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‘Writing as Re-Vision’: Female Creative Agency in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich

Diving into the Wreck (1973)

I came to explore the wreck.

The words are purposes.

The words are maps.

*I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.*

[...]

the thing I came for:

the wreck and not the story of the wreck

the thing itself and not the myth

*the drowned face always staring
towards the sun*

[...]

This is the place.

*And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
I am she: I am he*

[...]

*We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way*

back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.[1]

In this seminal poem, 'Diving into the Wreck' (1973), United States poet Adrienne Rich demonstrates that achieving female agency is a political *and* imaginative labour. The poem, conjured from the voice of a direct female subject, begins by acutely acknowledging its own position in the literary canon: 'First having read the book of myths' (p. 53). From its opening line, Rich promises a fresh and urgent poetic experience – not to reiterate stale versions of womanhood – but instead to journey into undiscovered, and potentially dangerous, zones of female being. This daring quest will be lead by an unidentified female stranger/survivor – the lyric 'I' of the poem – as Rich asks the reader to put their trust in this unknown figure. The journey is into 'the wreck' (p. 53). Yet it remains unclear as to what this wreckage actually comprises: the ruins of human history after female experience has been erased, the latent female identities pushed down and concealed within, or even the foreignness of the female body. The purposeful ambiguity around the 'wreck' is only clarified by the decisive nature of the speaker's intention: 'the thing I came for:/ the wreck and not the story of the wreck/ the thing itself and not the myth' (p. 54). This urgency to reveal 'the thing itself' is the driving force behind the poem, yet no definitive answer is ever disclosed. However, through the undulating processes of the exploratory stanzas, the quest itself – the desire and commitment to discover and transform the female condition – gives the poem its legitimacy.

Written at the pivotal moment of second-wave Feminism, Rich's poetry is both testament to the idea that 'the personal is the political', whilst delving deeper into questions of mythology, sexuality and female complicity in systems of patriarchy [2]. Rich's most influential poetry emerged through reflections on her own life experiences - as a daughter, a wife and a mother. Born in Baltimore in 1929, Rich's evolving feminist consciousness is chronicled in her numerous poetry collections, as she struggled to juggle divergent aspects of her own identity: 'I felt that I had either to consider myself a failed woman and a failed poet, or to try to find some synthesis' (p. 173). In her poetically charged autobiographical confessions, Rich was a pioneer at fusing literary craft with personal and political mediation. It is in the synthesis of these two (traditionally) oppositional modes, intimate daily life and active political dissent, that her poems emerge. Reclaiming the space where women could write – in the political

sphere – was itself a radical move. As Jan Montefiore persuasively argues, feminist poetry, ‘encouraged women to write...as a political process of consciousness raising’ [3]. The burgeoning politicisation of poetry in the 1970s encouraged and facilitated larger political actions. Feminist poetic utterances promoted lively resistance against the disabling societal pressures of femininity, and provided the opportunity for deep thinking about women’s identities. During this empowering historic moment, the world was being widely re-imagined in feminist terms. Multiple and sonorous voices of dissent took on the challenge of reconstructing the foundations of female experience. It was in this mid-seventies context that Rich partook in more extreme and public actions of opposition: she became an advocate for the Women’s Rights Movement, as well as aligning herself with the anti-Vietnam war campaign, the Peace Movement and Civil Rights groups. Rich declined to accept the 1974 National Book Award for Poetry for *Diving into the Wreck* as an individual recipient, and instead the other feminist poets nominated, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, joined her on stage to accept it on behalf of all women, ‘whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world’ [4].

