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Poetry of Adrienne Rich: The Sources of Female Power

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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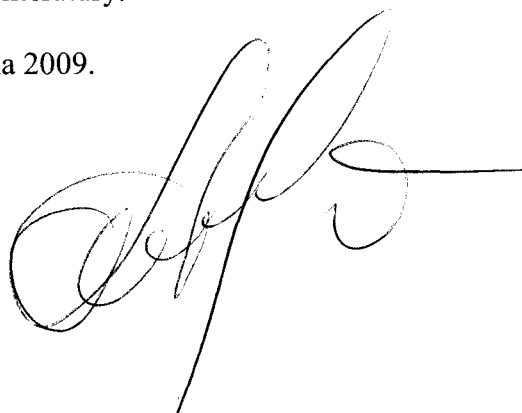
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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě
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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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Introduction

Writing about such accomplished poets as Adrienne Rich is something of a challenge, which stems from the complexity and variety of issues connected to the poet's fame and literary works. Already at the early stage of her career, Rich had earned the status of an eminent poet and enjoyed widespread recognition from both readers and critics alike, but she has never been a person who could stop and rest on her laurels¹. Her subtle, acuminous yet powerful nature has always possessed a tremendous internal energy articulated in her poems, essays, speeches and during her interviews. Today, more than forty years later, Rich's authentic and effectual voice has not been lost as the poet can still be found capable of expressing overwhelming anger, pain and euphoria, all mixed with a lightness of being.

Adrienne Rich has always been a very particular type of poet whose life and career have been in a continual state of metamorphosis for the purpose of refashioning the world around her. Her voice is the voice of a woman concentrating her acumen and enthusiasm on historical analysis, women, literature and life itself, better personified through Rich's own "living memory"², simply put: her individual personal experience. Rich's endowment and rather revolutionary ideas, mixed with unfailing courage and activism, transformed her into an idol of feminism, pro-lesbian movement, art and poetry, and thus made of her a living legend for a great amount of people in many countries.

This thesis will explore the transformation of Rich's personal and poetic expression from her early years, when she lived a rather forced traditional life, to her later period of innovation and radicalism. It is my purpose to focus on her life, poetry and prose to elucidate the source of Rich's power as a poet; to trace the sources of her determination and explore how her

¹ Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, eds, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) xi.

² Gelpi xiii.

experiences influenced her perception of life, her literary works and ultimately the entire feminist movement. This thesis will be divided into four chapters unified under a theme of what comprises “the source of female power”.

Chapter I

The Power of Language and Art

In one of her essays Rich confessed that she was blessed to be born “white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged me [Rich] to read and write.”³ As Rich admits, for more than twenty years every piece of writing she would produce was unconsciously addressed to the praise or criticism of her father. He indeed played a momentous role in Rich’s personal development and also had a crucial influence on her future writing. However, he simultaneously created many unbearable limits Rich decided to break later in her life:

My personal world view was shaped in part by the poetry I had read, a poetry written almost entirely by white Anglo-Saxon men, a few women, Celts and Frenchmen notwithstanding. Thus, no poetry in the Spanish language or from Africa or China or the Middle East. My personal world view, which like so many young people I carried as a conviction of my own uniqueness, was not original with me, rather, my untutored and half-conscious rendering of the facts of blood and bread, the social and political forces of my time and place.⁴

Under the influence of her father, Shakespeare, and Blake, Rich was captivated by the idea that each woman was “special”⁵, a token woman, a mysterious and strange being, praised mostly for her beauty and modesty. However, people hardly spoke about woman’s

³ Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible*: “When We Dead Awaken” (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2001)15.

⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible*: “Blood, Bread and Poetry” (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2001)45.

⁵ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 15.

skillfulness, consciousness, or other important qualities. This myth of the “special woman” puzzled Rich for many years and created quite a confusing network for her poetic expression. Yet what confounded her more was an odd feeling she had inside herself: it was a sort of fear that everything she might think of, produce or invent would be inevitably analyzed and criticized by a Man⁶. Who was this Man? Any man, from poets to critics, teachers, fathers, and friends. In other words, every single man on earth. Using models and schemes invented by men and writing in a language formed and dominated by men, Rich’s self-expression was perplexed and paralyzed by the distress coming from her presumption that all her creative experiments were mere imitations of “the greats” rather than real inventions. However, as she later realized, the need of imitation came from her unconscious desire to please this Man, leaving out of consideration her personal ambitions, self-expression, or any sort of artistic delight.

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken”⁷, Rich recalls reading *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf, where the most extraordinary thing was the manner of Woolf’s narration and the encoded message she put between her words. The author, as Rich comments, tried to make her every single utterance sound calm and self-absorbed; no anger or incrimination could be felt from her words, which she wove into a coherent, deliberate network. Woolf addressed the audience of women, simply encouraging them to be more active in reading and writing. In this manner, Woolf wanted to persuade women to start changing their position in the sphere of literature and literary production from which they had previously been debarred due to the various social and economic restraints⁸.

⁶ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 15.

⁷ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 10-29.

⁸ Sally McConnell-Ginet, et al. eds. *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (PRAEGER, New York, Westport, Connecticut, London, 1994) 50-51.

However, it is obvious, Rich admits, that regardless of the fact that the work was directed to women, Woolf was highly aware of the male omnipresence. That is why her language seemed to be a mere shell, a sort of camouflage, which served only to protect her work and its real message from the male judgment: the writer “drew the language out into an exacerbated thread in her determination to have her own sensibility yet protect it from those masculine presences.”⁹ The masculine presence and potential misjudgment kept, as Rich says, the passion of Woolf’s voice out of the major part of her essay as at her times there was an urgent need to sound “as cool as Jane Austin, as Olympian as Shakespeare, because that is the way the men of culture thought a writer should sound.”¹⁰

Thus, as Rich confirms with her words once again, women writers and, taken more generally, women artists, political activists and ordinary housewives have always been haunted by the fear of simply being *themselves*, as well as by the fear of being unfairly criticized and judged by a Man. She claims that while female writers were preoccupied, male writers, in contrast, never worried about women’s criticism; moreover, they never even wrote “primarily or largely for women.”¹¹ For Rich, the moment when women can finally have a real autonomy while choosing their themes and means of self-expression is a big step forward in the entire literary tradition:

If we have come to the point when this balance might begin to change, when women can stop being haunted, not only by ‘convention and propriety’, but by internalized fears of being and saying themselves, then it is an extraordinary moment for the woman writer-and reader.¹²

⁹ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 14.

¹⁰ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 14.

¹¹ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 14.

¹² Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 14-15.

A young woman writer or poet, Rich argues, comes to poetry or fiction looking for her own voice, trying to express her feelings and ideas through the medium of language. She also looks for guidance trying to make her voice as original as possible. But what does she find? According to Rich, a young writer neither finds her own language, her own distinguishable voice, nor does she find any motivation for searching. What she finds is only “a beautiful pale face,” “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” “Tess” and “Salomé,”¹³ despite the fact that all these impressions and characters might be very distant from her. She can never find herself, “a puzzled, sometimes inspired creature,”¹⁴ trying to make her contribution into the world of literature, in any work written by men. Thus, she can never find a clue to the realm of her own personal expression - in other words, she can never find her own language.

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,”¹⁵ stated the language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Indeed, language defines personal identity and frames the limits of this identity. Willard Spiegelman in his essay “Driving to the Limits of the City of Words: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich”¹⁶ claims that it is important to explore one’s language in order to define one’s distinctiveness; however, any poet should remember that together with the exploration of language there is a risk of “entrapment within it because it offers itself as both maze and salvation.”¹⁷ Like a dancer who can be completely dissolved in the impulses of his or her body movement, driven by rhythm to the state of trance, a poet can dissolve in the city of language and lose his or her personality without a reliable guide, a map, or, in other words, a tradition. An old map is drawn by men and for men, therefore women can hardly look for guidance there. “Rich wishes to discover in language a map not only for herself but also for

¹³ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 16.

¹⁴ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 16.

¹⁵“Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Quotes,” *Quotation Page*, 1994-2007, 13 Aug. 2009
<http://www.quotationpage.com/quotes/Ludwig_Wittgenstein/>.

¹⁶ William Spiegelman, “Driving to the Limits of the City of Words’: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich.” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 370.

¹⁷ Spiegelman 370.

the larger community – often a community of women, sometimes one that includes both sexes – of which she is a part.”¹⁸ A new map for a woman should be a valid reflection of her own perception of life, of her own experiences; only in this case maze will be transformed into salvation.

