Natural Resources: Adrienne Rich's Early Works.

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NATURAL RESOURCES: ADRIENNE RICH'S EARLY WORKS

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ADRIENNE RICH'S EARLY WORKS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Adrienne Rich's career to date can be divided into halves, the first beginning in 1950 and ending with the completion of Necessities of Life. Leaflets initiates the second. Careful reading shows that the political poetry of the later collections (beginning with Leaflets) is both a reaction to and a development from the early work, which is the focus of this study.

Love, identity, synthesis, art: these have been Rich's primary concerns for over thirty years. What has changed gradually is her perception of the world and of her place as a woman poet. Each one of her nine volumes of poems is significant in itself and representative of a step in the evolution of Rich's poetry and poetics. The poetry of the first four volumes not only offers a record of Rich's emerging realizations but also reveals the processes by which she assimilated her influences and developed her "natural resources": perception, imagination, language.

A Change of World and The Diamond Cutters mark Rich's modernist apprenticeship. Both the poet and her personae maintain a careful distance from others. Establishing defenses against change is the poet's work in the first volume, but The Diamond Cutters ac-

knowledges with resignation that change cannot be averted. This second collection shows an increase in imaginative play and an interest in the imagination as a subject for poetry.

The publication of Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law is the first indication that Rich herself had thoughts of "smash [ing] the mould." The forms are freer, the content more personal. The abstract theme of experience found in the earliest books becomes more concrete in poems based on the poet's life.

Necessities, with its confessional poses and retreats into nature, actually links the two halves of Rich's career. If the title poem of Snapshots is a call to action, the title poem of Necessities illustrates the first stage of the new woman's action. In order to reenter the world on her own terms, she must literally step backwards to determine in privacy what "the bare necessities" are. Rich's early and continuing interest in metapoetry and her growing belief in the process of writing as a means of personal discovery lead here to poems that describe and demonstrate her understanding of psychodynamics. This subject reappears later in her critiques of sexual politics as well as in her equations of dream, film, and poetry. The translations that make up the second section of Necessities provide a metaphor

for subsequent volumes: all poetry and even life itself, the political Rich insists, are translations.

Only recently, in The Dream of a Common Language, has Rich allowed herself to use the word "vision," but the early works show where both the "split" from tradition and "a world unfit" and the reconnection with the power of the imagination began.

INTRODUCTION

"THE MOON IS BROKEN LIKE A MIRROR"

A small biographical note to Adrienne Rich's "Caryatid" in The American Poetry Review prompted me to buy Diving into the Wreck in 1973. Sitting at the kitchen table on a sweltering Fourth of July, copying "Incipience" into my journal, I did not know that I would eventually spend several years writing on Rich's work. I only knew that this poem, striking in its simplicity as it equated poetry and life, spoke to me and for me:

> Nothing can be done
> but by inches. I write out my life
> hour by hour, word by word
> . . . . . .
> imagining the existence
> of something uncreated
> this poem
> our lives.[1]

I began to look for Rich's new poems and to search for her earlier books. Little criticism had appeared before 1973, despite the laudatory early reviews by Donald Hall, Randall Jarrell, and Hayden Carruth. While I was "discovering" Rich, however, so were many others. Diving, which won the 1974 National Book Award for

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[1] Diving into the Wreck (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), p. 11.

Poetry, and the 1975 Poems: Selected and New, in conjunction with the widely reprinted 1972 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," firmly established Rich's reputation as a poet and as a feminist. These publications inspired articles that, with a few exceptions, treated the first two books--A Change of World (1951) and The Diamond Cutters (1955)--summarily and did not quite know how to deal with Necessities of Life (1966). The suggestions of feminism in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963) and the anti-war position and open forms of Leaflets (1969) and The Will To Change (1971) made these three volumes more accessible. It is, nevertheless, interesting to note that the explications of "Snapshots"--perhaps one of the most important long poems of this century--began to appear only after the publication of Diving.

Each book, as I emphasize throughout this thesis, is both significant in itself and representative of a step in the evolution of Adrienne Rich's poetry and poetics. In fact, her work "reveals . . . a paradigm, an emblematic trajectory of the course of American poetry since the Second World War."[2] The nine volumes

[2]Richard Howard, "Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends Us Anchor But the Mutable?'" in Alone with America (New York: Athenum Publishers, 1969), pp. 423-24.

of poetry that Rich has published show her growth from modernist to postmodernist, from dutiful daughter to militant feminist. Yet, as I also explain, Rich has not discarded her early subjects but has instead re-investigated and re-interpreted them.

Rich's career to date can be divided into halves, the first beginning in 1950 and ending with the completion of Necessities of Life. Leaflets initiates the second half; the political poetry of Rich's later collections (beginning with Leaflets) is both a reaction to and a development from the early work.[3] The contrasts and the connections between life and poetry, form and content, consciousness and dream, the self and the other, the self as poet and the self as woman: these have been Rich's primary concerns from the beginning. What has changed gradually over thirty years is Rich's perception of the world and of her place as a woman poet. At every stage, the development of Rich's art has been organic. The old forms would not suffice in a world lacking absolutes, so she began to experiment; the old treatments of subjects would not suffice for women, so she began to write feminist poetry.

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[3]Necessities was published in 1966; both Necessities and Leaflets include poems written in 1965.

In the second half of her career, Rich began to write about the subjects of relationships, separation, and poetry in a political context, emphasizing the ties between the public and the private. The poetry of the first half of Rich's career, the subject of this thesis, not only offers a record of Rich's emerging realizations and her efforts to come to terms with them, but also reveals the process by which she developed her "natural resources": perception, imagination, language.[4]

A Change of World and The Diamond Cutters mark Rich's apprenticeship, her "mastery of elements" under the influence of such poets as Blake, Dickinson, Eliot, Frost, and Stevens.[5] In A Change of World, Rich praises the "restraining purity" of form; "At a Bach Concert" sums up her belief in the Aristotelian product.[6] Establishing defenses--against change and against one's own anxiety--is the poet's work. Both she and her personae maintain a careful distance from others. Distance and passivity dominate the travel poems of The Diamond Cutters as well, but these poems do acknowledge that

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[4]I have taken the title of my dissertation from one of the poems included in Rich's Dream of a Common Language (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), pp. 60-67.

[5]"Storm Warnings," A Change of World (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1951), p. 17.

[6]A Change of World, p. 54.

change cannot be "averted." (At the time, Rich's characteristic tone was one of resignation.) This second collection shows both an increase in imaginative play and an interest in the imagination--the "light of sleep's high noon"--as a subject for poetry.[7]

The publication of Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law first indicates that the keeper of the house has thoughts of "smash[ing] the mould."[8] The forms are freer, the content more personal. Sequences using juxtaposition replace rhyming narratives. The setting for poems on alienation shifts from Europe to the poet's kitchen; the abstract theme of experience found in The Diamond Cutters becomes more concrete in poems based on the poet's life.

The metaphor of the photograph in Snapshots and Necessities of Life suggests both the autobiographical nature of poetry and the tension between the Apollonian concept of the poem as a literal "still life" and the Dionysian concept of the poem as a process. Necessities actually links these two parts of Rich's career. Her

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[7]"Villa Adriana," The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), p. 44.

[8]"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," Snapshots . . . (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., c. 1963 [c. 1967], p. 24.

interest, present from the beginning, in metapoetry and her growing belief in poetry-writing as a means of personal discovery lead, in this fourth volume, to poems that describe and demonstrate Rich's understanding of psychodynamics. This subject appears later in Rich's equations of dream, film, and poetry and, later still, in her critiques of sexual politics. The translations that make up the second section of Necessities provide another metaphor that dominates subsequent volumes: all poetry and even life itself, the political Rich insists, are translations.

Influenced by certain poets and influencing still others, Rich has repeatedly announced new beginnings for herself and for her poetry, as if trying to find the ways--for there is no one way--to use language to embody "silent truths."[9] Only recently, in The Dream of a Common Language (1978), has Rich allowed herself to use the word "vision," but her readers must look at the early works to discover where both the "split"--from tradition, innocence, "a world unfit"[10]--and the

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[9]Chr. J. Van Geel, "Sleepwalking," translated by Adrienne Rich in Necessities of Life (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 66.

[10]See "Transcendental Etude," The Dream of a Common Language, p. 72, and "Waking in the Dark" and "Merced," Diving into the Wreck, pp. 10 and 36.

reconnection began:

> Out of my head, half-bursting,
> still filling, the dream condenses--
> . . . . . .
>
> Should I make you, world, again . . .
> ("Mourning Picture," 1965)[11]

[11] Necessities of Life, p. 32.

CHAPTER I

A CHANGE OF WORLD:

"THE MASTERY OF ELEMENTS"

By 1951, when she was twenty-one years old and a senior at Radcliffe, Adrienne Cecile Rich (she would drop her middle name after her second book) had published poems in Harper's Magazine, The Virginia Quarterly Review, and Poetry. In that year, her manuscript titled A Change of World was chosen for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, and soon after her graduation her first book was published.

W. H. Auden, the editor of the series, ended his introduction to A Change of World by saying: "the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs: that, for a first volume, is a good deal." Earlier in his introduction, Auden had referred to Eliot's observations on poetry--"In a young poet, . . . the most promising sign is craftsmanship for it is evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible."[1]

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[1] "Foreword" to A Change of World (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1951), pp. 11 and 10. Subsequent references to Auden's "Foreword" and to Rich's Change of World are to this edition.

A Change of World is an accomplished first book; the poems are well-crafted, and Rich's facility with language and her keen perception are obvious. Like other poets' first works, the poems show a "respect for," if not a reliance on, the methods and subjects of her "elders." In Rich's case these elders include Auden himself; "The Ultimate Act," "What Ghosts Can Say," "The Innocents," and "The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room" show his influence. "Design in Living Colors" and "At a Deathbed in the Year Two Thousand," the latter with its reference to "a crumbling stair," are reminiscent of Yeats' poetry. "Life and Letters" recalls the work of both Robinson and Lowell, while "Unsounded" and "Boundary" are clearly modeled on Dickinson's poems. "Storm Warnings" is reminiscent of Frost's "Tree at My Window," in which the persona stresses the similarity between the storm-tossed tree outside his window and himself in troubled sleep. The "ultimate blue" of "Stepping Backward" suggests Stevens' use of the word "blue" to represent the power of the imagination.[2]

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[2]For brief but thorough discussions of the influences on Rich's early poetry, see Howard, "Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends Us Anchor But the Mutable?'" in Alone With America, pp. 424-25, and Rosellen Brown, "The Notes for the Poem are the Only Poem," Parnassus: Poetry in Review, 4 (Fall, Winter 1975), 53-54.

Donald Hall's summation in his review of her first two books is valid: Rich is one of the "young poets of talent . . . [who] are gifted with easy competence and are plagued by not always sounding quite like themselves." Hall is careful to point out that although Rich falls into this category, "she does not fall far" in her second book, The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems (1955).[3] In her first book, Rich seems to be trying out voices and modes while displaying a mastery of elements, to paraphrase a line from "Storm Warnings."

Eliot's "detachment from the self" applies to A Change of World. These poems are objective and and controlled. Their reliance on regular rhyme and meter, their abstract quality, and their sense--for the reader--of accomplishment without originality mark many of the poems of the time in which A Change of World was written. (Auden warned against the "desire to be 'original'" ["Foreword," p. 8].) Rich has provided her own comments on her early work in an interview with Stanley Plumly--"When I started writing poetry I was tremendously conscious of, and very much in need of, a formal structure that could be obtained from outside, into which I could pour whatever I had, whatever I thought I had to ex-

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[3]"A Diet of Dissatisfaction" (rev. art.), Poetry, 87 (February 1956), 301.

press"[4]--and in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision"--"In those years, formalism was part of the strategy--like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded."[5] In the latter statement, Rich is referring specifically to the rhymed, objective poem on woman's imagination titled "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers."

Creating "felt," original poetry was doubly difficult for a woman writing in the fifties. The modernist poets had left examples and precepts in poetry and criticism for the younger poets to follow. Leslie Fiedler explains the paradoxical result: "What had begun as a revolutionary movement in the arts . . . just before World War I, had in the three decades stretching roughly from 1925 to 1955 became an almost unchallenged orthodoxy. . . . [T]he Eliotic new poetry . . . was . . . well on the way to becoming academic and genteel, well-behaved and passionless, a convention made out of revolt."[6] With a few exceptions, the mentors of the age

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[4]Stanley Plumly, Wayne Dodd, and Walter Tevis, "Talking with Adrienne Rich," The Ohio Review, 13, No. 1 (1971), 30.

[5]"When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," College English, 34 (October 1972), reprinted and revised in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979), p. 40. All citations from this essay are to this edition.

[6]Waiting for the End (New York: Stein and Day, 1964), pp. 215-17.

were men.[7] Rich has said that she "had been taught that poetry should be 'universal,' which meant, of course, non-female" ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 44). In fact, when Rich included "Afterward" from A Change of World in the 1975 Poems: Selected and New, she revised the pronoun in the final line from masculine to feminine: "We who know limits now give room / To one who grows to fit her doom" (emphasis mine).

The themes in this first book are "universal" themes, such as mutability ("Storm Warnings," "A Change of World," "A Clock in the Square," and "The Return of the Evening Grosbeaks") and death ("Why Else But To Forestall This Hour," "At a Deathbed in the Year Two Thousand," and "Life and Letters"). Poems about love ("This Beast, This Angel" and "Vertigo") are balanced by poems about separation and alienation ("A View From the Terrace," "Unsounded," "Sunday Evening," and "Stepping Backward"). Other themes include anxiety ("Mathilde in Normandy" and "Eastport to Block Island") and the inadequacy of religion ("Reliquary" and "Air Without Incense"). The

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[7]One exception to this rule for Rich was Emily Dickinson, whom two of the poems here recall and whom Rich alludes to in later works such as "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," "I Am in Danger--Sir--" and "Face to Face." In 1976, Rich published a lecture on Dickinson, "Vesuvius at Home," which was included in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence.

subject of travel, which dominates The Diamond Cutters, is introduced here in "The Kursaal at Interlaken" and "By No Means Native." Art, which becomes one of the central themes of Rich's work, is the theme of "At a Bach Concert" and "From a Chapter on Literature."[8] The categories frequently overlap. "By No Means Native" is a travel poem about alienation; "Life and Letters" is about the death of the imagination and might be put under "art." These universal poems are also "timely," as Susan Van Dyne remarks, "voicing . . . the educated ennui of that decade."[9]

Van Dyne's suggestion that Rich's books represent a series of stages (an eminently logical approach that a number of critics have not followed) and David Kalstone's

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[8]Nearly every critic who has discussed A Change of World has commented upon the themes of mutability, anxiety, and separation, which dominate this book. For short but valuable discussions, see Howard, pp. 425-27; Helen Vendler, "Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds," Parnassus: Poetry in Review, 2 (Fall, Winter 1973), reprinted in part in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), pp. 160-64; and Albert Gelpi, "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," American Poetry Since 1960, ed. Robert B. Shaw (Cheadle, Cheshire: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1973), reprinted in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, pp. 130-32.

[9]"The Mirrored Vision of Adrienne Rich," Modern Poetry Studies, 8, No. 2 (1977), 142.

assertion that Rich has not "radically changed the direction or interests of her writing" are both accurate.[10] As Rich's philosophy of life and her poetics have evolved, her old subjects have been not so much discarded as reinvestigated and charged with new meaning. Like Sylvia Plath (and she has been called a "Sylvia Plath in reverse"[11]), Rich has had a "self to discover" and to rediscover. Although the majority of poems in A Change of World seem to echo what we have

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[10] See Van Dyne, pp. 141-73 and Kalstone, "Adrienne Rich: Face to Face," in Five Temperaments (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 162. While Kalstone studies Rich as an autobiographical poet and Van Dyne argues that Rich has used "shape-shifting" and masks, both are in essential agreement about Rich's evolving self-awareness. Interestingly enough, Van Dyne says, "Although the habit of keeping her distance has been repeatedly a source of personal suffering and guilt, it has nevertheless served throughout her career as an essential poetic advantage." While I think that Van Dyne is correct in saying that Rich's "motive for assuming a series of masks has been neither to embroider nor disguise her own identity; rather she struggles to sense it more keenly," I do not agree entirely with Van Dyne's development of her thesis. The poems show a complex examination of rather than an "insist[ence] . . . on her separateness or severalness." See also Suzanne Juhasz, "The Feminist Poet: Alta and Adrienne Rich," in Naked and Fiery Forms (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 189. Juhasz says that "relationship . . . [has been] Rich's abiding concern throughout her career."

[11] Howard, "Changes" (rev. art.), Partisan Review, 38 (Winter 1971-72), 486.

read or heard before, several of them, such as "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," "Stepping Backward," and "Mathilde in Normandy," provide evidence of a unique sensibility.

I am not implying that Rich could have written "Diving into the Wreck" in 1950; hindsight in criticism can be a terrible thing. The Rich of the early nineteen-fifties should not be called a political poet. I am suggesting instead that Rich had already begun to find paradoxes in daily experience and within herself to which she would return later on a more personal level and in a more direct way. The themes of relationship and art have been inseparable for Rich from the beginning of her career, and it is possible to trace a progression from Rich's point of view in A Change of World through the subdued affirmation of "A Marriage in the 'Sixties" (1961) and "Like This Together" (1963), the frustration of "The Demon Lover" (1966), and the anger of "Translations" (1972) to the joy and determination of her lesbian poem "Transcendental Etude" (1977).

Her concern for the "betrayed, too-human heart" continues for twenty-nine years; for the time being in the early fifties, Rich welcomes and works within the bounds of formalism in handling this volatile subject. "At a Bach Concert," a homage to the Baroque composer that may be read a metapoem, sums up the attitude im-

plicit throughout this first book. Here are the last two stanzas:

> Form is the ultimate gift that love can offer--
> The vital union of necessity
> With all that we desire, all that we suffer.
>
> A too-compassionate art is half an art.
> Only such proud restraining purity
> Restores the else-betrayed, too-human heart.

Form--imposed from without--offers "restraining purity"; the emphasis here is on the Aristotelian product. Nearly all of the poems in A Change of World are written in rhyme and meter. "Why Else But To Forestall This Hour," a poem about the failure to take risks and the worthlessness of the unexamined life, is written in iambic pentameter, with perfect and masculine end-rhymes:

> I am the man who has outmisered death,
> In pains and cunning laid my seasons by.
> Now I must toil to win each hour and breath:
> I am too full of years to reason why.

The regular base rhythm is usually iambic pentameter; Rich then frequently makes substitutions, shortening or expanding lines. "A Clock in the Square," a poem about change reminiscent of Frost's poetry, contains two lines (the seventh and eighth) that each end

with an extra unstressed syllable. The addition reinforces our sense of the seriousness of the theme:

> This handless clock stares blindly from
> its tower,
> Refusing to acknowledge any hour.
> But what can one do to stop the game
> When others go on striking just the same?
> Whatever mite of truth the gesture held,
> Time may be silenced, but will not be
> stilled,
> Nor we absolved by any one's withdrawing
> From all the restless ways we must be
> going
> And all the rings in which we've spun and
> swirled,
> Whether around a clockface or a world.

The rhyme scheme (aabbccddee) is varied by the use of slant- or half-rhymes in lines five and six ("held" and "stilled") and seven and eight ("withdrawing" and "going"). Like "A Clock in the Square," "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" consists of couplets or pairs of rhyming lines: "The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid." In "Storm Warnings," only the third-to last and last lines rhyme; in "Reliquary," end rhyme depends upon assonance:

> The bones of saints are praised above
> their flesh,
> That pale rejected garment of their lives
> In which they walk despised, uncanonized.

"Life and Letters," which is modeled after Lowell's "Mills of the Kavanaughs" (and, according to Howard,

after Robinson's poems), narrates the death of an old artist and the death of the imagination:

> An old man's wasting brain; a ruined city
> Where here and there against the febrile sky
> The shaft of an unbroken column rises,
> And in the sands indifferent lizards keep
> The shattered traces of old monuments.
> Here where the death of the imagination
> trances the mind with shadow, here the shapes
> Of tumbled arch and pediment stand out
> In their last violence of illumination.

This poem is written primarily in blank verse. Even here, however, as this selection shows, Rich introduces variations; she employs assonance and expands lines to eleven or twelve syllables, using hypermeter or substituting lines of hexameter for pentameter.

An exception to the poems written in iambic pentameter is "Boundary," a paradoxical poem that recalls Emily Dickinson's work. The base rhythm is iambic tetrameter; each line has either seven or eight syllables, and the lines are arranged in rhyming triplets:

> What has happened here will do
> To bite the living world in two,
> Half for me and half for you.
> Here at last I fix a line
> severing the world's design
> Too small to hold both yours and mine.
> There's enormity in a hair

Enough to lead men not to share
Narrow confines of a sphere
But put an ocean or a fence
Between two opposite intents.
A hair would span the difference.

"Unsounded," another poem about separation, is also reminiscent of Dickinson in form and content. The lines have five, six, or seven syllables, and the rhyme scheme is irregular:

Mariner unpracticed,
In this chartless zone
Every navigator
Fares unwarned, alone.
Each his own Magellan
In tropics of sensation:
. . . . . .
These are latitudes revealed
Separate to each.

Rich's range of experimentation within prescribed limits in A Change of World suggests that even in 1950 she recognized that the form of a poem must add to and reinforce its content rather than simply demonstrate the poet's technical skill. In The Diamond Cutters, the rhyme schemes become even more varied, and in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963), Rich begins to work with organic, self-defining forms.

Rich only occasionally uses simlies in A Change of World. Four poems here--"The Kursaal at Interlaken," "From a Chapter on Literature," "The Return of the

Evening Grosbeaks," and "The Springboard"--include similes, none of which are particularly original. For example, the mist "Crawl[s] like a snail" in "From a Chapter on Literature." By the time of Snapshots, one outstanding feature of Rich's poetry is the use of striking similes and short metaphors. These in turn are replaced by images in The Will To Change (1971). One way to measure the changes that Rich's work has undergone is to compare the ghazals in Leaflets (1969) and poems such as "Images for Godard" and "Shooting Script" in The Will To Change, which consist of series of juxtaposed images, with the extended metaphors of A Change of World.[12] An example of Rich's use of extended metaphor occurs in the title poem, which begins with "Fashions are changing in the sphere" and which continues to use the "fashion" metaphor, with its connotation of change, in the second stanza, by introducing "tailors" and "stitches." Rich even includes an allegory in this collection--"The Rain of Blood." The rhyming couplets give a fairy-tale quality to this poem about humankind's refusal to assume responsibility:

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[12]In her latest book of poetry, The Dream of a Common Language (1978), Rich's forms are less experimental.

> And all men knew that they could staunch
> the wound,
> But each looked out and cursed the
> stricken town,
> The guilty roofs on which the rain came
> down.