This gesture of female community and solidarity expresses Rich’s aims in the collection, particularly apparent in the title poem ‘Diving into the Wreck’. The poem poses a set of fundamental questions for women’s writing: where are women’s roots in literature? What is the fabric, the basis for their creativity? And how do we negate the false mythologies of women, and replace them with honest and authentic accounts? As the speaker affirms: ‘I came to see to the damage that was done/ and the treasures that prevail’ (p. 54). The mission here is dualistic; to expose and analyse the destructive representations of women, ‘the damage that was done’, and to locate and celebrate buried female achievements, ‘the treasures that prevail’. After the repression of the ‘tranquilized fifties’ in the United States, the void around women’s experiences had hardened into a set of fabricated conventions [5]. It was regarded as normal for women to appear as object, rather than subject in literature, or indeed to be absent altogether. Romantic myths of femininity also persisted: ‘She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ (p. 171). Yet in order to counter these damaging images, the poetic speaker of ‘Diving into the Wreck’ must first familiarise herself with their potency: ‘carrying...a book of myths/ in which/ our names do not appear’ (p. 55). Rich identifies the foundation of women’s self-imposed fragmentation; by passively accepting or encouraging destructive imagery, women became objectified as, ‘part legend, part convention’ (p. 11). Rich maintains that women have been complicit in representations of themselves, purely by their own inaction. Yet there is a building momentum in the poem not only to recognise these stereotypes, but to reclaim them: ‘the drowned face always staring/ toward the sun’ (p. 54). The archetypal figure of the woman on the front of ship – classically immobile and objectified – is subverted by her expression of hope, ‘staring/ toward the sun’. Rich cleverly inverts women’s traditionally subjugated position to authority here, as she goes

underneath the surface to reveal a covert strength. It is this action, of re-taking autonomy over female depiction, that Rich honours.

The means by which the persona of 'Diving into the Wreck' enacts this autonomy is catalogued by the equipment she uses: 'the body-armor of black rubber/the grave and awkward mask....carrying a knife, a camera/ a book of myths' (p. 53, p. 55). Mary DeShazer describes the equipment in terms of its figurative uses: the camera, to capture and record reality; the knife, to cut through illusion; the suit and mask, to cover vulnerability [6]. Similarly the unusual method by which the speaker descends, climbing down a ladder (rather than the aforementioned 'dive') places the reader in a strange dream-like confusion. 'This is the place', we are told, but it is unlike any place we could have envisaged; the submerged wreckage echoes conventional debris, 'the ribs of the disaster', yet transcends traditional classification with its dislocating seascapes (p. 55, p. 54). Unlike some of her earlier, more conventional poetic expressions, Rich is brilliantly fragmentary here. Her discontinuities are entirely purposeful, as they demonstrate, through a determined absence of conventional lucidity, the flaws and pitfalls in the logic of patriarchal culture. Language is knotted, disjointed and tense, while lines appear jagged and unpredictable in length, framing shards of confronting imagery: 'half-wedged and left to rot/ we are the half-destroyed instruments' (p. 55). As the poem reaches its conclusion even basic punctuation melts away; the capital letters and the commas frequent in the first stanzas are forgotten in the urgency to elucidate the speaker's mounting empowerment.

In this poem, Rich, like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and other post-structuralist theorists, is attempting to deconstruct the framework behind patriarchal language forms. Writing often about the 'dead' oppressors' language, she recognised that the historic associations of words was a key political issue. Through the disruption of normative poetic construction, Rich takes apart, and destabilises the logic implicit in traditional modes. Such deconstruction prompts an active and positive reconstruction of values, a reconstruction that will place feminist thought and procedure in a central position. Alicia Ostriker agrees that Rich generates a new feminist myth in the poem, by re-building and re-formulating a feminist consciousness in the mind of the poetic speaker [7]. As part of the revisionist mythmaking of post-60s women poets, Rich looks to forgotten or erased female exemplars, 'the treasures that prevail' (p. 54). Throughout the poem Rich makes reference to those women who have traversed the path before her, the 'tentative haunters' of the wreck who have already 'used' the ladder (p. 54, p. 53). The sea itself, 'bluer and then green and then/ black' embodies the unknown absence of the contemporaneous female condition; surrounded by silence, and a sense of lack, the figure descends alone 'and there is no one/ to tell me when the ocean/ will begin' (p. 54). But once submerged 'the thing itself', the wreck, fills the empty space. What is encountered below the surface may in fact be Rich's exemplary women, resurrected and revived, their voices echoing resonantly – finally – through the ages.

