Chapter - 3

‘The Phenomenology of Anger’ : ‘Rage’

God damn it,
at last I am going to dance on your
grave,
old man;

you’ve stepped on my shadow once
too often,
you’ve been unfaithful to me with
other women,
women so cheap and insipid it
psyches me out to think I might ever
be put
in the same category with them;

I have learnt to dance on your grave
because you are
dead
dead
dead
under the earth with the rest of the shit . . . .

(Emerald Ice, Wakoski 191)

The Will to Change: Poems, 1968-1970, which received the Shelley Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America, manifested Rich’s intense desire to expand the themes and issues raised in Necessities of Life and Leaflets into a wider public sphere. The critical reactions varied from Robert Boyers condemnation of the volume as the “nauseous propaganda of the advance-guard cultural radicals” (ARP 156) to David Kalstone’s defense of it as “a force deeply subversive of radical politics” (Reading AR 225). However such extreme responses were inevitable in the wake of the great political uncertainty and turmoil associated with the Civil Right’s Movement and the Vietnam War protests, when the work was written.

The poems in the volume chronicle Rich’s increasing rage associated with the denigration of women in a patriarchal society and continue to explore women’s efforts to define their own reality. The theme of the personal being political is reiterated in 'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children' and 'The Photograph of the Unmade Bed', where psychological and political revolutions are depicted as interdependent. However, the title poem 'The Will to Change' declares that individually and collectively, we need, not merely the will to exist but the will to change:

We’re living through a time that needs to be lived through us. (CEP 391)
Relating the process of Rich's growth to the process of her evolution as a poet, we realise the full significance of the will to change. In 1970, Rich took the radical step of walking out of her marriage and later the same year, Alfred Conrad, her husband, committed suicide. Soon after she committed herself to feminism and thereafter to lesbian feminism. Her style of writing, too, correspondingly underwent a change. As analysed in the previous chapters, the verbal compression and the formal symmetry of the poems in the fifties gave way in the sixties to a more open form with unmetred and unrhymed lines, which gave her the freedom to explore her personal and political experience on her own terms. In the seventies, the stress climaxed and culminated in more knotted and fragmented language, violent images in unpunctuated jagged lines, breaks and gaps between lines, spacing the pieces in arrested juxtaposition and bold confrontation. The style was indicative of Rich’s growing recognition of the oppressive divisions within patriarchy, which distanced the personal from the political.

*The Will to Change*, then, is a passionate attempt by the poet to show us a new vision of ourselves. The poems recognize that myths and legends have a complex interrelationship with the so-called development of civilization and the concomitant development of the consciousness of the self. Rich moves back and forth from the images of humankind’s prehistoric and preconscious state to a new, altered perception, giving birth to a new consciousness in the process. 'November 1968', the first poem of *The Will to Change* begins with the image of an incinerator of
autumn leaves, the smoke from which begins:

to float free

. . . the unleafed branches won’t hold you

nor the radar aerials. (CEP 359)

The smoky essence of the leaves, drifting into the air and disappearing, becomes a metaphor for the human return to a preconscious state in which the self and the environment are one, before an individual had begun to differentiate from the surroundings. As the poet watches the individual leaves merging into smoke, she wonders:

How you broke open, what sheathed you

until this moment

I know nothing about it

my ignorance of you amazes me. (CEP 359)

The imagery of Rich’s early poems also clearly shows that the agent for change in Rich was often presented as her animus - the dynamism in a women’s psychological, mental, emotional, spiritual, imaginative life which enacts certain powers and urges within herself in masculine images - as seen in poems like 'The Demon Lover'. However, as Rich’s changing consciousness evolved to reject and reconstruct her cultural assumptions under patriarchy, she found the animus imagery suspect and subversive. Her feminist poem, 'Origins and History of Consciousness' derives its title from Erich Neumann’s Jungian and masculinist anatomy of the hero archetype. Rich no longer associates her powers of mind
and will, language and imagination with male figures, since, traditionally men have been the chief perpetrators of aggression and their language, a chief mode of oppression. Instead the poems of the seventies present men as agents of violent disempowerment and show an absorption of animus-power into a growing sense of identity as a woman and of identification with women.