In recalling her admiration for this first book when she originally read it in the fifties, Helen Vendler says, "most of A Change of World is written by a girl in love."[13] "Vertigo," the poem that Vendler cites, is certainly about a girl in love:

> As for me, I distrust the commonplace;
> Demand and am receiving marvels, signs,
> Miracles wrought in air, acted in space
> . . . . . .
> I have inhaled impossibility,
> And walk at such an angle, all the stars
> Have hung their carnival chains of light
> for me:
> There is a streetcar runs from here to
> Mars.
> I shall be seeing you, my darling, there,
> Or at the burning bush in Harvard Square.

A large number of these poems, however, are written by a woman who keeps her distance. The rhyme and meter; the abstractions ("Now that your hopes are shamed, you stand, / At last believing and resigned" ["Afterward"], "What if the world's corruption nears, / The consequence they dare not name" ["The Ultimate Act"]); the masculine personae; the decorum (Rich's word to describe her early

[13]"Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds," p. 162.

work, which the critics have picked up); and the decorative nature of the language ("denizens of enchantment" in "Itinerary," "the whisking emerald lizards" in "The Innocents") help Rich maintain her distance from herself and her subjects.[14] Keeping one's distance, moreover, is both a technical matter and a thematic concern in these poems. Frequently the subjects themselves--whether third person "characters" or the personae that speak the poems--seem removed; they are observers, onlookers, old people who are no longer in the center of things, young people who do not quite fit. With a few exceptions (such as in "Why Else But To Forestall This Hour" and "Rain of Blood"), distance and passivity are neither criticized nor lamented--the world itself is less than ideal.[15]

The speaker in "At a Deathbed in the Year Two Thousand" is an old dying man who advises his listeners to "Be proud on a sorry earth." As for the old writer in "Life and Letters," "All he does now is watch the square below." "Art has left the man to rest," and all he can do is try to remember the past:

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[14]See Vendler, p. 161, on this last point.

[15]Cf. Willard Spiegelman, "Voice of the Survivor: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich," Southwest Review, 60 (Autumn 1975), 371. "The people in A Change of World and The Diamond Cutters (1955) are elegant, passive, and will-less."

> The failing searchlight of his mind
> remains
> To throw its wavering cone of recognition
> Backward upon those teeming images.
> New York invades the memory again.

In "A View of the Terrace," a young woman and her companion choose alienation "from the bright enamel people" on the lawn below and clearly feel superior. Although "Vertigo" is a lilting love poem, another "love poem" is more problematical. In "The Kursaal at Interlaken" the speaker expects the man that she is with to make love to her. As the evening ends, however, she focuses her attention on the mountain, an image of self-sufficiency:

> This image still pursues us into time:
> Jungfrau, the legendary virgin spire,
> Consumes the mind with mingled snow and
> fire.

"By No Means Native," another one of the travel poems, is also about alienation and is apparently light in tone. Rhyming couplets mask its seriousness. A man tries to be like the natives of the place he visits and learns that "He must remain eternally a guest . . . [and] never overstep that tenuous line." Yet this limbo is preferable. He is:

> By no means native, yet somewhat in love
> With things a native is enamored of--
> Except the sense of being held and owned
> By one ancestral patch of local ground.

The poems about Europe and the poems about local scenes, the poems about art and the poems about the inadequacy of religion: all are, as Richard Howard has said, poems of "exile and estrangement."[16] This sense of separateness continues in Rich's work, as something to celebrate, as something to work against, as something to articulate as unwanted but inevitable. In her first two books, she is sometimes condescending, speaking from "the automatic literary stance that mimics earned wisdom."[17] (Most young poets and not a few older ones are guilty of this.) Later on, knowledge will be harder won, the issues more ambivalent, yet even in writing these first poems Rich is aware of certain paradoxes. In what many have agreed is the finest poem in the book, "Stepping Backward," the speaker pretends that she is leaving the person she is with:

> Good-by to you whom I shall see tomorrow,
> Next year and when I'm fifty; still
> good-by.
> This is the leave we never really take.
> If you were dead or gone to live in China
> The event might draw your stature in my
> mind.
> I should be forced to look upon you whole
> The way we look upon the things we lose.
> We see each other daily and in segments;
> Parting might make us meet anew, entire.

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[16]"Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends Us Anchor But the Mutable?'" p. 426.

[17]Brown, p. 57.

"Stepping Backward" may be necessary to see more clearly, to gain perspective--"we live by inches / And only sometimes see the full dimension." It is a paradox that the artist must face--she is (must be) separated from the rest by the nature of her function.

If certain poems seem like set-pieces, their resolutions too easily won ("every flower emerges understood / Out of a pattern unperceived till now" ["Design in Living Colors"]), Rich does not always seek final resolutions. In poems such as "By No Means Native" and "Boundary" (both quoted above), Rich presents both sides of issues. The tension <u>is</u> the poem. In "The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room," the uncle says, "We stand between the dead glass-blowers / And murmurings of missile-throwers." The guardian of the past stands between what has always sufficed and the threat of change, as does the onlooker in "For the Felling of an Elm in the Harvard Yard." This poem concludes:

> Watching the hewn trunk dragged away,
> Some turn the symbol to their own,
> And some admire the clean dispatch
> With which the aged elm came down.

In "Five O'Clock, Beacon Hill," the speaker sits in a conservatory, drinking sherry with a man named Curtis who "Meets elder values with polite negation." The

woman comments: "What rebel breathes beneath his mask, indeed? / Avant-garde in tradition's lineaments!" The poem as a whole is wry and detached; yet the speaker describes herself as "between yew and lily, in resignation."

There is a suggestion in the last three poems quoted above that it may not be possible to effect resolutions. While the speakers--raisonneurs for Rich--see both sides, they fear extremes. This collection suggests that we cannot avert change, and the author's and the personae's response to this is one of anxiety. Like the inhabitants of the shore in "Eastport to Block Island," we must "prepare / As usual . . . for foul, not fair." The title poem concludes with lines that are obviously and intentionally ironic: "They say the season for doubt has passed / The changes coming are due to last."

The metaphorical poem that opens the book, "Storm Warnings," is about "Weather abroad and weather in the heart." The persona knows that she cannot stop change: "Between foreseeing and averting change / Lies all the mastery of elements." The elements she lists here--"time" and "wind"--cannot be mastered: "We can only close the shutters." The speaker "draw[s] the curtains as the sky goes black / And set[s] a match to candles

sheathed in glass," explaining:

> This is our sole defense against the
> season;
> These are the things that we have
> learned to do
> Who live in troubled regions.

Change is Rich's theme again in later books, but by the late fifties she welcomes change and does not establish defenses against it.

Rather than choose a few poems and discuss them at length, as I will do in subsequent chapters, I have given a broad overview of A Change of World because Rich herself seems to be trying out different approaches, searching for her own authentic voice. Like Vendler, I can feel a sense of "wonder" in reading this accomplished book. Yet, as I have said earlier, the sense of felt experience is frequently lacking. "An Unsaid Word" is illustrative:

> She who has 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.

While the masculine mind experiences "estranged intensity," the woman must wait--an odd point of view for a woman artist.

There is the final paradox: Rich can be wryly perceptive about her time and herself--but within the limits of the time and of her young age. In her "Foreword" to Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974, Rich explains that she has left out poems "that felt more like exercises than poems, or that were written out of technique and habit rather than out of strangeness and necessity." Her terms seem to be accurate ones for describing many of the poems in A Change of World. Yet, as Rich herself believes, these very poems are part (the first part) of the process that her writing has undergone and continues to undergo.[18]

Responding to these poems on an intellectual level is not difficult, but they rarely meet the criterion established by Emily Dickinson: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." In concluding, I shall discuss one poem that does meet this dictum and which is perhaps the finest poem in Rich's first book--"Mathilde in Normandy."

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[18]"Foreword" to Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), p. xv. All references to this book are to this edition.

The poem uses the extended metaphor of weaving:[19]

> From the archaic ships the green and red
> Invaders woven in their colored hosts
> Descend to conquer. Here is the threaded
> headland,
> The warp and woof of a tideless beach,
> the flight,
> Recounted by slow shuttles, of swift
> arrows,
> And the outlandish attitudes of death
> In the stitched soldiery. . . .

The speaker addresses a woman who, with other women,

> sat at home
> To the pleasing minor airs of lute and
> hautbois,
> While the bright sun on the expensive
> threads
> Glowed in the long windless afternoons.

The scenes in the tapestries the women wove were scenes that the women had to imagine "when their lords abandoned / The fields and apple trees of Normandy / For harsher hunting on the opposite coast." While the women were not conscious of themselves as artists or as par-

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[19]References to traditionally feminine arts have appeared throughout Rich's work, beginning with A Change of World. Tapestry-making serves as a metaphor for imagination and creativity in three poems in her first book: "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," "Design in Living Colors," and "Mathilde in Normandy." In the final lines of the title poem of Necessities of Life (1966), old women knit, "breathless / to tell their tales." In The Dream of a Common Language, patchwork quilts are metaphors for women's art, history, and collective memory; the quilt represents woman-lore in "Sibling Mysteries" and "Natural Resources."

ticipants in history, the products of their "pastime" are works of art that have outlived the men and women--

> That this should prove
> More than the personal episode, more than all
> The little lives sketched on the teeming loom
> Was then withheld from you; self-conscious history
> That writes deliberate footnotes to its action
> Was not of your young epoch . . .

--and now this poet imaginatively recreates and interprets the scene of the women weaving:

> Say what you will, anxiety there too
> Played havoc with the skein, and knots came
> When fingers' occupation and mind's attention
> Grew too divergent, at the keen remembrance
> Of wooden ships putting out from a long beach,
> And the grey ocean dimming to a void,
> And the sick strained farewells, too sharp for speech.

The language is precise without being decorous. Like a tapestry itself, this poem pulls together certain themes from the first book--separation, anxiety, art--that emerge again and again in later books. The immediacy of the line "Say what you will, anxiety there too . . ." anticipates later poems and Rich's own sure voice. This address to an imaginary woman is a woman's poem that succeeds in being both particular and

universal. It is interesting to recall Randall Jarrell's comment in his review of The Diamond Cutters--"This young thing, who knows what it may be, old?"[20]

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[20] "New Books in Review," The Yale Review, 46 (September 1956), reprinted in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 127.

CHAPTER II

THE DIAMOND CUTTERS:

"WE COME LIKE DREAMERS"

Between the publication of her first and second books, Adrienne Rich received a Guggenheim Fellowship, traveled in Europe, and married Alfred H. Conrad, an economist and Harvard professor. In the same month in 1955, her first son was born and The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems was published. This book consists of lyric and narrative poems about travel, change, alienation, the contrast of youth and age, marriage, and poetry.[1]

By now Rich had established herself as a poet, and reviews of her work began to appear. The two most notable reviews were the ones I have already quoted from--Hall's review in Poetry (February, 1956) and Jarrell's critique in The Yale Review (September, 1956). Hall began by saying, "Adrienne Rich is distinguished by her uncanny ability to write."[2] Rich herself was apparently

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[1]Biographical information is taken from the "Chronology" in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 203, and from Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, p. 42. References to Rich's second book of poems are to The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955).

[2]"A Diet of Dissatisfaction," p. 301.

not so pleased. In writing about her career in 1972, Rich said, "by the time that book came out I was already dissatisfied with those poems, which seemed to me mere exercises for poems I hadn't written" ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 42). This may be hindsight on Rich's part, but we have no reason to doubt her comment in a 1972 interview with Kalstone: "I was very actively not dealing with a great deal of what I was going through."

In The Diamond Cutters, Rich is still providing "universal" poems; "The Marriage Portion" is far from personal ("From commissars of daylight / Love cannot make us free"). The double bind of successful women like Rich in the fifties becomes clear in such statements of hers in the Kalstone interview as, "I would have said ten or fifteen years ago that I would not even want to identify myself as a woman poet. That term has been used pejoratively."[3] Her publications do not include any poems about pregnancy, and only one poem about her children as infants dates from this period. ("Lullaby" appeared in The Ladies Home Journal in August, 1956 and has not been reprinted. This was apparently Rich's only excursion into the "women's market" and is indicative of

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[3]"Talking with Adrienne Rich," Saturday Review, 22 April 1972, p. 57.

the split that she felt between being a woman and a poet, of which she has spoken on numerous occasions.) The lessons that women students were taught became internalized: "Once in a while someone used to ask me, 'Don't you ever write poems about your children?' . . . For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself."[4] The result was critically acclaimed poetry that avoided certain emotions and experiences.[5]

Like the poems in A Change of World (and not unlike diamonds, Rich's metaphor for poetry here), many of these poems are lapidary, presenting hard, finished surfaces. Art--and life--still "require a distance," as the woman speaker in "Love in the Museum" tells the person she is with:

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[4]Rich, Of Woman Born (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 31. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[5]Motherhood and marriage are only two examples. See Robert Boyers, "On Adrienne Rich: Intelligence and Will," in Contemporary Poetry in America (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1974), pp. 157-58. In discussing Rich's first two books, Boyers says, "It was not as though the young poet was entirely unaware of the abyss of uncertainty, but she had a confident way of holding it off, of handling it elegantly . . ." He continues: "[I]n the poems of the late fifties, a more embattled and urgent air began to creep in, and the poet discovered that she had been covering up, not controlling merely, but willfully evading." See also the conclusion of this chapter.

let me be
Always the connoisseur of your perfection.
Stay where the spaces of the gallery
Flow calm between your pose and my inspection,
Lest one imperfect gesture make demands
As troubling as the touch of human hands.

In "The Platform" Rich reiterates the central idea of "Stepping Backward":

Dear loves, dear friends, I take my leave
all day
In practice for a time that need not come.
I turn and move from you a little way,
As men walk out from beyond the fields of
home
In troubled days, to view what they love
well--
Distance confirming for a moment's spell,
Meeting or going, that when we embrace
We know the heart beyond the transient face.

There is a difference between the necessary distance that permits one to "see" in order to write poetry and the distance that prevents a writer from saying what he or she means in poems. The distinction between the two, however, is sometimes blurred in Rich's early poetry (for both reader and writer). The poet who remains detached runs the risk of failing to capture the particular "gesture," imperfect or otherwise, that would make the poem more genuine.

In some instances, the poems show that Rich still had not assimilated her influences thoroughly enough. "I Heard a Clangor in the Brain" is clearly a Dickin-

sonian line, and the "blood-red spiral of the stair" ("Colophon") is Yeatsian. "Landscape of the Star" is obviously indebted to Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" ("The palaces behind have ceased to be / Home, and the home they travel toward is still / But rumor stoking fear in Herod's brain"). These too-obvious sources may have contributed to Rich's dissatisfaction. The narrative poems that are reminiscent of Frost, however, stand on their own; Jarrell called "Autumn Equinox" (discussed below) "almost the best Frost-influenced poem [he had] ever read."[6]

Form is still imposed from without. The poems do show a variety of rhyme and meter, with half-rhymes occurring more frequently here than in A Change of World. Even a single example, "The Wild Sky," is sufficient demonstration:

> Here from the corridor of an English train,
> I see the landscape slide through glancing
> rain,
> A land so personal that every leaf
> Unfolds as if to witness human life,
> And every aging milestone seems to know
> That human hands inscribed it, long ago.

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[6]For discussions of the influences on the poems in Rich's second book, see Albert Gelpi, "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 132; Jarrell, "New Books in Review," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 128; and Howard, "Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends us Anchor But the Mutable?'" in Alone With America, pp. 425 and 430. The list sounds like a "Who's Who" in modern poetry: Yeats, Robinson, Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Auden, and Lowell. Howard and Jarrell also include Shakespeare and Wordsworth.

Oasthouse and garden, narrow bridge and
hill--
Landscape with figures, where a change of
style
Comes softened in a water-color light
By Constable; and always, shire on shire,
The low-pitched sky sags like a tent of air
Beneath its ancient immaterial weight.

The weather in these gentle provinces
Moves like the shift of daylight in a house,
Subdued by time and custom. Sun and rain
Are intimate, complaisant to routine,
Guests in the garden. Year on country year
Has worn the edge of wildness from this air.

And I remember that unblunted light
Poured out all day from a prodigious height--
My country, where the blue is miles too high
For minds of men to graze the leaning sky.
The telegraph may rise or timber fall,
The last frontier remains, the vertical.

Men there are beanstalk climbers, all day
long
Haunted by stilts they clattered on when
young.
Giants no longer, now at mortal size
They stare into that upward wilderness.
The vertical reminds them what they are,
And I remember I am native there.

Here Rich uses perfect and masculine rhyme (train : rain and know : ago), as well as half-rhyme (year : air and long : young).

The personae sometimes seem disembodied, as in "I Heard a Hermit Speak":

Upon the mountain of the young
I heard a hermit speak:
"Purity is the serpent's eye
That murders' with a look.
. . . . . .

O let your human memory end
Heavy with thought and act.
Claim every joy of paradox
That time would keep intact.

Be rich as you are human,"
I heard that hermit cry
To the young men and women
All walking out to die.

Some of the poems still rely upon abstractions: "Love is like childhood, caught in trust and fear" ("Lovers Are like Children"). Yet, as critics have generally agreed, many of the poems are superior to those in A Change of World. One reason, which I have not found discussed anywhere else, is that the poems are simply more imaginative than Rich's earlier work. Just two examples of this are the choice of Lucifer as representative traveler and the use of the metaphor of the diamond cutter for the poet. While the themes are not new, Rich's development of them shows growth on her part. Albert Gelpi says, "What makes [the travel poems that fill the book] more than genteel impressions is the developing metaphor which implies that we are all aliens in a fallen world."[7] Some of the places to which the personae travel, like Versailles or Concord, are treated realistically; others, such as the moon ("The Explorers")

[7]Albert Gelpi, p. 132. See also Vendler, "Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, pp. 164-65.

and scenes in pictures by Vuillard (in the poem of the same title) become landscapes of the imagination. Ultimately, the places are concretely detailed points of departure for speculation and imagination.

The theme of alienation in a fallen world exists on two or even three levels in the poems. There is the imperfect world that we are born into (which is simultaneously the fallen world of the medievalists and the absurd and chaotic twentieth century) and there is the fallen world of adulthood, with its loss of childlike imagination. The metaphor of the garden is used or suggested repeatedly. We find it in such phrases as

> that lilac shadowed gate, the branches of the wild pear tree; The park . . . / [where] Poachers have trampled down the maze; the old walls where the daisies grew / [abandoned for] harsher hillsides; Sun and rain / Are . . . / Guests in the garden; the sunlit green; a vague Arcadian longing; the Sunday garden; Summer was another country, those unwardened provinces; the deserted playground.[8]

In using this pervasive metaphor and relying on allusion with its richness of connotation (a lesson learned from

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[8]These quotations, separated by semicolons, are from "Pictures by Vuillard," "Orient Wheat," "Recorders in Italy," and "The Wild Sky" (Section One, "Letters from the Land of Sinners"); "Concord River" and "Autumn Equinox" (Section Two, "Persons in Time"); and "The Middle-Aged," "Holiday," and "The Marriage Portion" (Section Three, "The Snow Queen"). Even this rather long list is incomplete.

the modernists), Rich found, if only temporarily, a way to "contain" her evolving attitude toward change. By now the poet had realized that one must accept living "in a changed, uneasy land" ("Orient Wheat") and that it is futile to establish defenses against change. Hall was the first to comment on this theme: "The earlier book was sometimes tame and even a little smug about its ability to keep experience away from the door. In the second book, the wolf is inside and is busily writing poems about its successful campaign."[9]

The sense of loss that accompanies change is historic and personal. The speaker in "At Hertford House" laments:

> Perfection now is tended and observed,
> Not used; we hire the spawn of Caliban
> For daily service. In our careful world
> Inlay of purple-wood and tulip, curved
> To mime the sheen of plumes and peacocks'
> eyes,
> Exists for inspection only.

We are "ill at ease / Amid perfections" of earlier times. Fairy tales, as well as artifacts of other eras, offer ideal images that are impossible for us to make our own. The persona of "Ideal Landscape" knows

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[9]Hall, p. 301.

> We had to take the world as it was given:
> The nursemaid sitting passive in the park
> Was rarely by a changeling prince accosted.

"Readings of History" (1960) and later political poems such as "Leaflets" (1968) and "From an Old House in America" (1974) directly challenge the "perfections" of the past: its "absolute" truths and its archetypes. Here Rich contrasts the imaginative expectations of childhood and the reality of adulthood. In the second stanza the speaker explains, "our lovers blundered / Now and again when most we sought perfection." Men and women are flawed--"The human rose to haunt us everywhere, / Raw, flawed, and asking more than we could bear." In the third and final stanza, the speaker turns to the landscape with its "sunny squares" and "gilded trees"--an ideal landscape that she thought she had seen but "could not find again, no map could show."

Rich clearly associates the changed world with the fallen one in "A Walk by the Charles," which presents an inversion of the traditional metaphor of the river of life. It is autumn: "Finality broods upon the things that pass." The speaker says:

> You oarsmen, when you row beyond the bend,
> Will see the river winding to its end.
> Lovers [on shore] that hold the chestnut
> burr in hand
> Will speak at last of death, . . .

for

> From our evasions we are brought at last,
> From all our hopes of constancy, . . .
> What lends us anchor but the mutable?

Here Rich describes the human condition. We should note that this resigned philosophical stance is halfway between the earlier one of A Change of World and that of Rich's poems from the late sixties and early seventies, in which she emphasizes the will to change. Using a convention of the fifties (inherited from the modernists), she concludes with a mythological reference.[10] She advises the oarsmen to resign themselves:

> united with the tide,
> Leave off your bending to the oar, and glide
> Past innocence, beyond these aging bricks
> To where the Charles flows in to join the
> Styx.

Should we try to go back, we find nothing, as the speaker in "Ideal Landscape" and the man in "The Strayed Village" discover. The latter has returned to the village where he was born only to "find it gone." Its houses, tower, willows, and bridge are no longer there.

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[10] R.W. Stallman, "The Position of Poetry Today," The English Journal, 46 (May 1957), 241. Stallman points out "the increase of interest shown today, both by poets and critics, in myth."

The phrasing is reminiscent of Frost's poetry:

> So often he had thought a man's whole life
> Most rightly could be written, like his own,
> In terms of places he was forced to leave
> Because their meaning, passing that of
> persons,
> Became too much for him.

The implications of this are bitter. He meant nothing to the place that meant so much to him; no "trace" of his origin remains. A "youthful rector" explains that

> "The village had gone
> Quite without taking leave. Strayed, is the
> word
> We found ourselves speaking as if by
> acquiescence
> Using to speak of it, as if we thought
> Someday to come upon it somewhere else
> And greet our former neighbors as before.
> No one has ever found it, though. . . ."

The man replies:

> "Yes, so much gets strayed,
> But one of all the things a man can lose
> I thought would keep till I could come again.
> It almost seems it went lest I should come,
> Because I always promised I would come,
> And had this latest penalty in store,
> The last of losses."

