CHAPTER THREE

EXPLORATION OF SELF:

THE QUEST FOR A POETIC AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

The words “I” and “we” assume a lot of importance in the writings of Adrienne Rich. They are central to the definition of her identity as a poet and the formation of her self. The self is the idea of a unified being and the agent responsible for the thoughts and actions of an individual. The “I” that represents the self and its various presentations in the form of “we” in Rich’s writings are unique aspects in her search for linguistic and poetic identity. This search involves the struggle to find an adequate voice, a platform from which to speak, and the continued revision of her writings. In the diverse voices reflected in Rich’s writings, the incoherent boundaries of her identity can be traced. For Rich, “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 45).

Throughout Rich’s career she has constantly engaged in the act of exploration and discovery within a system which permits the existence of the female identity. This journey, however, does not aim at discovering an unchanging and fixed female self. Therefore, multiplicity of the selves is always an
essential theme in her works. Rich knows that self is the source and the manifestation of her “written subjectivity” (Perreault 3) and writing about the self is a way of “making the self available, visible and accessible to others” (Kalstone, “Talking with Adrienne Rich” 31). The textual contours of subjectivity articulated in the writings of Rich bring into being a self that she calls “I”, whose norms often go beyond its conventional understanding. For Rich, writing “I” has been an emancipatory scheme and a crucial one in the progression of her self because she believes, “only where there is language is there world” (L 21). She views poetry as “a transformative political act of self making” (Templeton 28) and an “attempt to create alternative cultural positions for the self” (Templeton 29). This chapter attempts to gather the various aspects of her identity, resolved or unresolved, the important questions of her past as well as those of her present which intersect both as a poet and as a woman, retreating to the sources. This has been done through an analysis of her writings that reflect her pent-up attitude and perceptions about her heredity and social ambience.

Rich’s writings are unified by three central questions, which are both aesthetic and philosophical, and she maps the exploration of her self through these questions: “Where are we moored? What are the bindings? What behooves us?” (ADW 23). With these challenging questions she urges the readers to
partake of the reconstruction “to help create a more human society here in response to the ones we are taught to hate and dread” (BBP 220). From Rich’s perspective, emancipation cannot be understood as an escape from the oppressive effects of culture or as a surrender of individual will to a notion of historical determinism. Emancipation is the experience of the poetic self and it is through the participation in the culture that the self is truly liberated.

In her 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” Rich explains her development as a writer and the problem she had in creating a personal voice in her poetry. She talks about writing for the first time in the late 1950s about her experiences specifically as a woman but still using the pronoun “she” rather than “I”. Rich knew that “I” carried an authority which at that time she felt she could not claim. When writing the essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Rich continued to feel anxious about “I” since this “I” had by then become the sign of a chosen woman—“educated, white, middle-class—and also a token woman, the woman men would tolerate, even romanticize ... as special” (LSS 38). Rich says, “I was startled because beneath the conscious craft are glimpses of the split I even then experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men” (LSS 43). In a
typically careful way Rich has explored a number of pivotal responses to the designations of “I” and “we”.

Rich’s poem “In Those Years” (*DFR*), written in 1991, about an earlier era, stands as a timeless warning about the understanding of her self. Rich writes,

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of *we*, of *you*
we found ourselves
reduced to *I*
and the whole thing became

These lines, written twenty years after the essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971), show her view of history, questioning the boundaries between the collective and the individual self. For Rich, “any question about the ‘we’ must begin with the ‘I’ ” (Zimmerman 5). She admits that “my ‘I’ is a universal ‘we’ ” (*WFT* 85). Therefore, her poetry continues the exploration of self that she began in her prose, especially with “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971). It gives a direct account of her career and the special difficulties of a woman becoming a poet. In her poetry we find the idea that the female subject cannot be clearly and finally defined since
subjectivity is constantly changing. The female self is “a subject in process of continuous becoming” (Gorey 74).

With the same emotional bent Rich writes in her essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” (1984), “I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create” (BBP 212). Thus her earlier exploration of self probed into her identity as woman and poet, while now her writings are preoccupied with her identity as white, North American, and Jewish. In her essay, “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982), Rich says that the identity that emerges from her exploration is complex and contradictory:

The middle-class white girl taught to trade obedience for privilege. The Jewish lesbian raised to be a heterosexual gentile. The woman who first heard oppression named and analyzed in the Black Civil Rights movement. The woman with three sons, the feminist who hates male violence... .The poet knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor’s language sometimes sounds beautiful. The woman trying, as part of her resistance, to clean up her act. (BBP 123)
Rich admits that every woman has an equally complex identity. In Rich’s exploration of the white, North American, Jewish individual self, she is motivated by an ardent desire for social justice and a determination to put it into action. Therefore, in her writings, Rich has been wedged in historical responsibilities: “to know and to name herself it demands to place herself in categories, such as Jewish, lesbian, white and American” (BBP 103). Rich acknowledges the impact of this material reality on her view of the world. She names herself not only woman but lesbian and Jew, white and southern. In an interview Rich acknowledges that she is also “inescapably North American: a poet attentive to variations and situational differences” (Rabinowitz). For Rich, these groupings are ways of knowing herself and ways of being in the world. Thus her writings explore the boundaries of selfhood expressed or suppressed, recognized or disapproved, by taking on the self as part of a larger context (Perreault 36).

Rich states that her autobiographical materials in some of her early writings are conventional. Therefore, Rich consistently affirms the possibility of change, of re-vision in her writings. This act of re-vision or seeing again in the light of rereading history, literature, philosophy, politics, and so on, is a part of Rich’s search for identity (Ratcliffe 113). In this process of evolution, exposure and change are inextricable. For Rich this is
an ongoing process, never complete. Within the context of community and history, Rich knows that “the self changes and is changed as breaking silence, putting self into words, transforms reality” (Perreault 37). Rich’s perception of self is not to be equated with self-consciousness or self-awareness; instead she understands “self-consciousness as a means for making self” (Perreault 19). So aspects of Rich’s identity and subjectivity are not inextricably related to the process of unfolding of life events. Rich’s act of writing is a part of the self that she experiences and with which she brings the self into existence. In that sense, self is both a process and a product. It being a process and a product, Rich’s self-in-the making resists and at the same time it affirms; as a result a new kind of subjectivity is being evolved.