Rich frequently celebrates such women in other poems: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson and Sappho all appear throughout her oeuvre. Yet Rich does not merely pay tribute. Instead she engages in critical arguments with her literary ancestors, illuminating and re-energising long-standing feminist debates. By assembling a female genealogy through a collection of fragments, Rich begins to connect her contemporary moment with a wider feminist lineage.

Rich articulates this strategy of 're-vision' in her groundbreaking essay, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1971). She explains: 'Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival' (p. 167). The essay emphasises that the poetic tradition is itself an area of intellectual and political struggle. In order to replace myth, and re-establish contact with ourselves, women must actively revise prior definitions. Hence Barbara Eckstein argues that, 'what we acquire by diving into the wreck is not a place in the book of myths alongside other myths,' but instead, 'a place in the on-going process of revisiting' [8]. The poem records this re-visioning process, and so the conclusion describes not a static ideal of lost womanhood, but rather: 'the necessity to dive again' [9]. As Rich herself argues: 'The awakening of consciousness is not like the crossing of a frontier – one step and you are in another country' (p. 176). The 'ladder' of the poem – 'always there/ hanging innocently' – symbolises this gradual and incremental movement towards feminist self-discovery (p. 53). Yet what instigates the journey is an initial leap of faith, or in this case a 'dive' (p. 53). The emphasis here on process and mutability, rather than definite and singular resolutions, became a trope common during second-wave feminism. As new versions of womanhood, sexuality and motherhood were articulated by the women poets of the era, such fluid forms of self-definition and self-inscription opened up the possibilities of 1970s feminist activism.

Rich's poetry outlines this steady development from the unconscious into the spoken, yet her ultimate aim is for her personal expressions to inspire direct political actions [10]. In her confessional mode there is little room for ambiguity or abstraction. In 'When We Dead Awaken' Rich discloses that at first her poetry emulated that of her male poetic forebears: 'Frost, Dylan Thomas...Stevens, Yeats' (p. 171). This honesty is not only refreshing but also a calculated manoeuvre; we must stop lying to ourselves, Rich reasons, as in lying we falsify our own reality. As, 'a woman sworn to lucidity', her search for 'the thing itself' is uncompromising [11]. This was not the moment for subtlety or indirectness – Rich asserts that feminist poetry must pronounce the harsh realities of female-ness, as well as conceive of alternatives. As we share in the experiences of the poet, we join a tumultuous voyage of suffering, resistance and solidarity. There is a confidence and conviction in Rich's assertive use of the 'I', a conviction that would soon become unfashionable with the rise of language poetry in the United States. This literary movement, popularised in the 1990s, displaced or

ignored poetic self-manifestation in favour of more abstract linguistic experimentation. Yet, even in our own epoch, Rich can be seen as invoking something daring, and even dangerous, in talking about herself so openly. By bearing out her own autobiography, she is able to actively reconfigure the fragments of her former selves. For Rich this journey is terminally incomplete; the identities of Rich's poems are continually shifting, not lost, but rather transformed in the undulations of the poems themselves.