Why "penalty?" Like "garden" and "perfection," the words "sin" and "penance" recur in these poems. Men and women do not sin against God, however; there is no God in these poems. Sometimes, as in "The Strayed Village," they seem more sinned against than sinning. At other

times, they harm each other, as in "The Roadway" and "The Perennial Answer," or themselves, as in "Versailles." (Not seeing becomes a secular sin.) The subject of "The Roadway," the opening poem, is a stock one in literature--the feud that persists out of habit. Those involved are "Good men grown long accustomed / To inflexible ways of mind." In a line reminiscent of Frost, "The wild grass grows up rank" between the neighbors' homes. Perhaps Rich also intends us to remember the images of overgrown gardens in Shakespeare's Richard II that suggest disorder in the kingdom.

The loss of innocence and the loss of imagination are frequently synonymous. Jarrell was correct in evoking Wordsworth; we might even recall Blake. In "Versailles" the persona visits the site of the royal pleasure garden, which is now

> Merely the landscape of a vanished whim,
> An artifice that lasts beyond the wish;
> . . . . . .
> The empty shrine the guidebooks say is
> love's.

Yet she must acknowledge that this landscape was created out of a sense of imaginative play that she cannot recapture. She is moved to contrast herself and her companion with their younger selves:

When we were younger gardens were for games,
But now across the sungilt lawn of kings
We drift, consulting catalogues for names
Of postured gods.

The poem ends with an address to children to "be wild today" and to lovers to "take one long and fast embrace / Before . . . evening finds you in a restless town / Where each has back his old restricted face."

Experience brings knowledge and restriction. "Living in Sin" involves a play on words to make its point. The woman in the poem has moved in with a man at his invitation. "Living in Sin" is a term of moral disapprobation for the situation, but the poem is not about sin in this sense. It is instead a poem about experience; about the distinction between fantasy and reality; and about the erosion of love under the mundane lpressures of daily living:

She had thought the studio would keep
itself;
No dust upon the furniture of love.
. . . . . .
Not that at five each separate stair would
writhe
Under the milkman's tramp; that morning
light
So coldly would delineate the scraps
Of last night's cheese and blank sepulchral
bottles.

During the day, she considers the differences between the sexes:

Meanwhile her night's companion, with a yawn
Sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
Declared it out of tune, went out for
cigarettes;
While she, contending with a woman's demons,
Pulled back the sheets and made the bed and
found
A fallen towel to dust the table-top,
And wondered how it was a man could wake
From night to day and take the day for
granted.

The difference between the man and woman here is an example of new "knowledge" for the woman. While noting the traditional point of view, we can still appreciate Rich's insight into the tension in relationships and acknowledge that this poem does not seem to be so formal as "Versailles" or "A Walk by the Charles." The poem ends with the suggestion of "unease," of the anxiety of daily life:

By evening she was back in love again,
Though not so wholly but throughout the night
She woke to feel the daylight coming
Like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

"The Middle-Aged" treats the subject of knowledge or understanding ironically, by contrasting the points of view of the young and middle-aged persona:

to be young
Was always to live in other peoples' houses
Whose peace, if we sought it, had been made
by others,
Was ours at second-hand and not for long.

The response of the persona was "envy" for what the older people had but "could not give"--"twenty years of living." Only now does the middle-aged speaker realize that peace must be earned and how uneasy or incomplete "peace" may be:

> Nor did they ever speak
> Of the coarse strain on that polished balustrade,
> The crack in the study window, or the letters
> Locked in a drawer and the key destroyed,
> All to be understood by us, returning
> Late, in our own time--how that peace was made,
> Upon what terms, with how much left unsaid.

Some experiences bring only the pain of negation, as the old woman in "The Perennial Answer," a dramatic monologue, has learned. On her deathbed, she is still unresigned and is a bitter woman. Her passion recalls that of the women in Robinson Jeffers' work as well as that of the people in Frost's poetry:

> There must be some
> For whom the thrusting blood, so long deferred
> In alder-stem and elm, is not the rise
> Of flood in their own veins; some who can see
> That green unholy dance without surprise.
> I only say it has been this for me:
> The time of thinnest ice, of casualty
> More swift and deadly than the skater's danger.

Finding that her husband Joel was "A man not made for love, / But built for things of violence," she turned to Evans:

> But Evans and I were hopeless from the start:
> He, collared early by a rigorous creed,
> Not man of men but man of God indeed.

When he told her,

> "Neither you nor I
> Have lived in Eden, but they say we die
> To gain that day at last. We have to live
> Believing it--what else can we believe?"

she answered:

> "Why not believe in life?" I said, but heard
> Only the sanctioned automatic word
> "Eternal life--" perennial answer given
> To those who ask on earth a taste of heaven.

After Joel died, Evans left; "Now Joel and Evans are neighbors down beneath." Having outlived both men, the woman has discovered that

> The penalty you pay for dying last
> Is facing those transactions from the past
> That would detain you when you try to go.

Her life has been her hell; experience has taught her to see clearly, bitterly. Denial of love is a matter between a man and a woman, and we are moved to sympathize with her, not with the "man of God," as she speaks her final nihilistic words:

> I'd like to know which stays when life is past:
> The marriage kept in fear, the love deferred,
> . . . . . .
> The hopeless promise of eternal life--
> Take now your Scripture, Evans, if you will,
> And see how flimsily the pages spill
> From spines reduced to dust. What have they said
> Of us, to what will they pronounce me wife?
> My debt is paid: the rest is on your head.

"Lucifer in the Train" is one of the strongest poems in this volume, and the choice of Lucifer as representative traveler becomes all the more fitting when viewed within the context of this collection. The first stanza describes Lucifer's journey to hell:

> Riding the black express from heaven to hell
> He bit his fingers, watched the countryside,
> Vernal and crystalline, forever slide
> Beyond his gaze: the long cascades that fell
> Ribboned in sunshine from their sparkling
> height,
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . Imperceptibly
> That landscape altered: now in paler air
> Tree, hill and rock stood out resigned,
> severe,
> Beside the strangled field, the stream run dry.

The suggestiveness of "That landscape altered" is a sign of Rich's maturity as a writer. The landscape is hell, the fallen world, the world as it must have appeared to Lucifer, with his altered vision.

The second stanza clarifies the connection between Lucifer and us:

> Lucifer, we are yours who stiff and mute
> Ride out of worlds we shall not see again,
> And watch from windows of a smoking train
> The ashen prairies of the absolute.
> Once out of heaven, to an angel's eye
> Where is the bush of cloud without a flaw?
> What bird but feeds upon mortality,
> Flies to its young with carrion in its claw?

Here we are joined as fellow travelers who experience the pain of leaving "worlds we shall not see again"; the "worlds" can be the garden of Eden, heaven, a city in Europe, or the past. In a theological sense, of course, Lucifer and we are bound by sin or imperfection and the pain of separation from God, but Rich is writing on several levels here, using allusion well to make her own point. The biblical metaphor suggests our existential situation--our despair at alienation not from God but from other human beings and from ourselves.

The poem ends with an ironic invocation:

> O foundered angel, first and loneliest
> To turn this bitter sand beneath your hoe,
> Teach us, the newly-landed, what you know;
> After our weary transit, find us rest.

Who would be a better choice to call upon than the first displaced being?

In "Recorders in Italy" Rich turns from Europe and its "gentle and extinct" music. Punning, she explains that we cannot presume to be "the heirs of perfect time":

> our journeys run
> To harsher hillsides, rockier declensions.
> Obligatory climates call us home.

Rich knows, moreover, that being "native" depends on inner resources; "Henry Thoreau most nearly learned to live / Within a world his soul could recognize" ("Concord River").[11] According to several of the poems in this collection, it is possible to reach a twentieth-century equivalent of Blake's third stage, an existential world in which knowledge and imagination, experience and imagination coexist. In "Letter from the Land of Sinners," the speaker lives in a province "blasted in certain places":

> We keep these places as we keep the time
> Scarred on our recollection
> When some we love broke from us in defection,
> Or we ourselves harried to death too soon
> What we could least forgo. Our memories
> Recur like the old moon.

Yet the inhabitants have come through their experiences intact:

> But we have made another kind of peace,
> And walk where boughs are green,
> Forgiven by the selves that we have been,
> And learning to forgive. Our apples taste
> Sweeter this year . . .

Their gardens are fruitful, peaceful, as is the farm in "Autumn Equinox."

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[11]Rich uses the word "native" in "By No Means Native" (A Change of World) and "The Wild Sky."

The latter poem is the dramatic monologue of a professor's wife "who spent [her] youth and middle age / In stubbornness and railing." She recalls her pride and her weeping. When her husband asked, "Are you ill, unhappy? / Tell me what I can do," she answered, "I'm sick, I guess-- / I thought that life was different than it is." Now she has learned that "Even autumn / Can only carry through what Spring began," and she

> pass[es] the time
> Now, after fifty, raking in the sun
> The leaves that sprinkle slowly on the grass,
> And feel[s] their gold like firelight at
> [her] back,
> In slow preoccupation with September.

This garden is not perfect; it is an "Arcadia" reminiscent of the forest of Arden, where the woman's husband, "gentle as an old shepherd," reads satires. Still, they have learned to be content:

> We wake and take the day for what it is,
> And sleep as calmly as the dead who know
> They'll wake to their reward.

This woman who no longer feels "dissatisfaction" concludes simply by saying, "We finish off / Not quite as we began." Resigned acceptance of the world, tolerance for others, preoccupation with the present moment: these things may redeem our lives.

The poet's job would seem to be to note change and to remind herself and us of the staying power of the

imagination. This thematic concern associated with Stevens' work is new for Rich's poetry. "Villa Adriana" (titled "Hadrian's Villa" when it appeared in The Atlantic Monthly in October, 1955) is about "the summer palace built by the Emperor Hadrian for his favorite boy, Antinoüs."[12] The villa, a work of power and imagination, has fallen into ruin:

> When the colossus of the will's dominion
> Wavers and shrinks upon a dying eye,
> Enormous shadows sit like birds of prey
> Waiting to fall where blistered marbles lie.
> . . . . . .
>
> Dying in discontent, he must have known
> How, once mere consciousness had turned its back,
> The frescoes of his appetite would crumble,
> The fountains of his longing yawn and crack.

Yet those who view the villa bring their own need and their own imagination to bear on the scene:

> Who sleeps, and dreams, and wakes, and sleeps again
> May dream again; so in the end we come
> Back to the cherished and consuming scene
> As if for once the stones will not be dumb.

Both here and in "The Insomniacs," "dreamers" are those who have imaginative "vision":

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[12] Rich's note, added in Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974, p. 247.

> We come like dreamers searching for an
> answer,
> Passionately in need to reconstruct
> The columned roofs under the blazing sky,
> The courts so open, so forever locked.

Rich holds out the possibility that some may imaginatively "know" the other and appropriate its images for themselves:

> And some of us, as dreamers, excavate
> Under the blanching light of sleep's high
> noon,
> The artifacts of thought, the site of love,
> Whose Hadrian has given the slip, and gone.

"The light of sleep's high noon" suggests the poet's ability to carry away impressions and to recreate her or his own "artifacts."

As Howard has pointed out, Rich's purpose as a poet is contained in the final lines of "The Insomniacs":[13]

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[13]"Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends Us Anchor . . .,'" pp. 430-31. This poem is interesting for another reason as well. While several of Sylvia Plath's confessional poems apparently influenced Rich's work in Necessities of Life, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, it is quite possible that the second stanza of "The Insomniacs" was the inspiration for, if not the source of, Plath's "Death & Co.": "So we are fairly met, grave friend-- / The meeting of two wounds in man. / I, gesturing with practised hand, / I, in my great brocaded gown, / And you, the fixed and patient one, / Enduring all the world can do. / I, with my shifting masks, the gold, / The awful scarlet, laughing blue, / Maker of many worlds; and you, / Worldless, the pure receptacle."

To do what men have always done--
To live in time, to act in space
Yet find a ritual to embrace
Raw towns of man, the pockmarked sun.

In subsequent books, as Rich continues to write about what it means to live in a hostile world and as her point of view and her personal voice become stronger, she increasingly turns her attention in the poems themselves to the process of making poetry. It is fitting that the final poem in this book, "The Diamond Cutters," is a metapoem. It is also significant that Rich chose this title for the collection. She addresses the diamond cutter, who represents the poet:

Now, careful arriviste,
Delineate at will
Incisions in the ice.

Be serious, because
The stone may have contempt
For too-familiar hands,
And because all you do
Loses or gains by this:
Respect the adversary,
Meet it with tools refined,
And thereby set your price.

She warns against poor craftsmanship, advising the poet to concentrate on the present moment, the present poem:

Be hard of heart, because
The stone must leave your hand.
Although you liberate
Pure and expensive fires
Fit to enamour Shebas,
Keep your desire apart,
Love only what you do,
And not what you have done.

Then the poet may feel pride:

> Be proud, when you have set
> The final spoke of flame
> In that prismatic wheel,
> And nothing's left this day
> Except to see the sun
> Shine on the false and the true,
> And know that Africa
> Will yield you more to do.

The poet who works at her or his craft with sincerity can be reassured that she or he will continue to find subjects. The emphasis is still on "product"--"the stone"; but the lines "you liberate / Pure and expensive fires" contain the suggestion that "life exceeds the form" and connote "process."[14] Rich, moreover, seems to be trying to find ways--more imaginative ones than in A Change of World--to demonstrate her belief that "all poetry is about poetry" and that "all poetry is the subject of poetry."[15]

In the poems of her early and mid-twenties, Rich continually emphasizes the need for order; the form and content of her poems describe and demonstrate this idea. Thematically, The Diamond Cutters is stronger than A Change of World. If Rich seems less sure of herself as

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[14]Howard, "Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends Us Anchor . . .,'" p. 431.

[15]Plumly, Dodd, and Tevis, "Talking with Adrienne Rich," p. 42.

a person living in the world, her poems are all the more convincing because of that. Yet even when she is voicing Hawthorne's "truths of the human heart," she seems to be keeping a careful distance from the reader as well as from certain experiences. Paradoxically, the use of "we" becomes an irritating mannerism when encountered again and again in these poems. Rather than invite readers to identify with the speaker, these poems place everyone a priori in generalized categories. The Diamond Cutters, moreover, does not always allow readers to be certain that they are hearing Rich's own voice.

Perhaps I am being unfair. The author of these poems, after all, was only twenty-six years old, and her work here demonstrates her commitment to her craft as well as her growth. She was still writing in the modernist tradition, however, and doing so without the innovation of a Roethke. Moreover, Rich was still clearly identifying with masculine poets. The poems about relationships between men and women are general and abstract. The Diamond Cutters is a catalog of separations, but not one poem deals with the feeling of separation a woman poet experiences or the way in which her several functions as a creative woman are kept separate from each other.

There are eight years between The Diamond Cutters and Rich's next book, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law. Perhaps Rich worried that life and art would not "yield [her] more to do." But that is secondary (all poets worry about that, despite the assurances of "The Diamond Cutters"), for what emerge in 1963 are new poems, freer in form and more original. Rich continues to be open to the influences of other writers, but her dutiful apprenticeship is over; her experimentation begins.

CHAPTER III

SNAPSHOTS OF A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

"THINGS LOOK AT YOU DOUBLY"

One year after the publication of The Diamond Cutters, Rich contemplated abandoning poetry. In a notebook entry dated November 1956 she wrote, "If there is going to be a real break in my writing life, this is as good a time for it as any. I have been dissatisfied with myself, my work, for a long time" (Of Woman Born, p. 27).

Rich never actually stopped writing or publishing, but she did write fewer poems in the years when her first two sons were infants, and a number of the poems she published at the time have remained uncollected.[1] The late fifties seem to have been years of isolation,

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[1]See, for example, "Allhallow's Eve," The New Yorker, 29 October 1955, p. 30; "Lullaby," Ladies' Home Journal, 73 (August 1956), 140; "At the Jewish New Year," The New Yorker, 1 September 1956, p. 28; "Wish," Harper's, 215 (September 1957), 57; "Moving Inland," The New Yorker, 21 September 1957, p. 46; "Piece of Happiness," The New Yorker, 9 November 1957, p. 50; "Survivors," The New Yorker, 21 December 1957, p. 98; "Tryst in Brobdingrag," The New Yorker, 4 January 1958, p. 26; and "David's Boyhood," "Ball Is For Throwing," "Mark of Resistance," and "Travail et Joie," Poetry, 90 (August 1957), 302-305. 1955, the year of the publication of The Diamond Cutters, is almost a blank in terms of new work.

dissatisfaction, and introspection for her. In another journal entry she said:

> These months I've been all a tangle of irritations deepening to anger: bitterness, disillusion with society and with myself; beating out at the world, rejecting out of hand. What, if anything, has been positive? Perhaps the attempt to remake my life, to save it from mere drift and the passage of time . . . (June, 1958 [Of Woman Born, p. 28])

Significantly, after she had verbalized her self-dissatisfaction and her disillusionment regarding her poetry, Rich wrote, between 1958 and 1960, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," considered by many to be the turning point in her career.

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Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems, 1954-1962, published in 1963, is generally agreed upon as Rich's transitional work;[2] most critics' in-depth studies of Rich's work begin here, after brief examinations of the first two volumes. The book is a trying-out ground for Rich, in which she began to work out not only the conflicts that she had felt as a woman writing poetry but also her dissatisfaction with traditional forms and in which she began to write in a new way about separation

[2]New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., c. 1963 [c. 1967]. Subsequent references are to this edition.

and relationships.

Rich still had models--as shown not only by Snapshots but also by Necessities of Life (1966), Leaflets (1969), and The Will To Change (1971). In addition to Eliot, Pound, and Williams, her influences in the late fifties and sixties include Lowell (who had begun to write "confessional" poetry), Plath, and the projectivists Olson and Levertov; but for the first time, in Snapshots, Rich seems to be speaking for herself. She evidently embraced the principle of organic poetry--"Such as the life is, such is the form"[3]--to give voice to her own life, and with Snapshots, Rich's poetry ceases to be derivative.

Both Howard and Kalstone have written about the advantages and the difficulties for the new generation of poets writing after World War II, while noting the changes that poetry has undergone. Since their books were written later than Fiedler's Waiting for the End, they are understandably more optimistic. In 1969, Howard was able to write of "the last development, the longing to lose the gift of order, despoiling the self of all that had been, merely, propriety."[4]

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[3]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to His Genius," in Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, Inc., 1951), p. 433.

[4]"Foreword" to Alone with America, p. xiii.

Several sentences from Auden's introduction to Rich's first book may ironically help to explain the "radical transformations of style and subject matter"[5] of such poets as Lowell, Plath, James Merrill, James Wright, and Rich. Auden's very warning against unfounded radicalism and his explanation of why originality was impossible offer insight into the changes in poetry in general and in Rich's poetry in particular since the late fifties: "Radical changes and significant novelty in artistic style can occur only when there has been a radical change in human sensibility to require them."[6] The late fifties and sixties--with the threat of nuclear war, the civil rights movement, the psychology of R. D. Laing, the war in Viet Nam, the protests against the war, and the re-emergence of the women's movement--saw the "cultural revolution" that Auden had said was a prerequisite for radical changes in the arts. Individually and personally, Rich was undergoing change as a thinking woman who was a poet, wife, and mother. On public and private levels, Rich was seeing and experiencing fragmentation. In "When We Dead Awaken," she says that those years were ones

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[5]Kalstone, "Introduction" to Five Temperaments, p. 5.

[6]"Foreword" to A Change of World, p. 8.

> of rapid revelations: the sit-ins and marches in the South, the Bay of Pigs, the early anti-war movement, raised large questions--questions for which the masculine world of the academy around me seemed to have expert and fluent answers. But I needed desperately to think for myself--about pacifism and dissent and violence, about poetry and society and about my own relationship to all these things. For about ten years I was reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments; I was looking desperately for clues, because if there were no clues then I thought I might be insane. (p. 44)

Rich's personal experience, sensitivity, and intelligence required new forms. Vendler's observation may be helpful here: "we may assume various influences . . . but since the modern movement as a whole was well on its way toward dispensing with rhyme, it was inevitable that Rich should forsake her sweetness, cadence, and stanzas, once her life began to refuse its earlier arrangements."[7]

By mentioning the titles of Rich's later books on page two, I may have gotten ahead of myself (and Rich's career), for I do not mean to suggest that in 1963 a new radical Rich sprang full-blown from her own forehead in a contemporary variation on Athena's origin. Snapshots is, as are each of the subsequent books, part of

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[7]"Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 165.

the process of Rich's writing career; as such it represents the first stage of a new awareness on Rich's part as to what it means to live in the world. After the publication of The Diamond Cutters, Rich began dating her poems because, as she explained to Kalstone, "I felt I was changing so much, and it was like trying to keep my finger on the pulse of that change; I very much wanted them to be in chronological order."[8] Her dating of each poem makes Rich's development as a poet much easier to trace.

In the earliest poems here, Rich relies, at least partially, upon rhyme. Interestingly enough, one of the rhymed poems, "Rural Reflections" (1956), is a metapoem about the difficulty of saying what one means:

> This is the grass your feet are planted on.
> You paint it orange or you sing it green,
> But you have never found
> A way to make the grass mean what you mean.
>
> A cloud can be whatever you intend:
> Ostrich or leaning tower or staring eye.
> But you have never found
> A cloud sufficient to express the sky.

If we try to impose order on an experience, the experience may be falsified or lost. It should instead be allowed to reveal itself:

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[8]"Talking with Adrienne Rich," p. 57.

Get out there with your splendid expertise;
Raymond who cuts the meadow does no less.
    Inhuman nature says:
Inhuman patience is the true success.

At a poetry reading in 1964, Rich said, "I had suppressed, omitted, falsified even, certain disturbing elements, to gain . . . perfection of order. . . . [In "Rural Reflections"] there is an awareness . . . that experience is always greater and more unclassifiable than we give it credit for being."[9] The result is paradoxical. The lines that use grammatical repetition are written in strict iambic pentameter. "Rural Reflections" is a formal poem about organicism:

Human impatience trips you as you run;
Stand still and you must lie.
It is the grass that cuts the mower down;
It is the cloud that swallows up the sky.

Rich's attempt to move away from the forms and content that had sufficed for the two earlier books is also evident in another poem, "From Morning-Glory to Petersburg (The World Book, 1928)." The conclusion is rhymed, but Rich uses lower case letters to begin lines and she experiments with indentation. Written two years before "Rural Reflections," this poem is about the "untidiness"

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[9]"Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading" (1964), printed in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 89.

of knowledge:

> "Organized knowledge in story and picture"
> confronts through dusty glass
> an eye grown dubious.
> I can recall when knowledge still was pure,
> not contradictory, pleasurable
> as cutting out a paper doll.
> You opened up a book and there it was:
> everything just as promised, from
> Kurdistan to Mormons, Gum
> Arabic to Kumquat, neither more nor less.
> Facts could be kept separate
> by a convention; that was what
> made childhood possible. Now knowledge
> finds me out;
> in all its risible untidiness
> it traces me to each address,
> dragging in things I never thought about.

The date of this poem indicates that Rich wrote it while she was preparing The Diamond Cutters for publication. "From Morning-Glory to Petersburg" does not clarify what "things" Rich was thinking about for the first time, but it does suggest her awareness that she would have to move beyond the subjects of her work up to 1954. The poem concludes by suggesting that the juxtaposition of the two encyclopedia topics shows the interconnectedness of "facts":

> If I could still extrapolate
> the morning glory on the gate,
> from Petersburg in history--but it's too late.