Jacques Lacan who gave a renewed concentration upon language and identity remarked that “the identity [thus] produced is never fully transparent to itself but is mediated by otherness” (qtd. in Hendricks and Oliver 23). In other words, the self is necessarily social, shaped by its relationships to other persons, to various social and political factors, and to language. Thus the newly evolved subjectivity reflected in Rich’s identity must deal with “the issues of representation” (Perreault 6). In Rich’s context ‘to represent’ means to speak for, to speak about, and most troublingly, to speak as. When “self” is recorded, whether that is understood to mean described, represented,
recreated, articulated, or fixed, the distinction between the evolved self, i.e. the product, and the self in the making, i.e. the process, is to be revised necessarily. Thus the act of will toward transforming the self in Rich’s writings is multidimensional. And Rich admits that like all writing, writing about self is refined by the experiences of everyday life. So the writer’s world can be imagined, predicted, and documented only from the art of writing.

This understanding of the self implies that the self is mostly provisional and flexible in Rich’s writings. It is an exploration of possibility, thus a tentative outline for an adequate language. In Lacan’s view the effects of language on the subject's identity are profound, since it is only by entering the system of language that the subject can become fully delineated as a subject. So Rich does not treat self as a fixed or clearly conceptualized notion but she perceives it in a “community of discourse of which she is both product and producer” (Zimmerman 7). This interrelation of self and community—a linear progression from “I” to “we”—is one of the most provocative issues in the writings of Rich. This movement from “I” to “we” takes into account the accumulation of individual experience in its complexities of language, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity and the possibility of corresponding change in self and community. About this change Rich writes, “I felt more and more urgently the
dynamic between poetry and language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (BBP 181).

For Rich, this type of independence from poetic conventions and articulation of a personal self is integral to her identity. By setting words in new configurations and hearing and seeing words in new dimensions (LSS 248), Rich “demonstrates reflective and critical self-definition thereby initiating the re-reading of the self and the transactions of self and history” (McCorkle 87). Her view on poetry as “criticism of language” shows her creative and critical involvement with culture (LSS 248). Rich values this meaningful endeavour as a means of reintegration of the split in her identity as well as a way to express social and individual contradictions in constructive and liberating ways. It helped her to affirm “I” which she had not dared to do in her earlier writings, and thus to transform her self with a new mission (LSS 45).

The poems in The Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963) and Leaflets (1969) mark the beginning of her continued examination of these issues, but her development of a poetic self has been recorded only in her later works. Her earliest poetry describes a critical response to the condition of women and of that shared but unacknowledged world of women. In her early works, Rich tried “to disguise or erase the self, letting the
pretense of impersonal objectivity deliver the subject” (Templeton 29). The critical perceptions of herself as a woman poet and the inclusion of her critical self-reflections are only latently present.

The self-affirmation, partly done through the reiteration and repetition of “I” in her later writings, is an attempt to resist the pressures imposed by an institutionalized society. Thus Rich feels that assertion of self, and of the right to speak the self, must be repeated as self changes. Rich experiences danger in speaking the self especially “when those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you” (BBP 199). The act of being seen and being heard implies the affirmation of the self and its dimensions—the voice or language or writing. Rich writes about the experience of threat and danger that she feels in the society:

This experience has reminded me of what I should never have let myself forget: that invisibility is not just a matter of being told to keep your private life private, it’s the attempt to fragment you, to prevent you from integrating, love and work and feeling and ideas, with the empowerment that can bring. (BBP 199 - 200)

Here the self in writing, in language, in public, is in no way a rejection of the aspects of self. Rather, it provides opportunity for other people to speak their fragmentation and suppression
because the act of speaking itself is a form of resistance and an effort of integration resulting in transformation. Rich writes,

There are people who want to meet us in our wholeness instead of fragments, and others who do not want to know, who run away, who want us to be quiet, who will use all kinds of indirect and genteel means to keep us that way, including the charge that we never talk about anything else. (BBP 201)

This attempt for integration reflected in Rich’s writings shows her unique vision of community and history. Thus “I” and the “we” are interconnected here “integrating love and work and feelings and ideas, with the empowerment that can bring” (BBP 200).

The issue of fragmentation and attempts for integration are central to Rich’s poetry. In the poem “Integrity” (WP) Rich speaks of wholeness. Her work prefaced with Webster’s definition of the word, “the quality or state of being complete; unbroken condition; wholeness; entirety” (WP 8), the poet looks into woman’s landscape. Rich re-creates what ‘being complete’ may mean and comes to a realization: “but really I have nothing but myself / to go by” and then reflects in another voice, “Nothing but myself?... My Selves. / After so long, this answer” (WP 8). In this poem, selves are experienced as “anger and tenderness: my selves,” which, she says, “breathe in me / as angels not
polarities” (*WP* 9). Rich speaks of the process of integration in her poetry of the late 1960’s: “I began to resist the apparent splitting of poet from woman, thinker from woman, and to write what I feared was political poetry” (*BBP* 176). The multiple selves that she speaks of in her poems are not so easily divisible either into roles like mother, poet or into socially, divisible functions. Rich comes repeatedly to the assertion of a multiple and complex subjectivity. The self here is “selves” and not always figured as angels in her writings. The resistance here is seen in her refusal to reconcile the public definitions of a woman with that of the longing for the personal vision of woman. In her early writings, Rich found little location of the self; therefore the poet’s own identity was man or woman.

The articulation of the self in her later writings is the result of the shift in her vision: “from poetry as language to poetry as a kind of action” (*BBP* 181). It shows the long evolution of Rich’s awareness of the relation of poetry to political and personal presence with the contradictions and continuities of the self. Indeed, Rich seeks to envision the very possibility of community instead of a society split by power and silence (McCorkle 89). Rich’s assuming of the public voice demands a response to her community or to her audience, who seek to be represented through the poet’s language. Therefore, there is marked variation in Rich’s writing of a self as a political, socio-cultural event.
Instead of using poetic language to diffuse the self or to expose it as a mere “rhetorical or historical construct” (Templeton 28), Rich turns to poetry as “a clear mode of discourse” (Altieri 20). In some poems, past selves have been described with confidence and in some others Rich treats them with uncertainty. The present speaking self is by nature certain and logical in some settings, in others troubled and struggling. Whatever the tone of Rich’s writing, no aspect of the self is exempt from considerations of language, class, race and identity. The difference in the perception of the self as a part of a group and the self as a privately experienced separate being is troublingly subtle. Her first collection, *A Change of World* (1951), reveals the emergence of a private self in a conventional language. As Rich moves further, growing more aware of the artistic self, she describes an urge toward transformation even by giving up self-identity.

