CHAPTER TWO

AN AESTHETICS IN PROCESS:
FROM IMITATION TO MASTERY

The poetry of Adrienne Rich often appears paradoxical to the readers, for it seems to say that “all that is worth expressing is the inexpressible,” “speaking the unspeakable” to authenticate its unique experience of reality (Moramarco vi). From the start, Rich’s poetry has been an unpredictable writing-in-process, a fact that Rich herself has emphasized repeatedly. Titles such as “From Patriarchy to Female Principle,” “The Moment of Change,” “Beginning Again,” “Adrienne Rich’s Power of Change,” and “Writing an Act of Re-vision” are typical of Rich’s criticism. As she states, her work, both poetry and prose, is “a process still going on” (PSN xv), “a continuing exploration” (BBP xii), and “a struggle to keep moving” (BBP 211). She has been aware of her writing as “a multilevelled process” (Werner 198). This process shows its potential for self-revision and change. Rich says, “I have been changed, my poems have changed through this process, and it continues” (FD: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984, xvi). The word ‘change’ emerges again and again in her titles: A Change of World (1951) marks an acceptance of the world’s changes and The Will to Change (1971) enunciates the possibility of changes in that world and in oneself.
Dating each of her poems by year since 1956, Rich reaffirmed her faith in this process-oriented aesthetics in her writings. Rich says, “I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself; I knew my life was changing, my work was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuing process” (BBP 180). Her attempts to unify the multiple levels of experience—personal and political; academic and aesthetic; emotional and intellectual—dictate her continuing emphasis on process. Rich describes her movement to a process-oriented aesthetic. In an interview with Wendy Martin, Rich admits that her prose outlines “her conscious understanding of her process” and her poetry outlines “the map of her passage from the unconscious into the sayable, into the actable” (An American Triptych 169). This chapter explores the linear progression of change in Rich’s aesthetic process: from the imitation of the graceful lyrical style of the major male poets of her early years to the development of a rebellious and radical voice. This has been done surveying poems and stories in Rich’s writings and occasionally alluding to her life experiences.

In her early years, more specifically until the fourth grade, Rich was educated at home according to the moral and aesthetic precepts of her father, Arnold Rich. He pushed her to excel in "the room with the books / where the father walks up and
down/ telling the child to work, work / harder than anyone has worked before” (YNL 16). Her father’s guidance helped Rich to become an accomplished writer at an early age. While her mother Helen kept her at piano rather relentlessly (OWB 224), her father, selecting two poets from his largely Victorian, Pre-Raphaelite library, taught her to write verse by copying every day from Blake and Keats. Her father had a great admiration for “formalism and strict meters,” and “was offended by so-called free verse” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 173). Thus, he set lofty ideals for his daughter in the art and craft of writing. The introduction to the Victorian writers like Tennyson, Keats, Arnold, Rossetti, Swinburne, Carlyle and Pater opened up a literary world with varying tastes. In the picture of the student poet drawn in her early poem “Juvenilia” (SD) Rich recalls herself as a dutiful schoolgirl docile to her father:

Again I sit, under duress, hands washed,

at your ink-stained oaken desk,

by the goose-neck lamp in the tropic of your books,

stabbing the blotting-pad, doodling loop upon loop,

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. (*CEP 156*)
With this docility and fervour Rich tried to imbibe the spirit of literary authenticity and unique individualism following her twentieth-century predecessors, Hilda Doolittle, Louis Bogan, Elinor Wylie and Marianne Moore. She considered herself privileged because she had started reading poetry at a very early age, even before her school days. At the same time she developed the habit of writing poems almost as long as she had been reading them. Rich explains,

"Today I have to say that what I know through making poems... the poem itself engenders new sensations, new awareness in me as it progresses. Perhaps a simple way of putting it would be to say that instead of poems about experiences I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it."

(ARP 89)

As an undergraduate, Rich learned poetic craft from the male poets she read. “My style was formed,” Rich summarises, “first by male poets: by the men I was reading as an undergraduate—Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNeice, Stevens and Yeats. What I chiefly learned from them was craft” (LSS 39- 40). Following their lead, she started writing under the influence of a male writing tradition. Rich can be seen as part of a mainstream
tradition of twentieth century male poetry: that of Yeats, Eliot, Williams and Auden.

Early in her career, Rich consciously conformed herself to the late modernist vision expressed in W.H. Auden’s “Foreword to A Change of World”:

So long as the way in which we regard the world and feel about our existence remains in all essentials the same as that of our predecessors, we must follow in their tradition; it would be just as dishonest for us to pretend that their style is inadequate to our needs as it would have been for them to be content with the style of the Victorians. (278)

Reading through the works of Rich, one gets the impression that she has always been eager to imitate the style of her masters: “in the decorous early pieces indebted to Auden, in the looser confessions under the thrall of Robert Lowell” (Logan 13).

As a young poet with a “universal vision of poetry as the expression of higher world view” (Spiegelman 149), Rich articulated the aesthetic precepts of Auden in her poem, “At a Bach Concert” (CW). Like much of her early work, this poem illustrates what Auden saw as the positive merit of her poetry, “the capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions” (Auden 278). Rich consciously imitated them by adopting their style and stance: “a metrical skill so flexible that each line seems
to meet its formal requirements with conversational ease and a posture of mature disillusionment, an austerely anti-Romantic emphasis in the limitations of human nature” (A. Morris, “Imitations and Identities” 138).

About her literary authenticity, Rich says, “I had grown up hearing and reading poems from a very young age, first as sounds, repeated, musical, rhythmically satisfying in themselves, the power of concrete, sensuously compelling images” (BBP 168). Her selected readings from the poems of Blake gave her a taste for the persistent rhythmic pattern and the melodious voice in her early writing. Rich realised that in Blake’s poems there is a sense of innocence and experience that goes beyond the limits of the words, for “the poem is created as experience, not as a reaction or defence against experience” (Howard 511). At the same time, she admits: “Poetry soon became more than music and images; it was also revelation, information, a kind of teaching. I believed I could learn from it” (BBP 169).

While Rich was still young, music and pure sounds fascinated her and she had a genuine admiration for any poet who could blend the poetry of the world with the poetry of sound. Rich readily agrees that she had grown up with a lot of poetry ranging from folk poetry to the popular nursery rhymes. “In my student years,” Rich recollects, “it was Yeats who seemed
supreme in this regard. There were lines of Yeats that were to ring in my head for years: Many times man lives and dies / Between his two eternities, / That of race and that of soul, / And ancient Ireland knew it all…” (BBP 173). Apart from Yeats and the modernists, she had two favourites among the 19th century English poets: Tennyson and D.G. Rossetti whose poetry she found lyrical and sensuous. In one of the interviews conducted by the Lennan Foundations, Rich says, “through them [D. G. Rossetti and Tennyson], I got a lot of music poetry into my blood” (Boland, “Adrienne Rich: Reading and Interview”). At that time Rich thought that the writers who found room in the anthologies were only the poets, and their greatness, to a certain extent, depended on the amount of poems that got published in the anthologies. She owed much to the anthologies, from Silver Pennies to the Oxford Book of English Verse (BBP 170).

Rich believed in the prophetic authority of the poets and thought that they were divinely inspired to speak the truth in the language of music. By then, Yeats had become her idea of the Great Poet, who could mesmerise the world more than any one else did, with the power of his imagination and the system of mythical belief. Thus, her personal world-view was shaped partly by the poetry she had read, a poetry written almost exclusively by the white Anglo-Saxon, Celts and the French.
The cultural atmosphere in which Rich grew up encouraged her to believe that poetry, in comparison with the rest of the forms of art, is a profound expression of metaphysical world-vision. At the same time, Rich believed that the poet achieves “universality and authority” as he or she infuses his or her dreams, fears, anxieties and expresses it in the language of ordinary man (BBP 171). “Obviously,” Rich says, “I believe language is capable of expressing both simple and complex intentions and meanings, and more—the physicality of our lives” (AP 117). It enables her to write with ease, by loosening the self from the constrictions of lived experience to “enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot” (LSS 43).

Rich was the product of the social and political forces of her time in her own unique ways. Surprisingly, in spite of the political and aesthetic controversies surrounding Rich’s work, critics agree with the major divisions of her career. In the light of the analysis of her works, critics describe these stages using various terminologies. Rich’s career has been seen as “a passage through phases of self-reconstruction, political engagement and feminism” (Spiegelman 174). From another angle it has been viewed as a psychological journey centred on her self; a fall from “controlled ambivalence into intense but indulgent fragmentation; a movement from patriarchy to the feminine principle” (Spiegelman 174). In her career there is a gradual
recognition of self as the crucial link between private and public experiences; a passage through “the stages of women’s isolation from victimisation to validation” (Spiegelman 175). Anne Newman argues for a subdivision of the third phase, emphasizing the development of a communal “we” in the place of the individualistic “I” in Rich’s writings. Peter Romonov seems to agree with a two-part division between Rich’s “early formalism and her later conversational poetry” (qtd. in Spiegelman 176). Despite such minor disagreements on the precise demarcation of periods, few critics would object seriously to a division of Rich’s career into three basic phases, with Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963) and Diving Into the Wreck (1973) as crucial transitional volumes. At the same time, her collection of poems, Your Native Land, Your Life (1986), strongly implies a third phase in progress.