'Women' describes three images of self as “my three sisters” and comments: “For the first time in this light, I can see who they are.” “Planetarium” is a tribute to the astronomer Caroline Herschel (1750–1848), who discovered eight comets but whose accomplishments were eclipsed by the fame of her brother William. In the closing lines, Rich speaks in the voice of Caroline Herschel:

... I am an 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. (CEP 362)

Translation of “pulsations / into images” is the work of a poet and it entails a great sense of relief for her body and the birth of a new consciousness for her mind.

In the poem 'I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus' Rich adapts imagery from Jean Cocteau’s movie about Orpheus, to depict the resurrection of the poet within her. The dream poem traces out the resurrection of Orpheus through the woman’s determination to resist
all depersonalizing forces — psychological, political, sexual — that prevent the exercise of her powers:

I am a woman in the prime of my life, with certain powers and those powers severely limited by authorities whose faces I rarely see

a woman feeling the fullness of her powers at the precise moment when she must not use them. (CEP 367)

The poet comes alive again within the psyche, and the poet’s return is a measure of her ability to “see through” and to move forward on her ‘mission’. It is not the safe course laid out by the “authorities”, but the only way intimated by “the fullness of her powers” to deliver herself whole. But Orpheus revives within her “on the wrong side of the mirror”, “learning to wall backward against the wind”, but this contrary direction is not negative. It is intent on affirming life’s possibilities which makes the pressure bearable and transfiguring.

The resurrection of the poet can be paralleled with the awakening consciousness in women which also encounters various resisting factors. Feminist theologian Mary Daly, whose work Rich enthusiastically endorses, identifies four basic psychological / rhetorical mechanisms which are used to deny or redirect individual awareness of patriarchal oppression. In Beyond God, the Father, Daly observes that a given perception may
be countered with trivialization ("the problem isn’t important");
particularization ("the problem results from special circumstances and
has no general significance"); spiritualization ("the problem is unimportant
in relation to transcendental values") or universalization ("the problem
is one faced by all human in some form") (5) Rich became increasingly
aware of the effect of such patriarchal mechanisms on her own process
of evolution, tried her best to overcome them and ultimately succeeded
as the poet within her evolved and grew.

As her understanding of patriarchy grew, Rich gradually came to
believe that no individual could afford to ignore either the personal or
the political dimensions of cultural solipsism - rather the very distinction
between personal and political might be nothing more than an illusion.
'Tear Gas' announces:

The will to change begins in the body not in
the mind
My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding
with every
act of resistance and each of my failures. (CEP
420).

The subjective physical self thus becomes the focus for profound
political change. A woman needs to assert control over her own destiny,
physical and cultural. To achieve both the ends, she needs:

... a language to hear myself with
The language for change is inadequate and it will be years before women find the images they need for this expression. But Rich is aware that she is moving “toward a place where we can no longer be together” as men and women. To effect this journey to a new place, Rich must create a new language, a new way to express women’s experience. The old language causes pain, suffering and isolation since it refuses to acknowledge the human situation in a truthful way. One way of correcting the situation is to make an accurate record of human feeling by rewriting the stories and myths that represent our deepest reality. So Rich turns her attention to the challenge of articulating an alternative vision in a patriarchal language originally designed to obscure relationships and fix boundaries.

'Our Whole Life' both dramatizes and proposes a relationship between language and political status. It reflects Rich’s deep fear that no conceivable language could be adequate to experience either personal or political. Seeing 'Our Whole Life' as a texture of ‘permissible fibs/... a knot of lies”, she envisions all expression as a politically corrupt translation—“dead letters/ rendered into the oppressor’s language” (CEP
The poem culminates in the image of a burning Algerian, the victim of cultural solipsism which is manifested in global imperialism. Unable to articulate his experience, he has "no words for this/ except himself", and hence his experience transcends definition. The inability to articulate is a sad recognition for a poet, who had earlier claimed "only where there is language is there world" (CEP 293). The absence of punctuation, the participial nature of the phases and the infrequent verbs make the poem seem almost entirely provisional in its theme.

'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children' is also an effort to connect victimization and the "oppressor's language". Quoting draft resister David Berrigan's admission that "I was in danger of verbalizing my moral impulses out of existence", Rich suggests that the poem itself is a verbalization of the poet's moral impulses about her function and purpose in a violent society.