In most of the poems written in the 1980’s Rich tries to discover just how the self – private and artistic – fits into the larger social order. Rich achieves a credible tension by cross-examining her own actions and motivations. “We move but our words stand” (*YNL* 33), she writes in the poem “North American Time” (*YNL*) demanding a recognition of the accountability of writers before they put across their ideas on the page. She has
...the firm conviction that there is no creation with the exclusion of self:

Try sitting at a type writer
one calm summer evening
at a table by a window
in the country, try pretending
your time does not exist
that you are simply you

………………………

try telling yourself
you are not accountable
to the life of your tribe

the breath of your planet. (YNL 34)

Here Rich escapes this illusion by relying on the forms of “you”. If “you” refers to a man, the figurative slant of the poem might be to blame or curse. If “you” refers to a woman, the poem will be informed, most of the time, by praise and blessing. But at all times, in her mature poetry, Rich speaks in her own voice. Her voice is responsible to its time and place, and accepts that even poetry is positioned for and against, that the political problem of “us” and “them” is the poet's limit as well. The components of self or the factors that constitute a social as well as personal identity are not in themselves unified, and Rich feels that all aspects must be acknowledged and recognized.
A strategy for connecting inner and outer aspects of self is conveyed in the poem “The Stranger” (DW) in which the poet is presented as an exiled seer:

my visionary anger cleansing my sight
and the detailed perceptions of mercy
flowering from that anger

I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the lids
of the newborn child. (DW 19)

Here the anger and mercy are reflections of a deadened, deadening society, and the poem envisions the appropriation of a new language with its potential to create and its submission of her full identity. In order to write, Rich feels that she has to affirm herself as a Jew, an inextricable part of her identity. She opens the essay “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982) with awareness of her fear. She places herself physically and emotionally, “sitting chin in hand in front of the typewriter, staring out at the snow” (BBP100). She is trying to “figure out why writing this seems to be so dangerous an act, filled with fear and shame” (BBP 100). Rich writes, “directly and overtly as a
woman, out of a woman’s body and experience society is split at the root. Art is separated from politics and the poet’s identity as a woman is separated from her art” (Baym 2690). Art is referred to as the “common interchange” (CW 57); thus Rich emphasizes “the desire for connection as the defining practice of art and art as a location for defining the condition of the self” (McCorkle 91). In this context, the condition of the self and the artist is provisional, and it demands that Rich has an attitude of resistance: “These are the things that we have learned to do / who live in troubled regions” (CW 18).

Rich finds her frame of mind at the moment of writing “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982) instructive because “the inter-space between the living and the writing, the self and the text, is charged with danger and fear” (Perreault 38). Rich analyses her fear and in this context she wants to think back through her mother’s ancestry since Jewish heritage is passed through the maternal line, not through her father. At the same time, to admit publicly her Jewish heredity, she must claim her father and then acknowledge the fact of his Jewish inheritance. But Rich affirms: “I have to face the sources and the flickering presence of my own ambivalence as a Jew; the daily mundane anti-Semitism of my entire life” (BBP 100). To write of this self or her Jewish identity is to mirror a consistent but unstable self against self. Rich’s recognition of identity
through self-affirmation is a part of an experimental strategy. It is claimed as an effort toward wholeness and integrity. At the same time, for Rich, self-affirmation alone does not make self whole; nor does her writing about self suppress conflicted feelings about either accepting or denying her Jewish heredity.

Rich’s Jewish inheritance and identity, that has often been left neglected, is similar to the dormant but evident anti-Semitism in her culture. As she acknowledges the roots of her multiple identities, the self reflected in her writing is exposed as a kind of social entity. Thus Rich comes to know herself, as if in a personal encounter, as one might interact with another person. So the other self whom Rich encounters is inextricably related to the self that she calls “I” in her life situations as well as in her writings. She writes as if she were talking to herself: “These are stories I never tried to tell before. Why, now? Why, I asked myself last year, does this question of Jewish identity float so impalpably, so ungraspably around me. And yet I've been on the track of this longer than I think” (BBP 100-101).

While Rich was writing “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982) she had not arrived at a clear stand about her Jewish identity, but now those past memories reflected in her essay seem as lived experiences. The issue of choice in this regard is a recurrent idea in Rich’s writings, but once having made a choice, she does not imply that she rules
out other possibilities. So the unsettled questions about her identity evoke an ambivalent attitude about her Jewish heredity with which she translates her impulses into writing in order to silence the complexity of her feelings as well as that of the situation. In the midst of these conflicts, she longs for a unique identity leaving the other troubling parts of her self in oblivion. As Rich speaks of racism and the involvement of white women with white men in the southern racist scenario, she says, “it would be easy to push away and deny the gentile in me–that white southern woman, that social Christian. At different times in my life I have wanted to push away one or the other burden of inheritance, to say merely I am a woman; I am a lesbian” (BBP 103).

Since the issue of identity was not fully resolved, Rich sometimes wishes to make her personal self and the public one–a woman, a poet–a perfect match as though that were a single identity. Sometimes she retreats into a narrow lyric “I”, a “sincere emotive self” (Templeton 27) concentrating emotions instead of encouraging “a lyric dialogue among competing voices in the self or among ideas the self tries out as interpretations of its experiences” (Altieri 16). To do so, she has to be oblivious of the ideals of the white, Christian world of family and social context: “not hurting someone’s feelings by calling her or him a Negro or a Jew, naming the hated identity” (BPP 104). Thus to
identify herself as a Jew or Christian is to make visible that which may already be perfectly obvious but can remain in the realm of the unknown unless acknowledged. Following these overt remarks about her family’s cultural practices, Rich writes: “Writing this I feel dimly like the betrayer: of my father . . . of my mother . . . of my caste and class; of my whiteness itself” (BPP 104).

The struggle between what can be spoken and what cannot also appears in the form of early impressions in Rich’s writing. In “Delta” (TP) Rich speaks of the complex dichotomy of the self: Rich is the poet and speaker, but the warning, “think again” (TP 32) implies that the speaking self distances the real self:

If you have taken this rubble for my past raking through it for fragments you could sell know that I long ago moved on deeper into the heart of the matter If you think you can grasp me, think again: my story flows in more than one direction a delta springing from the riverbed with its five fingers spread. (TP 32) What is important about this poem is the varied ‘selves’ at work in it. This ambivalent state of mind has been reinforced by the experiences in her life. The recognition of her own white race has
been taken as a stand to expose its secrets which now she views as a kind of betrayal (BPP 104), exposing her deep revulsion of racism. By doing that, Rich gave those voices a language, making more aspects of her self available for transformation (Birkerts 797). In this respect, recalling the memories of watching the documentary newsreels of the liberation of prisoners from Nazi concentration camps, Rich says, “Writing this now, I feel belated rage that I was so impoverished by the family and social worlds I lived in, that I had to figure out by myself what this did indeed mean for me” (BPP 107).