No matter how challenging the journey of finding a unique means of expression may be for a woman, woman’s language, or, more precisely, typical ways of self-expression, can present an unfailing source of female power. Women can confidently use their language without hesitation and fears of borrowing or stealing men’s property; moreover, women do not have to pretend to be “special” anymore, they can simply enjoy being themselves. Rich’s poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” written in 1951, discusses this particular topic: a woman with a command of her language (art) defines herself through her language (art), and also defines her relationships with the masculine world:

Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
they pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer’s finger fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band
sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand.

¹⁸ Spiegelman 371.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.

The tigers in the panel that she made
will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

Despite living in a situation of a palpable domination by her spouse, expressed by “The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band/ Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand”, the unflinching creativity of the poem’s protagonist and her art seem to be amaranthine and stronger than any kind of oppression. As Thomas Byers pointed out in one of his essays, “tigers display the values that Aunt Jennifer must repress or displace in her daily behavior: strength, assertion, fearlessness, fluidity of motion”¹⁹. Byers also shows the connection between the lines “The tigers in the panel that she made/ Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid”, and an old Latin proverb “*vita brevis, ars longa*”²⁰, meaning “life is short, art is eternal.” Indeed, the “tigers” may also be a metaphor for words, musical notes, dance moves or pictures; in other words, art expressions, which remain present even when their creators are gone and forgotten. With her own tiger, the poem, Rich proves the perpetuity of poetry, also suggesting that “art is a vehicle for personal immortality.”²¹

According to Rich, the problem of female artists of her time was the impossibility to combine the fulfilling of the traditional female roles with the fruitful process of creation because, as is commonly believed, art requires freedom, both physical and emotional, as well as freedom of the imagination. As Rich mentions in one of her essays, “...to be a female human being trying

¹⁹ Thomas Byers, “Vision as Rewriting,” *World, Self, Poem: Essays on Contemporary Poetry from the Jubilation of Poets*, ed. Leonard M. Trawick (The Kent State University Press, 1990) 13 Aug. 2009 <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/tigers.htm>.

²⁰ Thomas Byers, “Vision as Rewriting.”

²¹ Thomas Byers, “Vision as Rewriting.”
Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” 42.

to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination.”²²

In the mid-fifties, as Rich recalls in one of her essays, she did not really know what her position in the world was or what kind of life she wanted to lead. However, she knew quite well that “marriage and motherhood - experiences that were supposed to be truly, naturally, womanly, often left me [Rich] feeling unfit, disempowered and adrift.”²³ She understood that her art needed more freedom and that she had to break the limits that the conventions of the American society were imposing on her. However, at that time it was rather difficult to define the idea of freedom and what it meant, as “freedom” has always been quite an abstract concept.²⁴ Some possible solutions were provided by several emerging philosophical movements, both in Europe and in America. Rich apparently was affected by the initiative presented in French existentialism, of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, which designated freedom as a conception closely connected with revolt: “The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.”²⁵

For Rich, this rebellion was in a close proximity to the radical changes in female art. She and many other women understood that they needed discover or create their own tradition in art that could unite them together and link with their own history, “to show us our true faces-all of them, including the unacceptable.”²⁶ Indeed, they needed art that was able to reflect the truth of their living conditions no matter how bitter that truth was; to mirror the actual state of

²² Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 21.

²³ Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” 49.

²⁴ Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” 51.

²⁵ “Albert Camus’s Quotes”, *Think Exist*, 1999-2006, 12 Aug. 2009
<http://thinkexist.com/quotes/albert_camus/2.html>.

²⁶ Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” 56.

their existences without idealizing or embellishing any single detail. They also felt the necessity to speak of what before had been ignored or simply considered trivial:

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience, to take women's experience seriously as theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger; it did indeed imply the breakdown of the world as I have always known it, the end of safety...but it realized tremendous energy in me, and in many other women, to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community. I felt for the first time the closing gap between poet and woman.²⁷

However, most women were still mere spectators in the theatre of life, not actresses or staff; their plays, ideas, ambitions and expectations did not fit into the eloquent and predictable scenario of how things should be organized, rehearsed and performed. They were supposed to participate of course, but rather passively: they could watch and enjoy the play in silence, and when it was time to respond, all that remained for them was to applaud, as the play they were watching was always irreproachable, the decorations and costumes stunning and the acting itself persuasive. But the audience never ceased to be on the other side, in the darkness, not on the illuminated stage. They were still mere visitors, unknown strangers.

Therefore it comes with no surprise that in her poem "The Stranger,"²⁸ written in 1972, Rich asserts her fierce dissatisfaction with the unfair state of "the audience," (i.e., women), and

²⁷ Rich, "Blood, Bread and Poetry," 56.

²⁸ Rich, "The Stranger," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 52-53.

condemns the whole “theatre” (i.e., society), and the language of oppression that is used there, calling it “a dead language”:

If I come into a room out of the sharp misty light
And hear them talking a dead language
if they ask me 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 letters of my name are written under the lids
of the newborn child

Indeed, in “talking a dead language” the masculine world, dominated by its own prejudice and wrong impressions, fails to comprehend the female world, as it often seems that men and women do not speak the same language, or even if they do, they seem to use identical words for different concepts. The usage of simple linguistic terminology (“nouns”, “verbs”) combined with quite metaphorical, in this particular case, participial adjectives (“lost”, “surviving”) creates a powerful image and helps to define the place of women in the society. In the phrase “the lost noun,” Rich probably exemplifies the very core of female personality, the personality which is “lost” in the world of men (or maybe unaccepted?)

On the other hand, “the verb surviving only in the infinitive” can be seen both as an additional linguistic unit and as a symbolic figure of something open-ended and perpetual, something that the ordinary human brain has difficulties in grasping and classifying. This phrase can also imply that women could survive only in the “infinite” state: not finished and defined, but rather blurred and oblivious. From this perspective, the whole female history is reflected as something undefined, androgynous, as if it still were in its fetal period. “The infinitive” itself may also stand for Rich’s belief that “life on the planet is born of woman”²⁹ – in other words, life comes from something infinite and undefined, which may emblematically represent a female body and its amazing regenerative capacities.

The finishing lines of “The Stranger” are quite optimistic as Rich uses the image of a newborn baby as a palpable symbol of innocence, change, new life and new beginning. She confirms this with her syntactic strategy: the lines of the poem are linked by space and silence rather than with punctuation marks, and the very last line “of the newborn child” has no punctuation either, which allows her to leave the doors of possibility and hopefulness wide open.

Rich understood, however, what presented the hardest obstacle and the crucial moment for every woman who wanted to reestablish her identity in the masculine world: according to her, it was essential that women begin *to explore* their cultural and sexual identities even at the cost of rebellion³⁰; it was essential not to cease questioning the irreproachability of an old patriarchal dogma. Every woman had to begin a struggle not only against the conventions

²⁹ “Adrienne Rich’s Quotes,” *Wisdom Quotes*, 1995, 13 Nov. 2008
<<http://www.wisdomquotes.com/000785.html>>.

³⁰ Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” 57.

within the society and the myth of a “special woman”, but also with the wrong, imposed and unnatural views and perceptions each woman had residing in herself.³¹

Women had to stop being “lost nouns” and “verbs surviving in the infinitive only,” they had to write their own plays and perform themselves on the illuminated stage. Denying the “dead language” and the distorted image of women presented in plays written by the sexists, women had to create their own image of themselves, but a fresh one, more authentic and innate. Thus, such concepts as knowledge and self-exploration became a driving force and the source of power for many women.

³¹ Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” 57.

Chapter II

The Power of Knowledge

Margaret Atwood, in her review of *Diving into the Wreck*, gave the following portrayal of Rich's concept of a "wreck"- the title poem's dominant symbol:

The wreck she [Adrienne Rich] is diving into, in the very strong title poem, is the wreck of obsolete myths, particularly myths about men and women. She is journeying to something that is already in the past, in order to discover for her the reality behind the myth, "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth."³²

The opening lines of the poem introduce the reader an instance of the life of one woman, the narrator, who puts on a diving costume and apparently is about to go underwater. At first it is quite difficult to understand why apart from the diving equipment she also needed some previous reading. However, as the poem proceeds, the narrator makes it clear that without previous knowledge her journey would have had little sense as only knowing the stories (myths) beforehand would give her a chance to change them.³³

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber

³² Margaret Atwood, "Diving into the Wreck," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 280.