Rich also establishes fire as the central metaphor in the poem (as it has been for writers from St. Augustine, Dante through T.S. Eliot) to signify torment, purgation and renewal of creative energy. A male neighbour of Rich's upset at their sons having burned a mathematics textbook informs Rich that:

there are few things that upset me so much as
the idea of burning a book (CEP 365).

Rich perceives a complexity in the act, invisible to her neighbour bothered by an abstract idea of the boys' hatred of the educational system
or their choice of a math book, itself, a symbol of abstract systematization. However the verbalization of moral principles without reference to their experiential context also suggests an oppressive patriarchal activity. Rich realises that books merely provide “knowledge of the oppressor” suggesting oppressive knowledge encoded in a dominant group language. Rich concludes the first section with a sentence reflecting her own ambivalent perception “I know it hurts to burn.” The first section thus asserts that the symbolic act (burning a book) is less important to the poet than burning a child, or Joan of Arc. Yet she learns of Joan’s martyrdom in a book, *The Trial of Jeanne d’Arc* and is so mesmerised by the story that “they take the book away/because I dream of her too often”. (CEP 363) This paradox of the power of words versus the power of action runs throughout the poem.

“To imagine a time of silence” is the effort of the second stanza and sexuality generates a sense of relationship providing “relief/from this tongue”. However, even her sensual experience (the tongue as sexuality) cannot be separated from a rigid mode of expression (the tongue as “oppressor’s language”). The poet realizes that even her critique of oppression is cast in the oppressor’s discourse, but makes no attempt to conceal these contradictions:

Knowledge of the oppressor
this is the oppressor’s language
yet I need it to talk to you. (CEP 364)

In section four, Rich emphasizes similar contradictions involved
in making love. The sexual experience ironically heightens the lovers’ dissatisfaction with language, even in literary attempts to articulate the contradictions. "there are books that describe all this/and they are useless". (CEP 366)

Sections three and five of the poem highlight the difference between abstract analyses of suffering and the actual experience of suffers. Rich also reconceives the relationship between “literacy” and moral perceptions by juxtaposing a “standard English” sentence concerning the “dignity and intelligence” needed to overcome the suffering caused by poverty with several “illiterate” expressions of the suffering:

... a child did not had dinner last night
: a child steal because he did not have money
to buy it : to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for her children and to see a child without cloth it will make tear in your eyes. (CEP 364)

It is clear that the “broken” English communicates its moral impulse much more forcefully than the articulate abstractions of the first sentence. Rich paradoxically concludes the third section with a grammatically ambiguous statement of an abstract moral principle:

The fracture of order / the repair of speech / to overcome this suffering. (CEP 365)

Section five of the poem presents a charged picture of tension
between Rich's own solipsism and her urge to engage the suffering. Rich comments ironically on her "successful" articulation of the suffering, suggesting a parallel between her position and that of Frederick Douglass who "wrote an English purer than Milton's". But the ability of the former slave and the twentieth century feminist to "master" forms of expression deeply connected with racism and misogyny represents only a limited triumph. Rich observes, "A language is a map of our failures", (CEP 366) and translates the suffering of section three into morally neutral English:

There are methods but we do not use them. (CEP 366)

In the last part of the poem, Rich recognizes that her own involvement with the oppressor's language is also a form of suffering. Rich's final sentence compresses her own articulate suffering with the fracture of order anticipated in section three:

The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language. (CEP 366)

Eventually Rich realizes that she is a part of the patriarchal system which tempts her either to translate her perceptions into the oppressive language or to perceive herself as a powerless victim. She then intersperses the verse with liberal prose passages in the poem.

The dissatisfaction with the dominant literary modes is also voiced in 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' identified by Betsy Hirsch as
one of Rich's most important aesthetic statements (Werner, 133). Echoing Donne's poem of the same title, the poem expresses a dissonance between kinetic female experience (“My swirling wants”) and static masculine expression (“Your frozen lips”) Although she refrains from making any explicit linguistic connection between the two images, the second line renders any separation between the images as impossible, “The grammar turned and attacked me” (CEP 400). The containment of the masculine and feminine figures within the same structure, however, places her in an antagonistic relationship with the masculine presence of both Donne and “you” of the poem - perhaps referring to her husband, who she is preparing to leave “forever” in inversion of Donne’s original. Looking in retrospect at her previous writing, she finds, “Themes written under duress/emptiness of the notation” (CEP 400). Having attempted repeatedly to articulate her experience in dominant modes, she attempts to develop a voice that helps to deal with her pain in concrete practical terms as against “the failure of criticism to locate the pain”.