Her first collection of poems, A Change of World (1951), which was selected by W. H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets Series, reveals the influence of Eliot, Lowell, Tate, Pound, Stevens, and Frost. When Auden selected this work for the Yale Younger poets Award, he took the occasion to stress a quality he would later see as poetry’s inexplicable purpose in Rich’s writings. Thus “the echoes of Frost, Yeats, Stevens, Robinson, Emily Dickinson and Auden himself in these first poems indicated her intelligence and discretion” (Gelpi 283). When
asked about the overt influence of the male writers on her style, Rich confessed, “I did not mind in some of these solacing poems, echoes of Auden or Yeats, feeling that what was beautiful was beautiful no matter who invented it; but there was, it was true, an ominous note which kept being interlaced with the poised rhythms” (qtd. in Vendler, “Ghostlier Demarcations” 300). A Change of World (1951) manifestly contains “artfully crafted poems about her experience and preoccupations as an undergraduate demonstrating command of poetic technique as a young poet” (Martin, An American Triptych 174). It had a set of “delicately apprehended and exquisitely remembered lines” (Vendler, “Ghostlier Demarcations” 300).

In A Change of World (1951) lines of some poems are organized into blank verse paragraphs. Some, however, are loose adaptations of the English sonnet. Rich uses, besides, a variety of stanza forms such as the heroic couplet and the triplet and her favourite metrical patterns include trimeter, tetrameter and pentameter. They demonstrate not only a mastery of versification but also, as Auden testifies, “an ear and an intuitive grasp of much subtler and more difficult matters like proportion, consistency of diction and tone, and the matching of these with the subject at hand” (278). She mastered, at least for the time being, a unique artistic style of her own befitting the themes she developed and the images she employed. An artistic use of
figurative techniques creates a powerful visual and verbal impact. With the excitement and enthusiasm of an adventurer, Rich shows in the slant rhymes and elegant concluding couplet her superb control of her craft. In an interview Rich says, “Technical competence was something I learned the way people learn arithmetic or to play scales” (Plotz 14).

The poems in *A Change of World* (1951) are supple, graceful, and clear, their merits, as Auden describes them, resembling those of well-trained school children: “The poems 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” (278-79). One might modify Auden’s statement and say that though her poems speak quietly and refrain from telling fibs, they do not tell the whole truth (A. Morris, “Imitations and Identities” 146). “They are,” Rich admits in an interview, “poems in which the unconscious things never got to the surface” (Plumly 30). Describing *A Change of World* (1951) as “a book of very well-tooled Poems, Rich innovated its craft in the act of covering” (Plumly 30). Since her language functioned as a kind of façade, her words and images concealed the emotions and obscured her search into her own consciousness. The voice in *A Change of World* (1951) manifestly resembles that of her professed masters:
Poems with garrulousness of the neurotic-violent Frost rub against poems with the sweet decorative archaisms of early Yeats, and the quick, caustic wit of W.H. Auden. From each of these poets, as to a lesser extent from Eliot, Stevens, and MacNiece, Rich picked up characteristic tricks and tones of language, elements she needed master before she could fully possess her own individual style. (A. Morris, “Imitations and Identities” 139)

As a woman writing in a male-dominating culture and deeply influenced by the poetry of Frost, Stevens, Auden, Yeats and Eliot, Rich naturally imitated their theme and style.

From Frost, Rich seems to have learned the rhythmic patterns with the fusion of melody and crisp conversation as in “Eastport to Block Island” (CW):

> Along the coastal waters, signals run  
> In waves of caution and anxiety.  
> We’ll try the catboat out another day.  
> So Danny stands in sea-grass by the porch  
> To watch a heeling dinghy, lone on grey,  
> Grapple with moods of wind that take the bay. (39)

Her association with Frost in partly self-imposed restrictions of metre in form and coherence in content is evident, especially in the lyrics like “What Ghosts Can Say” (CW):
When Harry Wylie saw his father’s ghost,
As bearded and immense as once in life,
Bending above his bed along after midnight,
He screamed and gripped the corner of the pillow
Till aunts came hurrying white in dressing gowns
To say it was a dream. He knew they lied.
The smell of his father’s leather riding crop
And stale tobacco stayed to prove it to him.
Why should there stay such tokens of a ghost
If not to prove it came on serious business? (22)

Her poems “The Perennial Answer” and “Autumn Equinox” are clearly influenced by Frost. Randall Jarrell describes “Autumn Equinox” as “almost the best Frost-influenced poem I have ever read” (“Review” 128). Like the poems of Frost, her poems tend to insist on “the dramatic necessity of immediate situation, a conversation or event which may at the same time provide the hints and indirections of parable” (A. Morris, “Imitations and Identities” 140). Rich once named Yeats as “my master, absolutely, when I was 21 years old” (Plumly 43). Yet his influence seems to have less impact on her than that of Frost.

Yeats’s influence on her is explicit in poems like “Stepping Backward” particularly in respect of vocabulary and rhythm in lines like these: “Good-bye 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” (CW 56). The images in “Let us return to imperfection’s school, / No longer wandering after Plato’s ghost, / Seeking the garden where all fruit is flawless, / We must at last renounce that ultimate blue / And take a walk in other kinds of weather” are typical of Yeats (CW 58). The casual nature of observations in poems like “Afterward,” echoes Yeats: “Now that your hopes are shamed, you stand / At last believing and resigned, / And none of us who touch your hand / Know how to give you back in hand” (CW 43). Of the more profound aspects of Yeats, his visionary temper and the vivid mythical belief system are not exhibited explicitly in these poems. But Rich was easily entranced by pure sound, no matter what it was saying. She confessed: “Any poet who mixes the poetry of the actual world with the poetry of sound interests and excites me more than I am able to say” (BBP 173).

Two poets whose vision Rich seems to have more fully adopted are Emily Dickinson and W.H. Auden. Dickinson is the only woman among the poets to whom Rich looked for direction and inspiration. The influence of Emily Dickinson is clearly discernible in Rich’s poetry as it developed through the decades. Dickinson’s poems seemed to Rich to have psychological as well as literary authenticity. Recalling that influence Rich frankly admits: “I have never lost the sense that it contains, through and beyond the force of its creator’s imagination, some nourishment I
needed then and still need today” (LSS 89). At twenty-one, however, these insights were reflexive and intuitive rather than integral in her writings. Rich does not list Dickinson among the poets who formed *A Change of the World* (1951) and there is only one poem which shows her direct influence. The impact, however, is clear and powerful. The poem “Unsounded,” a story of isolation, is written in a style that closely resembles that of Emily Dickinson. It builds on her opposition of sea and town, search and safety, myth and manners. The three quatrains of the poem, though not separated, rhyme *abcb*, and the poem begins: “Mariner unpracticed, / In this chartless zone/ Every navigator/ Fares unwarned, alone” (*CW* 66). The existential affirmation developed in the poem explores the innermost self and is an onerous, desolate and dangerous quest. This sea, search, and ‘chartless zone’ are the recurrent images in Dickinson and Rich seems to have adopted them from Dickinson.

Rich’s early poetry, like Auden’s, is largely a poetry of direct statement. In this respect, she follows the anti-Romantic lead of W.H. Auden. The theory of impersonality made explicit by the Eliotian dictum, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from personality” (Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* 176) forms the centre of Auden’s poetic theory and practice. And part of Auden’s praise for Rich is the result of what he sees as
“evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible” (Auden 278). This sense of detachment is clearly seen all through the volume, A Change of World. Imitating Auden, Rich writes with a sense of immediacy but lightly, didactically, and dryly, as in the following lines from “Air without Incense” (CW):

We eat this body and remain ourselves.

We drink this liquor, tasting wine, not blood.

Communion of no saints, mass without bell,

Air without incense, we implore at need.

There are questions to be answered, and the sky

Answers no questions, hears no litany.

We breathe the vapours of a sickened creed.

Ours are assassins deadlier than sin;

Deeper disorders starve the soul within. (33)

To a poet like Rich who aspires to free her soul from the grip of the existential threat and one who “breathes the vapours of a sickened creed,” (CW 33) the choice of complex poetic forms is inevitable. This kind of poetry “seemed to be substantiating Eliot’s prediction that poetry should take a turn to a stricter formalism than was needed in the `teens and `twenties” (Gelpi 283). The need to escape one’s personality may be particularly strong in poets like Auden and Rich whose inner experience is
profoundly anxious. Self-doubt, guilt, fear, anguish, the sense of isolation and betrayal, pressures, urgencies, anger, uncertainty, hesitation, complexities without resolution—all these are appropriate to the world Auden inherited from Eliot’s generation and Rich from Auden’s. The echo of this voice in Rich’s early work is part of that inheritance because it was, in Auden’s words, “not a parrot-like imitation without understanding but the expression of a genuine personal experience” (278). Her mimicking of the style and substance of preceding poets is the first step in the creation of her own.

With reference to *A Change of the World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) it has been observed that from Frost, and Auden in particular, Rich inherits craftsmanly formalism as well as emotional treatment of material. “We had to take the world as it was given,” she says regretfully, “while an emotion more violent than resignation stirs beneath the surface” (qtd. in Ostriker, “Her Cargo” 7). Auden perceives craftsmanship not merely as a talent for versification but as an intuitive grasp of much subtler and more difficult matters like proportion, consistency of diction and tone, and the clubbing of these with the subject at hand (278). In the poems in *A Change of the World* (1951), Auden readily admits that Rich’s poems meet all these subtle qualities. They do not attempt to disown the familial affinity to the male tradition: “A Clock in the Square,” for
instance, squarely fits into the design of the poetry of Robert Frost, “Design in Living Colors” sounds similar to the poetry of Yeats. At the same time they are not the blind imitation of those established poets but the powerful expression of her own authentic personal experience (Auden 278).