³³ Judith McDaniel, "Reconstituting the World," 13 Aug. 2009
<http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/rich/wreck.htm>.

the absurd flippers

the grave and awkward mask³⁴

As can be seen in the extract, the woman also decides to carry a camera for recording the things she will encounter, and makes sure her knife is sharp enough, possibly for self-protection. However, not “the knife-blade” or “the absurd flippers,” but previous knowledge, albeit possibly false, presents the most vital requisite for this subaquatic expedition. She decides to do everything alone, “Not like Cousteau with his assiduous team.” The woman, as Nancy Milford suggested, “is descending, she is ‘having to do this,’ ‘and there is no one / to tell me when the ocean / will begin.’ And even though the mask of the diver is powerful the point of the dive is not the exercise of power in self-defense,”³⁵

...the sea is not a question of power

I have to learn alone

to turn my body without force

in the deep element.

If the sea is understood to be a metaphor for the waters in the womb in which all varieties of life are formed and developed, including human beings, then going back into its waters means to go back to the very beginning of all things, to reach their core, their essence. “The deep element” the diver needs to become is an androgynous element, which is the nucleus of each and every substance. As Rich implies, to understand the sea one has to become water first, yet this transformation should be effortless as if it were natural for a human body.

“I came to explore the wreck”, the narrator says and continues, “I came to see the damage that was done/and the treasures that prevail.” People apparently forgot the essence, distorted

³⁴ Rich, *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 22.

³⁵ Nancy Milford, et al. eds. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 13 Aug. 2009
<http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/rich/wreck.htm>.

its image, and the speaker's mission is to change this situation. She wants to see the very core, to reach the initial point from where existence itself takes its root:

This is 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

Here, Rich's voice echoes Walt Whitman's perception of the sexes expressed in the poem "Song of Myself."³⁶ In his poem Whitman sees absolutely no distinction between such concepts as male and female, and states that both men and women share the same origin which comes from "the mother of men."³⁷ Rich in the same fashion sees no essential difference between two opposite sexes and proves that if one goes deeper, he or she will inevitably come to the conclusion that the core of all beings is androgynous, possessing both female and male elements, which are inseparable: "we dive into the hold/I am she: I am he." Therefore, as Rich implies, if there is no distinction between the sexes, never should occur the situation when one being tries to control or dominate another.

As Rich suggested in the concluding lines of the poem, "our way back" is not the way out of the water depths; on the contrary, the way back is going "back to this scene," diving deeper to the wreck to explore what has remained there. Whatever the stimulus for this exploration comes from, the poet stresses the necessity of doing so:

³⁶ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (The Modern Library, New York, 1993)

³⁷ Whitman 60.

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

The phrase “find our way back” echoes the idea of “awakening” or, to be more precise, “re-awakening”, “revision” and “rediscovery”, all widely discussed by the poet in her various works. In her 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” for instance, Rich says that for her re-vision is the process “of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”³⁸ She also suggests that women can understand their real selves only if they clearly understand perceptions and attitudes commonly applied towards them.³⁹ Therefore, “Diving into the wreck” is meant to understand “what” and “when,” to discover and rediscover. However, in addition, it is also a journey meant to help to analyze or, in other words, to understand “why,” and what the consequences are.

Comprehension of all these matters is the real source of power, the power to create the future using a fresh model, different from the one used in the past. The women that possess knowledge shall also be the women capable of using this knowledge in order to change the future. In this future, man’s power to control, intimidate, decide, choose, or reject will be confronted with woman’s power to be independent, decide, choose, and reject or accept. “The

³⁸ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 11-12.

³⁹ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 11.

Charisma of man seems to come purely from his power over her [woman] and his control over the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving,”⁴⁰ Rich wrote. According to her, the world has been turning into the wreck over the centuries. Seeing this wreck, understanding the unpromising disastrous situation of the present world, must give each woman energy, power and ability to create an impulse for a dynamic change: “The creative energy of patriarchy is fast running out; what remains is its self-generating energy for destruction. As women, we have our work cut out for us.”⁴¹

Rich’s poem “Power” from the collection *The Dream of a Common Language*,⁴² written in the mid-seventies, explores a similar subject. The central figure of the poem is again a woman-explorer, a woman-scientist to be more precise. This is Marie Curie, a woman hungry for knowledge, for whom knowledge is more than just personal experience. For her, an academic scholar, knowledge presents the very meaning of her existence. According to Rich’s critic Joanne F. Diehl in her essay “Of Woman Born,” the poem describes “an attempt of one woman to reach into the earth for the sources of woman’s distinctive power.”⁴³

Rich first combs through the earth deposits of “our” (female) experience of history to discover the amber bottle with its bogus palliative that will not ease the pain of “living on this earth in the winters of this climate.” The second gesture of the poem is toward a text and model: the story of Marie Curie, a woman who seeks a “cure”, denying that the element she discovered has caused her fatal illness.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 12.

⁴¹ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 29.

⁴² Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language 1974-1977* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1979, 1993)

⁴³ Joanne F. Diehl, “Of Woman Born,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 405.

⁴⁴ Diehl, “Of Woman Born,” 405.

Indeed, the poem's protagonist goes on in her experiments neglecting her "cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends" and dies as a famous woman, a scientist, an academic, an inventor, finally recognized and respected by suspicious male scientists. She was the first female professor at the University of Paris, and received numerous awards, including the Nobel Prizes for physics and chemistry.⁴⁵ The poem's concluding lines, with their almost mystical alliteration, and the repetition of "her," "wounds," and "denying" sounds both like Rich's admiration of Curie and the manifesto for the coming generations of women scientists:

She died a famous woman denying

Her wounds

denying

her wounds came from the same source as her power

As Diehl explains the extract above,

Here, in the poem's closing lines, Rich uses physical space and the absence of punctuation to loosen the deliberate syntactic connections between words and thus introduce ambiguities that disrupt normative forms. The separation between words determines through the movement of the reader's eye--the movement past the "wounds" where it had rested the first time--the emphasis on the activity of denial and its necessary violation.⁴⁶

Denial, as Diehl suggests, is "an essential precondition for the woman inventor's continuing to succeed; what she is denying, of course, is the inevitable sacrifice of self in work, as well as

⁴⁵ "Marie Curie: Honours, Disaster and Renewal," American Institute of Physics, 13 Apr. 2009
<http://www.aip.org/history/curie/brief/04_honors/honors_2.html>.

⁴⁶ Diehl, "Of Woman Born," 405.

the knowledge that her power and her wounds share a common source.”⁴⁷ As Rich implies in the poem, women should be steadfast while denying their physical pain, along with the stereotype that teaches us that a woman, physically and mentally, is less capable than a man, and thus can achieve significantly less than a man. However, this denial of stereotypes has to be the simultaneous acceptance of responsibility, because the wounds that may be involved in the process are the wounds that each woman must be ready for.

⁴⁷Diehl, “Of Woman Born,” 405.

Chapter III

The Power of Love

In one of her essays, Rich recalls her early adulthood and, put in plain words, the destiny of most young American women of her time:

no content

I finished college, published my first book by a fluke, it seemed to me, and broke off a love affair. I took a job, lived alone, and went on writing, fell in love. I was young, full of energy and the book seemed to mean that others agreed I was a poet. Because I was also determined to prove that as a woman poet I could also have what was then defined as a “full” woman’s life, I plunged in my early twenties into marriage and had three children before I was thirty. There was nothing overt in the environment to warn me: these were fifties, and in reaction to the earlier wave of feminism, middle-class women were making careers from domestic perfection, working to send their husbands through professional schools, and then retiring to raise large families.⁴⁸

Indeed, in the 1950s and 60s many middle-class women in the USA were proud of proclaiming their occupation: a housewife. Evidently, many really took pleasure in dealing perfectly with all the household chores and making cakes for their husband. However, in Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*⁴⁹ we can see the deep frustration of one of the characters, Laura Brown, who is depicted as one of those wives living a “dream” life in an American suburb in the fifties. A perfect loving husband, a lovely child, a clean beautiful house – what

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⁴⁸ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 19.

⁴⁹ Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (Picador, USA; New York, 2002)

else should a woman desire? Laura, however, tries to commit suicide, regardless of the fact that she is pregnant and her life is a “dream.”

Apparently, life in the intricate net that American society wove for women was not something that the spirits of freedom of Laura and her contemporaries, such as Rich, for example, could accept for a long time. Similar to that of Laura, Rich’s life was full of periods of acute despair and long depressions, yet on the surface there was no reason for them: she was a good wife, a mother of three children, and even an accomplished poet. Although her early writing was indeed successful and even praised for its “gracefulness,”⁵⁰ Rich herself was greatly dissatisfied with her works and considered them to be mere drafts of her future poems. When Rich’s spirit of freedom could no longer endure the burden of a “perfect” life she was supposed to have, she decided to leave her husband. That decision, a breath of fresh air, brought radical changes to her life, and determined the following direction of her development both as a poet and as a woman. Nevertheless, those changes were rather painful and chaotic, and had a fatal impact on the life her ex-husband, who committed suicide.

