly about his/her feelings to the love object, "Parler amoureuxment, c'est dépenser sans terme, sans crise; c'est pratiquer un rapport sans orgasme" 'to talk lovingly is to give of oneself without limit, without crisis; it is to establish a rapport without orgasm' (87), so that language becomes impregnated by the desire since words "surround" or "envelop" the object of love: "j'enroule l'autre dans mes mots" 'I envelop the other with my words' (87). Translations here and in the body of the text are my own.

8. For a discussion of alternatives to the essentialist / constructionist opposition in female identity, see Linda Alcoff (428-36, particularly).

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