Poetry being the expression of unique personal experience, “the poet achieved ‘universality’ and authority through tapping his, or occasionally her, own dreams, longings, fears, desires” (BBP 171). When asked what holds the poems within a collection together, Rich answered with an interesting metaphor: “They are often ways of taking hold of the wild animal at different points, or trying different strategies to seize the animal, some of them succeeding better than others may be toward the zeroing in on the experience” (Plumly 33). The persistent experience confronted in A Change of World (1951) is susceptibility. On the one hand there is a menacing world, a world vulnerable to wars, death, deceptions, power struggles and protests; on the other, is a poetic self which did not make this world, does not especially understand it, and seems to leave little or no effect upon its workings. Each poem in the volume can be read as a strategy for containing this experience. The poems in this first volume are heavily rhymed and carefully controlled. Years later, Rich admitted that praise for meeting traditional standards gave
her the courage to be innovative and to break social and poetic
conventions in her later work.

In “At a Bach Concert” a sense of rebelliousness remains
central to Rich’s aesthetics until the publication of The Will to
Change (1971). Moreover, it counteracts with the act of art: on
the one hand Rich shows compassion, tenderness, feeling, and
desire and on the other, discipline, severity, form, and necessity.
As per this formula, the poetic composition should reflect the
generation and elaboration of polar realms. What happens
instead is revitalizing and revealing: the terms are distorted and
the poem builds in a series of oxymora anticipated by an
ambiguity in the first two lines—“Coming by evening through the
wintry city / We said that art is out of love with life” (CW 54).
The phrase “out of love with life” may imply that art emerges
from love of life or it may mean that art comes out of love with
life. The poem seems to say both, for art is “tenderly severe,”
unites “necessity / with all that we desire” and renews belief in
love yet masters feeling. If “a too-compassionate art is half an
art” (CW 54), the implication is that a too-formal art is also
partial.

This question, which is central to Rich’s life and her
poems, recurs frequently in the twenty years between A Change
of World (1951) and The Will to Change (1971). During those
years Rich tried to merge these two major concerns: the first, of
course, her identity as a writer; the second, her identity as a woman. The part of her that wrote poems, Rich came to see as “the active principles, the energetic imagination, and the force which generated discipline, severity, form and necessity” (“WWDA” 25). The part of her that was ‘womanly’ on the other hand, she identified with compassion, tenderness, feeling, and desire. In discussing her poem “Orion,” a poem that took shape from the conflict confronted in “At a Bach Concert,” she puts the argument this way:

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 egotism–a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. We know that the alternatives are false ones–that the word “love” itself is in need of re-vision. (LSS 46-47)

In the 1950’s, when Rich’s first two books, A Change of World (1951) and The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems (1955), were written, the prevailing idea of poetry was substitutional: that is to say, one had to have something to say and in order to say it, one had to employ proper images. The poetic theory, in this view, was the art of finding equations for emotions and synchronising them with the form and content. In Eliot’s famous phrase, it is the art of “finding an ‘objective correlative’;” in other
words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that “particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” 124). This reduces the whole natural world to “a collection of bric-a-brac from which the poet takes selections to represent emotional states” (A. Morris, “Imitations and Identities” 152).

This poetic theory implied a two-step process: first the formulation of an idea, then the selection of an image to present it. This theory of poetry is active in Rich’s early works and she made it clear in a statement at a poetry reading in 1964:

In the period in which my first two books were written I had a much more absolutist approach to the universe than I now have.... There were occasional surprises, occasions of happy discovery that an unexpected turn could be taken, but control, technical mastery, and intellectual clarity were the real goals, and for many reasons it was satisfying to be able to create this kind of formal order in poems. (ARP 89)

This strategy seems to function effectively and emerges in the form of direct statements, but in returning to her early poetry she came to the realization that they form only one layer of experience. Believing that “poems are like dreams into which,
you put what you don’t know you know” (LSS 40), she explored the dynamism of each layer of experience and the fluid energy behind the statements.

It was energy not fully visible but active and evolving throughout her writing. Later in an interview at SUNY College at Brockport Rich confesses:

About the time I was writing The Will to Change, I went back and reread my first book, which was written before I was 21, and I was just amazed by what I found there in terms of concerns and themes that I didn’t even know I had at the time. At that time I thought I was writing very consciously; I was writing as a craftswoman. What I found was that a lot of those poems were concerned with things that I have been more laterally concerned with on a more conscious level. But they were already there. (qtd. in Puolin Jr. 44)

From revealing confessions like these and from her decision to reprint and anthologise the poem it is clear that “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (CW) is an important and powerful poem that gives expression to her poetic theory. “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (CW) is a poem about a woman artist by a woman artist. It presents the images of women alienated from themselves, their husbands and from community. Aunt Jennifer spends her days embroidering
tigers that “prance across a screen” and “do not fear the men beneath the tree” (CW 19) while her own life is hopelessly made complex by the prevailing customs and traditions:

Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.

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. (19)

The poem’s style and structure favours a masculine form rather than a feminine one. It is straightforward and to the point as its brevity seems to indicate. This poem also employs a very formal aabbcc rhyme scheme, which adds to the poem’s formality and objectivity. The overall meaning is expressed clearly without any obliqueness. This could be partly due to her study of Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNeice, Stevens, and Yeats from whom she learned her “craft” (LSS 40-41). This craft that Rich adopted from these male writers was her style and formality. Written as a narrative, Aunt Jennifer is clearly expressed as a woman under the influence of a man. In the second stanza Rich describes Aunt Jennifer's hand as being too heavy to pull the needle through the wool because of the “massive weight of Uncle's wedding band” (CW 19). The “massive
weight” is man’s control over his wife and the “wedding band” is the symbol of this control. The third stanza also supports the idea of men’s control over women when Rich describes Aunt Jennifer dead being still “ringed with ordeals she was mastered by” (CW 19).

The closed couplets arranged in quatrains give the poem a balance and the rhymes serve to reinforce the reason: the ring on her hand is indeed a constricting band, as the tigers that she made are her effort to be proud and unafraid. Again, “the tight rhyme scheme serves to control the turbulent emotions that lie beneath the surface” (Martin, An American Triptych 180). The theory in and through the poem is Yeats’ theory of the mask: “the self generates its opposite in art” (A. Morris, “Imitations and Identities” 154). If Aunt Jennifer is as meek as her tigers are sleek, as dull as they are glossy, as baffled as they are bold, then perhaps we might infer by extension that the poet is in turn her opposite. “It was important to me,” Rich has written, “that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible—distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone—even by putting the woman in a different generation” (LSS 40).

In addition, Rich’s personal and artistic potentials were considerably enhanced by the exposure she got during her college education and the wide range of literary and cultural
expeditions to different countries. Primarily, as an American woman of the white Jewish upper class, Rich possessed autonomy in thinking and freedom in mobility that were unknown to most women in earlier generations. Because of the extraordinary individual freedom she experienced as a student and young woman, Rich must have been depressed and outraged when she realised that she would have to set aside her artistic talents for the demands of motherhood imposed on her by the society of the time.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Adrienne Rich experienced an extraordinary conflict between her need for love and her desire to write. Rich was aware of this split and wrote: “A life I didn’t choose / chose me: - even / my tools are the wrong ones / for what I have to do” (CEP 193). Influenced by the open-ended writing of such poets as Ezra Pound and Charles Olson as well as the confessional mode of Robert Lowell and John Berryman, Rich had evolved a dynamic and progressive style of her own. In Rich’s writings, these are by no means the only male presence. Even at a later stage, the verses in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) pay a curious homage to the male tradition: “Heroines,” for example, is written in the staggered tercet or three-step line first used by William Carlos Williams. To take another example, certain of her poems read like updated versions of the English Classics. In “What is possible” for
instance, the poet’s contemplation of “the clear night in which two planets / seem to clasp each other” (*WP* 27), recalls “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold.

Since writing has traditionally been considered the prerogative of the male artist, Rich was deeply disturbed by the adverse demands of societal roles and her powerful imagination. So she tried to create a literary world that could sustain the changed consciousness and, thus a changed life. In an interview Rich remarked that poetic form should be the expression of this interaction of unconscious and conscious experience:

A poem can't exist without form, but it should be the result of a dynamic or dialogue between what is coming out of the unconscious and what is coming out of experience. This dialogue is expressed through the medium of language, and everything that means--rhythm, sound, tone, repetition, and the way words can ring off each other and clash against each other.

(Martin, TCWM)

Thus she started writing poems in ornamental language and lyrical texture with assonance, consonance, slant rhyme, and other literary devices. Her poetry highlighted the political slogans of the antiwar and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It was rich with the literal quotations from women's diaries, letters, and essays. It captured very well the incongruous
diction from conversation and internal monologue that express the suppressed anger and feeble voices of women who have been silenced or left neglected in a male dominant society. For Rich, “poetry is not simply an aesthetic rendering of experience, but it is also a way of changing the world” (Martin, An American Triptych 169).