The last two stanzas of the poem embody the dialectical voice which Rich was to use for communication in the coming decades. She makes a “last attempt” to communicate with the masculine world, speaking in as direct a voice as possible:

the language is dialect called metaphor.

implying, perhaps, that the “oppressor’s language” is simply a dialect, an expression of a particular cultural group, composed primarily of Euro-American males with some degree of economic and social power.
Claiming to be a universally valid language, the dialect speaks through "metaphors" encoding values which relegate women to marginal positions. Rich talks in her emerging voice, in a language in which "These images go unglossed: hair, glacier, flashlight". (CEP 400) She concludes the stanza with the self conscious retreat into silence:

I could say: those mountains have a meaning
but further than that I could not say. (CEP 400)

This "silence" intimates the alternative concept of women's creativity and her association with natural forces, but it does not, as Margaret Homans suggests "uncritically (accept) what amounts to the male paradigm of the woman who merges with nature" (234-35). The poem closes with a rhymed couplet:

but further than that I could not say
To do something very common, in my own way. (CEP 400)

which suggests the dominant tones of voice Rich was to adopt as she gradually shifted from the deconstructive aspects of her stance following *The Will to Change*.

Rich continued to explore several alternative forms of writing in this volume – the dream form of 'I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus', the collage form of 'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children', and most innovatively, the cinematic style of Jean-Luc Godard, the French New Wave Director in 'Images for Godard' 'Pierrot Le Fou', and 'Shooting
Script'. By transforming his approach to cinema, Godard was responding to the political turmoil in Paris, which gave way to deconstruction as a major movement. Moving from the comparatively commercial and conservative narratives of *Breathless* (1959) and *A Married Woman* (1964), Godard produced a sequence of radically deconstructive films, including *Alphaville* (1965), *Masculine / Feminine* (1966), *The Chinese* (1967) and *Sympathy for the Devil* (1966). Clearly alienated from the dominant bourgeois culture that dictated the form in his earlier films, Godard, nonetheless, resisted alternative ideological or cultural movements that failed to evolve. He sought instead to deconstruct the forms of aesthetic discourse supporting the oppressive economic, social and political systems and also to highlight the extreme difficulty of altering perception sufficiently, to allow a reconstruction of some significance. Godard's awareness of his own passivity in an oppressive aesthetic was particularly fascinating to Rich, who adapts the “jump cuts” and other cinematic techniques to convey her meaning through quick bursts of images rather than argument or narration.

Grounded in the theatre where she watches the film, the opening lines of “Images for Godard” meditate on the dynamics of deconstruction and reconstruction: “To know the extremes of light/ I sit in the darkness.” (CEP 396) Deconstructing the apparent structures of thought, Rich plunges into an extreme darkness to accompany Godard on his journey back to a new enlightenment, based on the experience of negation. Following Wittgenstein, both Rich and Godard investigate “Language
as city" and Rich imagines "driving to the limits/ of the city of words" (CEP 396), to explore the limits of her vision. Her commitment to the light of meaning is expressed in her awareness of power relationships inherent in her own expression:

When all conversation becomes an interview under duress

when we come to the limits of the city

my face must have a meaning (CEP 396).

The problem is structured to reflect the reality and necessity of change and Rich adapts the ghazal's emphasis on free-flowing juxtaposition to the needs of an increasingly political voice. In the poem, she offers three seemingly proscriptive but cumulatively self-deconstructing definitions of the nature of her work: "the notes for the poem are the only poem"; "the mind of the poet is the only poem"; "the moment of change is the only poem". (CEP 399) The final formulation, in fact, incorporates the contextual, textual as well as the biographical perspectives in Rich's life.