However, Rich explained her decision with the following arguments: “About the time my third child was born, I felt that I had either to consider myself a failed woman and a failed poet, or to try to find some synthesis by which to understand what was happening to me”. She described her life before leaving her husband as a life of total loss: she did not really feel as an alive, breathing, and conscious being. She had lost the feeling of a young girl full of hopes and potential, “who experienced her own will and energy almost ecstatically at times, walking around a city or riding a train at night or typing in a student room.”⁵¹ She nearly ceased writing, overwhelmed with weariness and anger coming from her anxious heart: Rich felt she

⁵⁰ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 20.

⁵¹ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 20.

had lost the essential contact with her own self, and therefore had little motivation to write. Small household chores made her forget the big dreams of her past, and turned her life into frustrated and meaningless. As a true mother and wife, she used to put on pedestal her family, children and husband, ignoring completely her personal ambitions and desires. Rich came face-to-face with the conflict, which she inevitably had to resolve:

The choice still seemed to be between “love”-womanly, maternal love, altruistic love-a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egoism-a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so.⁵²

As can be seen from the quote above, Rich found herself in a very delicate situation: she had radically changed her social status, but these changes caused a chain reaction and required other changes to take place. Therefore, she urgently needed to revise her perception of love and life in general. Rich’s struggle between altruism and egoism, between self-centered love and selfless love came to its culmination in her “Twenty-One Love Poems,”⁵³ written in mid-seventies, not long after Rich had become an explicit and active gay poet.

Rich’s love poems worship a feeling strikingly different from the love most people know and experience. In her interview with Sandra Berman, Rich mentioned that she loved reading Hispanic poetry, particularly the poetry of Lorca, Castellanos and Neruda.⁵⁴ Hence, it might be suggested that her sequence of “Twenty-One Love Poems,” is connected to Pablo Neruda’s

⁵² Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 25.

⁵³ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*: “Twenty-One Love Poems,” 25-36.

⁵⁴ Charles Altieri, “Some Questions from the Profession,” *Arts of the Possible*, Adrienne Rich (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2001)133.

book *Veinte Poemas de Amor y una Canción Desesperada*⁵⁵ translated into English as *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Even though the sequences differ in terms of defining and dealing with love, as Neruda's love is heterosexual and in many aspects more romantic and surreal than Rich's, both sequences are definitely linked by explicit eroticism, uniqueness and intriguing profundity.

Those who choose to read Neruda's work without any background reading, simply envisaging it as a piece full of sentiments, love's pleasures and pain, will unquestionably encounter all these things in the book. The very first poem, "Body of a Woman," while striking with its sincere erotic imaginary, still meets the reader's expectations of a love poem which is written by a man and addressed to a woman:

Body of a woman, white hills, white thighs,

you look like a world, lying in surrender.

My rough peasant's body digs in you

and makes a son leap from the depth of the earth.⁵⁶

Intensely admiring the physical female beauty ("Oh the goblets of the breast! Oh the eyes of absence! Oh the roses of the pubis!"⁵⁷), Neruda takes physicality to a different level, transforming the female body into a spiritual entity, white and pure, comparing it to the world itself. At the end of the poem, he replaces the indefinite article "a" with a possessive pronoun "my", thus defining a particular woman as *his* beloved and making her unique: "The body of my woman, I will persist in your grace."

⁵⁵ Pablo Neruda, *Veinte Poemas de Amor y una Canción Desesperada*, transl. by W.S. Merwin (Penguin Books, 1993)

⁵⁶ Neruda 3.

⁵⁷ Neruda 3.

The first love poem of Neruda has much in common with the “floating poem, unnumbered”⁵⁸ from Rich’s sequence, where she also explores the physicality of her beloved:

Whatever happens with us, your body
will haunt mine - tender, delicate
your lovemaking, like the half-curved frond
of the fiddlehead fern in forests
just washed by sun. Your traveled, generous thighs
between which my whole face has come and come -
the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there⁵⁹

In this poem, similar to Neruda’s in general tone, the female body is also a symbolic representation of the world: tender, delicate, with thighs full of experience and generosity, between which the world with its innocence and wisdom is concentrated. Rich, as well as Neruda, transforms the body of her beloved into something spiritual: the half-curved corpus of a woman is compared to the fiddlehead fern’s frond – a leaf with the shape of eternity, bright and warm, “just washed by sun.”⁶⁰ However, the tone of this poem’s closing lines is quite different from Neruda’s: while he is foreseeing pain which his immeasurable desire may cause him, Rich sounds fairly calm, saying: “whatever happens, this is.” She knows her relationship might be as unpredictable as life itself, yet she remains unruffled. “Carpe diem” or “cease the moment” is her approach towards love, apparently influenced by existentialism: she does not consider the past or the future to be more important than the present, confirming it by the last words of the poem: “this is.”

⁵⁸ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 32.

⁵⁹ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 32.

⁶⁰ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 32.

Generally speaking, the exploration of Rich's poems without any background will never meet the readers' expectations: instead of a traditional love story, one finds a sequence of twenty one fragments of a beautiful mosaic presenting a love relationship between two women. Most of these fragments are linked by the narrative style and a particular sensitivity encoded in each word. As I have mentioned above, the existential tone is palpable throughout the sequence and is a clue to understanding the author's attitude to love and lovers.

Rich's poems focus on two ordinary women, distinguished only by their rapport. As Claire Keyes pointed out, the poems "are extraordinary not simply because they declare one woman's love for another woman, but because they transcend sex. The poems are not narrowed by the focus on lesbian love but expanded."⁶¹ Indeed, Rich's love is raised above mere physicality, because the connection between lovers is based on far more than just physical attraction, whereas oftentimes men's love poems (included those of Neruda) focus on an idealized view of the woman and her physical beauty. The woman most men write about still proves the myth of being "special", and traditionally is depicted as pure, distant and almost artificial. Neruda, for instance, frequently uses such phrases as "absent eyes", "flown away eyes", "distant female", "I like for you to be still", or "distant and full of sorrow as though you had died." His woman is a perfect portrait, a beautiful memory, a dream-like nymph - everything but the reality.

Rich, conversely, does not portray her heroines as beau ideals but rather as two ordinary persons, living far from an idyllic surrounding. In the very first poem of the sequence, these women face their reality, a brutal urbanized metropolis: there is no romantic scenery, no picturesque landscapes, but a cruel stone jungle. However, this is the place where they live

⁶¹ Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1986), 1 July 2009 <http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/rich/21love.htm>.

and so they simply walk “through the rain soaked garbage, /the tabloid cruelties /of our own neighborhoods.”⁶² This couple is hardly welcome in the city, and Rich confirms it by saying “no one imagined us.”⁶³

According to Adrian Oktenberg, the author of “Disloyal to Civilization: The Twenty-One Love Poems of Adrienne Rich,”⁶⁴ the meaning Rich gave to the aforementioned phrase is the following:

She [Rich] means that no man, no work of literature, no member of a patriarchal culture has taken into account the possibility of two women together, loving each other, and of this as an embryonic beginning of something new, perhaps even a woman-centered civilization.⁶⁵

He also suggests that, of course, there can be other interpretations of this expression, yet the important thing is that with the phrase “no one has imagined us” Rich emphasizes the fact that her characters are not the products of someone’s imagination (even her own), in other words they are not *fictional* characters but *real* people.⁶⁶ Indeed, the life they lead and the decisions they make have the power to affect the history of the contemporary world, “the world of pain and struggle, life and death.”⁶⁷ Therefore, their existence cannot be ignored for a long time, but sooner or later has to be acknowledged and respected. However, as the society seems to

⁶² Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 25.

⁶³ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 25.

⁶⁴ Adrian Oktenberg, “Disloyal to Civilization Disloyal to Civilization: The Twenty-One Love Poems of Adrienne Rich.” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 329-342.

⁶⁵ Oktenberg 331.

⁶⁶ Oktenberg 331.

⁶⁷ Oktenberg 331.

be hardly ready for such an innovation, many things which are natural for gay people still face a rather prejudicial attitude and various sorts of discrimination.

In fact, for any gay couple, living in a patriarchal society is rather uncomfortable, if not impossible. Gay relationships still shock the majority of people, and the conduct and lifestyle of people with unorthodox sexual orientation (homo and bisexual) undermine the traditional values that society has been creating for centuries. In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,"⁶⁸ Rich claims that heterosexuality, or at least the "normality" or "necessity" of heterosexuality keeps many women trapped in the net of double standards and artificial conventions, while "lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life."⁶⁹ Historically, Rich argues, lesbians were stigmatized and the records of their existence were mostly erased or distorted.⁷⁰ In comparison to the history of male homosexuals, homosexual women were always put at the lowest possible level of the society due to their lack of economic and political independence. Even the term "lesbian" was allied to a distorted patriarchal definition, and therefore it was limited only to the erotic associations, which excluded female comradeship and friendship.⁷¹ The essay claims that the established and standardized heterosexuality limits the possibilities of women and prevents them from the discovery of their true identities.