Revelation of the past events and similar emotionally charged reflections in the present writing, like the past selves, are complex, even contradictory. But the process of writing makes the variations and conflicts within the self known to the world. Rich’s mental struggle with the betrayal of the social codes of anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and intellectual graciousness is evident in her writings. Among these, the betrayal that inflicted most pain on her is not the one that shattered the parental or societal expectations, but the one that wounded the self. Recalling those betrayed parts of one’s self does not bring the self into easy acceptance. Rich is really troubled by the impossibility of wholeness: “Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class,
feminist, exmatriate Southerner, *split at the root*—that I will never bring them whole” (*BBP* 122).

As Rich registers her identities, it is important to note how Rich moves from first-person singular to plural and finally to third person. Emphasizing the split between self as poet and self as woman, in some poems Rich wrote using “the persona of a man” (*LLS* 41). Even when she wrote from the position of a woman, she says, “I hadn’t found the courage yet to use the pronoun ‘I’–the woman in the poem is always ‘she’” (*LSS* 45). Rich might agree that her early uses of the third person serve as a kind of façade, when the speaker in the poem is committed to integration, the third person is ‘she’. At the end of the essay, “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982) Rich writes,

> I know that in the rest of my life, the next half century or so, every aspect of my identity will have to be engaged. The middle-class white girl... the Jewish lesbian raised to be a heterosexual gentile... the woman with three sons, the feminist who hates male violence. The woman limping with a cane, ... the poet who knows that beautiful language can lie...” (*BBP* 123)

The different aspects of Rich’s identity, namely the white girl, the woman, the poet, the Jewish lesbian, the feminist,
include what makes woman different from poet and woman from thinker. When Rich displays the aspects of her identity in the third person, she is certainly making herself accountable. Thus Rich’s self is present in all her persons, singular, and plural, first, second, and third. Since her personal self has been made accountable for judgment, her attitudes, values, experiences become not merely aspects of self, but ethical and aesthetic issues. The writing about Jewish identity was to create an identity more comfortable than the one Rich had developed. She writes: “I am not able to do this yet. I feel the tension as I think, make notes: *If you really look at one reality, the other will waver and disperse*... . And sometimes I feel inadequate to make any statement as a Jew; I feel the denial of history within me like an injury, a scar” (*BBP* 122-123).

Since Rich knows that the composition of her self occurs in the act of writing, she considers “the language as the place of possibility, of anxiety, of loss—and the place of wish” (Perreault 42). Her changing worldview has required certain shifts in her poetics, which Rich has worked out by rewriting herself (*BBP* 152). In both prose and poetry, Rich’s poetic sensibility rewrites her self and thus makes a poetics of subjectivity. But Rich repeatedly has tried to answer her own question, “What kind of beast would turn its life into words?” (*DCL* 28). In “Meditations for a Savage Child” (*DW*) Rich having the same question in her
mind, searches for directions and reaches a very delicate balance in her attempt, as if she is not certain, by confessing her inability to make the various aspects of her identity unified in her writings.

The identity that does not limit itself can expect to be at odds with itself and exploited by covert interests. Being aware of that, Rich made it clear in an interview:

The ‘humanity’ trip—not women’s liberation, but human liberation—tends to feel too easy to me. Women have always supported every “human” liberation movement, every movement for social change... . Which is not to say that we're against the other half of humanity, but just to say that if we don't put ourselves first, we're never going to make it to full humanity. (qtd. in Des Pres 24).

Affirming her responsibility to speak for humanity, Rich says: “We can’t wait for the undamaged to make our connections for us; we can’t wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous” (BBP 123). Personal speaking shifts to communal speech: “I” the individual subject becomes “we” the collective subject and she joins with the voice of a community that understands that “we can’t wait to speak”. The “I” gradually became the collective and often opinionated “we”. As she talks
about the silenced and the denied aspects of self in terms of “we”, Rich shows her accountability (Zimmerman 6).

The accountability and commitment of every aspect of her identity requires of Rich a recollection of her life sketched in language and a denial of even language as a safe place. Her sense of accountability and commitment takes her to openly speak that denial. But she recognizes that even the language that she has been using as a medium is not necessarily dependable and trustworthy. Rich speaks of herself as “the poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor’s language sometimes sounds beautiful” (BBP 123). Rich writes in the poem “Tear Gas” (UP)

... I am afraid

of the language in my head

I am alone, alone with language

and without meaning

coming back to something written years ago:

our words misunderstand us. (PSN 139)

Rich seeks to recover language’s ability to heal itself and transform itself, and thus to provide the medium for change of her self and culture. The aesthetic process that she began with the imitation of the male poets of her time comes to mastery of the art by the development of her own unique style. Rich breaks poetic decorum by experimenting with the language and sets the
poetic code by defining herself as “a woman writer with a woman’s consciousness” (McCorkle 94). The medium of consciousness transforms “language into a passionate and lucid presence” and it becomes “fiery in its anger and alchemical in its transformative powers” (McCorkle 92).

To effect this journey to a new place, a new action, Rich must first create a new mode of communication, a new way to express women’s experience. Rich knows that the task is enormous, but not impossible for she means to shape this new language, not through new words, but through new perceptions. The old language and way of perceptions cause pain, suffering, and isolation because it does not acknowledge or portray the human situation in a truthful way. The conspicuous tensions and the inadequacy of language form a part of the poem, “Tear Gas” (UP):

I need a language to hear myself with

to see myself in

a language like pigment released on the board

blood-black, sexual green, reds

veined with contradictions

bursting under pressure from the tube

staining the old grain of the wood. (PSN 140)

The poems “Burning Oneself In” and “Burning Oneself Out” (DW) suggest one strategy Rich uses for practising and critically
analysing the lyric impulse. “Burning Oneself In” recounts Rich’s inability to exercise the power of her self in a world which she perceives as violent, violating, and filled with personal anguish. External and internal dissatisfaction infuse each other. The necessity of using that anger constructively to change the self and the world in terms of writing is described in “Burning Oneself Out”:

A word can do this
or, as tonight, the mirror of the fire
of my mind, burning as if it could go on
burning itself, burning down
feeding on everything
till there is nothing in life
that has not that fire. (DW 47)

The fire of the imagination that connects inner and outer aspects of self in an ambivalent way suggests a determination to connect the self to the world. These poems point to two different positions of the poetic imagination: one portrays a passive self chosen by destiny which suffers quietly; the other portrays a willful, deliberate poetic self which chooses the transforming capacity of poetic imagination.