Like Blake, Rich is a poet with a strong missionary zeal and a didactic enthusiasm. “Her poetic forms and the techniques of her discursiveness derive from political obsessiveness and, more specifically, from anger” (Spiegelman 176). It is anger, however, the correlative of which appears to be love, that compels the poet to expose the duplicities of language in order to tell the truth:

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 obsessed
with Love, our subject:
we’ve trained it like ivy to our walls
baked it like bread in our ovens
worn it like lead on our ankles
watched it through binoculars as if
it were a helicopter
bringing food to our famine
or the satellite
of a hostile power. (DW 40)

Personal anger, over the circumstances of her own life and those of the society, moulded Rich's poetic and social vision, a vision that includes the public and historical dimensions of female experience. Rich has broadened her ground to include the lives of all women regardless of their social status or historical context. This community of women includes "the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mother, the dishwasher, the pregnant teenager, the teacher, the grandmother, the prostitute, the philosopher, the waitress" (ARP 204).

"Anger," Rich once remarked in conversation, "can be a kind of genius if it's acted on" (Spiegelman 148), and it is as a poet of and for anger that Rich has acted out her genius. Acting on anger establishes the necessary grounds for emotional and poetic identity from which other gentler emotions may pour. Rich writes, "And today, much poetry by women–and prose for that matter–is charged with anger. I think we need to go through that anger" (LSS 48). In her works, notably Necessities of Life (1966), Rich extends the process outlined by Julia Kristeva in "Powers of Horror": "I expel myself out, I abject myself, within the same
motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (NL 63). In
doing so, Rich has discovered not only an appropriate form or a
mere outlet for her anger but created a poetic self.

For Rich, anger is an emotion closest to reason. The
anger that gives vent to logic should provide a strong basis for
didactic poetry. But it is proved experientially that anger
frequently inhibits or prevents articulation: “it may wall the wells
of speech, or erupt with a fury that overflows all boundaries, but
we seldom associate it with the formal control demanded by
poetry” (Spiegelman 156). Rich herself, recognising the ironic
frustrations of working out of such an emotional deadlock, has
experienced this truth. The poet cannot speak “words thick with
unmeaning in order to clarify, to reduce, and clearly to
propound” (Spiegelman 161). Rich has radically made use of the
lyrical forms as a vehicle for her political themes.

In 1955, two years after she was married, Rich published
*The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* and it received the Ridgely
Torrence Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America.
Again, Rich was praised for her graceful style, her poetic
modesty, and her skill in the use of diction and tone. Praising
the volume that showed grace under pressure, Randall Jarrell
described her as “an enchanting poet,” “a sort of princess in a
fairy tale,” and exclaimed that "she lives nearer to perfection . . .
than ordinary poets do” (“New Books in Review” 102). This
graceful style is reflected in the poem, “Lucifer in the Train” that wittily invokes the first traveller to an alien land for guidance:

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

………………………………………

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.  (CEP 75)

The alienation in this poem and the poems like this inspires creativity: “Art requires a distance: let me be / Always the connoisseur of your perfection” (CEP 113). The human heart requires a sense of innocence and purity to repair a world of inevitable imperfection and disappointment. Art defends against invasions from outside and threats from within. This youthful endurance of suffering and hardship without showing one’s feelings or complaints shows the acceptance of the human reality, an ideal subject for poetry.

However, in poems like “The Roofwalker” (SD), Rich begins to abandon this “infirmity of the romantic mind” (Spiegelman 188) because she increasingly refuses to take the world as it is given. In her late twenties Rich began to realise that the rules by
which she was living a privileged life as a model Cambridge mother and faculty wife were false. She could see herself as Aunt Jennifer. So she disavowed the rules for poetry that enabled her to tell fibs in her first two books: “I had suppressed ... certain disturbing elements to gain that perfection of order” (qtd. in Spiegelman 188), she later admitted. As was already seen, her early works contain slavish imitations of poets like Yeats, Frost and Auden. In her struggle for identity, a rebellion against these masters who gave her words, not images, inauthentic to her own experience will not go unnoticed.

In the second phase of her career, with the publication of the 1963 volume, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, Rich announced a major change in her stance towards the world. She begins to struggle more with her internal voice and lets the shape of that struggle give shape to her poems. They are more conversational and spontaneously metaphorical. Rich writes in a more individual style in her third volume, more openly of her personal concerns, using poetic forms more suited to her emotions after her initial publishing success. In addition to breaking the bonds of traditional versification, Rich begins to probe her experiences more deeply to discover the sources of her conflict as a woman writer who is also a mother and wife. For the first time, she writes from a point of view that is clearly a woman's; Rich herself has observed that until this volume, she
“had tried very much not to identify myself as a female poet” (LSS 44).

*Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* records her resentment and dismay at the disparity between her aspirations as an accomplished poet and the traditional social values. Rich’s contemporaries, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, also experienced considerable anxiety and distress owing to their conflicting roles as women and as serious artists, but unlike Rich neither of them evolved an analytic approach that enabled them to understand the socio-cultural roots of their guilt and despair. Rich’s references in *Snapshots* to Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and other autonomous women indicate that she was already working within a radical framework that enabled her to recognize and reject self-destructive emotional responses.

As Rich begins to become independent of the embedded values and social expectations that have previously limited her range of poetic expression, she abandons the forms of her earlier decorative poetry. In “Double Monologue” (*SD*) Rich writes:

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.
How much expense of time and skill
which might have set itself
to angelic fabrications! All merely
to chart one needle in the haymow?

Find yourself and you find the world? (33)

Here her lines are more loosely structured and her ornate rhyme
schemes give way to slant rhymes that do not contain and
control emotion but express complicated ambivalences of her
thought. Rich rebels against male authorities and commits
herself to the primacy of her own perceptions.

The bolder experiments resulting in new compelling forms
and content were visible in her next volume, Necessities of Life
(1966). Her authentic voice speaks lucidly and powerfully, with a
tensed excitement that doesn’t give way to pestering self-righteousness or obscurity. Human relations are studied with
compassion, anger, and sorrow and her poems reflect her
fluctuating moods. Rich’s career really began when she emerged
from the shadows of influence and began to speak in the
impassioned rhythms of her own reveries: “As the Sixties became
more clamorous, however, Rich, like other poets, found that the
eye of intimacy, needed reinforcement from other media: the
painter’s focus, the movie camera’s accelerated montage, the eye
of dream and the eye of madness” (Goldstein 365). Rich remarks,

The book I published after that, Snapshots of a
Daughter in -Law, in which I was changing my forms,
changing my structures, writing about women’s lives, writing about my own life very directly, very nakedly for that time.... I was also very conscious of male critics then.... It was as though they were telling me, ‘You did so well in book two, but you flunked in book three.’ But I knew I was strong as a poet stronger in my conviction with myself. (“Adrienne Rich” 44)

In comparison with her earlier poems, though a powerful language and personal rhythms characterise the writings in the 1960s, her Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law is less forceful. Rich herself admits that her voice is still tentative: “The poem was written in a longer, looser mode than I’d ever trusted myself with before. It strikes me now as too literary, too dependent on allusion; 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’ ” (LSS 44-45). Nevertheless, Rich began to find a personal centre and a unique poetic style. As Albert Gelpi aptly observes, this volume marks “a penetration into experience that makes for distinguishing style” (qtd. in LSS 133).

About Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963), Rich says, “My words reach you as through a telephone / where submarine echo of my voice / blurts knowledge you can’t use” (CEP 190). In this volume, Rich’s lines loosen up into free verse; we may assume various influences, from Eliot to Lowell to Plath, but the
modern movement as a whole was on its way towards dispensing with rhyme, and it was inevitable that “Rich should forsake her sweetness, cadence, and stanzas once her life began to refuse its earlier arrangements” (Vendler, “Ghostlier Demarcations” 301). Rich’s effects now depend only on metaphor, juxtaposition, and a skilful adaptation of lineation:

like a fish
half-dead from flopping
and almost crawling
across the shingle,
almost breathing
the raw, agonising
air
till a wave
pulls it back blind into the triumphant sea. (PSN 64)

In “To the Airport” (SD) the structure of the poem becomes more experimental; her poetic line becomes longer and looser, and she begins to find her individual voice. The student who travelled freely in Europe is now a young wife and mother who must stay close to home because her own life has been constricted by domestic necessity and the city loses its excitement:

Death’s taxi crackles through the mist. The cheeks
You dreamed us, City, and you let us be.

Grandiloquence, improvidence, ordure, light,
hours that seemed years, and ours—and over all
the endless wing of possibility,
that mackerel heaven of yours, fretted with all
our wits could leap for, envy batten on. (CEP 166)

In this poem the city is a projection of the poet’s feelings about herself. Here “inner and outer realities converge as her subjective inertia. It affects her perception of a world that once hummed with vitality for her” (Martin, “Another View of the ‘City Upon a Hill’ ” 251).

As she becomes a radical poet with a unique individual voice, Rich insists on the need to transform all relationships in order to create a new world where equality becomes a reality, not a myth, and right relationships a norm, not a dream. This transformation of relationships, Rich felt, requires a restructuring or re-forming, a seeing again or re-visioning of the social network of relationships and the linguistic generalisations that govern the fabric of the society. It involves a paradigm shift, a deep plunge into the repressed experiences, individuating these perceptions, and compiling them into daily life. It creates new awareness, new patterns of meaning and a consequent
renewed existence. Since consciousness responds to language, Rich has committed herself to writing a poetry that will be a catalyst for social change. As she has observed: “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. Poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe” (LSS 248).

*Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) forms “a part of the personal agenda and political enterprise whereas her later works show the glimpses of the depths of the interior self as well as of the world of politics and social activism” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 181). The melodious smooth-running structure and carefully rhymed stanzas of the earlier work are replaced in the title poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” by staccato rhythms of modern life images. The poems in this volume connect Rich to the tradition of T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell and Charles Olson. Rich begins to free herself from the traditional values that constrained her personal freedom from social expectations that had previously restricted her range of poetic expression by rebelling against the forms of her earlier decorative poetry:

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Time wears us old utopians.
I now no longer think
“truth” is the most beautiful of words.
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Today, when I see “truthful”
written somewhere it flares
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?  (CEP 158)

Here truth’s twists and turns reflect Rich’s admirable realism and the restraint in her attitude.

In comparison with the earlier pattern of composition, the loosely-structured lines in this poem with slanting rhymes give expression to complex and ambivalent thoughts. With the publication of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) Rich planned to break away from socially accepted forms in which “she feels the lives and energy of women and men are essentially controlled by a masculine ethos that denies the inherent value of all but a few powerful men” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 183). Rich wrote several years later,

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour—determine what part women shall or
shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere
subsumed under the male. (OWB 57)

Rich was aware of her great responsibility as a poet; she
was at the same time dissatisfied with herself for not being fully
able to fulfill it. In “The Roofwalker” (SD) she portrays a life of
daring self exposure, a passive submission to the rules dictated
against the act of her will. Again, she questions the adequacy of
maps as guides to truth. Though she is identifying with the
builders by necessity, she doesn’t trust the intrinsic value of this
‘roofwalker’ metaphor:

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. (CEP 193-94)

The poem treats poetry as a vehicle to express the poet’s life;
work is never selected but somehow dictated. Her choice is not
her own and her vocabulary is limited.

In the title poem, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” the
speaker exposes the futility of the utilitarian existence of women
in a society that makes them ready to disown their merits and potential for the accomplishments of others:

    Sigh no more, ladies.
    Time is male
    and in his cups drinks to the fair.
    Bemused by gallantry, we hear
    our mediocrities over-praised,
    
    every lapse forgiven, our crime
    only to cast too bold a shadow
    or smash the mould straight off. (148)

At this instance Rich makes references to strong women who have been left neglected in the dark passages of history without freedom of thought and action. She cites the examples of the British Queen Boadicea, who according to Tacitus, led an attack against the Romans in A.D.62, and of Mary Wollstonecraft, who advocated the equality of education and social rights for women; both were called “harpy, shrew, and whore” (SD 147).

This awareness leads Rich to *Leaflets: Poems, 1965-68* (1969) which expresses her internal conflicts resulting in the mixing up of her private and public life: on the one hand, a type of receptivity attained by associating herself with the life in the mainstream of the society and on the other, the quest for an identity as a poet. Her active participation in the
institutionalised life of the society and her greater responsibility as a poet made her aware of the unique identity and mission. It gave shape to her thinking pattern and gave her the strength to stand for the people who have been left neglected or whose voices have been unheard in the history of literature. She writes of the prospective threat that might extinguish her identity:

Death’s in the air,
we all know that. Still, for an hour,
I would like to be gay. How could a gay song go?
Why that’s your secret, and it shall be mine
We are our words, black and bruised and blue.
Under our skins, we’re laughing. (Leaflets 21)

Rich is aware of the prevailing situations that pose threats to her identity. In spite of that knowledge she wants to be contented because she knows that she can speak for herself and for others.

In Leaflets (1969), Rich wishes to create literary forms that give expression to her intimate desires and the aspirations close to her heart, and she rejects conventional masculine aesthetics which arbitrarily distances art and life. Asserting that poetry has the power to transform lives, Rich writes, “I wanted to choose words that even you / would have to be changed by” (L 42). Since she cannot escape from a traditional aesthetics, she calls for a reintegration of the personal and the political in order to create new forms of civilisation. According to Rich,
the impulse to write good poetry is an expression of the desire to reweave the fabric of human lives. In an interview Rich said that in *Leaflets* (1969) she was “rebelling against poetic conventions” (Martin, TCWM), and the structure of a short poem, “Picnic” reflects her effort to create a free style:

Sunday in Inwood Park

the picnic eaten

the chicken bones scattered

for the fox we’ll never see

the children playing in the caves

My death folded in my pocket

like a nylon raincoat

What kind of sunlight is it

that leaves the rocks so cold? (*Leaflets* 36)

Along with this change in the style there is a corresponding change in her tone that suits the context and the content.

*Leaflets* (1969) also records the political crises of the 1960s: the terror of the Vietnam War, the revolt in Algeria, the student uprisings in France and the United States. For example, the third section of the collection, “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib” evokes disruption caused by the social and political crises. In her introductory note on the ghazals, Rich says, “each couplet is autonomous and independent of the others. The continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing back and
forth among the couplets in any single *ghazal* (Leaflets 59). In this Arabic verse form that consists of a series of five independent but interrelated couplets, Rich tries to depict the insecurity and anxiety which prevailed in the fragmented world in which she lives.

Through the images of daily urban life Rich tries to conscientize the masses about the tyrannical situation they are in. Leisurly but tense conversations in Central Park that express the growing dissatisfaction with the policies of the political system, and graffiti, another expression of rebellious attitude against the prevailing inequality in the society, remind that everything is not well with the world:

> In Central Park we talked of our own cowardice.
> How many times a day, in this city, are those words spoken?

> If these are letters, they will have to be misread.
> If scribblings on a wall, they must tangle with all the others.
> ‘Fuck reds    Black Power    Angel loves Rosita’
> –and a transistor radio answers in Spanish: *Night must fall*. (L 62-68)

Here the form and structure of “Ghazals” conform very well to the thought expressed in the poem. Informal syntax, political
slogans, and renderings in Spanish language convey “a sense of the cultural alienation, mental fragmentation and indifference” (Diehl 534).

In “Nightbreak” (Leaflets), the poet feels one with the victims of war; war has left wounds in their body and tormenting scars on their psyche:

In the bed the pieces fly together
and the rifts fill or else
my body is a list of wounds
symmetrically placed
a village
blown open by planes
that did not finish the job. (48)

Here the spaces between the words that look as significant as the words themselves show Rich’s experiment with the language. The gaps between the phrases suggest a groping for understanding; the broken lines express the tension inherent in her struggle to find a language that will express her concern for a meaningful existence.

The poems in The Will to Change: Poems, 1968-70, (1971) which earned her the Shelley Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America, mark Rich’s sense of rebellion against the double standards with which women have been treated in the society. They also reflect the tremendous change that occurred
in the poet’s personal life and her decision to respond to its threatening challenges. In 1970 she took her ways with the marriage with Alfred Conrad, the Harvard economist. Later in the same year, he committed suicide. That tragedy in her life and its consequences find expression in the fragmented lines and images of “Shooting Script” (WC):

We are bound on the wheel of an endless conversation.
Inside this shell, a tide waiting for someone to enter.
A monologue waiting for you to interrupt it.
A man wading into the surf.
The dialogue of the rock with the breaker.
The wave changed instantly by the rock; the rock changed by the wave returning over and over.
The dialogue that lasts all night or a whole lifetime.

(CEP 401)
The inevitability of endless conversation, along with the alienation one feels towards oneself and others in the form of pent up feelings is expressed through the images of waves and rocks.

Rich’s experiments with various means of communication as an alternative to traditional poetic methods are also evident in poems like “Images for Godard” (WC). She incorporated the techniques of New Wave film makers, including rapid succession of images, freeze frames, and jump cuts (Young 359). At this
stage Rich unwillingly bypasses her belief in the possibility of change through political demonstration and action. The oppressive reality represented by the monolithic structure of the city seems too insignificant to effect any improvement in the conditions of the daily lives of its people. Since Rich cannot save her culture, at least not immediately, she is resolved to plan new strategies. “Replete with images of fragmentation and dissociation, “Images for Godard” marks the poet’s intention to explore new territory” (Martin, “Another View of the ‘City Upon a Hill’ ” 254).

Beginning with *Leaflets* (1969) and increasing in tempo with *The Will to Change* (1971), the poems become profusely ornamented with imagery. Public and private worlds come into conflict with each other in jarring images like the absurd juxtapositions of reports from Vietnam and commercial messages on the evening news. Through this innovation Rich finds her way to an aesthetics best described by Charles Olson: “poetry, to be vital, must have the rapidity and variety of natural energy itself” (qtd. in Goldstein 372). Rich’s poetry becomes more fluid and cinematic. She composes a large number of “ghazals”. In these and other experiments, fragmentation and disassociation bring the reader closer to the mechanism of the creative process, at the expense of a satisfying but in Rich’s view, “a reactionary completion of thought” (Goldstein 373). As with all
ideologies, the principal requirement of a poet is minute articulation of thought and feeling, and Rich is doing that in an observable manner. At the same time, Rich’s new conception of forms brings with it new dangers: “obscurity is so built-in to the non-sequential method of composition and it must be considered the result of mastery of craftsmanship, not one of its faults” (Goldstein 373).