According to Rich, women without an acute feeling of their own identity can be easily manipulated and used in patriarchy, whereas while armed with such a feeling they would present a strong opposition to the ruling class. The latter, of course, presents a certain danger

⁶⁸ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 203-224.

⁶⁹ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 217.

⁷⁰ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 217.

⁷¹ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 218.

for those at the helm, therefore they deliberately try to preserve the dogmatic arrangement and avoid any changes. Rich claims that the whole idea of heterosexuality is erroneous and established to serve men's interests; it distorts the reality and history to such an extent that women accept this fabrication with no suspicion. In the essay, Rich compares the heterosexual orientation with a political institution, which helps to deceit women and camouflages their possibilities:

Woman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for each other, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.*⁷²

With the poem XIV from the love sequence, Rich tries to destroy the stereotype, showing a gay couple's routine surrounded by heterosexual couples. In the poem, everybody is cooped into a claustrophobic space of a cabin, and tries to calm down by touching the other's hands. The act of touching is the core of this poem: the honeymoon couples touch each other to sooth the pain, while the same thing happens between two lesbian lovers:

(XIV)

In the close cabin where the honeymoon couples
huddled in each other's laps and arms
I put my hand on your thigh
to comfort both of us, your hand came over mine,
we stayed that way, suffering together

⁷² Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 221.

in our bodies, as if all suffering
were physical, we touched so in the presence
of strangers who knew nothing and cared less
vomiting their private pain
as if all suffering were physical.⁷³

The physical connection (“I put my hand on your thigh”, “your hand came over mine”) and the presence of the beloved comforts while one goes through some unpleasant experience. The parallel between the gay couple and the honeymoon couples makes it obvious that on the surface, the relationships are different, but as a matter of fact they are almost identical if based on compassion, helping, and staying together despite all difficulties. However, if for a man and a woman in a relationship the main challenge presents the ability to adjust their two worlds, a male and a female, to one another, a for a gay couple the challenge is to try to adjust to the patriarchal way of life or explicitly promote anti-patriarchal attitudes. In “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Rich presents a struggle of two women – an embodiment of challenge itself – who do not receive anything gratis:

(XIX)

If I could let you know -
two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness,
the slow - picked, halting traverse of a pitch

⁷³ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 31-32.

where the fiercest attention becomes routine

- look at the faces of those who have chosen it.⁷⁴

The last line saying “look at the faces of those who have chosen it” sounds almost like a manifesto of female self-assertiveness: there are women who have chosen to struggle and no matter whether their faces are cheerful, or pale and fatigued. Their faces and hearts, as Oktenberg points out, are embellished “not only by love, but also by the intense intellectual work in which they are involved,”⁷⁵ as well as a firm belief in their principles. Their struggle is deeply connected to their emancipation: not only do the two women fight with the social conventions, but, most prominently, they realize the need to fight against the conventional archetypes that dwell in their own hearts and minds.

Despite the fact that the majority of poems in the sequence focuses on the relationship between two women and the process of their emancipation, there are also pieces that simply portray two people in love with a lesser emphasis on whether this love is homosexual or heterosexual. The poem III, for instance, discusses the theme of helping each other to go through a painful process of aging: the author portrays two people, who are more than just partners, lovers, or friends. Even though eventually it is obvious that the poem is again about love between two women, the main focus of the poem is still to illustrate the importance of emotional and physical *connection* between lovers, their common language, which intensifies their feelings, mutual understanding and compassion:

⁷⁴ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 35.

⁷⁵ Oktenberg 335.

(III)

At twenty, yes: we thought we'd live forever.

At forty-five, I want to know even our limits.

I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow,

and somehow, each of us will help the other live,

and somehow, each of us must help the other die.⁷⁶

The inevitable process of aging accompanied by certain biological changes makes people, especially women, sharply feel emotional instability due to various factors. For example, many women going through this process experience it with a certain amount of pain: their beauty and energy seem to fade, and along with the energy, the joy of life vanishes forever, mainly because of the stereotypes produced in the youth-oriented society.⁷⁷ Therefore, Rich brings up another important feature of her perception of love values: love for Rich is to “help the other live”, and to “help the other die.” Through touching, she tries to fathom the depth of the body and mind of her beloved, creating a linkage between them; eventually, this linkage helps both of them to go through and survive intricate transformations that are involved in the process of aging.

Finally, in addition to introducing a fresh concept of love, redefining the fundamental values of a relationship and showing the significance of such relationships for the world history, Rich

⁷⁶ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 26.

⁷⁷ Marilyn Poole and Susan Feldman, ed. *A Certain Age: Women Growing Older* (Allen & Unwin, 1999) 4-7, 11 July 2009

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zJhPABds4TsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=process+of+aging+of+women&source=gbs_similarbooks_s&cad=1#v=onepage&q=&f=false>.

broaches another issue, a prominent theme of the sequence, which deals with unfailing faith and love as a means of survival:

(VI)

Your small hands, precisely equal to my own -
only the thumb is larger, longer - in these hands
I could trust the world, or in many hands like these,
handling power-tools or steering-wheel
or touching a human face.⁷⁸

From reading the poem it seems that the world exists because there are hands like these, because there are relationships like these, because there is love like this. This love is compassionate, giving, and, what is important, selfless. Neruda, for example, accentuates his desire to possess his beloved, frequently using the possessive pronouns (“my woman”⁷⁹, “you are mine, mine”⁸⁰) and is often preoccupied with the fact that his beloved may abandon him, or that for some reason her feelings may fade away, and he will be left in solitude. Rich, on the other hand, is distant from the fuss of love in the traditional sense, with its euphoric pleasures and unbearable pain, and promotes her own vision on this matter: for her, love is an emotional and physical connection between two people/women who are responsible for their choices in life, whatever challenge these choices engage. They help each other live, while their love makes them feel complete, desired, and realized both sexually and intellectually. Moreover, she can “trust the world”⁸¹ in the hands of her beloved without any fear or hesitation.

⁷⁸ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 27-28.

⁷⁹ Neruda 3.

⁸⁰ Neruda 41.

⁸¹ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 28.

A similar subject of mutual faith and emotional and physical connection between women is depicted in “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev,”⁸² a poem devoted to the leader of a woman’s climbing team⁸³. Rich depicts a struggle of the women-climbers against the odds of unconquerable natural forces in the Pamir Mountains’ area. Even though nature eventually wins, none of the women gives up until they all are dead, covered by ice and snow.

The poem’s main focus, however, is the connection between women, their community spirit: sisterhood, empathy and mutual help. Throughout the whole poem, the narrator, Shatayev herself, makes the readers realize how intensely she is connected with the rest of her team, how much strength and support they give her despite all the difficulties and dangers: “I have never loved/like this I have never seen/my own forces so taken up and shared/ and given back.”⁸⁴ Danger, however, was always present in their lives: entire lives of these women were devoted to the performing of traditional wifely duties, cooking and looking after their children, and therefore were kept away from one another. The lack of communication affected the community making its ties looser and its members weaker:

We know we have always been in danger down in our separateness
and now up here together but till now
we had not touched our strength

Apparently, despite the danger and challenge of the mountains, for the first time in their lives, the women-climbers could discover and ascertain their real selves: undomesticated and potent. It seems that up until their adventure, although unfortunately it finished with a tragic ending, their lives were mere shadows of the lives they wanted to lead. In the mountains,

⁸² Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 4-6.

⁸³ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 4.

⁸⁴ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 5.

these women had a real chance to feel *powerful* and *alive*, not only because they were free from their domestic routine, but mainly because at last they were reunited by the spirit of community.

In the last stanza of the poem, Rich posed the flowing question:

What does love mean

what does it mean “to survive”⁸⁵

Throughout the whole poem, Rich uses no punctuation, apart from parenthesis and quotation marks. In this stanza, only through syntax it is obvious that the question the author asks has an interrogative function. However, the phrase itself seems to be more rhetorical than interrogative. In consequence, her question becomes an existential one, while the use of physical space, so typical of Rich⁸⁶, creates a vacuum between the phrase and the verb “to survive” and make readers pause and reflect for a little while, before they reach the verb. These two lines mirror each other and seem to be the twins as the words “what”, “does” and “mean” are repeated. However, the pair for “love” in the second line is not “it” but “survive.” Therefore, it seems that the last line is not another question, but the repletion of the first question, while “to survive” is the answer.