By 1958, the year that Rich began "Snapshots," she was writing poems without regular rhyme or meter. The

structuring of stanzas and lines began to change as well. For example, the final stanza of "September 21" consists of one line--"Then the houses draw you. Then they have you." (Rich relies more heavily on repetition in later books.) The 1960 "Double Monologue" uses enjambment (which Rich had used before) in a radical way in the first line:

> To live illusionless, in the abandoned mine-
> shaft of doubt, and still
> mime illusions for others? A puzzle
> for the maker who has thought
> once too often too coldly.
>
> Since I was more than a child
> trying on a thousand faces
> I have wanted one thing: to know
> simply as I know my name
> at any given moment, where I stand.

We should also note the effectiveness of line 8; "to know" reverberates. By its position, it suggests a passion for knowledge that is both general (to know and understand all that I can) and specific (to know where I stand). In several instances, Rich uses fragments instead of complete sentences. "Juvenilia" (1960) begins, "Your Ibsen volumes, violet spined, / each flaking its gold arabesque!" Section II of "Merely To Know" (1959-1961) concludes with a series of verb fragments: "I take nothing, only look" is followed by "Change nothing. Have no need to change. / Merely to know and let you

go."

Boyers has pointed out that "The single controlling image demanding control of all particulars in a given poem . . . accounts for the still formal quality we sense in the various poems" of this book.[10] Rich was not yet ready to attempt the technical experiments of Leaflets or The Will to Change, but the short similes and metaphors in these poems are, as I have said in Chapter I, striking. They are more vivid and more colloquial than Rich's earlier figurative language. They are also more original and in several instances are identified with the female sex.

In "From Morning-Glory to Petersburg" Rich makes concrete the difference between the child's perception of knowledge as "organized" and "pure, / not contradictory" and the ambivalence of knowledge that experience teaches by using the simile of "cutting out a paper doll." In "The Knight" (1957), reminiscent of Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," Rich presents two contrasting descriptions of the same knight (and thus two contrasting descriptions of "reality"). In the second stanza, the negative portrait, Rich describes the knight's eye as "a lump of bitter jelly / set in a metal

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[10]"On Adrienne Rich: Intelligence and Will," in Contemporary Poetry in America, p. 158.

mask." In "September 21" (1958), the "equinoctial evening" produces "light like melons bruised on all the porches." In "Antinoüs: The Diaries" (1959), the "sopping leaves [of Autumn are] / rubbed into the landscape as unguent on a bruise." The powerful woman that Rich is waiting for in the final section of "Snapshots" (to be discussed below) is "at least as beautiful as any boy / or helicopter." The woman who has nursed another's "nerves to rest" in "The Afterwake" (1961) is

> like a midwife who at dawn
> has all in order: bloodstains
> washed up, teapot on the stove,
> and starts her five miles home
> walking, the birthyell still
> exploding in her head.

In "End of an Era" (1961), the speaker is "Stale as a written-out journalist"; the city she is leaving is "dumb as a pack of thumbed cards." The "man of red and blue" in Karel Appel's painting is "a fish, / drawn up dripping hugely / from the sea of paint" ("Face," 1962).

Rich continues to use allusions, but her use of allusion here differs from that in The Diamond Cutters in two ways. First, she does not rely upon one literary allusion, such as the garden, for her central motif. (As do all of Rich's books, this volume has a central

motif; significantly, it is an action--seeing--rather than a place.[11]) Second, her sources continue to include mythology, literature, and history, but now she also turns to biography, old letters, art, and computer science.

The earlier poems include conventional mythological references. In "At Majority" (1954), a poem written for Alfred Conrad, Rich says "When [he is] old and beautiful," his look will be as "Grave as Cordelia's at the last." In "The Loser" (1958), the speaker describes the woman whom he loved and who married someone else as "one / more golden apple dropped to ground," and the preoccupied person in "The Absent-Minded Are Always To Blame" (1958) is told that

> Odysseus
> wading half-naked out of the shrubbery
> like a god, dead serious among those at play,
> could hardly be more out of it.

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[11]See Albert Gelpi, "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, pp. 134-35. Gelpi says, "The words 'eye' and 'see' recur insistently (some thirty times) throughout the Snapshots volume, and there can be no mistaking her purpose: to 'outstare with truthfulness' each moment in the flux of time and thereby live as keenly as her powers of perception make possible. To be is to see; I am eye. . . . and poems are snapshots." I would like to point out, however, that this central motif is implied rather than stated and that while Rich emphasizes "seeing" (as opposed to her earlier evading), the "snapshot" represents what Rich is trying to break out of in these poems--stasis.

Allusions dominate the title poem; in fact, Rich has even criticized "Snapshots," saying "It strikes me now as too literary, too dependent on allusion" ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 45). Her references are more varied than in The Diamond Cutters, however, and range from Horace to Wollstonecraft, from Baudelaire (and Eliot) to de Beauvoir. Rich's effective use of allusions in "Snapshots" and in "Readings of History" (in which she refers to Pirandello, letters from the Civil War period, and Life) depends partly upon her choices and partly upon her organization of the poems into sections that juxtapose references. (Her use of the sequence is in itself the first step away from the poems of "the single controlling image.") In "Artificial Intelligence" (1961), the speaker addresses a computer at the end of a chess game:

> denied
> our luxury of nausea, you
> forget nothing, have no dreams.

Rich's long note explains that this poem was written in reaction to Herbert Simon's "A General Problem-Solving Program" in The New Science of Management Decision. "Face," quoted in part above, is an imagistic poem about one of Karel Appel's paintings.

In several instances, Rich uses the persona poem (a poem in which the poet assumes a role, figuratively wearing another's mask) in a new way for her, a way that is closer to Pound's than to Frost's. The speaker in "Euryclea's Tale" (1958), "the old nurse of Odysseus and the first person to recognize him when he returned home from his wanderings" (Rich's note in Poems: Selected and New, p. 247), waits with the son of Odysseus. The poem has a dramatic opening typical of Pound:

> I have to weep when I see it, the grown boy
> fretting
> for a father dawdling among the isles,
> and the seascape hollowed out by that boy's
> edged gaze
> to receive one speak, one only, for years
> and years withheld.

This is one of Rich's first mythological references to a woman, and Rich has endowed the nurse, never dwelt upon in mythology textbooks, with perception, with the ability to understand that things have changed and the ability to "see":

> But all the time and everywhere
> lies in ambush for the distracted eyeball
> light: light on the ship racked up in port,
> the chimney-stones, the scar whiter than
> smoke,
> than her flanks, her hair, that true but
> aging bride.

Ten years later, in a surrealistic poem that invites

comparison with Diane Wakoski's poetry, Rich retells another mythological woman's story. In "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus," the new Eurydice says:

> I am a woman in the prime of life
> driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce
> . . . . . .
> a woman sworn to lucidity.[12]

In "Antinoüs: The Diaries" (1959), Rich uses the persona of a man, but "as the favorite of the Emperor Hadrian, memorialized in busts for his sensual beauty, Antinoüs becomes the perverted image of the object of man's lust, and so a mirror of a decadent society."[13] In her footnote to "Hadrian's Villa," which she added in Poems: Selected and New, Rich says that in "Antinoüs" she "let the young man speak for [her]" (p. 247); the poem presents a person oppressed and literally sickened by his situation, by the company he keeps, and by himself. He begins by noting the

> Autumn torture. The old signs
> smeared on the pavement, sopping leaves
> rubbed into the landscape as unguent on a
> bruise.

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[12] The Will To Change: Poems 1968-1970 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 19.

[13] Albert Gelpi, p. 136.

He goes for walks in the evening, "needing to be out"--"till on the black embankment / [he's] a cart stopped in the ruts of time." He attends parties at which "the rumor of truth and beauty / saturates a room like lilac-water / in the steam of a bath." The word "rumor" underlines the hypocrisy and the vacuity that dominate these gatherings. Alienated, another Prufrock, the persona "shiver[s]." (The "poetry of furs and manners" and the "arm / striated with hairs of gold" recall Eliot's "Love Song.") Antinoüs' self-loathing culminates in the third and final stanza; he is at once a Roman man of the year 130, an existentialist of the twentieth century, and a poet who is, timelessly, socially and culturally oppressed:

> The old, needless story. For if I'm here
> it is by choice and when at last
> I smell my own rising nausea, feel the air
> tighten around my stomach like a surgical
> bandage,
> I can't pretend surprise. What is it I
> so miscarry?
> If what I spew on the tiles at last,
> helpless, disgraced, alone,
> is in part what I've swallowed from glasses,
> eyes,
> motions of hands, opening and closing mouths,
> isn't it also dead gobbets of myself,
> abortive, murdered, or never willed?

Rich has continued to use persona poems that allow her to articulate her evolving perceptions. One of her

more interesting observations on this point and on autobiographical poetry is contained not in the prose written ten to fifteen years after Snapshots (for her comments on eliminating all distance can be misleading) but in her highly positive 1964 review of Berryman's 77 Dream Songs. Noting that "the poems collect about a persona," Rich says Berryman "manages private history without self-photography."[14] In using poetry to record experience, to place herself in time, and to evaluate her development in terms of politics, other people, and her old selves, Rich has produced a body of work that has been autobiographical but never confessional.[15]

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[14]"Mr. Bones, He Lives," The Nation, 25 May 1964, p. 538. Leaflets and The Will To Change illustrate Rich's attempt to record experience directly, to eliminate any medium between experience and poetry, between the poet and the poem's speaker. All poems, however, involve selection and rearrangement. "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" and "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," two selections from Rich's latest book of poetry, The Dream of a Common Language, make it quite clear that, for Rich, the persona poem offers the poet not a disguise but rather a means for expression of personal convictions.

[15]Kalstone makes a helpful distinction in his introduction to Five Temperaments: confessional poetry is autobiographical poetry that is "desperate and on the edge" (p. 8). Brown has accurately pointed out that "Rich has never been confessional in the usual sense; all her intimacies are in tone, not in detail" ("The Notes for the Poem Are the Only Poem," p. 58).

Finally, Rich has always been an intellectual poet.[16] Despite the four-letter words in Leaflets and the explicit sexual description in one of her "21 Love Poems" (reprinted in The Dream of a Common Language), Rich has remained an analytical poet rather than a visceral one. These general observations about Rich's work may help to clarify my statement in Chapter II that there is a distinction between the distance that allows one to write poems and the distance that prevents one from saying what he or she means. Because two short poems exemplify what I have attempted to explain, I shall examine them before discussing "Snapshots," even though the latter poem appears first in this volume.

In both "later" poems--"Juvenilia" (1960) and "A Marriage in the Sixties" (1961)--Rich uses details from her private life. "Juvenilia" is simultaneously reminiscent of and distinctly different from Lowell's "Father's Bedroom." The poem is about Rich's father and his exacting lessons; she is his apparently dutiful daughter, who seethes inside:

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[16]Cf. Juhasz, "The Feminist Poet: Alta and Adrienne Rich," in Naked and Fiery Forms, p. 201. Juhasz says, "Rich is an intellectual, and her poetry, which is mind-poetry, works by blowing our minds."

Your Ibsen volumes, violet-spined,
each flaking its gold arabesque!
Again I sit, under duress, hands washed,
at your inkstained oaken desk,
by the goose-neck lamp in the tropic of
your books,
. . . . . .

Unspeakable fairy tales ebb like blood
through my head
as I dip the pen and for aunts, for
admiring friends,
for you above all to read,
copy my praised and sedulous lines.

Rich doesn't use the word "father," as Roethke, Lowell, and Plath do. The identity seems fairly clear, however, and even if it were not, the autobiographical sections Of Woman Born would clarify this point. Biographical approaches to analyzing literature can turn into second-rate criticism. I have brought up the subject only to illustrate the way in which Rich began to use personal experience in her poetry; this is "private history without self-photography." The identity of the authority figure, at any rate, is secondary. Rich's main purpose seems to be to suggest once again--as in "Antinoüs: The Diaries"--her sense of oppression. She has neatly managed to contain two points of view; the words "Again I sit" simultaneously suggest the images of a child and an adult remembering the past.

The adult woman has been only partially freed by the distance of time. The conclusion suggests the sense

of oppression that is still vivid for the speaker and that prompts her--as she begins to examine her life--to return to this early scene from her personal history: "Behind the two of us, thirsty spines / quiver in semi-shadow, huge leaves uncurl and thicken." The ominous final lines are perhaps overly dramatic--another contrast to Lowell's "Life Studies." The punning on books and plants, moreover, is suggestive of traditional techniques.

"A Marriage in the Sixties" is according to Vendler, "a poem still hoping for the best and yet unwilling to dissemble the worst."[17] The poem begins with a simple pastime--a couple sitting together late on a Sunday afternoon, reading the Times. The wife contemplates first her husband and then her recent feelings about time:

> As solid-seeming as antiquity,
> you frown above
> the New York Sunday Times
> where Castro, like a walk-on out of Carmen
> mutters into a bearded henchman's ear.
>
> They say the second's getting shorter--
> I knew it in my bones--
> and pieces of the universe are missing.
> I feel the gears of this late afternoon
> slip, cog by cog, even as I read.
> "I'm old," we both complain,
> half-laughing, oftener now.

[17] "Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds," p. 165.

The two subjects are related for her:

> Time serves you well. That face--
> part Roman emperor, part Raimu--
> nothing this side of Absence can undo.
> Bliss, revulsion, your rare angers can
> only carry through what's well begun.

Thoughts about time and its effects lead to her remembering the past and to her contrasting the past with the present, using details from her private life and geographical metaphors:

> When
> I read your letters long ago
> in that half defunct
> hotel in Magdalen Street
> every word primed my nerves.
> A geographical misery
> composed of oceans, fogbound planes
> and misdelivered cablegrams
> lay round me, a Nova Zembla
> only your live breath could unfreeze.
> Today we stalk
> in the raging desert of our thought
> whose single drop of mercy is
> each knows the other there.
> Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock,
> may have at least the perfect hour of talk
> that language aches for; still--
> two minds, two messages.

After their years together, they are separate, knowing "the silent isolation of marriage"[18]--"two minds, two messages." The woman continues to look at her husband, seeing the outward manifestation of his

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[18]Vendler, p. 165.

Meanwhile, Rich has written a direct, unevasive poem about marriage. Personal but not confessional, this analysis begins with specific details and moves to general statements. Rich uses autobiographical details as a point of departure for a poem about the coming of age of a representative marriage in a decade far removed in many ways from the fifties.

2

With her two sequences, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" and "Readings of History," Rich enters the mainstream of modern and contemporary poetry in still another way. In his introduction to The New Poets, M. L. Rosenthal talks about "the development of the sequence as the characteristic form of the long poem." Rosenthal sees "the fragmentation of the long poem [as] an aspect of [the] alienation" that has marked modern and postmodern poetry:

> Starting with Song of Myself, we can make a minimal list in addition consisting of The Waste Land, Four Quartets, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley . . ., the Cantos, The Bridge, Voyages and Paterson.

Rosenthal's intention is to show in later chapters how the confessional and projectivist poets adopted and

adapted this form. His analysis of the fragmented long poem is a helpful introduction to Rich's work:

> Each of the sequences I have mentioned has a number of independent units within it, special points of focus which, taken in order, make for the Poundian periplum, or "image of successive discoveries breaking upon the consciousness of the voyager." The voyager in each of these instances . . . is the speaking sensibility itself, testing the social and cultural landscape, the lines of continuity with the past, and the prospects of possible reconciliation with the alienating real world at every step along the way.[20]

Everyone who has written on Rich's work includes some mention, if not a comprehensive study, of "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." As I have already pointed out, Rich herself has said, "It strikes me now as too literary," adding "I hadn't found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even to use the pronoun 'I'--the woman in the poem is always 'she'" ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 45). In fact, the poem may be put alongside "The Bridge," Paterson, Lowell's "Life Studies," Ginsberg's "Howl," and Olson's "Kingfisher" and Maximus Poems as one more version of "the wasteland" in its depiction of women's fragmentation and its juxtaposition of scenes and allusions.[21] "Snapshots" is

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[20] The New Poets (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 20.

[21] Cf. Kalstone, "Adrienne Rich: Face to Face," p. 146. Kalstone says that "Snapshots" is "ironically like 'The Wasteland.'"

significant for two reasons, summed up by Rich and touched upon earlier in this chapter. First, it was written in "a longer, looser mode than [she had] ever trusted [herself] with before"; and second, despite her reservations, Rich admits that "It was an extraordinary relief to write that poem" ("When We Dead Awaken," pp. 44-45). The relief is apparent both in the optimism of the conclusion and in the other less formal and more autobiographical poems that Rich started writing soon after beginning "Snapshots" in 1958.

Although Rich continued to use men as her subjects (as in "Always the Same" [1962]) and as figures to identify with ("The Roofwalker" [1961]), the very title of "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" indicates Rich's determination to stop evading issues; we should not underestimate the risk she took in writing something so new for her (and so new in women's poetry). Her title suggests the poem will be about the ways in which society--and women themselves--have seen and "placed" women. The first section is addressed to Rich's mother, a romantic:

> You, once a belle in Shreveport,
> with henna-colored hair, skin like a
> peachbud,
> still have your dresses copied from that
> time,
> and play a Chopin prelude . . .

The second stanza of this section is a direct attack on her mother's uselessness and irrationality:

> Your mind now, mouldering 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.

The third stanza consists of only two lines and presents the contrasting reaction of the daughter: "Nervy, glowering, your daughter / wipes the teaspoons, grows another way."

The daughter/daughter-in-law reappears in the second section as a housewife experiencing madness: "Banging the coffee-pot into the sink / she hears the angels chiding." Dazed, dulled, she responds neither to the trivialities of her daily life nor to the "voices," which are perhaps part of an internal monologue. She does nothing to change her situation, and the images of masochism and waste are vivid:

> Only a week since They said: Have no patience.
>
> The next time it was: Be insatiable.
> Then: Save yourself; others you cannot save.[22]
> Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm,
> a match burn to her thumbnail,
>
> or held her hand above the kettle's snout
> right in the woolly steam. . . .

If she has no positive outlet for her creative energy, the "thinking woman" becomes monstrous, according to the third section. Repressing her intelligence, refusing to investigate her unconscious mind, "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her she becomes." Nature--"that . . . / steamer trunk of tempora and mores"--is seen by such a woman as a taker, not a giver, of her resources. Her existence is nightmarish and vindictive. In the second stanza, two women turn against each other, a fourth example of fragmentation:

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[22]This is a variation on Matthew 27:42; the priests and elders mocked the crucified Jesus by saying, "He saved others; himself he cannot save." See The Norton Introduction to Literature, ed. Carl E. Bain, Jerome Beaty, and J. Paul Hunter (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., c. 1973 [c. 1977]), pp. 769-71. The editors' footnotes provide the sources for this line, the line from Horace in section five, and Johnson's comment on women preachers quoted in section nine. Rich herself has provided notes for sections four (Dickinson), seven (Wollstonecraft) and ten (de Beauvoir).

> Two handsome women, gripped in argument,
> each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
> across the cut glass and majolica
> like Furies cornered from their prey.

Rich puns on the logical fallacy of argumentum ad hominem, concluding with an altered version of the lines Eliot adopted for "The Wasteland" from Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil:

> The argument ad feminam, all the old knives
> that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,
> ma semblable, ma soeur!

In what is the outstanding critical study of this work so far, "The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser," Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls "Snapshots" an "example of the critique of consciousness"--that is, a "critique of assumptions [on the part of women as well as of men] about women's roles and behavior." According to DuPlessis, the poem is divided into three groups of three poems each, with "a coda [that] projects a new woman." The first three poems "discuss the . . . patterns of behavior of actual women in Rich's own family" and give "a bleak sketch of the limited 'personal' options available to women--frustrations taking shape as vagueness, madness, bitchiness"; the second set of three poems analyzes literary texts and provides the "causal explanation" for

the limited options of the first group, showing "three social expectations"--"domesticity, beauty, and love"; the third set offers "three more modern touchstones of cultural attitudes toward women, showing . . . the complex psychological paralysis and kinds of failure that have been the lot of women who themselves appropriate and are controlled by male opinion of their possibilities."[23] This guide is excellent, although there is more overlapping between sections than DuPlessis seems to suggest, as Rich repeatedly approaches this subject of repression from as many angles as possible, while using a fragmented form to mirror the content. Moreover, four of the ten sections are directly concerned with the woman writer.

In the first three sections, Rich has written about several of her roles with a new directness; in the fourth section she turns to the "split" between woman as homemaker and woman as writer, using Emily Dickinson as her extreme but effective example. Here we find what was missing from The Diamond Cutters--the painful experience of being a woman writer. The first lines refer both to the "sisters without sisterhood" of the third section (the phrase is DuPlessis') and the women writers exemplified by Dickinson:

---

[23] Feminist Studies, 3 (Fall 1975), 203-206.

Knowing themselves too well in one another:
their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn,
the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn.

Rich then illustrates the way in which women--willingly or unwillingly--have accommodated their "acts of the mind" to household schedules:

Reading while waiting
for the iron to heat,
writing, My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--
in that Amherst pantry while the jellies
boil and scum,
or, more often,
iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
dusting everything on the whatnot every day
of life.

Section five is only three lines long, and its conciseness underscores its point. Women have accepted their image, working to become gleaming objects. The first line, which translates "Sweetly laughing, sweetly speaking," is adapted from Horace (Ode, 1, 22):[24]

Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,
she shaves her legs until they gleam
like petrified mammoth-tusk.

---

[24]The original line in Horace is "Dulce ridentum, dulce loquentem." Horace borrowed this line from Catullus (Frag. 51), who--interestingly enough--had borrowed it from Sappho (Frag. 31). I am grateful to Professor Edna de Angeli of Lehigh University for pointing this out.

In the next section Rich turns to the subject of men's classification of women as muses or as objects of love--that is, men's acceptance and glorification of women as sources of inspiration but never as artists. Rich begins with the opening line of a work by the Elizabethan poet Thomas Campion--"When to her lute Corinna sings"--and then proceeds to undercut Campion's point of view with a parody:

> neither words nor music are her own;
> only the long hair dipping
> over her cheek, only the song
> of silk against her knees
> and these
> adjusted in reflections of an eye.

The pun in the last line emphasizes the ways men have chosen to perceive women. Her accomplishments ignored, Corinna has been falsified and limited in portrayals by men. Rich deliberately addresses a fictional Corinna while warning women that it is preferable to write poems rather than to be "immortalized" in them:[25]

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[25]The original Corinna was a Boeotian lyric poet, one of the few Greek woman poets whose work has survived; she taught Pindar the principles of verse. Her name is known chiefly, however, from Ovid's Amores, for he used this name as a pseudonym for his lover. In an interview with the Gelpis, Rich agreed with and expanded upon a comment made by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi: "[W]hat good does it do to be the woman that the poems are written about, and beyond that, what good does it do women to have these poems about women exist? Poems in which women are all beautiful, and preferably asleep." See Rich, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, and Albert Gelpi, "Three Conversations" (1974), in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 115.

> Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before
> an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
> tell us, you bird, you tragical machine--
> is this fertilisante doleur? Pinned down
> by love, for you the only natural action,
> are you edged more keen
> to prise the secrets of the vault? has
> Nature shown
> her household books to you, daughter-in-law,
> that her sons never saw?

Rich continues to point out how men have denied the validity of women's achievements and insights in section seven. A quotation from Mary Wollstonecraft's Thoughts on the Education of Daughters--"To have in this uncertain world some stay / which cannot be undermined, is / of the utmost consequence"--is followed by:

> 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 labelled harpy, shrew and whore.

Threatened, men react by further trying to undermine women. The rhyming couplet here--one of the few instances of rhyme in all ten sections--functions organically to contain this bitterly ironic point, a frustrating--and for many women an insoluble--riddle.

Section eight shows how women have accepted what men have told them about themselves and how they have resigned themselves to dreaming "deliciously" about what they might have been:

"You all die at fifteen," said Diderot,
and turn part legend, part convention.
Still, eyes inaccurately dream
behind closed windows blankening with
   steam.
Deliciously, all that we might have been,
all that we were--fire, tears,
wit, taste, martyred ambition.

Rich does not excuse women; for too long they have accepted men's estimations, as section nine makes even more clear. This section begins with the second half of a quotation from Samuel Johnson--"Not that it is done well, / but that it is done at all?" (The first half is "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs.") Rich continues:

                    Yes, think
of the odds! or shrug them off forever.
This luxury of the precocious child,
Time's precious chronic invalid,--
would we, darlings, resign it if we could?
Our blight has been our sinecure:
mere talent was enough for us--
glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

Like the other sections, this one is harshly ironic:

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 mould straight off.

To avoid antagonizing men and to avoid the risk of criticism, women have held back, have been content not to assert themselves intellectually or imaginatively. Rich includes herself ("we hear / our mediocrities over-praised"), and we may recall Jarrell's adjectives for the author of The Diamond Cutters--"enchanting" and "sweet." What would the consequences of "smash[ing] the mould straight off" be? Dickinson's answer in "Much Madness is divinest Sense,"

> Demur--and you're straightaway dangerous--
> And handled with a Chain,[26]

is made contemporary and more violent by Rich:

> For that, solitary confinement,
> tear gas, attrition shelling.
> Few applicants for that honor.

And yet, the poem ends positively, optimistically. In a description and demonstration of new consciousness, the outgrowth of the preceding nine sections, Rich anticipates the coming of a new woman: "Given what the poem says, a woman must literally reinvent herself."[27]

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[26]The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), p. 209.

[27]DuPlessis, p. 205.

Well,
she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.

She must be as "merciless" as Rich has been in sections one through nine, in an effort to understand herself and her situation. The new woman--Rich herself--will be propelled by her new consciousness:

Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,
taking the light upon her
at least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter,
poised, still coming . . .

The simile of the helicopter, an adaptation of a phrase from Simone de Beauvoir's Deuxième Sexe (Rich's note), is one that Rich uses as well in later poems, such as "In the Woods" in Necessities of Life. (The plane appears as a simile in "Song" in Diving into the Wreck and as an image in "From an Old House in America" in Poems: Selected and New.) "Snapshots" ends with the reassurance that this woman will be a representative:

her fine blades making the air wince
but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered
palpable
ours.

Carefully controlled, "Snapshots" was nevertheless clearly motivated by anger. Rich knew the risks that

she was taking, but the writing of "Snapshots"--a woman's poem filled with images of sharp edges[28] and radical in form and content--was essential to her development.[29]

Another poem from 1960 that illustrates Rich's evolving poetics and philosophy is "Double Monologue" (the opening stanzas of which are quoted earlier in this chapter). The processes of abandoning false illusions and striving to be more fully conscious are inevitably accompanied by the realization--a liberating one for Rich--that there is no such thing as absolute truth:

> Time wears us old utopians.
> I now no longer think
> "truth" is the most beautiful of words.
>
> Today, when I see "truthful"
> written somewhere, it flares

---

[28]Cf. Albert Gelpi, "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," p. 134, and Spiegelman, "Voice of the Survivor: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich," p. 374. Both have noted the image of "the sharp cutting edge."

[29]I do not see any contradiction between calling Rich an intellectual poet and noting the obvious anger behind the writing of "Snapshots." On the subject of anger, Rich has said: "I almost think that we have a history of centuries of women in depression: really angry women, who could have been using their anger creatively. I think an enormous amount of male art is anger converted into creation. . . . I think anger can be a kind of genius if it's acted on" ("Three Conversations," p. 111).

like a white orchid in wet woods,
  rare and grief-delighting, up from the page.
Sometimes, unwittingly even,
  we have been truthful.
In a random universe, what more

exact and starry consolation?

In the second sequence in Snapshots, "Readings of History" (1960), Rich expands upon this realization as she investigates further the possibilities of making organic poetry out of the subjects of fragmentation and consciousness. The poem begins with an epigram taken from Domenico Vittorini's Drama of Luigi Pirandello: "He delighted in relating the fact that he had been born near Girgenti in a place called Chaos during a raging cholera epidemic." "Readings" are generally attempts to impose order on "history," which is in fact as chaotic as the present. Rich's poem suggests that readings of public or private history can only be approximations of experience and that the only way to approach history is through multiple readings. Finally, the "truth" that we may unwittingly discover might well be a confirmation of chaos. Out of the effort to understand the past and the relation of our present selves to it, however, will come (once again, as in "Snapshots"), increased consciousness.

Visual records of personal history, such as the genre views and photographs of section one, "The Evil

Eye," present a paradox; even as they preserve life, they remind us of aging and death:

> Today, a fresh clean morning.
> Your camera stabs me unawares,
> right in my mortal part.
> A womb of celluloid already
> contains my dotage and my total absence.

Nevertheless, Rich

> is after a reading of history that will include herself, a perspective that will contain not only what she knows herself to be <u>now</u>, the present woman who is an anthology of all her wounds and wanderings, not only the <u>summa</u> of her past . . . but also "my dotage and my total absence."[30]

"The confrontation" of section two is between the two sides into which "the artist's self is split . . . the raving wife and the frustrated genius."[31] Rich's representative writer is Pirandello. This man, whose metalingual works were concerned with process and who left his own "readings of history,"

> looked like an old historian
> (oval head, tufted white beard,
> not least the hunger
> for reconciliation in his eye.

---

[30]Howard, "Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends Us Anchor But the Mutable?'" in <u>Alone with America</u>, pp. 433-34.

[31]Van Dyne, "The Mirrored Vision of Adrienne Rich," p. 151.

In the second stanza, Rich addresses Pirandello/herself:

> The present holds you like a raving
> wife,
> clever as the mad are clever,
> digging up your secret truths
> from her disabled genius.
> . . . . . .
>
> She will not let you think.
> It is important
> to make connections. Everything
> happens very fast in the minds
> of the insane. Even you
> aren't up to that, yet.
>
> Go out, walk,
> think of selves long past.

The examination of our "selves long past" may clarify the disordered present.

Our ancestors may show us ourselves, and in the third section, "Memorabilia," Rich turns to her familial past, recalling the

> Civil War letters of a great-grand-uncle,
> fifteen at Chancellorsville,
> . . . . . .
> Dying, he turned into his father's memory.

Moving from the specific to the general, Rich says: "History's queerly strong perfumes / rise from the crook of this day's elbow." She asks if we are "Prisoners of what we think occurred, / or dreamers dreaming toward a final word?" The question and the consciousness it implies are important. The question must be

asked, even though there is no answer, just as there can be no answer to the question about her ancestor in the final lines of this section: "What, in fact, happened in these woods / on some obliterated afternoon?"

Section four begins with another question:

> Can history show us nothing
> but pieces of ourselves, detached,
> set to a kind of poetry,
> a kind of music, even?

What follows are examples of "pieces" of history--the works of the "great Victorians" and "ancient copies of LIFE from World War II." Rich addresses the people pictured in the magazines, identifying with them:

> We look so poor and honest there:
> girls with long hair badly combed
> and unbecoming dresses--
> where are you now?
> You sail
> to shop in Europe, ignorantly freed
> for you an age ago.
> Your nylon luggage matches
> eyelids
> expertly azured.

Photographs, "secret truths," letters, memories, literature, and magazines--all provide fragments. The past can never be seen as a whole, yet pieces of it are enough to show that we are all, consciously or unconsciously, participants in history, and Rich concludes, "I, too, have lived in history."

Knowledge should be a means, not an end, and at this point--in section five, "The Mirror"--Rich stops to determine the motives for her preoccupation with this subject:

> Is it in hopes
> to find or lose myself
> that I
> fill up my table now
> with Michelet and Motley?

Is it in hopes to escape the present and herself or to understand the present? In the most directly autobiographical lines of the poem, she reveals her own personal history, as part of the attempt to analyze her interest:

> Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew,
> Yankee nor Rebel, born
> in the face of two ancient cults,
> I'm a good reader of histories.

Here in her split heritage may lie the reason for Rich's desire "to make connections," but she still isn't satisfied and must ask someone else:

> And you,
> Morris Cohen, dear to me as a brother,
> when you sit at night
> tracing your way through your volumes
> of Josephus, or any
> of the old Judaic chronicles,
> do you find yourself there, a simpler,
> more eloquent Jew?
> or do you read
> to shut out the tick-tock of self,
> the questions and their routine answers?

We need to "know" the past--even if imaginatively--but we cannot stay in the past as a defense against the chaotic present (nor can we falsify the past as less than disordered itself). "The Covenant," the final section, summarizes our predicament:

> The present breaks our hearts. We lie and
> freeze,
> our fingers icy as a bunch of keys.
> Nothing will thaw these bones except
> memory. . . .

But memory is

> like an ancient blanket wrapped
> about us when we sleep at home again,
> smelling of picnics, closets, sicknesses,
> old nightmare, and
> insomnia's spreading stain.

Memories cannot guarantee that the present will not break our hearts. But making connections <u>is</u> consciousness, and in our attempt to understand the past and in our absorption with the process of past time becoming and influencing the present, we may find or may begin to find ourselves. The only answer to any of the questions in the poem is our recognition of life as process. We are simultaneously participants in the present moment and in history. The concluding stanza suggests the ongoing process of consciousness and the perpetual rebirth of the self:

Or say I sit with what I halfway know
as with a dying man who heaves the true
version at last, now that it hardly matters,
or gropes a hand to where the letters
sewn in the mattress can be plucked and
read.
Here's water. Sleep. No more is
asked of you.
I take your life into my living head.

Two of the later poems in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law are about the importance of the unconscious, a subject that Rich returns to in subsequent volumes of poetry and in critical statements. In her 1974 interview with the Gelpis, for example, Rich talks about her belief "that the energy of poetry comes from the unconscious" ("Three Conversations," p. 113). Albert Gelpi has discussed "Face" (1962) in this context, pointing out that "the metaphor of 'a fish / drawn up dripping hugely / from the sea of paint' . . . establishes the connection between the artistic process and the interaction of consciousness and the unconscious."[32]

"The Well," a metapoem dated 1961, is about the writing process. The well here is clearly the unconscious:

[32]"Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," p. 138.

Down this old well
what leaves have fallen,
what cores of eaten apples,
what scraps of paper!
An old trash barrel.
November, no one comes.

The preliminary thought process and early drafts become experiments, as the poet searches for the word or the image that will release a chain of associations. If the poet leaves her- or himself open, the unconscious may suggest new images. This new material, at least partially synthesized in the unconscious, may even help to give the poem its form; that is, the content may have already begun to shape itself. The poet can then work organically, allowing the form of the poem to evolve from the content. The conscious mind, of course, continues the process of making connections among disparate subjects, ultimately selecting the final images from among the material that the unconscious offers:

But I come, trying
to breathe that word
into the well's ear
which could make the leaves fly up
like a green jet
to clothe the naked tree,
the whole fruit leap to the naked bough, . . .

After the two organic metaphors taken from nature, Rich adds a third figure of speech to describe the process, a simile that uses metalanguage: "the scraps

like fleets of letters / sail up into my hands." The original metaphor for images in the unconscious--"scraps of paper"--has undergone a transformation by the final lines of the poem, and the new simile suggests the parallel transformation in the processes of prewriting and writing.

The poem that concludes the book, "The Roofwalker" (written in 1961 and dedicated to Denise Levertov), is Rich's statement about her early poetry, about what she has attempted to do in this volume, and about her evolving view of poetry. "The Roofwalker" starts with a long description of builders standing on a roof:

> 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.

In the second stanza, Rich compares herself to them, deliberately undercutting, however, the heroic language that is traditionally used to describe people who perform daring acts and that she herself has used. Like the language in "Rustication" (1961)--"Still out of it"--the

language here shows a new colloquialism on Rich's part:

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

By the third stanza, Rich establishes the metaphor of the builder for herself and comments further on her predicament:

> Was it worthwhile to lay--
> with infinite exertion--
> a roof I can't live under?
> --All those blueprints,
> closing of gaps,
> measurings, calculations?
> A life I didn't choose
> chose me: even
> my tools are the wrong ones
> for what I have to do.

She could remain under the "roof" of the careful work of her earlier years of writing; she could remain an interested observer of people and politics (as she was in her first two books); but her poetry would not be adequate. She must instead begin again, as a number of the poems in this book have suggested:

> I'm naked, ignorant,
> a naked man fleeing
> across the roofs
> who could with a shade of difference
> be sitting in the lamplight
> against the cream wallpaper
> reading--not with indifference--
> about a naked man
> fleeing across the roofs.

There is something else here too--the suggestion that all that has gone before has been necessary and that Rich cannot regard the past, in terms of her life or her work, with "indifference." Those who believe in "process" must live in the present, but the past--at least according to this 1963 volume--is part of the process of one's life and cannot be dismissed. Snapshots itself represents, in fact, one stage of Rich's evolving philosophy and poetics. By The Will To Change (1971), Rich's whole emphasis is on the present. And this stage is followed in turn by Rich's feminist evaluation and "re-vision" of her own and other women's history.

An equally fitting concluding poem for Snapshots would have been "Prospective Immigrants Please Note," the poem that Rich placed at the end of her selections from this volume when editing Poems: Selected and New:

> Either you will
> go through this door
> or you will not go through.
>
> If you go through
> there is always the risk
> of remembering your name.
>
> Things look at you doubly
> and you must look back
> and let them happen.
>
> If you do not go through
> it is possible
> to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

Snapshots represents Rich's acceptance of the risk involved in being willing to see things "doubly"--that is, not simply according to preconceived notions--and in writing new poems. "Prospective Immigrants" ends on an existential note of reduction:

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

The door, the new things we commit ourselves to, the life we choose to live: these make no promises. Our only resource is ourselves, and we must constantly remake ourselves. In the books that follow, Rich elaborates upon and expands the realizations that led to Snapshots, describing and demonstrating the necessity to begin anew, again and yet again.

CHAPTER IV

NECESSITIES OF LIFE:

"WRITING THESE WORDS IN THE WOODS"

Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-1965 represents another stage in Rich's development. The twenty-five new poems on the now familiar themes of relationship, separation, death, and art, and the nine translations of Dutch poems are simultaneously personal statements and objective correlatives for our time. As usual, the diction is precise and the figures of speech original. While the forms are less experimental than those of Leaflets and The Will To Change, Rich had begun to move away from the "single controlling image." Writing this book may well have been one of the "necessities" of Adrienne Rich's life.

1

Although the general consensus is that Necessities, nominated in 1966 for the National Book Award, is "remarkable," a number of recent studies of Rich's opus have devoted relatively little space to discussions of this

fourth book.[1] The absence of long feminist poems comparable to "Snapshots," "Diving into the Wreck," and "From an Old House in America" may account in part for this. Another reason might be that suggested by Laurence Goldstein: the "bolder experiments" of subsequent books have overshadowed Necessities.[2] A third reason for the reluctance to analyze this book might be the curious split between poems such as the title poem in which the poet asserts herself and those such as "Moth Hour" in which she seems to seek effacement.[3]

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[1]While critics such as Kalstone, Boyers, and Van Dyne have provided lengthy discussions in their essays on Rich, others such as Spiegelman, Laurence Goldstein in "The Evolution of Adrienne Rich," Michigan Quarterly Review, 15 (Summer 1976), and Alicia Ostriker in "Her Cargo: Adrienne Rich and the Common Language," The American Poetry Review, 8 (July/August 1979) have confined themselves to briefly mentioning Necessities before moving on to Rich's later books. Brown admires the "beauty" of "Mourning Picture" in her conclusion but does not consider the poems of Necessities in the body of her review. DuPlessis' article does not include any of the poems. References to Rich's fourth book of poems are to Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-1965 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966).

[2]"The Evolution of Adrienne Rich," p. 362.

[3]Cf. Kalstone, "Face to Face," in Five Temperaments, p. 152. Kalstone is the only critic who has addressed this problem directly: "What is odd about Necessities of Life is the way the book moves from an emerging self to poems where Rich does, repeatedly, a vanishing act." Rich offered a feminist explanation in 1975: "[S]omething in me was saying, 'If my material, my subject matter as a woman is going to be denied me, then there is only one other subject for me and that is death'" ("Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan Talk About Poetry and Women's Culture," The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook, ed. Susan Rennie and Kirsten Grimstad [New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975], p. 107).

Rich comes closest to being a confessional poet in Necessities, yet the poems about death and those in which images of sharpness threaten the speaker (in contrast to "Snapshots") become part of a carefully controlled metaphorical drama acted out by one who seeks not to annihilate herself but to survive--and to survive on her own terms. I have already discussed the autobiographical aspect of Rich's work in Chapter Three. Two additional statements made by Rich, however, are of interest. Rich wrote the first, in a review of The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence, while preparing Necessities for publication: "If the poems are rooted in personal history they are also rooted in the development of a mind."[4] In the 1972 interview with Kalstone, she replied to his question on confessional poetry by saying, "I don't know about that term. . . . A poem can be dealing with a very concrete experience in some of its actuality and concreteness and still not be about that, but be out of that, metaphoric."[5]

Rich's work in the sixties and seventies exemplifies the "personalization of poetry"; the postmodernist tendency has been to move away from modernist "fabrication." Still, like "any art, personal poetry is a selective,

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[4]"Reflections on Lawrence," Poetry, 106 (June 1965), 223.

[5]"Talking with Adrienne Rich," p. 58.

calculated and public gesture, a formal utterance for which the poet selects a voice, one which is as approximate to [her] own as is manageable."[6] Jonathan Holden has elaborated on these points, noting that personal poetry uses the modernist image but has as its aim "the lack of conspicuous artifice."[7] The transition for Rich from the methods of the modernists was an uneasy one, as the early poems in her fourth book illustrate. For example, "In the Woods" (discussed in greater detail below) represents a halfway stage in Rich's development. While the distance between the poet and the speaker seems almost negligible, Rich apparently still felt obliged to introduce the abstraction "happiness." She did not achieve her mastery of "studied artlessness" (the term is Holden's) until she completed Necessities and began writing the poems of her next book, Leaflets.

The confessional movement in contemporary poetry may have encouraged Rich to attempt a more direct form of expression than she had dared to use even in "Snapshots."

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[6]A. Poulin Jr. discusses these trends in Contemporary American Poetry, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), pp. 460-62.

[7]"'Affected Naturalness' and the Poetry of Sensibility," College English, 41 (December 1979), 403.

More precisely, this movement begun by Snodgrass, Roethke, and Lowell allowed Rich to approximate her own voice while investigating a series of roles. The influence of Plath and Lowell is evident in the mood and tone of a number of poems in Necessities; we must also take into account, however, Rich's possible influence on Plath and the difference between Rich's work and orthodox confessional poetry.

"Moth Hour" (1965) seems to echo both Lowell's "Skunk Hour" (1957) and several of Plath's bee poems (1962 and 1963). "After Dark" (1964) recalls Plath's "Lady Lazarus" (1962) and "Crossing the Water" (1962). Phrases in "Open-Air Museum" (1964)--"two priests in a grey field"--and in "Autumn Sequence" (1964)--"an old shoe," "an old skin," "the blue / drought of another October"--may be recognizable to readers of Plath's work. (Both women were influenced by Stevens; Plath may very well have been familiar with Rich's use of "blue" in "Stepping Backward" [A Change of World].)

Inquiry into "influence" among poets who are contemporaries is, of course, nebulous. The repetition of the word "pure" in Necessities suggests that Rich was influenced by Plath but, as I have already indicated by noting the similarity between "The Insomniacs" (The Diamond Cutters) and "Death & Co." (1963) in Chapter Two,

there is evidence of reciprocity.

According to Edward Buscher, Plath read Rich's work as early as 1951 and "regarded [Rich] with envious dislike." Ten years later, as guest editor of a supplement to The Critical Quarterly titled "American Poetry Now," Plath included two poems by Rich that subsequently appeared in Snapshots. In Plath's January 1963 BBC review of Hall's Contemporary American Poetry, Rich was one of the poets whom Plath "singled out . . . for particular admiration." Two points that Plath emphasized in her review were the subjectivity and the surrealism of contemporary poetry, qualities that the works of Plath and Rich share.[8]

The strongest tie between these two poets who have been occasionally compared but more frequently contrasted is their anger. Rich has spoken approvingly of Plath's "voice of rage and anger";[9] just before Plath began writing her final poems of outrage, she was reading the angry poems that later made up Snapshots. Plath attempted to transcend the world and its attendant pain permanently:

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[8]Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 135, 272, and 359.

[9]Kalstone, "Talking with Adrienne Rich," pp. 57-58.

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her;[10]

Rich, however, saw escape as only temporary and chose to seek her place in the world.

The title poem, which was written in 1962 and which opens the book, picks up where "The Roofwalker" and "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" end. Here Rich announces her re-entry into the world, tracing the process of her life and work thus far:

Piece by piece I seem
to re-enter the world: I first began

a small, fixed dot, still see
that old myself, a dark-blue thumbtack

pushed into the scene,
a hard little head protruding

from the pointillist's buzz and bloom.

On one level, the poem traces Rich's life from birth; on another, it presents a summary of the life of the mind, a

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[10]"Stings," Ariel (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 61-63. For a study of Plath's influence on Leaflets and further discussion of the ways in which these two poets are both similar and different, see Judith McDaniel, Reconstituting the World: The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich (New York: Spinsters, Ink., 1978), pp. 8-9.

summary of Rich's writing career.[11]

Just as the first lines describe A Change of World and The Diamond Cutters--"fixed"--the lines that follow seem accurately to describe both Rich's intellectual adolescence and her introspective late twenties--that period between the publication of The Diamond Cutters and the writing of "Snapshots."

> Now I was hurriedly
>
> blurring into ranges
> of burnt red, burning green,
>
> whole biographies swam up and
> swallowed me like Jonah.
>
> Jonah! I was Wittgenstein,
> Mary Wollstonecraft, the soul
>
> of Louis Jouvet, dead
> in a blown-up photograph.
>
> Till, wolfed almost to shreds,
> I learned to make myself
>
> unappetizing.