The poems in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) demonstrate that Rich “cannot reconcile what she is (poet) with who she is (a woman). She won’t be able to effect this
reconciliation until she finds new terms for power, and ultimately a new language capable of embracing female energy and power” (McCorkle 97). The title poem “Snapshots of A Daughter-in-Law” was the first poem Rich wrote openly as a female poet about the female self. But she had not found “the courage yet to do without authorities or even to use the pronoun ‘I’; the woman in the poem is always ‘she’ ” (LSS 45). The assertion of this third person approach with reference to this poem puts into question the condition of the self or one’s own identity and the use of language.

Thereafter the issues of an adequate language, the survival of the self and self-definition are examined in the collection Necessities of Life (1966). In the poem “The Corpse-Plant” (NL) Rich writes:

Is it in the sun that truth begins?
Lying under that battering light
the first few hours of summer
I felt scraped clean, washed down
to ignorance. (NL 13)

The narrator is exhausted by any representation of truth. Her own self—not as truth—cannot assure her of the fullness of truth. The persona is then both secondary and external, and countering this force of abstraction demands a re-visioning of language and self. Here Rich underscores the dynamics of
change. It is an irreversible process, for the old self or identity is gone.

Rich is reaching toward an empty space where someone once was. Self-reflection helps her to shed the past and create the vision as in “Moth Hour” (NL):

A million insects die every twilight,
no one even finds their corpses
Death, slowly moving among the bleached clouds,
knows us better than we know ourselves.
I am gliding backward away from those who knew me
as the moon grows thinner and finally shuts its lantern. (47)

The self mirrors language and Rich posits this meditation about language in the cyclical and natural metaphor of lunar phases – and wonders whether she will be able to return to regain a full knowledge of self and language.

Rich sought her own ‘language’ which would not only expose those divisions between man and woman but would also integrate those divisions into the self and the world. In “The Lioness” (DCL), Rich writes,

In country like this, I say, the problem is always
one of straying too far, not of staying
within bounds. There are caves,
high rocks, you don’t explore. Yet you know
they exist. Her proud, vulnerable head
sniffs toward them. It is her country, she
knows they exist. (21)

Rich imagines how the split of self caused by straying too far can
be healed. The poem presents the woman with the naturalness
of an animal with regard to her power.

Language, in Leaflets (1969), undergoes change, and thus
gathers strength. As a “medium of interconnection” (McCorkle
101), language emerges as this volume’s central concerns. In the
poem “Leaflets” the narrator who feels that the language of
poetry, “no more sacred that is than other things in your life”—
demands to know “how can we use what we have / to invent
what we need” (L 56). Any moment of self-definition is
provisional since words are subject to change: “These words are
vapor-trails of plane that has vanished; / by the time I write
them out, they are whispering something else” (L 61). These lines
emphasize an underlying complaint that language escapes the
bounds of the author’s intent.

Assuming the subject position that “we are defined by what
we produce, that is, language” (McCorkle 102), Rich’s poetry
criticizes the power of language and the influence it exerts. Rich
sees the possibility of personal and political transformation even
in the midst of the fact that language has lost its creative
potential: “I wanted to choose words that even you / would have
to be changed by” (L 42). Rich reminds us that writing, though burdened with intention, is also the responsibility of the reader: “When they read this poem of mine, they are translators / Every existence speaks a language of its own” (L 68). Rich foresees a necessary reinterpretation of her writings: “If these are letters, they will have to be misread / If scribblings on a wall, they must tangle with all the others” (L 68). The process of writing which is experiential and at the same time provisional, assumes importance: “When you read these lines, think of me / and of what I have not written here” (L 61). Rich’s writing emerges from her personal context and at times it goes beyond the imagined boundaries. Thus Rich insists on writing as a dialogic activity that works as a social and cultural force resulting in relationships.

The realization that language works as a social and cultural force makes Rich criticize “the oppressor’s language” (WC 18), while simultaneously taking on the task of remaking language from “this lettering chalked on the ruins / this alphabet of the dumb” (PSN 169). By examining the scheme of language through its images, Rich analyses the power of language. Like photos arranged in an album, the alternating blocks of lines on each side that form the structure of a poem create visual tensions and emphasize the materiality of language. Yet photographs and poems differ, for in a photograph
Rich claims “The image / isn’t responsible / It is intentionless” (WC 45). Rich differentiates the impact of this by suggesting that language based on images often loses its focus because of the degree to which an image appears to have no intention. Instead, Rich conceives discourse, composed of discrete images, as the model for language because it communicates within and outside its frame. The photograph merely remains a copy of the still to show “trust in the dark / to see if there’s pain there” (WC 45). Rich attempts to substitute the direct impact of the images of the photograph with its analogue in language.

Rich’s awareness of the power of language to reform relations is seen at the end of “Origins and History of Consciousness” (DCL) when she refuses to confine poetry, language, and love to an isolated aesthetic or private realm. By making them accountable to life beyond the self, Rich affirms the powers of language:

I want to call this, life.

But I can’t call it life until we start to move beyond this secret circle of fire
where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall
where the night becomes our inner darkness, and sleeps
Like a dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner.

(DCL 9)
Here Rich exemplifies that her imagined poetic world is intimately informed by the real world, and the real world is integrally reconstructed by her poetry and language.

The collections, *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969) and *The Will to Change* (1971) focus on the relationship between private and public life and the social themes that openly reject patriarchal culture and language. Rich experiments with form by juxtaposing poetry and prose in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” (*WC*), a poem that was inspired by a neighbour who had become enraged over an instance of book-burning. Intended as an indictment against a society that perpetuates the establishment of oppressors and victims, Rich contrasts what she perceives “as purity of silence with the falsehoods of language” (*WC* 21). Willard Spiegelman rightly states that the poem “succeeds both in asserting Rich’s frustrations with language and in finding a new language apposite to her political discontent” (qtd. in Howard 497).

The poem “Shooting Scripts” (*WC*) is a newsreel of items describing effects of a destructive culture. This poem also takes into account language and poetry as caught up in that shallow culture: “The meaning that searches for its word like a hermit crab. / A monologue that waits for one listener. / An ear filled with one sound only. / A shell penetrated by meaning” (60). Then the moment of change seems impossible because of “the
subversion of choice by language” (WC 61). It assumes an ethical relation between language and culture and the potential power of language to effect change in the society. Through the process of the poem’s own movement, Rich discovers that “language’s transformative power lies in its projection toward a future through the ongoing, discursive transactions of language” (McCorkle 107).