The last line of the poem says: “We have dreamed of this/all of our lives.” Again there is no punctuation, but rather enough of space for a pause and meditation. The “dream”, however, might be the very dream the core of which is explained later in the poem “Origins and History of Consciousness”⁸⁷ with the words addressed to the true nature of poetry: “The drive/to

⁸⁵ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 6.

⁸⁶ Diehl, “Of Woman Born,” 405.

⁸⁷ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 7-9.

connect. The dream of a common language.”⁸⁸ Indeed, the dream of Shatayev is the dream of a common language, of a community, of mutual understanding and trust; this dream is the dream of love. As long as the desire to possess or dominate your lover exists, love can transform into obsession and become more destructive than constructive. However, for Rich, who chose a woman as a soul-mate, the desire to possess or be in control does not exist: “whatever happens to us”, she says, “this is.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 7.

⁸⁹ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 32.

Chapter IV

The Power of Courage

“There is a natural temptation to escape if we can, to close the door behind us on this despised realm which threatens to engulf all women,” Rich says in her essay “Conditions for Work.”⁹⁰ Here, the author explores the core of an ordinary trepidation women experience while doing or thinking of doing something that is considered to be unconventional or confrontational. “This temptation and fear compromise our powers, divert our energies, form a potent source of blocks and of acute anxiety about work.”⁹¹ In the same fashion, as throughout the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, when Rich started being dynamically involved in the feminist movement, in this day and age many women still have to face a great number of obstacles conditioned exclusively by their gender.

Of course, the situation in the third world, where women can still be seen as the property of their fathers and husbands and have absolutely no power or motivation to change their state, is much worse than the situation of women in the “civilized” Western world. In the USA, the Commonwealth and most European countries, the three waves of feminism did their job: women have the right to vote, the right to receive education, to work, to govern, and theoretically any woman can choose what she wants to do in life and who she wants to be. However, both the society and most women who live in that society have a rather distorted image of womanhood and hardly even realize that female minds and bodies are still victims of male abuse (as can be seen most explicitly in pornography and pop-culture, and inexplicitly at homes). Most women are still focused, even if unconsciously, on how to please men rather

⁹⁰ Rich, “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Woman” (New York, Pantheon, 1977)

⁹¹ Rich, “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Woman,” xvi.

than how to please themselves, and thus end up on the table of a plastic surgeon or feel the need to invest fortunes in eye-catching clothing and makeup.

The tarnished representation of womanhood, as Rich argues in her essays, is taught and learned; it is neither genetically encoded nor inherited. The world history, written mostly by men, shows no traces of shame for the mistreatment of women and their enforced peripheral status. Even the Western civilization's moral code, the Bible, enthusiastically supports the idea that female roles, apart from giving birth, are marginal, and as a consequence women have been and unfortunately still are *expelled* from the most important executive processes. No man had ever had to deal with such restrictions, but women used to obey them in silence: motherhood was traditionally regarded as the most imperative social function of women; as such women were supposed to desire nothing more from life. Hence, for many centuries most women suffered from sex segregation and were excluded from the world of politics, science, art and literature.

Generally speaking, all of the aforementioned facts contribute to the situation we have today: women have almost no history, because having always been a part of the history of men, women's involvement and input seems to be rather miserable. Nowadays, it is rather hard to speculate on the reasons for such a situation, but at the same time the past shows to us the facts that are very much confusing and non-stimulating. As mentioned above, the history of the world, as well as the history of world art and literature, do not show how much women suffered from the restrictions; instead of saying who they *are*, history rather emphasizes the fact who they *are not*. Indeed, there is no female Aristotle, no female daVinci, no female Shakespeare as for centuries women were not accepted as thinkers, writers, artists or actresses. They had no access to academic training and of course could hardly compete with men, who would never take them seriously. They would publish their books incognito

(George Sand, George Eliot), paint at home and never expose their works; their talents would dwell in the shadows of their fathers and husbands, and consequently simply ceased to exist:

Mary Wollstonecraft had seen eighteenth-century middle-class Englishwomen brain-starved and emotionally malnourished through denial of education; her plea was to treat women's minds as respectfully as men's-to admit women as equals into male culture. Simone de Beauvoir showed how the male perception of Woman as Other dominated European culture, keeping "woman" entrapped in myths which robbed her independent being and value. James Baldwin insisted that *all* culture was significant, and described the complexity of living with integrity as a Black person, an artist in a white-dominated culture, whether as an Afro-American growing up in Harlem, U.S.A., or as an African in a country emerging from a history of colonialism. He also alluded to "that as yet unwritten history of the Negro woman."⁹²

The "unwritten history of the Negro woman" is a part of the unwritten and ignored history of women in general. Why all we have is just a vague idea of female history and artistic tradition? Simply because most of the heritage sank into oblivion as it never had a chance to be praised and preserved. We do have fragments of female works, but they might look rather pale and insignificant in comparison with the tantalizing mosaic made by the hand of men. *Fear* used to dominate the minds of women and made them silent for centuries. The times have changed, however, and now it is important for women to first form their ideas and later have enough courage to articulate them.

Thus, Rich, alongside with her language, knowledge and love discussed in the previous chapters, realized the need of a profound change of female consciousness and gradually

⁹² Rich, "Blood, Bread and Poetry," 245.

taught herself to be courageous: to speak openly and defend her ideas fearlessly. In the last lines of the final piece of the “Twenty-One Love Poems” sequence, Rich says the following:

I choose to be a figure in that light,
half-blotted by darkness, something moving
across that space, the color of stone
greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.⁹³

In this remarkable poem, the speaker becomes a sort of a transistor that transmits the signals of universal wisdom to the mankind. Inside her chest, she hides the sacred history of womanhood, perhaps forgotten, or unwanted, yet indispensable. In general, Rich’s voice here is very dominant, while her courage is shown especially in the vocabulary she uses: she is the woman who *chooses*, who *decides*, the woman with a very distinctive personality, who is not afraid of taking responsibility (“I choose to be a figure,” “I choose to walk here,” “I meant this.”)

The distinctiveness of personality, the identity, is a great source of energy, and a tool that helps to make one’s existence truly unique. Fear is born of disconnection of one’s self from his or her true identity, while courage, on the other hand, is born from the firm harmonious union of body and spirit. However, there are instances when this union is hardly possible:

I am thinking this in a country
where words are stolen out of mouths
as bread is stolen out of mouths

⁹³ Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 36.

where poets don't go to jail

for being poets, but for being

dark-skinned, female, poor.

It doesn't matter what you think.

The piece above is extracted from Rich's poem "North American Time"⁹⁴ written in 1983, where the author openly criticizes many aspects of life in her motherland. Although her voice is robust, it is sharply contrasted with a very clear vision of a possible danger that living and writing in her country involves. Rich sees North America as a place where injustice and discrimination are still present and common, where real freedom does not belong to everybody but only to those privileged, most of whom are at the helm of the state and power.

According to Rich, in America, people are judged not for their deeds, thoughts or attitudes, but rather for their roots, background, and social status. At the time when the poem was written, being female, black or coming from the modest background were the marks of a potential outcast, if not an outlaw. The most essential words, which are the words capable of making real difference, were "stolen out of the mouths" meaning they could never be heard or meditated upon.

"Poetry", as Rich says in the poem, "never stood a chance of standing outside history."⁹⁵ Indeed, they are closely connected and affect one another. Poetry becomes history – the words survive and may be presented and interpreted in a different way, so that the whole history may be presented in a different way. Therefore, words are dangerous, for written on a piece of paper they can be transferred from one generation to another, but can represent true or false

⁹⁴Rich, "North American Time," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 114-118.

⁹⁵ Rich, "North American Time," 115.

ideas- depending on the will of those at the helm and their subjective interpretation. Poets should be aware of these things, Rich says, and they can always choose between writing and not writing.

Talking about “North American Time” in one of his works, Terrence Des Pres explicitly admires Rich’s courage, saying: “Her voice is responsible to its time and place, and accepts what humanists would rather escape: that even poetry (or especially poetry) is positioned for and against, that the political problem of us-and-them is the poet’s limit as well.”⁹⁶ He also mentions the fact that even though the feminist revolutions took place, the evident result is that the old patriarchal regime was replaced by a new one – and maintained its postulates about women and the relationship with them. However, Rich’s “revolution” is nonviolent yet radical in its own way: she does not want to disconnect two spheres, male and female, and put them on different parts of the barricades; alternatively, she wants to create a strong community and interconnect hearts and minds of people. Rich’s greatest desire, as it can be deduced from her later poetry, is to bring people’s attention to many pressing issues (such as wars, suffering, racism, feminism and various types of discrimination), and make them understand that only together they can make a real difference, not separately.