---

[11] See Vendler's autobiographical criticism in "Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, pp. 167-68. My reading of the ending differs radically from hers: "In [the last three lines], acquiescence and rebellion compete: that the dark-blue thumbtack should come to this; that the girl who dreamed of being Wittgenstein should join the garrulous crones. And yet, what else can the normal lot be; . . . is it not enough to sit on the doorstep and knit?" I have discussed the significance of references to traditionally feminine arts in Rich's poetry in Chapter One.

Rich describes a withdrawal into the self, a state that she advocated in earlier poems in A Change of World and The Diamond Cutters without fully conveying a sense of its significance or consequences. Here a more mature woman speaks:

> Scaly as a dry bulb
> thrown into a cellar
>
> I used myself, let nothing use me.
> Like being on a private dole,
>
> sometimes more like kneading bricks in Egypt.

Rich is not rhapsodizing over her condition in this ironic section; kneading bricks was slaves' work. But this part of the poem also suggests a necessary stripping away of old beliefs and frustrations:

> What life was there, was mine,
>
> now and again to lay
> one hand on a warm brick
>
> and touch the sun's ghost
> with economical joy,
>
> now and again to name
> over the bare necessities.

These days, in which she began the painful reassessment of herself in her journals and in her poems, end her introspective period, and Rich is ready for the next stage. Both here and in later poems such as "The Demon Lover" (Leaflets) and "Diving into the Wreck," Rich introduces

the possibility of creating a self to meet the world and its demands:

> So much for these days. Soon
> practice may make me middling-perfect. I'll
> dare inhabit the world
> trenchant in motion as an eel, solid
>
> as a cabbage-head.

Rich's irony is again apparent; she chooses similes from nature but refuses to use standard clichés or to romanticize her condition. Trenchant and solid, she is ready to interpret:

> houses along a road stand waiting
>
> like old women knitting, breathless
> to tell their tales.

The conclusion is not so dramatic as the ending of "Snapshots," with its image of the "fine blades" of the helicopter, but it is another kind of declaration. If "Snapshots" was an investigation of old modes of consciousness and a call to action, "Necessities" illustrates the first stage of the new woman's action. She must reenter the world on her own terms and in order to do so, she must literally step backwards to determine in privacy what "the bare necessities" are.

The originality of the metaphors--"a dark-blue thumbtack"--and similes--"scaly as a dry bulb," "solid

as a cabbage-head"--provide a marked contrast to the mist's "crawl[ing] like a snail" in A Change of World. Rich's juxtaposition of images marks another advance in her poetry. Progressing from pointillist metaphors to a catalog of biographies to a series of similes that draw upon objects from nature, "Necessities" ends with a reference to the traditionally feminine art of knitting.

Significantly, the "helicopter" of "Snapshots" reappears in the second poem of Necessities, "In the Woods" (1963). Rich--or the persona she has created--continues to assert herself, apparently paradoxically, by escaping to the woods. The retreat to nature suggests retreat into the self; Rich begins by meditating on a line she identifies as the Dutch poet J. C. Bloem's:

> "Difficult ordinary happiness,"
> no one nowadays believes in you.
> I shift full-length on the blanket,
> to fix the sun precisely
>
> behind the pine-tree's crest
> so light spreads through the needles
> alive as water just
> where a snake has surfaced,
>
> unreal as water in green crystal.
> Bad news is always arriving.
> "We're hiders, hiding from something bad,"
> sings the little boy.

With the most directly self-conscious lines that Rich had yet produced in her writing career, the poem continues:

> Writing these words in the woods,
> I feel like a traitor to my friends,
> even to my enemies.
> . . . . . .
>
> We're hiders, hiding from something bad
> most of the time.

She is a "traitor" because she has gone off alone to write and because she criticizes "hiding" while she celebrates the separation of the artist from society and writes about nature instead of the problems of contemporary society.

Nature, however, is not gentle. The light that Rich focuses upon evokes the image of a "snake surfac[ing]"; "bad news" can reach us even in the woods. Despite her affinities for Thoreau and Emerson (suggested here by the images of the pond and the soul), Rich's "green world" has always had more in common with Shakespeare's Forest of Arden and the dark places depicted by the romantics than with the transcendentalists' vision of nature.[12]

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[12]"Concord River" (The Diamond Cutters) illustrates Rich's ties with Thoreau. In addition to the works of the romanticists and transcendentalists, another possible source of inspiration for "In the Woods" may have been de Beauvoir's Second Sex. See DuPlessis, "The Critique of Consciousness and Myth," pp. 220-21, and de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, 1961, c. 1949 by Librairie Gallimard), p. 687. DuPlessis has pointed out that in "Snapshots" Rich "Curiously . . . reversed de Beauvoir's intention." de Beauvoir actually used the image of the helicopter, which Rich adopted as an image of flight and freedom, as an example of the "artifice" of our demeaning technological age. The reversal of meaning is one more example of the transformations that poetry consists of.

The suggestion of violence in nature recurs in "The Knot" (1965):

> In the heart of the queen anne's lace, a knot
> of blood.
> . . . . . .
>
> and there, all along, the tiny dark-red spider
> sitting in the whiteness of the bridal web,
>
> waiting to plunge his crimson knifepoint
> into the white apparencies.

Rich, moreover, has gone into the woods not to hide from something but to seek wholeness. Open to all experience, she achieves discovery:

> Yet, and outrageously, something good
> finds us, found me this morning
> lying on a dusty blanket
> among the burnt-out Indian pipes
>
> and bursting-open lady's-slippers.
> My soul, my helicopter, whirred
> distantly, by habit, over
> the old pond with the half-drowned boat
>
> toward which it always veers
> for consolation: ego's Arcady:
> leaving the body stuck
> like a leaf against the screen--
>
> Happiness! How many times
> I've stranded on that word
> at the edge of that pond; seen
> as if through tears, the dragon fly--
>
> only to find it all
> going differently for once
> this time: my soul wheeled back
> and burst into my body.
>
> Found! ready or not.
> If I move now, the sun
> naked between the trees
> will melt me as I lie.

She has found herself--her body and soul inseparable--and she has found an ability "to transcend the dichotomy of mind and matter."[13] The word "outrageously" and the adaptation of phrases from the children's game of hide and seek wryly balance the mystical experience--a metaphor for poetry-making--conveyed here. The effect is similar to that of poems by Dickinson, another poet who understood that poems and visions are projections of consciousness. Rich's tone of assertiveness and her confidence in the value of seclusion as a means of finding happiness and an individual style (the two are synonymous) reappear in fact in "I Am in Danger--Sir" (1964), a poem addressed to Dickinson. "'Half-cracked' to Higginson," Dickinson "chose to have it out at last / on [her] own premises." All three poems, "Necessities of Life," "In the Woods," and "I Am in Danger--Sir," suggest the necessity for Rich of living--and of writing--on her own terms.

As I have already indicated, Necessities of Life also contains contrasting poems about effacement and death. In "Side by Side" (1965), the speaker lies next to her husband in bed, observing that he is "a lemon-gold pyjama." She

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[13]Wendy Martin, "From Patriarchy to the Female Principle: A Chronological Reading of Adrienne Rich's Poems," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 179.

herself is

> a trousseau-sheet, fine
>
> linen worn paper-thin in places,
> worked with the maiden monogram.

The tone is light--

> Lassitude drapes our folds.
> We're slowly bleaching
>
> with the days, the hours, and the years.
> We are getting finer than ever,
>
> time is wearing us to silk,
> to sheer spiderweb.
>
> The eye of the sun, rising, looks in
> to ascertain how we are coming on--

yet it is precisely this condition that Rich struggled against in Snapshots. In "The Crib," Part I of "Night Pieces: For a Child" (1964), a small child's scream renders its mother powerless and negates her role. Unable to penetrate the child's dream, the woman is helpless, envisioning herself as part of the nightmare:

> You blurt a cry. Your eyes
> spring open, still filmed in dream.
> Wider, they fix me--
> death's head, sphinx, medusa?
> You scream.
> Tears lick my cheeks, my knees
> droop at your fear.
> Mother I no more am,
> but woman, and nightmare.

In "The Corpse-Plant" (1963), the persona has brought the flowers of the plant, "white as death," inside her house, and says, "I gave them their deathly names." She found them "growing like / shadows on a negative."[14] In "Halfway" (1965), a poem that Rich later said described herself ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 43), "A young girl, thought sleeping, is certified dead."

Rather than see these poems as irreconcilable with the point of view Rich expresses elsewhere, I suggest that we see them as attempts to investigate part of the process of life. The epigram Rich chose for Necessities is from Montaigne; the end of the quotation translates "It is the condition of your birth that death is a part of you: you flee yourselves."[15] From the cyclical deaths in nature through the figurative deaths of our old selves to the actual deaths of persons we love, death is one of life's necessities. Rich explores this idea more fully in several other poems here--"Moth Hour," "Open-Air Museum,"

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[14] The image of a film negative also appears in the beginning of "The Crib."

[15] Translated by Patricia DeBellis.

and "After Dark."[16]

In "Moth Hour" (1965), nature has provided a metaphor for the process the speaker must undergo if she is to remake her life. On one level, "Moth Hour" is about death; on another, it is about the estrangement and mutability that the living experience.[17]

> I am gliding backward away from those who
> knew me
> as the moon grows thinner and finally shuts
> its lantern.
> I can be replaced a thousand times,
> a box containing death.
> When you put out your hand to touch me
> you are already reaching toward an empty
> space.

At the risk of seeming simplistic, I point out the archetypal pattern of death and rebirth; the Phoenix and the Christ are only two examples. Olson incorporates this motif in "The Kingfishers," as does Rich in "Open-Air

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[16]See Howard, "Adrienne Rich: 'What Lends Us Anchor But the Mutable?'" in Alone with America, pp. 435-38. After calling death one of the necessities of life, Howard cites "After Dark." He does not pursue the theme of regeneration, except to say, "Miss Rich, in an art that reckons more with waste and destruction than her own economies, has made out of experience a self that is like the Emily Dickinson she returns to."

[17]See Martin, p. 181. In her essay, a feminist reading of Rich's works, Martin provides a more radical interpretation than mine; discussing both "Spring Thunder" and "Moth Hour," she says, "The poet distances herself from these patriarchal landscapes and returns again to her own experience with an awareness that her culture does not reflect her concerns and, in fact, could destroy her."

Museum." This early political poem is, like Olson's, a lament for modern America. The scene is a garbage dump, with its "Thick flames in a grey field . . . the flag of our true country": a field with

> its heart sucked by slow fire
> O my America
> this then was your desire?

A catalog of items including mattresses, "mad Lou's last stack of paintings," and a photograph of "the Harlem bride" establishes the "grey field" as a microcosm of twentieth-century America. The list expands to include

> those trucked-off bad dreams
> outside the city limits
> [that] crawl back in search of you, eyes
> missing, skins missing, intenser in decay
> the carriage that wheeled the defective baby
> rolls up on three wheels
> and the baby is still inside,
> you cannot burn fast enough.

The dump, however, also contains the chicory flower:

> Blue sparks of the chicory flower
> flash from embers of the dump
> inside the rose-rust carcas of a slaughtered
> Chevrolet
> crouches the young ailanthus
>
> and the two guardians go raking the sacred
> field, raking
> slowly, to what endless end
> Cry of truth among so many lies
> at your heart burns on
> a languid fire.

The subject and the paradoxical conclusion are reminiscent of Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust." The guardians' job is "endless." Yet the field that the two men tend is a "sacred repository," and the connotation of the fire has become positive as it has by the end of Hawthorne's tale; it is a smoldering "Cry of truth." Here--at the "heart" of our country and of human nature--lies the possibility of regeneration, once we have stripped ourselves bare.

"After Dark," one of Rich's most moving poems, is about the death of her father and, paradoxically, her new wholeness. The contrast between her early poems on death, such as "At a Deathbed in the Year Two Thousand" (A Change of World) and this work is illustrative of Rich's growth. Even with its overtones of Shakespeare (King Lear), Lawrence ("Sorrow"), Lowell, and Plath, this poem indisputably belongs to Rich.[18] It conveys a sense of felt experience and successfully reveals Rich's desire to contain a philosophy about life in her poetry. In section one, she, in propria persona, sits with her dying father, watching him as he falls asleep. The ambivalence and complexity of their relationship is established in

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[18]Cf. Boyers, "On Adrienne Rich: Intelligence and Will," in Contemporary Poetry in America, pp. 161-62. Boyers also emphasizes the "profound ambivalence" of this poem.

the first stanza:

> You are falling asleep and I sit looking
> at you
> old tree of life
> old man whose death I wanted
> I can't stir you up now.

She recalls the past--his domination of her and her resistance:

> Faintly a phonograph needle
> whirs round in the last groove
> eating my heart to dust.
> That terrible record! how it played
>
> down years, wherever I was
> in foreign languages even
> over and over, I know you better
> than you know yourself I know
>
> you better than you know
> yourself I know
> you until, self-maimed,
> I limped off, torn at the roots,
>
> stopped singing a whole new year,
> got a new body, new breath,
> got children, croaked for words,
> forgot to listen
>
> or read your mene tekel fading on the wall.

And she records the realization that they are, despite her attempts to believe or to act otherwise, bound together:

> woke up one morning
> and knew myself your daughter.
> Blood is a sacred poison.

The paradoxical phrasing of "sacred poison" is richly suggestive, with its connotations of archetypal or mythical patterns. (The reference in the second section to ancient burial rites reinforces this allusion.) The speaker no longer desires her father's death:

> Now, unasked, you give ground.
> We only want to stifle
> what's stifling us already.
> Alive now, root to crown, I'd give
>
> --oh,--something--not to know
> our struggles now are ended.
> I seem to hold you, cupped
> in my hands, and disappearing.

She extends her sense of his--and her--new vulnerability to the world:

> When your memory fails--
> no more to scourge my inconsistencies--
> the sashcords of the world fly loose.
> a window crashes
>
> suddenly down. I go to the woodbox
> and take a stick of kindling
> to prop the sash again.
> I grow protective toward the world.

Section two begins with the speaker encouraging her father (who cannot hear her) with words that echo Cordelia's to Lear. The organization of the two sections is similar; the persona begins to reminisce again. Her revelation about the past in this section, however, concerns the subconscious:

Now let's away from prison--
Underground seizures!
I used to huddle in the grave
I'd dug for you and bite

my tongue for fear it would babble
--Darling--

I thought they'd find me there
someday, sitting upright, shrunken,

my hair like roots and in my lap
a mess of broken pottery--
wasted libation--
and you embalmed beside me.

After these lines of surrealistic imagery that reveal her complex of emotions, she returns to the present, only to indulge in a "dream" within a dream. The speaker's wish for her father occurs within the larger context of her wish for both of them:

No, let's away. Even now
there's a walk between doomed elms[19]
(whose like we shall not see much longer)
and something--grass and water--

an old dream-photograph.
I'll sit with you there and tease you
for wisdom, if you like,
waiting till the blunt barge

[19]In Hendrik de Vries' "My Brother," one of the translations in Part Two, the persona says to his dead brother, "You walked along that path through the elms."

bumps along the shore.
Poppies burn in the twilight
like smudge pots.
I think you hardly see me

but--this is the dream now--
your fears blow out,
off, over the water.
At the last, your hand feels steady.

The final stanza suggests a steadiness and wholeness for the speaker's father in death; the last four stanzas suggest a new steadiness for the speaker. She has faced her old fantasies, resentments, and longings, and she has finally acknowledged her binding relationship with her father.

If death is the final necessity, relationships represent a major necessity of life. One leaves society--as in "In the Woods" or even in "Moth Hour"--only to prepare for re-entry. As "After Dark" and the earlier "A Marriage in the Sixties" (Snapshots) show, relationships are never simple in Rich's poems. Rich might have been speaking of her own work when she called attention to Lawrence's "enormous sense of the possibilities inherent in human contacts and human separateness" ("Reflections on Lawrence," p. 220). Both the will to remain separate and the struggle against separateness mark the human condition.

Like the first section of "Night-Pieces: For a Child," the second section, "Her Waking," is about the pain and complexity of motherhood:

> Tonight I jerk astart in a dark
> hourless as Hiroshima,
> almost hearing you breathe
> in a cot three doors away.
>
> You still breathe, yes--
> and my dream with its gift of knives,
> its murderous hider and seeker,
> ebbs away, recoils
>
> back into the egg of dreams,
> the vanishing point of mind.
> All gone.

The "seeker" may be both the danger that a mother cannot protect her child from and the mother herself, who has repressed her frustration. The persona continues:

> But you and I--
> swaddled in a dumb dark
> old as sickheartedness,
> modern as pure annihilation--
>
> we drift in ignorance.
> If I could hear you now
> mutter some gentle animal sound!
> If milk flowed from my breast again. . . .

Mother and child, though bound together, are separate; still, the mother longs for the physical, emotional, and almost symbiotic ties of nursing. What makes the poem so striking is the presence of and contrast between the war similes and the gender-identified imagery.

The ambivalence of marriage is the theme of "Like This Together" (1963), dedicated to Alfred H. Conrad. In section one, the couple sit together in silence:

> Wind rocks the car.
> We sit parked by the river,
> silence between our teeth.
> Birds scatter across islands
> of broken ice. Another time
> I'd have said "Canada geese,"
> knowing you love them.
> A year, ten years from now
> I'll remember this--
> this sitting like drugged birds
> in a glass case--
> not why, only that we
> were here like this together.

The persona is aware that long after she has forgotten the reason for their sitting together in unrelenting silence, she will remember this moment of isolation, this break in their relationship.

Section two emphasizes the existential nature of marriage:

> They're tearing down, tearing up
> this city, block by block.
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . Only
> a fact could be so dreamlike.
> They're tearing down the houses
> we met and lived in,
> soon our two bodies will be all
> left standing from that era.

Only they themselves will remain, faced with repeatedly renewing the pact of their marriage.

Section three presents a short inventory of what this married couple have in common. At first the examples seem to be ironic, undercutting the idea that marriage between two intellectuals is a sharing of great ideas and ventures:

> We have, as they say,
> certain things in common.
> I mean: a view
> from a bathroom window
> over slate to stiff pigeons
> huddled every morning; the way
> water tastes from our tap,
> which you marvel at, letting
> it splash into the glass.

Rich is indeed using understatement here, but her two selections from daily life illustrate one of the gifts of marriage, the way in which a husband and wife may bring each other to new perception:

> Because of you I notice
> the taste of water,
> a luxury I might
> otherwise have missed.

The fourth section points out the inadequacy of language--"Our words misunderstand us"--and the way in which individuals alternately seek comfort from and turn away from each other:

Sometimes at night
you are my mother:
old detailed griefs
twitch at my dreams, and I
crawl against you, fighting
for shelter, making you
my cave. Sometimes
you're the wave of birth
that drowns me in my first
nightmare. I suck the air.

The two themes introduced in this section become one in the last two lines: "Miscarried knowledge twists us / like hot sheets thrown askew." The night imagery is carried over into the conclusion in the simile of "hot sheets," as Rich conveys the frustration inherent in attempting to know the other.

The final section of "Like This Together," like the ending of "A Marriage in the Sixties," presents a hard-won reaffirmation. Returning to the season in which section one is set, Rich begins with the metaphor of "dead winter" for failure in marriage and for what constitutes that failure: silence, miscarried knowledge, isolation. But the cycles of nature also offer a reminder of the possibility of rejuvenation. "Dead winter" is "rained away" by the life of spring:

Dead winter doesn't die,
it wears away, a piece of carrion
picked clean at last,
rained away or burnt dry.
Our desiring does this,
make no mistake, I'm speaking
of fact: through mere indifference
we could prevent it.

The syntactical ambiguity that permits "it" to refer to several antecedents reinforces Rich's point. Relationships die as a result of "indifference"; "desiring"--that is, desiring each other, a shared life, communication--can wear away silence and misunderstanding. And desiring involves "intelligence and will." Rich concludes:

> Only our fierce attention
> gets hyacinths out of those
> hard cerebral lumps,
> unwraps the wet buds down
> the whole length of a stem.

Giving "fierce attention" to the other and to the relationship is the key.[20] The old idea of relationships' "blossoming" is given new significance by the handling of the image of flowering and new life. Rich's suggestion of literally willing hyacinths to bloom, moreover, emphasizes her belief that nothing must be taken for granted, neither in maintaining relationships nor in writing poetry.

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[20]The phrase "intelligence and will" is Boyers'. Arguing that "how to preserve one's essential humanity is the underlying thrust of [Rich's] poem," Boyers has correctly noted that the last section stresses "much more than affirmation, more than the blithe overcoming to which so many of our poets since Emerson have directed their energies. . . . an important aspect of its message is the exalting of 'fierce attention'" (p. 166).

The inadequacy of language, only briefly touched upon in "Like This Together," is a subject that Rich turns to increasingly, in statement and in grammatical demonstration, in subsequent volumes. Poems such as "The Demon Lover" (Leaflets) and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" (The Will To Change) question the capacity of language to convey what we mean--in conversations and in poetry. A second and related issue is gender-identified language. The "oppressor's language" of The Will To Change refers to words (and actions) sanctioned by the patriarchal government; the connotations of "oppressor," however, are not solely political. Or, to state this another way, Rich believes that the political and the personal, the public and the private, are one. In her review of The Collected Poems of Judy Grahn, Rich argues that Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking To Death"

> is both a political poem and a love poem. I mean, that it is a political poem to the extent that it is a love poem, and a love poem insofar as it is political--that is, concerned with powerlessness and power.[21]

Rich hints at these connections in "Two Songs" (1964), a two-part poem about adultery and lust. The

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[21]"Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman," "Introduction" to The Work of a Common Woman: The Collected Poetry of Judy Grahn (Oakland, California: Diana Press, 1977), reprinted in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, p. 251.

relationship described here is as complex as the marital and mother-child relationships. In section one, Rich attempts to describe a wholly sexual relationship, calling attention to and deflating the clichés of lovemaking that have their origin in medieval society and literature and that emphasize (hypocritical) chivalry and eros:

> Sex, as they harshly call it,
> I fell into this morning
> at ten o'clock, a drizzling hour
> of traffic and wet newspapers.
> I thought of him who yesterday
> clearly didn't
> turn me to a hot field
> ready for plowing,
> and longing for that young man
> pierced me to the roots
> bathing every vein, etc.

The "etc." is reductive, undercutting the preceding metaphorical adoption of Chaucer's lines. Rich's irony is twofold. She is using puns ("plowing") and innuendoes ("pierced") to parody the false conventions of traditional love poems. And she has, moreover, reversed the traditional roles in such poetry; the object of the woman speaker's physical longing is a young man. The second half of the first section contains yet another ironic twist. After refusing to call lust anything but what it is, after insisting that lust should not be confused with love, Rich continues her celebration of sex (and her validation of this subject for women's poetry) by using

romantic metaphors:

> All day he appears to me
> touchingly desirable,
> a prize one could wreck one's peace for.
> I'd call it love if love
> didn't take so many years
> but lust too is a jewel
> a sweet flower.