The publication of *Diving into the Wreck: Poems, 1971-72* (1973) marks the third phase in the writing career of Rich. Her effort to achieve a new understanding of her personal and political needs is perhaps best expressed in this work. This volume won the National Book Award in 1974 and has been praised by Helen Vendler for its “courage in the refusal to write in forms felt to be outgrown” (“Mapping the Air” 153). For Rich it was an occasion to give recognition to the community of women. Instead of emphasising her individual accomplishments and personal aspirations, she highlighted the achievements of black women writers. In her speech on the occasion of the National Book Award, Rich expresses her commitment to the ideal of cooperation among women and her efforts to bring equality as a prevailing order in the society. Accepting the award in the name of all women, Adrienne Rich read a statement written with two other nominees, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde:
We . . . together accept this award in the name of all women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain ... . We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every colour, identification or derived class. (ARP 204)

The effort that she put into the realization of this lofty ideal shows her decision to search for her roots in the community of women and find the rudiments of her cultural past. It is graphically presented in the title poem, “Diving into the Wreck”. In the depths of the sea, the origin of life, Rich explores the wreck of a ship, a multivalent metaphor for the remnants of Western culture, the poet’s past, and her subconscious life. As Alicia Ostriker observes, “this watery submersion is an inversion of heroic male ascents and conquests” (“The Thieves of Language” 72). The uneven structure and the direct statements of the first stanza resolutely describe the preparations for the dive “I put on / the body-armor of black rubber”, “There is a ladder / The ladder is always there,” “I go down. / Rung after rung...” (DW 22). This journey is a part of an enterprise that equips the poet to confront “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth” (DW 23). To these
unknown depths of the sea the poet has brought remnants of her culture to help her survive and understand her journey. She has the loaded camera to record the details of her findings and the sharpened knife to defend her from invisible perils of the sea. The forcefulness of *Diving into the Wreck* comes from the wish not to huddle the wounded, but to explore the caverns, scars, and depths of the wreckage. At first these explorations must reactivate all the old wounds, inflame the old scar tissue, awaken all the suppressed anger, and inactivate the old language invented for dealing with the older self (Vendler, “Ghostlier Demarcations” 170).

During this period Rich’s primary concern was to ennoble human existence by voicing her protest against the dehumanising and depersonalising aspects of life. Part ten of “The Phenomenology of Anger” (*DW*) conveys the poet’s despair about contemporary urban life. Rich takes the subway as a terrifying descent into the bowels of Manhattan:

> how we are burning up our lives testimony:
> the subway
> hurtling to Brooklyn
> her head on her knees
> asleep or drugged
> ‘la v’ia del tren subterr`aneo es peligrosa’
many sleep
the whole way
others sit
staring holes of fire into the air
others plan rebellion. (DW 31)

The subway is a metaphor for the destructive flight of city life. The Spanish the quotation literally says “the way of the underground train is dangerous”. The pun on ‘way’ underscores both “the literal and symbolic damage done by an increasingly depersonalized, mechanized society that leaves its citizens insensitive by frustration and despair” (Martin, “Another View of the ‘City Upon a Hill’ ”153).

In “A Primary Ground” (DW) selecting Woolf’s To the Lighthouse as the epigraph of the poem and referring to Mr. Ramsey’s devouring ego and his longing for sympathy in order to be assured of his genius, Rich surveys the sense of hollowness of conventional relationships in a mechanized society:

And this is how you live: a woman, children
protect you from the abyss
you move near, turning on the news
eating Thanksgiving with its pumpkin teeth
drinking the last wine
from the cellar of your wedding. (DW 38)
In “Translations” (DW) Rich describes “a woman of my time / obsessed / with Love, our subject: / we’ve trained it like ivy to our walls” (DW 40). Referring to the idealised romantic love existing in the mythology in “From a Survivor” (DW), she remarks that true relationships should be built upon the firm foundations of mutual love and respect which, she feels, is impossible in a society that exploits women. Rich could imagine an alternative world devoid of exploitations and inequality: a world in harmony with nature where one can be true to one’s self. She articulates the necessity for freeing herself from the boundaries of convention to make a new world:

I would have loved to live in a world
of women and men gaily
in collusion with green leaves, stalks,
building mineral cities, transparent domes,
little huts of woven grass
each with its own pattern—
a conspiracy to coexist
with the Crab Nebula, the exploding
universe, the Mind— (DW 30)

Rich’s next volumes of poems, The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977 (1978) and A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981) attempt to experiment with both the content and form toward a gentle poetics as opposed to the
aggressions of the patriarchal tradition of Western poetry. The language becomes more prosaic and rhetorical, at times giving way to crisp conversation. The poems are more concerned with the gender-based differences in language. Thus language moves between tones of irony and direct assertions as it is seen in these lines: “No one sleeps in this room without / the dream of a common language” (DCL 8). Consequently, Rich shifts from the intimate voice of inner conversations to the rhetorical formulations of the need for an alternative form of power. Although the reader may initially be puzzled by this disjunction as she moves from poem to poem, the two modes are interdependent; for “the apparently heterogeneous voices cohere around a common purpose–to strive toward overcoming the delimiting properties of language itself” (Diehl 533).

_The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977_ (1978) is divided into three sections: “Power”, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” and “Not Somewhere Else, But Here”. Each section has a different focus. The poems in the first group, “Power,” highlight the outstanding contributions of women; the second group, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” is a tribute to the shared lives of women; the third group, “Not Somewhere Else, But Here,” analyses history in order to explore its impact on the lives of women. The values Rich has embraced thematically in her books include female friendship and love, outspokenness,
working for reform, conversation, moral outrage, persistence in work, introspection, and memory. These have as their aesthetic counterparts a devotion to the plain style and to an endless earnestness of tone. As Randall Jarrell once wittily said, “Her poetry so thoroughly escapes all of the vices of modernist poetry that it has escaped many of its virtues too” (qtd. in Vendler, “Mapping the Air” 152).

These poems also mirror the conviction that only by choosing one’s own life freely and by making one’s choice of a language can woman redefine poetry. It closes with Rich’s assertion of the autonomy she seeks and the associated myths she creates through them:

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

(DCL 36)

In The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977 language itself appears to be changing its meaning. Through the metaphor of dream Rich asks the readers to dream collectively, suspend their waking sense of time as if it were in a dream. As a clever veteran explorer of the unconscious, she advises her readers to formally consider the dream as the single metaphoric
device that will guide them to consciousness. Accordingly readers are warned: “we are not talking, after all, about the common language, but about the dream of such a language, that familiar and safe old vehicle” (Muske 80).