In interview with David Montenegro⁹⁷, who asked Rich about the costs of speaking openly about the aforementioned issues, criticizing government and its representatives, she said:

What would be the cost of *not* doing it? I feel as though it is for my own survival, first and foremost. This is how I cope, this is how I survive. I have learned from my peers that this way of creating can be a way of surviving. I didn’t invent that.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Terrence Des Pres, “Adrienne Rich, North America East,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 358.

Paradoxically, Rich tries to survive, but her tactics is diametrically opposed to the common sense and practice. The instinct of survival, which humans have genetically encoded in their minds and bodies, is the instinct Rich paraphrases as self-protection through action. Thus, those who try to live and survive have two choices: to accept an established and artificial way of life with its most common imposed values, follow a safe reputable path doing what is prescribed by society, or, rather, to treat their lives as a unique work of art and make the world adjust to them and their perception of living, create their own destiny and make the history themselves. Apparently for Rich, this is the very meaning of living and surviving. As can be deduced from another extract from "North American Time," words can stand for actions, thoughts, principles, choices in one's life; all that is left is to make a decision, to choose a side. Nevertheless, the greatest amount of courage is not required for the act of making the choice but facing the responsibility for making this choice. This is definitely the most precious thing Rich teaches her readers:

Words are found responsible

All you can do is choose them

or choose

To remain silent⁹⁹

For almost six decades Rich has chosen not to remain silent. Always, her courage has put her voice at the epicenter of public affairs, connecting them to the vitality of the private sphere.

The poet Carol Muske commented on Rich with the following words:

⁹⁸ David Montenegro, "An Interview with Adrienne Rich," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 271.

⁹⁹ Rich, "North American Time," 115.

She [Rich] is in possession of a quality that few American poets are ever called upon to reveal - courage. She has had the courage to turn her back on a literary 'future' that seemed established and undertake a whole new definition of the future of poetry. She has had the courage to stand up to her detractors and critics for whom misogyny was a cultural imperative, and make it stick.¹⁰⁰

Rich's revolutionary shifts - from an exemplary wife and mother to a radical lesbian feminist, from a traditional to an alternative artist- made her rather unpredictable for both her readers and critics. Yet, she has been incessantly working on the development of her feminist ideas.¹⁰¹ Her recent poetry signifies another possible "shift" or rather stepping out the established borders of feminism: her feminist ideas seem to be closely connected with environmentalism, socialism, anti-war and anti-racism movements.

As I have already mentioned, to a large extent, Rich's poems of the 1990s maintain the poet's belief in the importance of spiritual and mental connection between people. Already in her earlier works, Rich talked about *poetry* as a great means of making this connection more palpable. Her belief in "the common language"-poetry, art, shared values, the spirit of community, is asserted in her later poems as well:

I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand
because life is short and you too are thirsty.

I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.

¹⁰⁰ Carol Bere, "The Road Taken: Adrienne Rich in the 1900s" (Literary Review, 2000)1, 13 July 2009 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2078/is_4_43/ai_64975505/pg_7/>.

¹⁰¹ Bere, "The Road Taken: Adrienne Rich in the 1900s,"1.

I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope

turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.

I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read

there where you have landed, stripped as you are.¹⁰²

The tone of the poem and the way the author speaks are very intimate and tender yet strong. The speaker is addressing readers with a unifying “you”-a pronoun which can stand for a woman, man, anybody. However, at the same time it is obvious that what she really means is our mutual interconnection -we all are “pieces” of the same mankind, existing in the same time and space.¹⁰³ We all are individuals, microcosms, yet we are the fragments of the same universe, very different from each other but paradoxically we become “one”, connected by Rich at the very moment of “reading this poem.” We all are literally connected by her words, by the language, which for many is not a mother tongue, and to understand it we have to use dictionaries or other means, otherwise we simply keep “guessing.”¹⁰⁴ We lead similar lives, with similar routine and similar tasks we “cannot refuse.” Furthermore, we all unconsciously share (and should share!) moments of happiness, bitterness and hope of today and tomorrow. Rich makes us realize it.

To conclude, it should be mentioned that Rich’s messages are not intricate, not obscure, but lucid and transparent: Rich teaches her readers to lead a life that resembles a fearless voyage of self-discovery. Being herself a source of pure energy, she promotes activeness as a means

¹⁰² Rich, “Atlas to the Difficult World,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 157-158.

¹⁰³ Bere, “The Road Taken: Adrienne Rich in the 1900s,” 2.

¹⁰⁴ Rich, “Atlas to the Difficult World,” 158

of survival and making real difference in many spheres, including cultural, political, public and, of course, private. Her greatest concern is the search for a “common language” – a figurative representation of people’s interconnection, which involves egalitarianism, lenience, acceptance of each other’s strong and weak parts, alertness to each other’s pain and mutual compassion. Rich also stresses the importance of courage, a quality needed not only to be able to lead an active life, but also be responsible for actions or non-actions, words or instances of silence. The poet herself is an example of a person who leads such a life, because, as Olga Broumas noticed, “Rich has extraordinary powers – of perception, eloquence, rhythm, courage, the rare fusion of vision and action, the ability to suggest not only to others but to herself a course of action in the mind and follow it in the next breath in the world.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Olga Broumas, “The Dream of a Common Language,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 324.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of humanity, women have been worshipped and admired for their beauty, grace and wit, and paradoxically abused, murdered and castigated for exactly the same qualities. Traditionally, women's role in history is considered to be marginal, which might be partially explained by the genetic lack of self-confidence and physical power;¹⁰⁶ however the real reasons apparently are the gender stereotypes, which define the role of men and women in the society.¹⁰⁷ World and art histories are written by men describing male protagonists, making most of us believe that this is the way it has always been and should be.

Women are said to be the sources of life. But what is the source of life in them? Until the 20th century, "ambition" and "woman" or "artist" and "woman" were mere antitheses. Rich has a different opinion: belonging to the second wave of feminism, being at the epicenter of female history in the 1960s and 70s, Rich is a woman who underwent a deep transformation of her personal and artistic expression from a daughter, mother and wife to an innovative poet, radical feminist, and political activist. For her, the source of power is her art, her knowledge, her understanding of female history, though the latter is difficult to grasp for it has been erased and distorted for ages.

Rich also finds her power in love and relationships. Her altruistic and devoting love to another woman is a beautiful example of how a beloved woman should be treated. She cherishes and

¹⁰⁶ Janet Hyde and Amy H. Mezulis, "Gender Difference Research: Issues and Critique," *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender: Sex Similarities and Differences and the Impact of Society on Gender*, ed. Judith Worell (Academic Press, 1990) 558.

¹⁰⁷ Richard A. Lippa, *Gender, Nature and Nurture* (Routledge, 2005) 110-111, 114-116, 23 Aug 2009 <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=T0HOHp2vVu4C&dq=gender+nature+and+nurture&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=I9IKnRRRqT&sig=LYYIFnI21OujrozmLrSg4pDP70&hl=en&ei=0zGRSooeCMGF_AbX8eGwAg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3#v=onepage&q=&f=false>.

respects her partner, admires every single feature of this person and protects her and their feelings from the dirt and prejudice of their environment.

However, Rich's most significant characteristic both as a woman and a poet is her courage: she does not choose to remain silent whenever she feels there are things needed to be articulated, and she does articulate them in her complex and subtle ways. She breathes life into her language, using words as a tool of self-protection. Every single woman can choose whether to accept the language and the rules the society teaches her, or whether to create and use her own version.

Through the "dead" and distorted language, the distorted image of womanhood is taught to all of us. The world history, written mostly by men, implies that the peripheral status of women is a standard. In spite of the explicitly depressing historical and actual facts, Rich remains optimistic: she states that women have achieved a lot and will continue to improve their state, helping those who are still being discriminated. According to Rich, courage is a gift which should be nourished and used for goodness; her courage is her peaceful protest articulated in her poetry, which, reaching people's hearts and making them reflect upon their lives and attitudes, is capable of changing their consciousness profoundly, teaching them virtue and simultaneously purifying them.