She then concludes by literally bringing the poem and the reader down to earth, providing a final reminder of the inseparability of mind and body:

> and what
> pure happiness to know
> all our high-toned questions
> breed in a lively animal.

Rich opens the second "song" with another cliché about sex: "That 'old last act'!" She then goes on to treat the subjects of the sexual act and language by developing a space-flight metaphor, her use of the moon in this technological vision of lust representing a radical departure from traditional love poetry:

> And yet sometimes
> all seems post coitum triste
> and I a mere bystander.
> Somebody else is going off,
> getting shot to the moon.
> Or, a moon-race!
> Split seconds after
> my opposite number lands
> I make it--
> we lie fainting together

at a crater-edge
heavy as mercury in our moonsuits
till he speaks--
in a different language
yet one I've picked up
through cultural exchanges . . .
we murmur the first moonwords:
Spasibo. Thanks. O.K.

The "different language" is that of men; it's a foreign language that women have to "pick up." Rich returns to this subject of patriarchal language with increasing seriousness in such didactic poems as "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (The Will To Change) and "Translations" (Diving into the Wreck). The very title of the latter poem illustrates Rich's position by 1972. She addresses a man:

You show me the poems of some woman
my age or younger
translated from your language

Certain words occur: enemy, oven, sorrow
enough to let me know
she's a woman of my time.

Rich's primary concern here is literature, as it was in "Snapshots," but she also advocates corresponding revisions of history, mythology, and psychology. The starting point for these revisions is a critique of language, a job that Rich undertakes as a political activist and protestor against the Vietnam War in the sixties and as a spokesperson for the feminist movement

in the seventies.[22] "But here," as Juhasz has pointed out, Rich "is still at the point of identifying [patriarchal language's] essential alienness to her; with wit she is playing with the images that such an observation has offered her."[23]

Repeatedly in the poems that make up Necessities and the books that follow, there is a tension between the desire to make connections and the realization that those connections are, at best, ambivalent. Language--a necessity of life--becomes a metaphor for humankind's

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[22]See "Planetarium," a poem about Caroline Herschel, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," and "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus" in The Will To Change: Poems 1968-1970 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 13-14, 15-18, and 19, and "Diving into the Wreck" and "Translations" in Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1970-1972 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), pp. 22-24 and 40-41. The subtitle of Rich's "When We Dead Awaken" is "Writing as Re-Vision." This "re-vision" is "more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (p. 35). According to Rich in "Power and Danger," "Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language" (p. 248).

[23]Juhasz, "The Feminist Poet: Alta and Adrienne Rich," in Naked and Fiery Forms, pp. 191-92. Juhasz's general introduction to "Two Songs" is also helpful: "Each of the two short poems is a movement between an existing vocabulary, which must instruct sensation as much as it describes it . . . and her own unnamed truth of feeling." While our interpretations of the second "song" are similar, our analyses of the first poem differ. Juhasz sees the ending as "ambivalent, skirting the language issue and opting for the validity of lust." The poem is ironic but not ambivalent.

situation. One must try to use language, yet the words that he or she chooses may be inadequate, may distort meaning, may fail the speaker. And if the inadequacy of language suggests our frailty and our vulnerability, "silence" in Rich's first four books is ominous. At times it is the mute silence of despair; at other times it is a seething and volatile mask.

What Rich longs for is the confrontation, the subject of "Face to Face" (1965), the final poem of Part One. In the first three stanzas, Rich tries to imagine and to recreate the state of mind of the early American who was separated from those he loved and who was faced with the necessity of remaking his life in the wilderness:

> Never to be lonely like that--
> the Early American figure on the beach
> in black coat and knee-breeches
> scanning the didactic storm in privacy,
>
> never to hear the prairie wolves
> in their lunar hilarity
> circling one's little all, one's claim
> to be Law and Prophets
>
> for all that lawlessness,
> never to whet the appetite
> weeks early, for a face, a hand
> longed-for and dreaded.

This poem may be read as a companion piece to or a mature version of "Mathilde in Normandy"; Rich returns to the themes of history and anxiety a third time in the

feminist poem "From an Old House in America" (Poems: Selected and New), presenting the point of view of American women settlers. Part of the strength of "Face to Face" lies in Rich's ability to make the condition of the early American more vivid than any textbook has done. For the Puritan, nature was the embodiment of God's law; Rich's concern, however, is not simple religious belief but rather the underlying psychological causes and effects of trying to live according to a vision. In its spiritual and physical aspects, the "didactic storm" becomes an objective correlative of the Puritan's attempts to resolve the duality of mind and body. What also adds to the power of "Face to Face" is the suggestion in the first line--"Never to be lonely like that"--of the value of any emotion that is deeply felt. Rich welcomes the risks involved in extreme isolation and (virtually) violent reunion.[24]

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[24]Kalstone, "Face to Face," in Five Temperaments, pp. 138-39. Kalstone says, "The poem is breathless with tension and with the envy felt by the modern speaker for the frontier's stern, adventurous and isolated life," and "The poem captures the absolute dependence of one condition upon the other, the mixed sense of danger and fulfilled desire when the man and woman come together again." Quoting Albert Gelpi's comment on "The Demon Lover," Kalstone stresses that Rich writes "a poetry of dialogue and of the furious effort to break through to dialogue."

This reunion is the subject of stanzas four and five:

> How people used to meet!
> starved, intense, the old
> Christmas gifts saved up till spring,
> and the old plain words,
>
> and each with his God-given secret,
> spelled out through months of snow and
> silence,
> burning under the bleached scalp; behind
> dry lips
> a loaded gun.

"How people used to meet!"--their experiences having stripped away all pretense. The ending expands upon the suggestion in Dickinson's "My Life had Stood--a Loaded Gun." The three words set off alone suggest the tension--intellectual, emotional, sexual--behind the settlers' reunion.

Throughout the poem, the terse phrasing serves to reinforce the feeling of tension that the situation evokes. The reliance here upon fragments (the majority of which are infinitive and participial phrases) and incremental repetition is representative of the experimentation in syntax and structure begun in Necessities and continued in the open forms of Leaflets and The Will To Change. Rich "fracture[s] . . . order" to test the capacities of language and of poetry ("The Burning of Paper"). Her preoccupation with the unconscious and her commitment to

the idea of poetry as process lead to Rich's adoption of Olson's field theory of composition, which relies on "the effort toward presentative simultaneity," and her emphasis on the similarities among the poem, the film, and the dream.[25]

In addition to "Face to Face," two other poems in Part I of Necessities--"The Trees" (1963) and "Mourning Picture" (1965)--describe and demonstrate the workings of the unconscious. Both poems are delineations of dream-states and both emphasize the synthesis necessary for the creation of art. Gelpi and Van Dyne have discussed "The Trees," a surrealistic poem in which a forest of trees (the unconscious) departs from the house while the persona (the conscious mind) writes "long letters":

> All night the roots work
> to disengage themselves from the cracks
> in the veranda floor,
> . . . . . .
> The trees are stumbling forward
> into the night. Winds rush to meet them.
> The moon is broken like a mirror,
> its pieces flash now in the crown
> of the tallest oak.

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[25]Charles Olson explains his theory in "Projective Verse," in Human Universe, reprinted in The Poetics of the New American Poetry, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973), pp. 147-58. For a thorough discussion of projective verse, see M. L. Rosenthal, "The 'Projectivist' Movement," in The New Poets, pp. 139-48 and pp. 160-73. For Rich's comments on film, see Plumly, Dodd, and Tevis, "Talking with Adrienne Rich," pp. 37-38.

As Gelpi has concluded, "One becomes aware of the complexities of one's becoming aware as well as of the complexities of the things perceived."[26]

"Mourning Picture," a portrayal of the artistic process and the artist's vision, marks another advance for Rich in her use of the persona poem.[27] The picture that the title refers to and that the poem describes is a painting by Edwin Romanzo Elmer. Yet in the poem it is not Elmer but Elmer's dead daughter Effie who speaks:

> They have carried the mahogany chair and the
> cane rocker
> out under the lilac bush,
> and my father and mother darkly sit there,
> in black clothes.
> Our clapboard house stands fast on its hill,
> my doll lies in her wicker pram
> gazing at western Massachusetts.
> This was our world.

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[26]Albert Gelpi, "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 145. See also Van Dyne, "The Mirrored Vision of Adrienne Rich," pp. 156-57.

[27]See Chapter Three for a discussion of Rich's use of the persona poem.

The girl's memory of this "world" is so vivid, her perception so keen, that she could "remake" it:[28]

> I could remake each shaft of grass
> feeling its rasp on my fingers,
> draw out the map of every lilac leaf
> or the net of veins on my father's
> grief-tranced hand.

With the second stanza, the scene becomes not a re-creation but the creation of an observer who must remain apart and whose subconscious teems with images:

> Out of my head, half-bursting,
> still filling, the dream condenses--
> shadows, crystals, ceilings, meadows,
> globes of dew.

Taking Elmer's work--which reaffirms Effie's presence in mourning her absence--one imaginative step farther, Rich literally makes this "presence" speak:

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[28]Cf. Van Dyne, pp. 157-58. Noting that Rich "reverses the painter's own imaginative process," Van Dyne says, "Ultimately for the poet it is Effie's consciousness which is more creative and encompassing, since it contains, besides a recreation of her father's painting, an awareness of the further unraveling of events begun by her death." Van Dyne includes a description of the painting: "The dead girl dominates the foreground of Elmer's painting; she stares disconsolately out, her back turned on parents, home, toys and pets. . . . Elmer . . . commemorated the immensity of his loss by imagining the absent child disproportionately large."

Under the dull green of the lilacs, out in
the light
carving each spoke of the pram, the turned
porchpillars,
under high early-summer clouds,
I am Effie, visible and invisible,
remembering and remembered.

The inversion begun by making the dead daughter the artist reaches its fullest development in the third and final stanza. Rich endows Effie with the prescience of the poet who is a sayer and a seer:

They will move from the house,
give the toys and pets away.
Mute and rigid with loss my mother
will ride the train to Baptist Corner,
the silk spool will run bare.
I tell you, the thread that bound us lies
faint as a web in the dew.

The poem concludes with a complete reversal:

Should I make you, world, again,
could I give back the leaf its skeleton,
the air
its early-summer cloud, the house
its noonday presence, shadowless,
and leave <u>this</u> out? I am Effie, you were
my dream.

It is Effie who is real. The world pictured here is her dream--a world that she as representative artist has imagined. One of Rich's finest poems, "Mourning Picture," along with "Face to Face," provides a foreshadowing of themes and techniques that Rich develops further in the

next fifteen years.

2

The nine poems that make up Part Two are selections from the body of work that Rich translated during her participation in a project sponsored by the Bollingen Foundation in 1961 and 1962. In his introduction to Translations by American Poets, Jean Garrigue describes the project, which involved forty-eight men and women, its aim, which was "to incite many more American poets to try their hands at this neglected art of translation," and the challenges it involved.

Translations of poems are not only difficult to do well but also to talk about, for poetry, as Garrigue points out, "by definition is untranslatable." He then goes on to quote Roman Jakobson--"Only creative transposition is possible: from one poetic shape into another or interlingual transposition."[29] The translator must remain true to the essence of the original while, paradoxically, literally remaking the poem. In her lengthy note on her translations, Rich says:

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[29]Translations by American Poets (Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1970), pp. xxv-xxviii.

> Anyone who will compare the Dutch poems with my translations will see that I have, deliberately, refrained from imitating rhyme patterns and have in some instances altered metres. I have tried to be faithful first of all to the images and the emotional tone of the poems, and have been unwilling to introduce distortions in order to reproduce formal structure. Much of the onomatopoeic music of the Nijhoff poem is thus necessarily lost. Possibly I have made Hendrik de Vries sound more modern than he actually sounds in Dutch: in "My Brother" for instance he uses an old form of the second person singular which corresponds to the English "thou." But I believe that the inner structure of these poems remains in the translations, and as a poet-translator I have tried to do as I would be done by.

I would add one final general comment: we can assume that poets choose to translate works whose themes and points of view resemble those of their own poetry.

No review of Rich's work has, to my knowledge, included any discussion of Part Two of Necessities, and Mona Van Duyn is the only critic who has mentioned the translations included in Leaflets. Rather than being extraneous or violating the organic nature of Rich's collections, however, the poems emphasize Rich's concerns. Van Duyn's comment that the "adaptations from Dutch, Yiddish and Russian poets [in Leaflets] seem entirely Miss Rich's poems, in subject and sensibility," applies equally to the translations in Necessities.[30]

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[30]"Seven Women" (rev. art.), Poetry, 115 (March 1970), 434.

The themes of these poems are the themes of Part One: individuality, separation, death, and the reality of the dream state. The paradox of Martinus Nijhoff's "Song of the Foolish Bees" no doubt appealed to Rich. The bees are foolish because of their recklessness:

> A smell of further honey
> embittered nearer flowers,
> a smell of further honey
> sirened us from our meadow.
>
> That smell and a soft humming
> crystallized in the azure,
> that smell and a soft humming,
> a wordless repetition,
>
> called upon us, the reckless,
> to leave our usual gardens,
> called upon us, the reckless,
> to seek mysterious roses.
>
> Far from our folk and kindred
> joyous we went careering,
> far from our folk and kindred
> exhuberantly driven.

"Driven," the bees die, yet their fate is preferable to death in life:

> No one can by nature
> break off the course of passion,
> no one can by nature
> endure death in his body.
>
> Always more fiercely yielding,
> more lucently transfigured,
> always more fiercely yielding
> to that elusive token,

we rose and staggered upward,
kidnapped, disembodied,
we rose and vanished upward,
dissolving into glitter.

It's snowing; we are dying,
homeward, downward whirled.
It's snowing; we are dying;
it snows among the hives.

Hendrik de Vries' "Fever" is a surrealistic poem about the unconscious. Unlike "The Foolish Bees," which depends on repetition for its effect, the poem juxtaposes fragmented images. The first stanza is illustrative:

Listen! It's never sung like that! Listen!
The wallpaper stirred,
and the hairs of the heavy-fringed eye.
What flew
through the rooms?

In "My Brother," another work by de Vries, the persona dreams about his dead brother. The poem approximates a dream state, as the speaker questions the dead man who has returned to lie beside him. Just as Elmer's painting suggests, the presence of the dead is real for the grief-stricken survivor:

My brother, nobody knows
the end you suffered.
Often you lie beside me, dim, and I
grow confused, grope, and startle.

You walked along that path through the elms.
Birds cried late. Something wrong
was following us both. But you
wanted to go alone through the waste.

Last night we slept again together.
Your heart jerked next to me. I spoke
   your name
and asked where you were going.
Your answer came:
"The horror! . . . there's no telling . . .
"See: the grass
"lies dense again, the elms
"press round."

There are, of course, no answers. There is only the horror that the persona feels and that he imagines his brother felt.

In "Sleepwalking" (subtitled "next to death"), by Chr. J. van Geel, the persona is awake; his walk at night becomes, however, a journey through the unconscious:

The twigs of the moon
in indifferent white,
horns upright, wood with-
out leaf and seeking bees,
sadness down to the ground.

The persona thinks of the woman he loves; she is either insane or dead:

Now you must get to the institution
with a mask on, your little feet
tarred, an iron crown on your head.
. . . . . .

Whatever I may contrive--
and I contrive it--death's
private roads are the coldest night.

That I shall not be with her--
not with her--
that nothing shall glimmer
except danger.

The poem is ambiguous, but the ambiguity only heightens our sense of the speaker's loss and alienation. (In either case, the woman is beyond reach.) Close to madness himself, the speaker contemplates suicide--

> Trees of ash, trees of ice,
> the light frozen.
> Summer and winter are
> constructed of one emptiness.
> The boughs of the wind are dead.
>
> Must I dejected and contemplating death
> now that above the sea a cloudless night
> empties the sky, let treason and false
> laughter
> prudently ring out till the morning?

He chooses to continue living, however, and returns home. The poem ends with lines suggesting the restorative nature of sleep:

> Morning has broken and the sea
> is wide, I go back home to sleep.
> Path, dune, trees and sheep
> are rosy from the cast, a rosy gull
> flies up under the rash sky.
> What's silent speaks aloud buried in sleep.

The persona's stream of thoughts makes it clear that, for van Geel and for Rich, alienation is indistinguishable from insanity and death (as it was for Poe as well), that the unconscious must "speak aloud," and that the conscious mind and the unconscious must interact.

The final poem in Necessities, "Sleepwalking" provides a fitting ending for a collection that includes "In the Woods," "Moth Hour," "Mourning Picture," and "Face to Face." If the results of Rich's striving to unite body and soul, head and heart, consciousness and dream seem apparently contradictory at times, Rich would agree with another one of her mentors in the sixties and seventies, Walt Whitman:

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> I contain multitudes.

The processes of living in the world and writing about living in the world involve paradoxes that the poet must accept and bring to others' attention. In the books that follow, Rich continues to "speak aloud" and to test silent truths.

CHAPTER V

THE LATER BOOKS: "IMAGINING THE EXISTENCE OF SOMETHING UNCREATED"

The translation from a foreign language into English is only one kind of translation. The translation of dreams into linguistic reality, as Rich has shown, is a second. And the books that follow Necessities reveal still others. To outline them is to trace the progression of Rich's life and art.

Both the act of reading and the process of poetry-making are translations: "When they read this poem of mine, they are translators" ("Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib," Leaflets); the poet is "an instrument in the shape / of a woman trying to translate pulsations / into images" ("Planetarium," The Will To Change). Existence itself, for Rich, is a less acceptable translation. "Rendered into the oppressor's language," translated into untenable forms by the patriarchal government, life must be re-translated and redefined ("The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" and "Our Whole Life," The Will To Change). Rich extends these meanings in Diving into the Wreck, in Poems: Selected and New, and in The Dream of a Common Language; the new feminist poet must translate the

patriarchal language--a foreign one imposed upon her--and respond with new words, new contexts. The prose works Of Woman Born and On Lies, Secrets, and Silence represent another kind of translation: the transformation of Rich's poetic concerns into polemics on power, the male and female principles, and women's writing.[1]

In the poems and prose that date from late 1965, the subjects of politics, relationships, and writing are inseparable. The sentence from George Eliot that Rich chose as an epigram for Diving sums up the second half of her career: "There is no private life which is not determined by a wider public life." Private life as well as public life is political for Rich, as it has been for other feminist militants, and one of the central concerns in Rich's writing has been the issue of power.

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[1]The significance of the word "translations" in Rich's poems arose during a discussion I had with Dr. Elizabeth Fifer of Lehigh University. All references to Rich's next five volumes of poetry and to her prose works are to the following editions: Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969): The Will To Change: Poems 1968-1970 (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971); Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972 (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973); Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974 (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975); The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977 (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978); Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976); and On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979).

In April 1965, while preparing Necessities for publication, Rich wrote in her notebook:

> Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relations, between e.g. my rejection and anger at [my eldest child], my sensual life, pacifism, sex (I mean in its broadest significance, not merely physical desire)--an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately--Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs--
>
> I weep, and weep, and the sense of powerlessness spreads like a cancer through my being. (Of Woman Born, pp. 30-31)

Developing further the dominant motifs of Necessities (growth and regeneration), the books of the late sixties and seventies are about power: the power of the revolutionary, the power of men, the power of women, and, ultimately, the power of language.

In the second half of the sixties, Rich moved from Boston to New York City and began teaching, first at Swarthmore College, then at Columbia University, and finally at the City College of New York. She has described as "shock treatment" her being in New York "at the time of events like King's assasination [and] Columbia," and during those years she became "increasingly active politically in protests against the Indochina War." It was inevitable that Rich, committed to

demonstrating in her work that life and art are one, should--along with many others--begin writing socio-political and anti-war poetry: "We're living through a time / that needs to be lived through us" ("The Will To Change").[2] And it was just as inevitable that the author of "Snapshots" should subsequently turn to the women's movement, recognizing that it was necessary for women "to determine their own political vision because radical men were frequently as sexist as traditional patriarchs."[3]

Even as Jarrell's "princess," Rich had sought to delineate the "fracture of order" and to restore for herself and her readers a sense of "interconnectedness." Now, with the world shattered by war and with her private world radically changed by the end of her marriage and the suicide of Alfred Conrad, Rich became the survivor's spokesperson, her poems serving as notes on the metaphorical interchangeability of the public and the private.

In Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968 and the early poems of The Will To Change: Poems 1968-1970, Rich takes her stand as activist and protestor against the war: "We're

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[2]Kalstone, "Talking with Adrienne Rich," p. 58, and the "Chronology" in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, pp. 203-04. For an overview of contemporary poets' commitment, see Poulin's essay in his Contemporary American Poetry, pp. 469-71.

[3]Martin, "From Patriarchy to the Female Principle," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, p. 183.

fighting for a slash of recognition, / a piercing to the pierced heart" ("Leaflets"). She turns away from the consolations of previous books: the past--"In America we have only the present tense" ("The Burning of Paper")--and nature--

> The sapling springs, the milkweed blooms:
> obsolete Nature.
> In the woods I have a vision of asphalt,
> blindly lingering.
>
> I hardly know the names of the weeds I love,
> I have forgotten the names of so many flowers.
>
> I can't live at the hems of that tradition.
> ("Ghazals," 7/24/68: i)

She would like to turn away from intellectualism as well, but her allusions to writers such as Weil and Artaud (the latter caught up in a paradoxical stance similar to Rich's) show that Rich can be critical of her past but cannot completely disavow her background or her training.

Her view of the poem as a means of communication has not changed in Leaflets; poems are "acts" that "touch" other human beings. She presents relationships with all of their (usual) attendant ambivalence. Men and women are engaged in a "common struggle" (the phrase is Martin's) as political comrades and as lovers. Now, however, the loneliness inherent in the sexual act becomes a metaphor for national and international situations:

Oh futile tenderness
of touch in a world like this!
. . . . . .

I ache, brilliantly.
. . . . . .
Death's in the air.
("The Demon Lover")

Rich's continuing interest in the artist's unconscious mind appears not only in poems such as the "Ghazals" that attempt to demonstrate the process of poetry-making but also in poems that deal explicitly with the male and female principles. The two selves of the author of "Readings of History"--the wife and the genius--reappear in "Orion." When the speaker confronts Orion, her animus, "an old transfusion happens again." The result, however, is the apparently necessary negation of her anima:

. . . when I look you back

it's with a starlike eye
shooting its cold and egotistical spear.