Once language has been shifted from the abstract to the concrete and private world, it assumes a new significance. Thus the sign or word agrees with the place of an object and becomes “a durable presence and history” (Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language” 70). “Meditations for a Savage Child,” the final poem in Diving into the Wreck, records Dr. J.M. Itard’s painstaking observations of the wild child of Aveyron. The tension between quoted text and the narrator’s sections forms the dynamics of the poem. The boy and the poet shadow each other and share the condition of oppression: “When I try to speak / my throat is cut” (DW 59). Rich feels that the language is used to commodify experience, to name “things / you did not need” (DW 55). Language as a mark of some original wound, a visible, extended scar, shows society’s alienation from nature and the division among sexes. Language, as Rich suggests in this poem, is also the place of healing or suturing. If language marks wounds, the scar is “a hieroglyph for scream” (DW 59). The spread of scar
tissue over the surface “white as silk” (DW 59) traces the ambivalent and reassuring nature of language:

Go back so far there is another language
go back far enough the language
is no longer personal
these scars bear witness
but whether to repair
or to destruction
I no longer know. (DW 58)

These lines show Rich’s indirection in her pursuit for reconstruction. However, she is resolved to go on with her mission.

In Leaflets (1969) and in The Will to Change (1971), the poet engages the world with the desire to use language for healing, but is repeatedly defeated. “Images of Godard” (WC) sees “language as city” (PSN 169) surrounded by shockproof suburbs and squatters awaiting eviction—a place out of touch with reality. Rich writes, “When we come to the limits / of the city / my face must have a meaning” (170). Attacking the formal language of the past as well as that of the present, Rich prefers to have a new beginning. Two years later, in the title poem of Diving into the Wreck (1973), a new possibility opens, a new way of reading that has been extended to the revision of customary ways of critiquing poetry.
In *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), Rich critiques language and desires to re-vision its creation and power. Here Rich proposes to share voices, to generate a sense of communion, rather than arguing for either a personal voice or a public voice. “Meditations for a Savage Child” in *Diving into the Wreck* reveals the quest for the sharing of voices, a movement from “I” to “we”, but for Rich the question remains whether this would change the oppressive structures. In spite of this uncertainty Rich’s title poem in this volume “Diving into the Wreck” expresses the desire to recover lost origins and the world as it was before the language of the oppressors:

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my task is powerful

………………………….

in the deep element. (*DW* 23)

The poem reflects the poet’s task to assert her self as well as the work of recovery of the meaning of language which has been repressed throughout cultures.

As the title implies, *The Will to Change* (1971) charges the poet and the reader with the need of personal transformation and political redefinition. In the poems in this volume Rich points to her future tasks. Language has been perceived as
“unfractured light, a fiery iconography” (McCorkle 109). Thus it becomes “the prism, the thin glass lens, the map / of the inner city, the little book either gridded pages,” a means for the poet to analyse her self as well as her life situations (WC 67). The poetics developed in her ghazals and such poems as “The Shooting Script” and “Meditations for a Savage Child” lead–stylistically and thematically–to the poems in *The Dream of a Common Language*. The poems expand the unstructured use of language, which mediates the impulse to describe the self in idealized terms. Showing the relation of the self as creator and respondent to language the title of the collection suggests the vision of a community-oriented outlook and indicates a radical shift from her earlier volumes which are critiques of the oppressive language.

If the source of an oppressors’ language is a set of false perceptions of reality, the poet feels that it is necessary to have a new beginning. Thus in the poem “Origins and History of Consciousness” in *The Dream of a Common Language* Rich reveals her desire for a community through a new poetic self:

No one lives in this room
without living through some kind of crisis.
No one lives in this room
without confronting the whiteness of the wall
behind the poems, planks of books,
photographs of dead heroines.

Without contemplating last and late
the true nature of poetry. The drive
to connect. The dream of a common language. (DCL 7)

Here through a kind of generalization the poem suggests a place, a scene, where the differences between perceiver and perceived, subject and object, he and she, I and you slowly dissolve.

In “Toward the Solstice” (DCL) Rich seeks a language by which she can construe her vision and work for the emancipation of her self:

the words would come to mind
I have failed or forgotten to say
year after year, winter
after summer, the right rune
to ease the hold of the past
upon the rest of my life
and ease my hold on the past. (DCL 70)

The poet recognizes the folly of thinking that language alone can provide a world to her self so as to aspire for a release from within. Though language cannot do everything, Rich knows that it is only “these words, these whispers, conversation / from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green” (DCL 20). Rich writes, “I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps” (DW 23). Therefore, Rich is
convinced that language can be truly performative only once it is made meaningful by the self.

Explicitly or implicitly, since *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), Rich’s understanding of her self has been dependent on the idea of opposition. Her affirmation of “I” with the inclusion of communal “we” against an order that is male-governed keeps women alien to themselves and each other. The difficult relationship between “I” and “we”, those respective “stories of solitude spent in multitude” (*YNL* 78), comes to a precarious state of balance in one of her essays, “Someone is Writing a Poem” (1993). Rich indicates how she depends on “a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an ‘I’ can become a ‘we’ without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, and images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers” (*WFT* 85).

Rich’s community recognized the potential of language to supersede the commands of silence. Such a language, as Rich emphasizes in “Natural Resources,” (*DCL*) is the work of salvage: “The miner is no metaphor. She goes / into the cage like the rest... into the fibers of her lungs” (*DCL* 60-61). The poet mines for language and uses language to search for the other, “a fellow-creature / with natural resources equal to our own” (*DCL* 62).
The miner, though it echoes the image of the diver, is different but explores history:

[blockquote]
The women who first knew themselves miners, are dead ...

………………………………….

the dark lode that weeps for light

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:

so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world. (DCL 67)

Here the poet asserts that the power of language depends upon the creative capacity of the woman poet, her ability to “reconstitute the world,” to create a linguistic context freed from the male-dominated images. The Dream of Common Language (1978) shows the assertions of this move toward a new mode of writing, toward a gentle poetics. Consequently, Rich shifts from “the intimate voice of inner conversations to the rhetorical formulations of the need for an alternative form of power” (Diehl 537). As she moves from poem to poem, the two modes are interdependent for, “the apparently heterogeneous voices cohere around a common purpose” (Diehl 537). It is a pursuit toward overcoming the limitations of language itself.
By being in communion with nature and others, Rich is trying to keep her self from the dangerous threats linked with writing, transformation, and identity. With the use of language, however, Rich insists on ethical or self-defining responsibilities: “the more I live the more I think / two people together is a miracle” (DCL 34). In “Planetarium” (WC) Rich writes “What we see, we see / and seeing is changing” (14). As an ethical observer and transmitter, the poet must act as the visionary of the community who could heal the wounds and scars of the community:

I am bombarded yet I stand

..................................