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Obsah:

První kapitola diplomové práce je nazvaná „Síla jazyka a umění“ (*The Power of Language and Art*) a krátce představuje pozadí života básnířky Adrienne Rich. Zaměřuje se přitom na okolnosti, které formovaly její vnímání života, sebe sama a ženství. Rich nejvíce ovlivnila výchova v tradiční rodině a četba klasických vydání Coleridge a Shakespeara, na základě kterých si vytvořila představu o „ideální ženě“. Posláním takové ženy bylo naplnit tradiční ženskou roli, být přitom obdivována pro krásu a skromnost. Povědomí o světě, myšlení a intelektuální schopnosti měla přenechat mužům. Takový mýtus „ideální ženy“ trápil Rich mnoho let, až si nakonec uvědomila, že ona sama z něj značně vybočuje. Byla ženou moderní, novou a odlišnou. Na dotvoření její osobnosti měl nakonec ještě větší vliv její vnitřní varovný pocit, že vše, co kdy vymyslí nebo vytvoří, bude nevyhnutelně analyzováno a kritizováno muži. V její době byl totiž názor mužů stále považován za důležitější a respektovanější.

Rich považovala stereotypy převládající v myslích žen-umělkyní za důsledek toho, že ženy tradičně neměly přístup ke vzdělání ani umění. Po staletí to byli muži, kteří vytvářeli mistrné příklady prózy a poezie, zakládali hnutí a teorie. Ženy byly buď čtenářkami nebo sloužily jako múzy, nic víc. Mladá básnířka 20. století pokoušející se spojit slova a obrazy dohromady mohla sice nalézt inspiraci v Belle Dame Sans Merci, Juliet nebo Tess a Salomé. Pouze fragment díla mužů se ovšem zabýval ženskou problematikou a nevyjadřoval ji ženským jazykem.

Aby mohla Rich nalézt svůj vlastní jazyk, musela se odpoutat od světa, ve kterém žila, tedy od manžela a rodiny. Idea tradičního manželství a mateřství byla v rozporu s její představou o

šťastném životě. Zážitky, které měly být přirozeně ženské, v ní vyvolávaly pouze pocity rozladěnosti a nespokojenosti. Byla si vědoma, že její umění potřebuje více svobody a že musí prolomit limity, které jí nutily konvence americké společnosti. Během hledání svého autentického ženského jazyka zjistila, že počátečním bodem jejího objevování musí být znalost minulosti, respektive znalost utajené pravdy.

Druhá kapitola „Síla vědomosti“ (*The Power of Knowledge*) je téměř zcela věnována básni „Potápění do vraku“ (*Diving into the Wreck*). V této básni se Rich pokouší objevit minulost za účelem definování skutečnosti, která je skrytá za mýtem. „Vrak a ne příběh o vraku/ věc sama o sobě a ne mýtus“.¹⁰⁸ Vrak představuje příběh ženství: je zneužitý, zdeformovaný, ignorovaný. Uvidět tento vrak je jako porozumět beznadějným a nešťastným poměrům světa. V každé ženě musí tento pohled vyvolat silnou touhu po změně.

Báseň „Síla“ (*The Power*), která je zasvěcena Marii Curie, je dalším tématem druhé kapitoly. Odmítání a záporná odpověď hrály v životě této vědkyně důležitou roli a stejně tak jsou obsaženy i v básni. Odmítnutí, tak jak ho chápe Rich, je nezbytnou podmínkou pro ženu, která jde za svým úspěchem. Nevyhnutelná zkáza Curie přišla zároveň s vědomím vlastní síly. Její rány a krvácející prsty jsou ztělesněním síly a vědomostí stejně tak jako odmítané bolesti. Manifest pro budoucí generace žen jako by byl přímo postaven na tomto odmítání. Jinými slovy, aby moderní žena mohla žít hodnotný život, musí odmítnout tradici, stereotypy a předsudky. Takové odmítnutí stereotypů však musí přijít ruku v ruce s přijetím odpovědnosti. S případnými ranami musí každá žena počítat.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Atwood, “Diving into the Wreck,” *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 280.

Třetí kapitola s názvem „Láska“ (*Love*) se zabývá několika básněmi z knihy „Sen o společné řeči“ (*The Dream of Common Language*) a pojetím lásky Adrienne Rich. Důraz je kladen především na báseň nazvanou „Dvacet jedna milostných básní“ (*Twenty-One Love Poems*), ve které se autorka otevřeně vyznává z lásky k jiné ženě. Adrian Oktenberg ve své eseji *Disloyal to Civilization*¹⁰⁹ píše: „Dvě ženy-milenky žijící v heterosexuální společnosti jsou ukotveny ve svých nejintimnějších myšlenkách a pocitech. To, co je pro ně krásné a absolutně přirozené, je společností vnímáno jako odporné a perverzní. Ty, jež existují v ženských tělech ve světě, kde jsou za lidské bytosti považováni pouze muži, musí denně zapírat nejzákladnější pravdy o sobě samých.“ Pro homosexuální pár byl život v patriarchální společnosti velmi těžký. Jejich sexuální orientace znepokojovala většinu lidí, kteří v nich viděli (a podle všeho stále vidí) nebezpečí pro tradiční hodnoty.

Ve svých milostných básních Rich zdůrazňuje, že přijetí anti-patriarchálních postojů vyžaduje co nejvíce jasnou představu a co nejvíce podrobnou revizi obdržených znalostí. Realitu ženského mileneckého páru představuje ve sbírce „Dvacet jedna milostných básní“ na pozadí zápasu o důstojný život žen-milenek, pro které není nic snadné a kterým není nic dáno zadarmo. Vědí, kolik bolesti a tvrdé práce stojí za tím, aby jejich vztah fungoval. Nicméně Rich ukazuje, že dvě do sebe zamilované ženy, plně nesoucí zodpovědnost za své rozhodnutí a připravené snášet jakoukoliv bolest, jsou schopné spolu šťastně žít a realizovat samy sebe jak na rovině sexuální tak intelektuální.

Poslední kapitola je věnována odvaze žen a jejich současnému postavení. „Je zde přirozená

¹⁰⁹ Adrian Oktenberg, „Disloyal to Civilization,” *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1993) 334.

touha utéci, zvolit si zadní vrátka v této říši pohrdání, která hrozí zachvátit všechny ženy--this translation is totally incorrect...“, uvádí Rich ve své eseji „Podmínky práce“¹¹⁰ (*Conditions for Work*). V té objevuje jádro běžných obav, které žena zakouší, dělá-li nebo jen myslí-li na něco odvážného, nekonvečního nebo kontroverzního. „Toto nutkání a strach oslabuje naši sílu, rozptyluje naši energii, vytváří zdroj „bloků“ a tísnivou úzkost z práce.“ Stejným způsobem jako během druhé vlny feminismu v 60., 70. a 80. letech, kdy Rich začala být aktivní na poli feminismu, dnes musí mnoho žen překonávat překážky a špatné zacházení pouze proto, že jsou ženami.

Ve většině rozvojových zemí, kde je žena vlastnictvím svého otce a manžela a nemá absolutně žádnou sílu ani motivaci na tom něco měnit, je situace samozřejmě nesrovnatelně horší než ve světě západním. V západním světě svou práci dobře odvedly tři feministické vlny. Ženy zde mají právo volit, právo na vzdělání, právo pracovat, právo vládnout a teoreticky si každá žena může za svého partnera zvolit, koho chce. Nicméně mužská společnost a většina žen, které v ní žijí, má velmi překroucenou představu o ženství. Neuvědomují si, že muži stále zneužívají ženskou mysl a tělo (jak můžeme vidět v pornografii a pop kultuře). Většina žen se stále zaměřuje na to, jak potěšit svého muže, spíše než na to, jak potěšit sebe samu (viz. plastické operace, nápadný make-up, svůdné oblečení, atd.)

Tento zdeformovaný obraz ženství je předáván a přejímán. Není ani geneticky zakódován ani zděděný. Historie světa, napsána většinou muži, zdůrazňuje, že okrajový status žen je norma. Nakonec základní morální pilíř západní civilizace, Bible, to podporuje. Ženských postav zde nalezneme velmi málo a když už se objeví, jsou převážně zobrazeny jako hříšnice. Někdy je

¹¹⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Woman,” *Working It Out*, eds. Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels (New York, Pantheon, 1977) xvi.

jejich duše zachráněna hodným mužem. V dějinách nebyl žádný muž vystaven restrikcím, kterým se ženy vždy v tichosti podrobovaly. Od středověkého honu na čarodějnice a rané Renesance přes využívání ženské pracovní síly, zákazu volebního práva a práva být zvolena. Dále omezování a překážky ve vzdělávací a profesionální sféře, vyloučení ze světa umění a mnoho dalších druhů diskriminace.

Navzdory historickým faktům zůstává Rich optimistkou. Tvrdí, že ženy dosáhly mnoho a budou v tom pokračovat. Podle Rich je odvaha dar, který by měl být udržován a používán pro dobro. Odvaha, tichý protest básnířky Adrienne Rich, je vtělena v její poezii. Ta se dokáže dotknout lidských srdcí, očišťujíc a činíc je silnějšími.