The speaker in "The Demon Lover" is caught in the tension between fearing this subjugation and wanting to be whole. Her address to her lover/animus ends in frustration: "I want your secrets--I <u>will</u> have them out. / Seasick, I drop into the sea." Rich is still working within the traditional framework of gender-related dichotomies (a

framework that she later attempts to revise).[4] But these poems show how her preoccupation with relationships and with the unconscious began to develop into one of her dominant interests in the seventies:

> This whole subject of sexuality in its broadest sense, and I mean really the full sense of it--I mean, what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, I think, is perhaps the major subject of poetry from here on. Because I think it's the ultimately political question, and it is going to affect all other questions.[5]

The tone of Rich's work in the late sixties is frequently one of frustration or despair. Dialogues between the self and the other, between the anima and the animus, are incomplete; poetry threatens to break down along with the world. Believing that "Only where there is language is there world" ("The Demon Lover"), the poet finds that

> there are moments
> closer and closer together
> when words stick in my throat
> 'the art of love'
> 'the art of words.'
> ("Gabriel")

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[4]See Gelpi's discussion of "Orion" and "The Demon Lover" as "animus poem[s]" in "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, pp. 145-47. See Also Beverly Tanenhaus, "Politics of Suicide and Survival: The Poetry of Anne Secton and Adrienne Rich," Bucknell Review, 24, No. 1 (1977), 111.

[5]Plumly, Dodd, and Tevis, "Talking with Adrienne Rich," pp. 44-45.

Rich urges that action--even if "in vain"--is imperative, her frustration repeatedly leading to suggestions of violence:

> I'd rather
> taste blood, yours or mine, flowing
> from a sudden slash, than cut all day
> with blunt scissors on dotted lines
> like the teacher told.
>
> ("Nightbreak")

The woman in "The Observer" is "Completely protected on all sides / by volcanoes,"[6] and "Violence" is in fact the title of a poem that begins "No one knows yet / what he is capable of."

With what had slowly become, over eighteen years, a complete reversal of her position in A Change of World, Rich insists that the ability to change is the strongest defense of one who lives in a world whose only constant is change. In a poem significantly entitled "Implosions," she extends this idea of personal change to the concept of the poem as a means to initiate change and even literally to fight back. In lines that are reminiscent of

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[6]Images and metaphors of volcanoes and volcanic rock recur in "Incipience" (Diving), "Re-forming the Crystal" (Poems: Selected and New), and "Twenty-One Love Poems" (Dream). In these poems the volcano represents woman and law of volcanoes, / making them eternally and visibly female. / No height without depth, without a burning core." Once again, Dickinson's influence is apparent: "On my volcano grows the grass / A meditative spot--/ . . . How red the Fire rocks below--" (#1677). The title of Rich's essay/lecture on Dickinson is "Vesuvius at Home."

Williams' "January" but whose urgency demands bluntness, not irony, Rich says: "I wanted to choose words that even you / would have to be changed by."

The title poem of Leaflets suggests that poetry, even the printed poem, is no less temporary than anything else. And yet Rich is impelled to return to a question that dates back to the writing of "At a Bach Concert": what makes a composition art?

> What else does it come down to
> but handing on scraps of paper
> little figurines or phials
> no stronger than the dry clay they are baked in
> yet more than dry clay or paper
> because the imagination crouches in them.

The paradox of Leaflets is that of any metapoem. The act of crying out in anguish postulates relief and even hope. The imaginative act of making the poem is the poet's ultimate statement. Lines addressed to Wallace Stevens in "The Blue Ghazals" (The Will To Change) should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with Rich's collected works: "Ideas of order . . . Sinner of the Florida keys, / you were our poet of revolution all along." Like Stevens, Williams, and Olson, Rich seems committed to demonstrating the acts of the mind. And, Rich would add, the acts of the heart.

The Will To Change contains few anti-war poems after "The Burning of Paper" (a poem that is also much more

than merely another anti-war poem). The political aspect of Rich's sixth volume lies in its almost strident insistence on remaking oneself.[7] And, since "lives are language,"[8] this insistence takes the form of a series of poems on poetry.

The title and epigram are taken from Olson's "Kingfishers": "What does not change / is the will to change." Olson's influence is also apparent in Rich's technical experimentation in the second half of the sixties. In "The Burning of Paper," Rich speaks as a mother, lover, activist, teacher, and poet, calling for

> the fracture of order
> the repair of speech
> to overcome this suffering.

The manipulation of syntax and the presentation of multiple perceptions are a demonstration: "Rich is breaking down poetic language itself in order to be able to recompose it."[9] Necessities and (to a limited degree)

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[7]The Will To Change is technically Rich's seventh volume if we count the 1967 Selected Poems that was published and distributed in England.

[8]Juhasz, "The Feminist Poet: Alta and Adrienne Rich," in Naked and Fiery Forms, p. 196.

[9]Juhasz, p. 194.

Snapshots work with line breaks and fragments, discard punctuation, and describe the process of poetry-making; the "Ghazals" of Leaflets and The Will To Change seem to be trying to push the theory of organicism to its limits, their open forms approximating the multidirectional flow of the mind as well as the fragmented nature of the late sixties. The careful similes of the early books have been replaced. Rich wants to "translate pulsations / into images" and to do away with linear sequence:

> Interior monologue of the poet:
> the notes for the poem are the only poem
>
> the mind collecting, devouring
> all these destructibles
>
> the unmade studio couch the air
> shifting the abalone shells
>
> the mind of the poet is the only poem
> the poet is at the movies
>
> dreaming the film-maker's dream but
> differently
> free in the dark as if asleep
>
> free in the dusty beam of the projector
> the mind of the poet is changing
>
> the moment of change is the only poem.
> ("Images for Godard")

The choice of titles such as "Pieces" parallels Rich's efforts to "fracture" syntax, while other titles such as "Images for Godard" and "Shooting Script" show Rich's need to find new forms and new images that ac-

curately contain and describe the poem in the process of reconstruction. As Rich's concept of form progressed from "still life to movement" in the period from 1950 to 1970, her images and metaphors for poetry showed a similar progression from "objet d'art to snapshots to cinema."[10] In A Change of World and The Diamond Cutters, the poem is a tapestry or a painting ("Mathilde in Normandy," "Design in Living Colors," "Love in the Museum," "Pictures by Vuillard"); in the works of the late fifties and the first half of the sixties, poems are "snapshots." Now, in "The Photograph of the Unmade Bed" (1969), Rich announces,

> In a flash I understand
> how poems are unlike photographs
>
> (the one saying This could be
> the other This was,

suggesting that film is closer to contemporary poetry in form (stills in motion) and in content (the projection of consciousness and imagination). In "Pierrot Le Fou," the title of which is taken from a 1965 film by Jean-Luc Godard, the speaker sees herself in a film, "scanning reel after reel." Like Godard's Pierrot, the poet is "confronted with the absurdity of an existence that is

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[10]Spiegelman, "Voice of the Survivor: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich," p. 377.

obviously not justified by any causative absolute."[11] Just as A Change of World expressed the "educated ennui" of one decade, The Will To Change expresses the existential anxiety of the next. The "only poem" is a motion picture: one that serves as an illustration of the constant revision of the thought processes of the poet living in the present moment and attempting to survive in a hostile world.

Testing the limits of form and style, however, is not enough; communication in poetry and in conversation between the sexes is still "stopped." The final poem in the series called "Shooting Script" (the last poem in this volume) ends with a familiar refrain: "To pull yourself up by your own roots." The next stage in Rich's development has already become evident in the fourteen sections that make up "Shooting Script" and that mark the culmination of Rich's technical experimentation and her despair. In her adaptation of Ghalib's lines, "Either you were playing / games with me, or you never cared to learn the structure of my / language," it is possible to see how one of the central issues of Rich's feminist poetics--the sexual politics of words--had begun to evolve from her

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[11] Royal S. Brown, "Introduction: One Plus One Equals," in Focus on Godard (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 12.

concern about "the tyranny of language over feeling."[12]

As early as 1958, Rich had questioned male-dominated literature and literary history; in the 1968 "Planetarium" and "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus," she was specifically concerned with the role of the woman poet. Now, after trying out a variety of approaches, she was starting to see the direction that women's poetry must take. Her description of Ghran's "Plain Song from an Older Woman to a Younger Woman" provides insight into the developments in Rich's work after The Will To Change; she perceives

> . . . its rhymes and rhythms strung in a very old form, but its direction a new one for poetry; the "new words" which are written by women writing entirely to and for women. (The point, by the way, in case it need be made here . . ., is not the "exclusion" of men; it is that primary presence of women to ourselves and each other first described in prose by Mary Daly, and which is the crucible of a new language.)[13]

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[12]This phrase is Kalstone's description of the theme of "The Burning of Paper." In a later section of his chapter on Rich, he points out another way in which "'Shooting Script' marks a turning point in Rich's career." Quoting section 10--"They believe your future has a history and that it is themselves"--Kalstone explains that Rich "begins to look to the historical misunderstandings behind sexual relationships, the long record of conflicts between men and women" ("Face to Face," in Five Temperaments, pp. 136 and 161). See also my discussion of "Two Songs" in Chapter Four.

[13]"Power and Danger," reprinted in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, pp. 249-50.

By the time of Diving, Rich has assimilated Olson's (and Williams') influence; her poems of the seventies are organic without their organicism calling attention to itself. (At their best, the open forms of Will rival Olson's. At their worst, they remain experiments: empty demonstrations of demonstrations.) The "Twenty-One Love Poems" of Dream, moreover, are contemporary sonnets that expand the limits of women's subjects (and thus the limits of women's language) for poetry.[14] Rich has been, as Joan Didion says of Doris Lessing, "a writer undergoing a profound and continuing cultural trauma, a woman . . . assaulted at every turn by fresh evidence that the world is not exactly improving as promised."[15] Rich's poetry--in all its stages--has been her response. What has carried her through this last decade is her recognition of her potential, her conviction that she and other women can

> imagin[e] the existence
> of something uncreated
> this poem
> our lives.
>
> ("Incipience," Diving)

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[14]As Rich points out in her interview with Kalstone, "the woman poet has been slower than the woman novelist in taking risks" (p. 57).

[15]"Doris Lessing," reprinted in The White Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 123.

By 1971, the new woman promised in "Snapshots" is "delivered / palpable." The opening poem of Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972, "Trying To Talk with a Man," echoes the resolution made in the last lines of "Shooting Script" and establishes the concerns and tone of the book as a whole: "What we've had to give up to get here." "Here" is a place uncluttered by other's projections, by empty forms, by obsolete myths. The speaker's male companion doesn't understand. Trying to talk with him is like "testing bombs"; the climax of twenty-one years' worth of poems on the ambiguity, complexity, and, finally, on the frustration of male-female relationships.

Man is "the true enemy." The "oppressor" is no longer limited to being a member of a patriarchal government, an abstract authority figure who tyrannizes others and causes suffering. Any male figure (with the exception of children and prisoners) is the enemy, as Rich repeatedly announces her disaffiliation from "a world masculinity made / unfit for women or men" ("Merced"). The public and the private are inseparable:

> I suddenly see the world
> as no longer viable:
> you are out there burning the crops
> with some new sublimate
> This morning you left the bed
> we still share
> and went out to spread impotence
> upon the world

I hate you
. . . . . .
I hate your words
they make me think of fake
revolutionary bills
crisp imitation parchment
they sell at battlefields

Last night, in this room, weeping
I asked you: what are you feeling?
do you feel anything?
Now in the torsion of your body
as you defoliate the fields we lived from
I have your answer.
("The Phenomenology of Anger")

The woman poet's dilemma is acute. She needs language, but words are fake. Patriarchal language governs lives: the vocabularies of both the anti-war protestors and the confessional poets are markedly similar. In an earlier section of "Phenomenology," Rich (for there is virtually no distance here between the writer and the speaker) asks, "Madness. Suicide. Murder. / Is there no way out but these?" All three "choices" suggest domination by the male principle; untempered, this principle is mechanical and destructive.

Rich had previously identified the artistic self with the animus, its force (or power) contrasting with the submissiveness of the "wife." In "Waking in the Dark," the woman artist sees "A man's world. But finished. / They themselves have sold it to the machines." She "walk[s] the unconscious forest,"

> . . . wish[ing] there were somewhere
> actual we could stand
> handing the power-glasses back and forth
> looking at the earth, the wildwood
> where the split began.

One source that records the "split" is western mythology, its archetypes dramatizing the psychic power-play between the male and female principles. In the title poem, Rich's persona enters the sea--the unconscious--to explore the source of myths:

> the thing I came for
> the wreck and not the story of the wreck
> the thing itself and not the myth.

In Diane Wakoski's words, poets must create their own mythologies. Rich insists on putting this in a psychological (and subsequently, for her, a political) context; only the integrated person can create

> . . . the place.
> And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
> streams black, the merman in his armored
> body
> We circle silently
> about the wreck
> we dive into the hold
> I am she. I am he.

These motifs recur in "The Stranger":

if they ask my identity
what can I say
but I am the androgyne
I am the living mind
you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive.

The metaphorical connection between lives and language is well made in the latter work, but both of these poems are problematical.

It is difficult to reconcile Rich's celebration of the androgyny of the woman poet with her denunciations of men and the male principle.[16] Synthesis is the basis of Rich's feminist philosophy and poetics. (The theme of--the desire for--synthesis of head and heart, of life and poetry, has been present throughout Rich's work; only the contexts have changed.) Here, however, she is trying to force new resolutions while working within a traditional system that depends upon dualisms; theories on integration have been male-oriented, as Rich's subsequent comments on androgyny (quoted below) emphasize. In addition, Rich's Diving seems insistently didactic, telling the reader about her emerging realizations, as if dramatizing

[16]Cf. Ostriker, "Her Cargo: Adrienne Rich and the Common Language," pp. 7-8. Ostriker, who comments on Rich's "feminism . . . point[ing] toward acts of synthesis," is the only critic who notes this contradiction between Rich's "defin[ing] herself as being the androgyne" and "her partisanship."

them verbally were not enough. Women's obsession with love for men is skillfully and imaginatively presented in a series of similes in "Translations," whose women have

> . . . trained it like ivy to our walls
> baked it like bread in our ovens
> worn it like lead on our ankles
> . . . . . .

Yet the conclusion to all of this is heavy, prosaic: the resultant grief "is shared, unnecessary / and political."

Diving represents another transition for Rich; it also held out the possibility of similar transitions for other women poets (Margaret Atwood is just one example). Its weaknesses as well as its strengths--such as Rich's perceptive insights into the phenomenology of victimization--are part of what writing has represented for Rich since the early sixties: a process of discovery. Her book on motherhood, Of Woman Born (1976); articles like "The Kingdom of the Fathers" (1976), an essay originally intended as a chapter for Of Woman Born; and the collection On Lies, Secrets, and Silence (1979) are further "explor[ations] of the wreck": prose investigations of literature, mythology, psychology, and philosophy. Rich's "re-vision" has on occasion extended to her own poetry, but for the most part, Rich has worked to formulate coherent systems of feminist philosophy and literary

criticism.[17]

Writing prose analyses may in fact have simultaneously helped Rich to synthesize her views and allowed her to create a "genuine poet's" poetry in The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977, a collection informed by her ideology but free from the rhetorical posturing that mars such poems as "Violence" (Leaflets), the title poem of The Will To Change, and "The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven understood at Last as a Sexual Message" (Diving).[18] In "Natural Resources" (Dream), Rich announces:

> There are words I cannot choose again:
> humanism androgyny

In "The Kingdom of the Fathers," published one year earlier, she explained that

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[17] As I suggest in Chapter Three, Rich's comments on her early poems are sometimes unreliable. For an analysis of Rich's literary theories, see Marilyn R. Forwell, "Adrienne Rich and an Organic Feminist Criticism," College English, 39 (October 1977), 199-203.

[18] See Hayden Carruth, "Excellence in Poetry" (rev. art.), Harper's, 257 (November 1978), 82. I have adapted and expanded Carruth's comments on Of Woman Born and Dream.

> "Androgyny" has recently become a "good" word . . . Rarely has the use of the term been accompanied by any political critique. Carolyn Heilbrun argues in her Toward a Recognition of Androgyny that an "androgynous" undercurrent runs throughout Western humanism, which if recognized would help us free ourselves and society from the role-playing and division of labor required under patriarchy. . . . [T]he very structure of the word replicates the sexual dichotomy and the priority of andros (male) over gyne (female).[19]

Here is the explanation again, transformed into poetry in "Natural Resources":

> Such words have no shame in them, no
> diffidence
> before the raging stoic grandmothers:
>
> their glint is too shallow, like a dye
> that does not permeate
>
> the fibers of actual life
> as we live it now:
>
> this fraying blanket with its ancient stains
> we pull across the sick child's shoulder
>
> or wrap around the senseless legs
> of the hero trained to kill
>
> this weaving, ragged because incomplete
> we turn our hands to, interrupted
>
> over and over, handed down
> unfinished, found in the drawer

---

[19] Partisan Review, 43, No. 1 (1976), 30. All subsequent references to this article are to this publication.

of an old dresser in the barn,
her vanished pride and care

still urging us, urging on
our work, to close the gap

in the Great Nebula,
to help the earth deliver.

"Patriarchal stereotypes" depend on "dichotomizing": mind/body; active male principle/passive female principle; powerful (and consequently destructive) woman/powerless, feminine woman ("The Kingdom of the Fathers," pp. 25, 30, 34). In another poem in Dream, appropriately titled "Splittings," the speaker says, "I will not be divided . . . / by myths of separation of mind and body." She "refuse[s] these givens the splitting / between love and action." The action of the woman who works

. . . with the musing of a mind
one with her body, experienced fingers
quietly pushing
dark against bright, silk against roughness,
pulling the tenets of a life together
with no mere will to mastery,
only care for the many-lived, unending
forms in which she finds herself,

is action that saves: "Vision begins to happen in such a life" ("Transcendental Etude").

This position, the origins of which can be traced back past Diving to the anger of "Snapshots" and the retreats into pastoralism and confessional poses in

Necessities, was not easily won. "Etude" represents another phase, one beyond the anger of earlier works. "The Stranger" (Diving), written six years before "Etude," called its anger "visionary," but lines in "Phenomenology" were no more than a variation on what Rich was condemning:

> When I dream
> the enemy, this is my dream:
> white acetylene
> ripples from my body
> effortlessly released
> perfectly trained
> on the true enemy.

The explanation is simple: the anger of women has frequently been turned inward, manifesting itself as guilt, madness, and suicide; in much of women's poetry it has taken the form of "a cry of pain, of victimization" ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 48). Diving itself is on one level a self-conscious cry of victimization.

> You show me the poems of some woman
> my age, or younger
> translated from your language
>
> Certain words occur; enemy, oven, sorrow
> enough to let me know
> she's a woman of my time.
> ("Translations," Diving)

Believing that women "need to go through [their] anger" ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 48), Rich turned her anger outward and took risks with her poetry. The

artist in "The Fourth Month of the Landscape Artist" (Poems: Selected and New) speaks for Rich: "My work has always been / with edges." But the exploration of anger, like that of victimization, is only one stage in the formulation of a new female consciousness. Rich and other poets such as Susan Griffin and Marge Piercy have come through this anger to investigate the "possibilities inherent in benificent female power"--active, life-giving power ("The Kingdom of the Fathers," p. 26)--and to move

> out towards what the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has described as the "new space" on the boundaries of patriarchy. Women are speaking to and of women in these poems, out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration. ("When We Dead Awaken," p. 49)

The poems of Dream are works of visionary love, celebrating women's relationships, women's history, women's power.[20] A record of risks, grief, and joy, Rich's latest volume of poetry is ultimately a celebration of the act of a woman writing. The complexity of

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[20]Cf. Ostriker, p. 10. The choice of the word "visionary" to describe these poems is inevitable. Ostriker finds "Toward the Solstice" reminiscent of Blake's poetry; "Transcendental Etude" should also remind readers of Blake's work.

relationships has not diminished for Rich; the middle section, "Twenty-One Love Poems," chronicles the growth and ending of sexual love between two women. This refusal to oversimplify has marked Rich's work since her second book; her lesbian poems are no exception. She wants women's poetry to present "the truths we are salvaging from / the splitting-open of our lives" ("Transcendental Etude").

The 1960 "Readings of History" stresses the importance of understanding the past and the relation of our present selves to it. In the late sixties Rich dismissed these concerns, but in the early seventies she began to see their significance from a feminist point of view. The feminist "reading of history" begun in "From an Old House in America" (Poems: Selected and New) continues here. In "From an Old House," Rich probed the past of "this savagely fathered and unmothered world," collecting and imaginatively recreating textbook "facts" to show the connection between her personal history and the lives of the women whose masks she tried on: Bradstreet crossing the ocean; a black slave giving birth while chained to a corpse; a Wisconsin woman committing suicide by self-immolation; the frontier woman living in isolation, "her mind with / the wild geese."

Public records have told only part of the story: women's history is contained in private records. "Natural Resources" offers a catalog:

> These things by women saved
> are all we have of them
>
> or of those dear to them
> these ribboned letters, snapshots
>
> faithfully glued for years
> onto the scrapbook page
>
> these scraps, turned into patchwork
> doll-gowns, clean white rags
>
> for staunching blood
> the bride's tea-yellow handkerchief
>
> the child's height on the cellar door
> In this cold barn we dream
>
> a universe of humble things--
> and without these, no memory
>
> no faithfulness, no purpose for the future
> no honor to the past.

Without these, no consciousness of what women were or can be. Choosing

> . . . to cast [her] lot with those
> who age after age, perversely,
> with no extraordinary power
> reconstitute the world,

the representative woman poet offers her "natural resource": language.

The themes of consciousness, lesbian love, and poetry--all synonymous with "connection" for Rich--are repeatedly interwoven in these poems. This very synthesis answers the description of "the true nature of poetry" in "Origins and History of Consciousness":

> The drive
> to connect. The dream of a common language.

"Transcendental Etude" is the coda, affirming women's power to live, not merely to survive, and to create new poems:

> two women, eye to eye
> measuring each other's spirit, each other's limitless desire,
> a whole new poetry beginning here.

The poem continues with the line I quoted earlier: "Vision begins to happen in such a life."

The old themes, the ones that have mattered to Rich since her earliest works, are here: love, identity, synthesis, art. The development of Rich's work, from 1950 to the present, has been organic; the political context and the open forms are only measures of the changes that the poet and the poet's work have undergone. What does not change, what has not changed, is that which makes language poetry: the power of the imagination.

Rich seems to have reached what the personae of The Diamond Cutters strove for: a Blakean world where experience and imagination are conjoined. I have called "Transcendental Etude" the coda but, like the final poems in Rich's other volumes, it may also prove to be an introduction to her future poems. "Vision" has replaced "translation" as a metapoetic term in Dream, and we can, I think, expect further explorations of the boundaries of woman's consciousness and of women's writing from Rich. For at least thirty-one years, she has worked to develop her poetry and her poetics, and there is, as "Toward the Solstice" tells us, "so much yet undone."

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VITA

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Carolyn Foster Segal graduated from Seton Hall High School in Patchogue, New York, in 1968, fifth in her class and recipient of the English medal. She graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Rosary Hill College in 1972. From September through December of 1973, she attended the State University of New York at Buffalo, taking graduate courses in the Humanities. In September 1974, she entered the Graduate School of Lehigh University. From January 1976 until May 1981, she was a teaching assistant in Lehigh University's English Department. In October 1976, she received the degree of Master of Arts in English; in November 1978, she passed her comprehensive exams with distinction; and in May 1981, she completed the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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