The third section of *The Dream of a Common Language* “Not Somewhere Else, But Here” contains poems written over the three-year period 1974-77. It does not have a chronological or thematic order. Recurring themes and images, a common feature of this volume, reiterate the idea of the need for relationship, for community and for the power of women. Rhythmic pattern with long pauses between phrases signifies the loss of connection, isolation, and fear: “the blood shrinks to the heart / the head severed it does not pay to feel” (*DCL* 39). The language is lyrical and its masterly improvisation conveys meaning more than the words could convey. The uneven internal structure of each stanza of the poem expresses the poet’s internal torment, inexpressible otherwise:

```
Her face The fast rain tearing Courage
to feel this To tell of this to be alive
trying to learn unteachable lessons
........................................
Split love seeking its level flooding other
lives that must be lived not somewhere else
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but here seeing through blood nothing is lost. (DCL 39-40)

Through these lyrical lines Rich actively participates in the suffering and loss, and commits herself to the mission of restoration by critiquing the ways of the world. She does not conceive an Eden—a world of eternal happiness devoid of suffering and death; nor does she conceive a Lethe, a world of forgetfulness but rather a meaningful existence through constant care and concern. In “Transcendental Etude,” the final poem in The Dream of a Common Language, Rich regains her poetic voice: “a whole new poetry beginning here / Vision begins to happen in such a life” (76).

This vision has been continued in Rich’s A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981) which attempts to forge a new language to celebrate the harmony that exists between Nature and the transient human existence. The title of this volume is taken from the first line of “Integrity”: “A wild patience has taken me this far.” This poem explains the struggle of “Anger and tenderness: my selves” (WP 9) for an integral, whole state of being. However, this time the anger and tenderness that impelled the poet to probe into the depths of consciousness help her to come up with an assumed “wild patience”: “And now I can believe they breathe in me / As angels, not polarities” (WP 9).
In “Coast to Coast” (WP) Rich portrays the deflected image of a woman as if in a prism blending it with the scenic beauty of nature, and turning it with a kaleidoscopic vision. The juxtapositions of paradoxical images and the extensive use of oxymora like ‘fog-hollowed’ and ‘burning cold’ give a unique perception of reality:

Seeing through the prism
Your face, fog-hollowed burning
cold of eucalyptus hung with butterflies
lavender of rock bloom
O and your anger uttered in silence word and stammer
shattering the fog lances of sun
piercing the grey Pacific unanswerable tide
carving itself in clefts and fissures of the rock. (WP 6)

At the same time poems like “Rift” (WP) very well explain the inextricably unavoidable human predicament and complexity of life:

When language fails us, when we fail each other
there is no exorcism. The hurt continues. Yes, your scorn
turns up the jet of my anger. Yes, I find you
overweening, obsessed, and even in your genius
narrow-minded–I could list much more–
and absolute loyalty was never in my line
once having left it in my father's house–
but as I go on sorting images of you
my hand trembles, and I try
to train it not to tremble. (WP 49)

This work shows Rich’s apprehension about her mission, seeing
the possibility of failure in her attempt. But she is resolved to go
on with her mission taking the community of women into
confidence.

As much as any revolutionary in a country, Rich tells us, we
must know our own choices and their consequences. In Your
Native Land, Your Life (1986) Rich asks what it means to be a
rebel and revisionist in the 1980s of Reagan’s administration.
Drawing from landscapes in the most embattled war zones,
South Africa, Lebanon, Nicaragua, she pushes us to recognise
that our own experience must be localised, that any landscape’s
particular slant has its history. Rich suggests the ideal, the
transformative capabilities of the revolutionary poet, as cited in
the following excerpt from What is Found There:

The revolutionary artist, the relayer of possibility,
draws on such powers, in opposition to a technocratic
society’s hatred of multiformity, hatred of the natural
world, hatred of the body, hatred of darkness and
women, hatred of disobedience. The revolutionary poet
loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees
inseparably from art, is not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying, and beloved. (250)

Rich weaves a world within a world and speaks clearly to define her struggle: “I knew, had long known, how poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire” (WFT iv). Being aware of the mission to build and reconstruct, she defines her own power in Time’s Power.

In Time’s Power: Poems 1985-1988 (1989) Rich continues to define her project as that of the vision and the re-vision of our time and place that engages with the power of time itself. “Letters in the Family” (TP) for example, is written in the voices of three women—from the Spanish Civil War, from a Jewish rescue mission behind Nazi lines, and from present-day South Africa. Time’s Power shows Rich’s writing with unprecedented range, complexity, and authority. In “Divisions of Power” (TP) Rich speaks about the plight of women with a sense of oneness with them:

–the women whose labour remakes the world

each and every morning

I have seen a woman sitting

between the stove and the stars

her fingers singed from snuffing out the candles
of pure theory Finger and thumb: both scorched:

I have felt that sacred wax blister my hand. (45)

Having felt united with the plight of women Rich’s vision gets broadened. “The Desert as Garden of Paradise” (*TP*), a poem in eleven parts, brings the readers to actual and figurative deserts, places where freedom movements often find their beginnings.

The poet continues her argument with America, pitting her poetic exactitude and moral sensibility against the calculated neglect of our age. *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991* (1991) has been praised for its insightful exploration of oppression, violence, and injustice in the twentieth century. The title is revealing. “Difficult” is an adjective of bafflement and struggle rather than of revolt and revolution; this is a marked change from her previous titles *Leaflets* or *The Will to Change*. The difficulty that Rich confronts in this book is the stand-off between discouragement at social evil and attachment to natural life. For all the ills she sees, Rich also has the panacea—a poet’s deep attachment to the beautiful that she has found in the material universe, in sexual connection and in ethical action. The tone is conversational, almost casual, and meditative. Neither poet nor landscape is unfamiliar territory, yet Rich brings a fresh perspective. Focusing on such issues as poverty, the Persian War, and the exploitations of minorities and women,
Rich creates a graphic picture of the moral and spiritual stand of American society.

In the thirteen poem sequence *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Rich examines the complexity of modern existence through vignettes in which people confront personal problems and widespread hardships. Rich writes in the title poem:

> Here is a map of our country:
> here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt
> This is the haunted river flowing from brow to groin
> we dare not taste its water
> this is the desert where missiles are planted like corns
> This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
> This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy
> This is the cemetery of the poor
> who died for democracy …
>
> ........................................................
> I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural
> then yes let it be these are small distinctions
> where do we see it from is the question. (*ADW* 6)

She moves quickly to a “Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt” (*ADW* 6). Her canvas is large; her initial gesture unfolds a vast world of indifference. Metaphors like “missiles are planted like corns” (*ADW* 6) are the poet’s greatest attribute and it cannot be
learned from others. Here Rich demonstrates her genius. She sees within the “breadbasket of foreclosed farms” many ghosts, she hears the reverberations of many public lies. Rich “juxtaposes image with the incantatory music of her speaking voice” (Hamill 38).

Rich has two characteristic methods of transforming her sociological generalisations into lyrical representations, methods that Whitman also found useful. They are the enumeration or catalogue, and the vignette or anecdote. Both confer a deceptive particularity of details pertaining to a single group. While Whitman’s catalogues tend to invoke quite diverse species within the group as he did in his poem “The Sleepers”, Rich tends to offer successive members of the same species. She catalogues a list, for instance, of a variety of readers to show how all-inclusive her perception is:

I know you are reading this poem late, before leaving the office...
I know you are reading this poem standing up in a book store...
I know you are reading this poem in a room where too much has happened...
I know you are reading this poem by the light of the television ...
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light...
I know you are reading this poem through your failing sight... (ADW 25)

In another section of this sequence, Rich comments on the American people’s need for introspection and reform: “A patriot is a citizen trying to wake from the burnt-out dream of innocence” (ADW 23). Poems in the second half of An Atlas of the Difficult World deal with similar themes, but are generally considered more autobiographical and allude to Rich’s commitment to feminism, her Jewish heritage and the suicide of her children’s father. Rich’s use of personal experience, first-person narratives, and prosaic language gives a certain amount of immediacy to the images employed in the poems. Dick Allen has observed:

Rich’s book is truly a small atlas; but it is also the mature poetry of a writer who knows her own power, who speaks in the passionate, ambitious blending of the personal and the universal forever present in major work. She will be read and studied for centuries to come (qtd. in Draper 208).

Since the early 1960s Rich has continually asserted her decision to write poetry that runs counter to the poetic language of a certain Romantic tradition that is self-centred and non-critical. She considered it “an outmoded poetic language mirrored in a patriarchal and imperial United States”
(Rothschild, “A Patriot Wrestling” 41). From her earliest work, Rich has been aware of the critical function of poetry as a means of exposing the depersonalising power that prevailed in the society. In such a way Rich’s aesthetics is tied into her political sensibility. Rich feels that she is inside a wrecked society and must forge a common language to get to human love, which is for her the central subject of any personal or social order. Rich asserts, “I take it that poetry—if it is poetry—is liberatory at its core” (AP 116). A poetry of ideological commitment must be real and vital, capable of entering the heart and mind,—that’s what makes it poetry. In Wallace Stevens’s terms, Rich’s subject is above all “the poetry of contemporary political economy and morality” (qtd. in Joseph 532). Her poetry is a passionate turning back into language that gives Rich’s work undeniable power. The poems in An Atlas of the Difficult World possess this power.

The title poem, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” as we have seen, gives the map of a country in collapse. Rich writes about her country, describing “the desert where missiles are planted like corms,” “the breadbasket of foreclosed farms” (ADW 6-7) and other typical landmarks of collapse. Written in 1990, this poem very well captures the true meaning of being a patriot in George Bush’s bureaucratic America. “Flags are blossoming now where little is blossoming” she says, “and I am bent on fathoming what it means to love my country” (ADW 6). In this poem, with direct
reference to the Persian Gulf War, Rich declares that “a patriot is not a weapon. A patriot is one who wrestles for the soul of her country ... / A patriot is a citizen trying to wake from the burnout dream of innocence” (ADW 23). She recognises that the jingoism of Americans supporting the Persian Gulf War reflects widespread protest across the countryside. It could very well be extended to the war waged against Afghanistan and the present military deployment and loss of lives on the pretext of ‘war on terror’ in Iraq. “Every flag that flies today is a cry of pain” (ADW 23), she writes. She has no illusions about America’s past. “Catch if you can your country’s moment,” she advises (ADW 12).

For redemption, Rich turns to nature. Right after she describes the destruction around her, she observes the natural world rescuing it: “the slow lift of the moon’s belly/ over wreckage, dreck, and waste, wild treefrogs calling in / another season, light and music still pouring over / our fissured cracked terrain” (ADW 24). Rich also extols work, beauty, truth, resistance, mercy and love, paying homage to her companion for her “woman’s hands turning the wheel or working with shears” (ADW 24). With genuine environmental concern for a green earth Rich recognizes the impending danger with the plane that sprays Malathion on a field of strawberry pickers.