... I am instrument in the shape

of a woman trying to translate pulsations

into images for the relief of the body

and the reconstruction of the mind. (FD: Selected Poems 1950-2001, 74)

Though Rich is determined about the vision of the community, she knows that language creates and controls official versions of history. Therefore, Rich extends the role of the readers and their participation in Rich’s re-visioning of language.

“In Phantasia for Elvira Shateyev” (DCL) and “A Woman Dead in Her Forties” (DCL) Rich’s voice illustrates her “dialogical modeling of language” (Templeton 76) and the inherent “desire for interconnectedness” (Templeton 77) within that model of
language. Here Rich makes use of the full figurative powers of language by creating an imaginary, non-literal “I” in the voice of the dead Shateyev, to show the “collectivizing of the self” (Templeton 25). “Twenty-One Love Poems” (*DCL*), a lyric sequence, justifies these moves by invalidating the patriarchal claim for language in the everyday world:

> We need to grasp our lives inseparable …
> No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
> sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
> dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
> our animal passion rooted in the city. (*DCL* 25)

Set in the ‘sulfuric air’ of a violent and deathly city, this sequence of poems emphasizes the energies needed for community as a means for survival and identity:

> two people together is a work
> heroic in its ordinariness,
> the slow-picked, halted traverse of a pitch
> where the fiercest attention becomes routine
> –look at the faces of those who have chosen it. (*DCL* 35)

The poem’s sequential structure composes glimpses that show the process of self-reflection. The poem moves from the alienated cityscapes to a “country that has no language / no laws” where what “we do together is pure invention” (*DCL* 31). The language Rich envisions mirrors the awareness of each other’s selves.
In “Twenty-one-Love Poems” (*DCL*) Rich names herself by questioning the solitude inflicted upon her by the city as the most concentrated site of the oppressor’s language: “Close between grief and anger, a space opens / where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder” (*DCL* 34). In this self reflective moment, Rich expresses the difficulty of maintaining the relationship with the world. In its re-visioning, language mirrors the phenomenal world and this same language both preserves and maintains the relationship:

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live
I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun.
It’s not my own face I see there, but other faces, even your face at another age.

Whatever’s lost there is needed by both of us–(*DCL* 29)

This capacity to translate the pulsations to images has a previous and ongoing existence as part of the language of a community. To construct them afresh requires more than merely reorganizing the words and reshaping the syntax. Rich speaks of staying close to concrete experience. In these words Rich is affirming the possibility of experience whose meaning is not already determined by language.

Rich makes this quality of consciousness a strategy, a method of making the language fresh. It implies that a shared consciousness is possible and the reality is not constructed or
felt by isolated individuals, but by a group or a community. “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” (DCL) emphasizes this strength of communion as Shatayev speaks to her husband in her diary:

What does love mean
what does it mean “to survive”
A cable of blue fire ropes our bodies
burning together in the snow We will not live
to settle for less We have dreamed of this
all of our lives. (DCL 6)

Here Rich asserts the belief that what women seek in this new ground is a space where love and language find meanings that violate the rules of society and go beyond the tradition of a male dominated discourse.

If women have lost their trust in language, Rich says, it has to be retrieved through finding a world more congenial to an imagination that seeks a reawakening of the powers of language. Success or failure of this enterprise depends upon Rich’s vision to stake out a territory freed from traditional identities and associations. At the same time, she cannot ignore the history of poetry because it is of a larger world of which she too is only a member. As an outsider, Rich seeks a way to re-appropriate language, to find a means of forcing language to free itself from patriarchal nuances. Still Rich goes on this search not in innocence but is aware that she must necessarily face the
constraints. Sometimes this search will consign her to oblivion because of the possibility that language may resist. Perhaps she may be defeated in her attempts to establish an alternative language capable of reaching beyond male experience into the exclusive relationships between women. Although love between women becomes a way of discovering fresh ground, of defining a world that will and can only be described by women, the play of desire and the formal character of language cannot be destroyed. In an interview Rich said, “I think that women ought to be putting women first now” (qtd. in Des Pres 67). This task of construction thus rests on a commitment and engagement of language, on the individual efforts of the poet, and on the common reality accessible through writing.

In part, Rich's desire to understand her own sense of mission or calling, her capacity to engage, and her commitment to speaking her 'selves' in her world make up the questions that she asks in “Sources” (YNL). Rich’s awareness of history and her attempts to transform language are the framework from which she takes note of herself and raises the question of what the source of her strength is. Rich uses various forms in the twenty-three sections of the poem “Sources” to trace the sources of her strength, and of her self, in a particular moment in time and history. The poem's references to stages of time work as the poet's memory:
I refuse to become a seeker for cures.

Everything that has ever
helped me has come through what already
lay stored in me. Old things, diffuse, unnamed, lie strong
across my heart.

This is from where
my strength comes, even when I miss my strength
even when it turns on me
like a violent master. (YNL 4)

With a sense of rebellion Rich affirms that her interior life,
filled with experience and the traces memory stored within her,
is the source of strength she needs for survival. It has been left
with a certain amount of uncertainty. Thus the self responds to
the previous speaker as if a different voice, a different consciousness:

*Where?* the voice asks coldly.

This is the voice in cold morning air
that pierces dreams. *Where does your strength come?*

*Where does your strength come, you Southern Jew?*

*Split at the root, raised in a castle of air?*
Yes. I expected this. I have known for years
the question was coming. *From where?* *(YNL 5)*

The demand to know the self comes from the self, from the written self of the old poems as well as from the named selves of the split identities in her prose. “Identity,” for Lacan, “is constructed through difference—the self, the ‘I,’ exists for each individual across a gap or a rift that signals what is ‘not-I’ ”*(qtd. in Hendricks and Oliver 24)*. So this affirmation of the self and the distancing of it as another voice is the strategy at work throughout the poem. The self as a written presence is made explicit and her commitment to the mission is made clear: “*With whom do you believe your lot is cast? / From where does your strength come?*” *(YNL 6)*.

In “Natural Resources” *(DCL)* similar questions come in the form of assertion: “I have to cast my lot with those / who age after age, perversely, / with no extra ordinary power, / reconstitute the world” *(DCL 60)*. The questions, with whom one’s lot is cast and from where one’s strength comes, may have different answers and different sources. Sometimes it exposes helplessness implying that what is given is to be accepted and sometimes it assumes a sense of assertion. It implies that “the problem of power and powerlessness enters here with the absence of choice” *(Perreault 52)*. As the “I” here shifts to “we,” the “you” addressed in the questions also shifts. The poem has
been centered on the process of revision. So the act of writing as such is the expression and desire for survival and partly answers the questions. It also gives a specific sense of her self in order to understand the mission:

The faithful drudging child

the child at the oak desk whose penmanship,
hard work, style will win her prizes
becomes the woman with a mission, not to win prizes
but to change the laws of history.