'Diving into the Wreck' concludes, 'I am she: I am he', which exemplifies Rich's innovative evocations of feminist possibility (p. 55). Throughout the poem we are offered female and male descriptors: 'the mermaid whose dark hair/ streams black, the merman in his armored body' (p. 55). The verses offer up an emancipatory androgynous body, which is liberated from specific gender conventions: 'I am she: I am he'. Whilst gesturing towards the illusion of gender-identity [12], it is upon the reader that Rich ultimately places her optimism. Through its address, and use of pronouns, the poem draws us into collaboration with the submersive mission. By the close of the poem the solitary female figure is not diving alone; the reader has become irrevocably imbricated. This is emphasised at the start of the final stanza, 'We are, I am, you are', a compelling invocation that unifies disparate female selves (p. 55). Beginning with 'We are', Rich summons camaraderie and solidarity to establish and extend the female community. Acknowledging her own didactic and polemical position taking, 'I am', marks Rich as a leader and pedagogical instructor. Finally, 'you are', provokes the reader into meditation and action. Constructing the reader she wants to awaken, Rich's goals in this short line are unifying ('We are'), directing ('I am') and inciting ('you are'). There is also an understanding that there are divergent routes into feminism: 'by cowardice or courage' (p. 55). Hence Rich's provocations are only ever a starting point: 'The words are purposes./ The words are maps' (p. 54). Her words are 'purposes', as they have a political weight behind them; her words are 'maps', as they form a guide in which to navigate the poem individually. While Rich makes direct feminist assertions, her language remains open ended; statements function as 'points of departure', ideas that should be read as stimuli for continued debate [13]. Rich encourages her readership to make new observations, to extend her thinking and to transgress her initial discoveries. By inviting the reader into the transaction of poetic meaning-making, Rich hopes to extend this participation into wider cultural involvement by women.

For Rich the emergent need for active female self-construction - being able to define and inscribe versions of womanhood creatively and autonomously - went hand in hand with achieving wider political agency. As Rich expounds: 'If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives' (p. 171). Rich reaches into the expansiveness of the imagination, and uses this latent creative potentiality to envisage new ways for women to exist in the world. Her feminist poetics of intervention work to help re-imagine the literal conditions of women's lives. By opening up the lacuna of female self-hood, Rich creates the

possibility for an exigent, and original, signifying space. Rich's poetry, unlike most of her male forebears, remains in a creative process; her ideas are active and malleable, and ultimately still exploratory. Her oeuvre, and particularly 'Diving into the Wreck', proclaims 'a way of becoming, rather than a narrowly defined end' [14]. Poetry provides the space for this discovery; Rich recognises its capacity to become a revolutionary mode, as it combines linguistic power with a privileged relation to perception, experience and consciousness. Before it could be actualised in the wider culture, Rich's embodied poetic iterations glimpsed the potential for female agency. Above all, Rich dedicated her literary career to generating a sovereign space for women in poetry, enabling imaginative encounters between gender and identity to be advanced on the page and, through language and publication, on into the public arena.

Notes

[1] Adrienne Rich, 'Diving into the Wreck', in *A Norton Critical Edition: Adrienne Rich's Poetry & Prose* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), p. 53-55. All subsequent references to Rich's poems and poetics will come from this edition, and will be indicated by parenthetical page references within the text.

[2] Rich had an acute awareness of the power of history to shape consciousness, so in 1956 she began to date every poem she composed.

[3] Jan Montefiore, *Feminism & Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London & New York: Pandora, 1987), p. ix.

[4] Adrienne Rich, 'Speech for the National Book Awards, National Book Foundation', 1974, <http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_arich_74.html#.VCi5PJXXHG5> [accessed 19 August 2014].

[5] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963), p. 17

[6] Mary DeShazer, *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1988), p. 156.

[7] Alicia Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 320.

[8] Barbara Eckstein, 'Iconicity, Immersion and Otherness: The Hegelian "Dive" of J.M. Coetzee and Adrienne Rich', *Mosaic*, 1996, Volume: 29, Issue 1, p. 57.

[9] Ibid., p. 57.

[10] Craig Werner, *Adrienne Rich: The Poet & Her Critics* (Chicago & London: American Library Association, 1988), p. 4.

[11] Adrienne Rich, 'I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus', in *The Will to Change* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), p. 19.

[12] Rich would later retract her commitment to the androgynous, declaring it useless as it would not help women feel themselves as women. This is a clear example of Rich's oscillating feminist ideas, which would shift and evolve over time.

[13] Charles Altieri, 'Self-reflection as Action: The Recent Work of Adrienne Rich', in *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 347.

[14] Judith McDaniel, *Reconstituting the World: The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich* (Florida: Spinsters Ink, 1978), p. 320.