Driving across country, Rich sees waste that “darkens / the state to their strict borders, flushes / down borderless
streams, leaches from lakes to the curdled foam / down the riverside” (ADW 11). Rich takes us confidently to our world through “blending thoughts, observations, vignettes, despairs and identifications with the men and women of the troubled times” (Allen 319). There is mourning of lost promises, especially those of the sixties; there is a love of the land “… old ranches, leaning seaward, low roofed spreads between rocks / small canyons running through pitched hillsides/ live oaks twisted in steepness” (ADW 8). In the same poem (An Atlas of the Difficult World), at times Rich seems to fall fully into despair, as when she writes: “The watcher’s eye put out, hands of the builder severed, brain of the maker starved/ those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish / now at risk in this segregate republic” (ADW 11).

With Dark Fields of the Republic (1995), which takes its title from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, Rich continues her dialogue with America, speaking again as a citizen, questioning inherited values. At the same time, the poems range further, assuming a more global, historical stance for her voices, conversations with other women, interrogations of war, the Holocaust, guilt, and responsibility. Rich’s note to the sequence "Then or Now" announces the urgency or need to respond to “the continuing pressure of events” (ADW 12). In the opening poem, "What Kind of Times are These,” with its references to Brecht
and Mandelstam, Rich sets the stage showing her concern for her country, in direct, occasionally somewhat hyperbolic language:

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted who disappeared into those shadows.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light –
ghost-ridden cross-roads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, disappear.
And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary

These lines echo the voices of the revolutionaries and the imprints of the shadows left by them. Rich is aware of the price they paid and their sacrifices in order to keep alive the spirit of patriotism. The volume, with a few exceptions, comprises
sequences which move from historical events to local, personal references, in language that is innovative, complex, and often fragmented. In the powerful, concluding six-part sequence “Inscriptions” (*DFR*), Rich moves beyond boundaries of nation, of self, to create a mosaic of voices, engaging notions of global history, political memory, of political process itself. From the deliberative opening, with its use of the indeterminate “you,” Rich implies solidarity, connections: “Little as I knew you I know you: little as you knew me you / know me / --that’s the light we stand under when we meet” (*FD: Selected Poems 1950-2001*, 256). Two sections, "What Kind of Times Are These" and "Then Or Now," explore the individual mind's impression on the world, sometimes drawing from the lives of political visionaries and intellectuals.

*Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998* (1999) has a different landscape from the one that exists in *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995). It is smaller and at the same time filled with more intimate spaces and urban snapshots: a New York subway, a Harvard restaurant, the house of the photographer and revolutionary, Tina Modotti. Rich’s rich craftsmanship leaves much room for the imagination of the readers. Her verse is sharp and clear, but has “a tendency to confuse the things as much as they enlighten” (Newey 51). In “Letters to a Young Poet” she spells out the poet’s duty to choose action over passivity:
Beneaped. Rowboat, pirogue, caught between the lowest and the highest tides of spring.
Beneaped. Befallen,
becalmed, benighted, yes, begotten.
–Be–infernal prefix of the actionless
–Be–as in Sit, Stand, Lie, Obey
…………………………………
You can be like this forever–Be
as without movement. (MS 28)

Uses of the sad properties in lines like these and the imperative overtones remind us that the writers’ mission is always to engage in the process of becoming. The fragmentary sentences, the reckless phrasing as in “my art's pouch / crammed with your bristling juices”; the clumsy typographical invention, lines vain with vanity as in “wanted for the crime of being ourselves,” or stiff with conceit as in “Art doesn’t keep accounts / though artists / do as they must/ to stay alive” (MS 29), are the expression of the complexity involved in this process.

In the title poem, “Midnight Salvage” with its shifting voices, the use of paired colons, which seem to intensify connections or sequences of thought, Rich suggests the turmoil of the poet who must speak out, must act. Later in the poem, Rich's voice shifts markedly from the conscripted poet reporting
for duty in the classroom to a sense of despair, even outrage, in a relentless combination of images suggesting perhaps the impotence of poetry as agency:

But neither was expecting in my time
to witness this:: wasn't deep
lucid or mindful you might say enough
to look through history's bloodshot eyes
into this commerce this dreadnought wreck cut loose
from all vows, oaths, patents, compacts, promises::

\textit{(MS 11)}

Rich’s language, at times pitched unfashionably toward beauty, is everywhere undermined by the clumsiness of her politics. Rich is by now “so suspicious of beauty she can hardly let a few phrases of description pass without guiltily whipping herself” (Logan 60). The vein of anger so evident in earlier works has become less intense here. It is still bubbling up in poems such as “Shattered Head,” but, in general, at this phase we find Rich more sombrely reflective than we’ve known her. Perhaps it’s a result of moving towards old age with the sense of her mission (Newey 52).

And her mission has been continued in \textit{Fox: Poems 1998-2000} (2001) as Rich pursues her signature themes and takes them further: the discourse between poetry and history, interlocutions within and across gender, dialogues between poets
and visual artists, human damages and dignity, and the persistence of utopian visions. The poems carry the spiritual pull toward overcoming a sense of hurt.

Trying to think about something else--what?--when

*the story broke*

the scissor-fingered prestidigitators

snipped the links of concentration

State vs memory

State vs unarmed citizen

wounded by no foreign blast or shell. (*Fox* 10)

It contains something universal, a common reality revealed in the finite experiences of one. This is something Rich has accomplished profoundly well throughout her career and it continues now as strong as ever, as in these lines from “Victory” (*Fox*):

If you have a sister I am not she

nor your mother nor you my daughter

nor are we lovers or any kind of couple

except in the intensive care

of poetry … . (6)

In these lines Rich captures a sort of desperation, a passion more vivid than despair but more urgent than desire. With this mind-set, during the seemingly innocent summer of 2001, Rich
had been reading accounts of human suffering caused by war in Beirut, Sarajevo, Baghdad, Bethlehem and Kabul.

Recollections of human miseries and the terror attacks on 11 September, 2001 became a catalyst for her new collection, *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004* which won 2004’s National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. Rich meant the title “The School Among the Ruins” in a larger metaphoric sense: “art as a school of the imagination in a world of violence and moral chaos” (Benson). The title poem, about a third-world school devastated by American bombing, is genuinely moving. Using montage techniques and lovely rhythm, Rich begins with a nod to Yeats’ great poem in eight parts, “Among School Children,” but winds up with something entirely different. In Yeats' world, after all, “The children learn to cipher and to sing / To study reading-books and histories, / To cut and sew, be neat in everything / in the best modern way” (Yeats 64). In Rich's “The School Among the Ruins”, however, diarrhea is "the first question of the day / children shivering ... it's September / Second question: where is my mother?"/ One: I don't know where your mother / is Two: I don't know / why they are trying to hurt us” (SAR 1). Set during a disturbed phase in American history, Rich says that children and their teachers are hostages to horror.
Rich’s method in many of her poems in this volume becomes a kind of Whitmanian cataloguing and a process of association, often appearing to be a series of notes. The journal entry has provided a form for her poems for many years now, each of which usually comes with a date; one sequence is called “USonian Journals”. The poem titled “Five O’Clock, January 2003” makes frequent references to photography and film. Another sequence is entitled “Dislocations: Seven Scenarios”. The methods and approaches employed here are not so much to eschew poetry as to escape the literary. Rich has long been a master of the telling shard of language broken off from some horrendous event. Part IV of “Ritual Acts” (SAR) is a good example:

You need to turn yourself around
face in another direction
She wrapped herself in a flag
soaked it in gasoline and lit a match
This is for the murdered babies
they say she said
Others heard
for the honor of my country
Others remember
the smell and how she screamed
Others say, This was just theatre. (59)
The poem ends by claiming, “We want to show ordinary life / We are dying to show it” (SAR 61) and it appears that Rich has mastered a style that can do just that. It is the prophet’s and visionary’s belief that poetry expresses truth, even at the expense of beauty. Thus for Rich the personal has long been raised to the level of the political.

The political is much on her mind and furnishes much of the subject matter of her poems, and it enhances the late excellence of Rich’s recent poetry. The final sequence of the book, “Tendril” follows her persona on an international plane flight, where she meditates on the life that has found her, a life of action rather than contemplation. She has her epiphany facing the mirror in a restroom:

This confessional reeks of sweet antiseptic
and besides she’s not confessing
her mind balks craving wild onions
nostril-chill of eucalyptus
that seventh sense of what’s missing
against what’s supplied
She walks at thirty thousand feet into the cabin
sunrise crashing through the windows
Cut the harping she tells herself
You’re human, porous like all the rest. (SAR 107)
Called to be a visionary and a prophet, a good poet has to remember her humanity. Rich’s craving for aspects of the California landscape—apolitical and nostalgic—reminds us that Rich’s greatest gift has always been to render the sensual details of the real world and her honest response to them.

Undoubtedly Rich is one of the leading American poets of our century. Her long writing career that spans more than fifty years brought out the veins of revolutionary anger and the voice of the revisionist, each distinct from the other. This strange combination of aesthetics and activism has won her considerable praise, including the National Book Award, the Fellowship of American Poets, and the Poets Prize. At the same time, she asserts that she is a “woman with a mission, not to win prizes / but to change the laws of history” (YNL 23). Rich insists that there should be no division between male and female rights, between aesthetics and social action, or between art and politics.

Her artistic mission is to write words that transform our perceptions and thus create a new world. For her, writing has revolutionary potential: “The act of writing itself can bring out truths we didn’t know we knew. The fact that it is written is going to have an effect on our consciousness—it changes consciousness...” (Martin, “Another view of the ‘City Upon a Hill’ ” 263). So writing has been viewed as an on-going process that demands change and remoulding of consciousness. This mission
finds its fulfilment in the evolution in consciousness through the acceptance of the traditional values and forms reflected in the male writing tradition. It may be strange to see that a poet as committed to re-vision and reform as Rich, is receptive to the style of male poets who, from her point of view, must appear to her as enemies (Perloff 135). She cast her poems in the very masculine modes she professed to scorn. The confessional-realistic mode that Rich has adopted, demands a willingness to expose herself, especially her own follies and errors, her conflicting desires. Though she was known for her intellectual graciousness, she could not find an adequate form and language to translate it into words. Perhaps the problem is that Rich is so anxious to teach and to persuade that the poet in her tends to give way to the teacher-scholar (Perloff 136).

Rich tried to visualise a new social order first by mimicking the method and manner of male poets or at least the effort to adjust to them, and then by questioning these values and aesthetic precepts in a unique rebellious voice and finally by separating from the dominant culture. She remarked once, “I began to sense what it might be to live, and to write poetry, as a woman, in a society which took seriously the necessity for poetry” (BBP 184). In such a world, Rich is convinced that “the visions and the attitudes necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence–new relationship to the universe” will prevail
(OWB 285). This sense of art as integral to life seems natural to Rich. She believes that “sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, language, motherhood, work, community, and intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed” (OWB 286) in order to give birth to a brave new world.