How she gets this mission

is not clear... (YNL 23)

Her sense of having a mission or the firm conviction “to believe that one has a destiny” (YNL 17), is part of the strength Rich attains through the analysis of her sources. These private conversations of the selves show the growth of the self from the faithful drudging child to the woman with a mission. This mission emphasizes that her self is part of the whole. In the process of writing Rich realizes how ‘she’ becomes “the woman with a mission ... / to change the laws of history” (YNL 23). This perception only transformed her from the ‘faithful drudging child’ to the ‘woman with a mission.’ Rich is convinced of this mission as she says with half-way reasonable logic:

no person trying to take responsibility for her or his identity, should have to be so alone. There must be
those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors. I think you thought there was no such place for you, perhaps there was none then, perhaps there is none now, but we will have to make it, we who want an end to suffering, who want to change the laws of history, if we are not to give ourselves away. (YNL 25)

The poem makes its “circle of self-knowledge, returning to the site of returns” (Perreault 54). Rich’s specific memory of reading a resource book of natural history in a place that was itself a recognized source of knowledge is part of her return to old landscapes to look for sources. Here Rich speaks directly to the reader, not with a sense of indifference but with emotional involvement, being aware of herself as a writer and of the community of which she is a part.

In “Contradictions: Tracking Poems” (YNL), Rich is speaking urgently with a desire of her self to become a part of the community. The poem reframes that world and the self that has been represented in “I”. The selves recorded in these poems are deeply troubled. The energy that sustains Rich as she composes an identity out of fragments is not powerful here. Self continues to be the source of possibility for her, whatever the dimensions of anguish she takes on. In sections six and seven of the poem, Rich moves to an odd dialogue, naming two
“Adriennes” as “I”. This is in the form of an exchange of letters from “Adrienne” to “Adrienne” and appears to present her processes of self analysis. The first letter that ends with “In sisterhood, Adrienne” has something of the tone of a big sister, and the second responds to the other Adrienne’s anxieties and concerns:

Dear Adrienne:

I’m calling you up tonight
as I might call up a friend as I might call up a ghost
to ask what you intend to do
with the rest of your life. Sometimes you act
as if you have all the time there is.
I worry about you when I see this.

……………………………………..

I hope you have some idea
about the rest of your life.

In sisterhood,

Adrienne. (YNL 88)

The poet writes to her self, “Adrienne” about her concerns for her; “Adrienne” then answers “Adrienne,” explaining to her how she is going to live.

Dear Adrienne,

I feel signified by pain

……………………………………..
You ask me how I'm going to live
the rest of my life
Well, nothing is predictable with pain
Did the old poets write of this?

Yours, Adrienne. (YNL 89)

Throughout this exchange each “I” is and is not the other, and each “Adrienne” is and is not the Adrienne. All are manifestations of “I,” of self, of “Adrienne Rich” and of Adrienne Rich. These selves work together as if they function with the same subjectivity.

Insisting on numerous selves, Rich here speaks of the different voices of self in their differing intensities and patterns. In both poems, Adrienne speaks to Adrienne about Adrienne, and the sense of the differences between them is informative: it is nothing so crude as the thinking self against the feeling self; rather it is a layering effect. The impulse towards relationship is the underlying structure of the poem. The constant movement from “Adrienne” to Adrienne shows one’s own pain and the other’s pain. It is her life that is being scrutinized in both poems. She is the Adrienne who speaks to herself. The self who speaks as a poet is enfolded in the language of contradiction. The contradiction of gain and loss is uneasily pursued in language. The difficulty of showing what is gained and the rejection of
artfulness in loss seem to parallel another frustration with language as well as with poetry:

This valley itself: one more contradiction
the paradise fields the brute skyscrapers
the pesticidal wells
I have been wanting for years
to write a poem equal to these
material forces
and I have always failed
I wasn't looking for a muse
only a reader by whom I could not be mistaken. (YNL 102)

But the emancipation of the reader who thinks she “can find words for everything” is a liberation for Rich, too. She writes, “You who think I find words for everything / this is enough for now / cut it short cut loose from my words” (YNL 111). The readers she is addressing believe that ‘everything’ can be named, yet Rich dreams of letters “in a language / I know to be English but cannot understand” (YNL 96). Those readers cannot see more than the words mistaking them for ‘everything’. Rich’s writings articulate the blurred edges of her self where the inner and the outer, the past and the present, configured and imagined are not the same, but they overlap, sometimes
becoming each other, or becoming impossible to differentiate from each other.

In her prose, Rich concentrates on one or another aspect of her identity, namely lesbian, Jew, mother, white woman. Her use of “I” makes her issues and arguments grow out of immediate personal experience. It allows her self to engage with the various silenced or suppressed or denied parts of herself, thereby achieving a broad and deep personal base for her political and cultural values. The prose often shows the written self as argumentative by nature, where the self is transformed in small stages, manifested in the writing of an individual. Thus Rich’s prose inscribes “a textual self that is unstable, provisional, urgently self-disclosing, attentive to its own processes, and explicit in displaying them” (Perreault 46).

The “I” that appears in the poetry is not less speculative than that of the prose. As Susan Van Dyne points out, Rich works to ensure “her poems prefigure what is possible, rather than make the past permanent” (157). Her poetry distills and concentrates the questions on language and makes clear the notion of self and identity. Because its language is compressed, its images specific, and its strategies varied, “Rich's poetry engages acutely the tension between presence and absence in the written self” (Perreault 47). Charles Altieri asserts that for Rich, “Poetry ... is not different from other modes of discourse
except for the focused interrelations and the emotional challenges it poses” (178).

Taken together the parts of her self-silenced, invisible, partly felt, partly remembered, or dreamed—are all aspects of the answer to her question: “From where does your strength come?” (YNL 5). Rich reconnects the past with her present in order to strengthen her own present self. She gives her reasons: “That’s why I want to speak to you now” (YNL 25). This urge to speak permits Rich to perceive and participate in possibilities where choices and change are seen as real. Rich’s participation in the struggle against injustice brings her the realization that she must withstand everyday demands of the world. Rich asserts that she will not be reduced to silence, nor will she deny the weight of her responsibility as a woman as well as a poet. In Rich’s writing, her commitment to this mission allows her to trace the world in her self. This act of consolidation of the various components of her self, both past and the present, prepares Rich for a transition to a new enterprise with the power of a woman poet.