Although Rich respects Godard's ability to create intense theatrical images of war and horror capable of affecting the audience, she resolves to move beyond his self imposed limits which keep him from articulating
the aesthetic of love. Rich seeks to create images of concrete love even as she understands that they must be realized outside the aesthetic confines of the theatre:

- to touch the breast
- for a woman

- to know the sex of a man

That film begins here

- yet you don’t show it
- we leave the theatre

suffering from that. (*CEP* 398)

Another structural form that Rich adapts in *The Will to Change* is the ghazal form, which she had used earlier in the 'Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib' section of *Leaflets*. In this volume, she adapts the form to write 'The Blue Ghazals' and 'Shooting Script'. Rich’s use of the ghazal form is at once profoundly inspired by, as also greatly distinct from the Urdu poet Ghalib, who lived his life in Delhi during the transition from the Muslim Moghul Empire to British rule and thereby shared Rich’s sense of “writing in an age of political and cultural break-up”. However as Aijaz Ahmad comments, “the movement in Urdu poetry is always away form concreteness. Meaning is not expressed or stated; it is signified” (xv). On the contrary, the movement in Rich’s poetry in this era is
toward immediacy, “an ungridded area of human activity without ideology
giving access to an epiphanal or purely experiential truth” (Du Plessis
128)

Rich’s fascination with the ghazal form culminates in 'Shooting
Script', a powerful fourteen part sequence which marks an important
transition to her lesbian - feminist work. The poem’s title suggests the
poet’s concern with the inadequacies of language and meaning to be
understood partially in terms of academic deconstruction. 'Shooting
Script' can be read as a film scenario, an attack on/of language or a
suicidal note (Rich’s response to her husband’s suicide). All readings
of the poem prove to be partial, their internal contradictions revealed
through juxtaposition with contrasting perspectives. 'Shooting Script'
can be compared to the deconstructive lyrics of John Ashbery and
Mark Strand, which simultaneously invite and resist the interpretations
of an ordering mind.

In a ghazal of 8/4/68, Rich wrote:

If these are letters, they will have to be misread.
If scribblings on a wall they must tangle with
the others. (CEP 353)

The final section of “Shooting Script” transforms this tangle into an
image of the deconstructive process of reconstruction. Looking at the
“web of cracks filtering across the plaster”, Rich attempts:

To read there the map of the future, the roads
radiating, from the
initial split, the filaments thrown out from the
impasse. \textit{(CEP 414)}

The process leading towards an awareness in 'Shooting Script'\textit{} (CEP 401–414) involves two general movements, reflected in the poem's two seven-section sequences. The first movement, in which the word "woman" is never mentioned focuses primarily on deconstruction, experiencing silence as torment. The second movement, beginning with the image of "a woman waking", focuses on reconstruction, experiencing silence as a potentially useful weapon for other forms of expression. The first person images a breakdown of "personal" communication and makes no direct political reference, while the second movement insists on the connection between the personal and the political and is captured in images from the Vietnam war.

The first movement begins with an initiation of communication that cannot be brought to a final point of rest, "We were bound on the wheel of an endless conversation". Rich juxtaposes images of speech ("The dialogue that lasts all night or a whole lifetime") with images of tide ("The dialogue of the rock with the breaker") thereby, envisioning communication as a continual process of change:

The wave changed instantly by the rock; the rock changed by the wave returning over and over.... A cycle whose rhythm begins to change
the meanings of words. (CEP 401)

As the cycle progresses, coherence emerges and “A monologue waiting for you to interrupt it”. transforms into “a monologue that waits for one listener” (CEP, 401).

The subsequent sections of the first part of 'Shooting Script' elaborate inherent problems in the course of conversation and Rich’s frustration with structures that hamper the attainment of unity envisioned in the first section. The opening lines of section four (CEP 404) envision destruction as a part of the reconstructive process, “In my imagination I was the pivot of fresh beginning.” She alludes to the war in Southeast Asia, projecting a vista of destruction “It is all being made clear, with bulldozers, at Angkor Wat. . . . the baring of the stones is no solution for us now. . . . Defoliation progresses.” However, in section five she juxtaposes pieces of “broken pottery” with the process of “turning the findings out, pushing them around with a finger, beginning to dream of fitting them together.” (CEP 405) The final two parts of the section reiterate the realities of alienation for Rich and emphasizes the need for deconstructing patriarchal sex roles. The movement concludes where 'Images for Godard' began, with the poet sitting in darkness, thinking of light.

The second movement opens in the darkness with the “woman waking behind grimed blinds.” (CEP 408) However, she also specifies
“the alternative: to pull the Sooty strings to set the window bare to purge the room with light to feel the sun breaking in” (CEP 408). Now she taps a specifically feminine power as a source of energy —“The woman is too heavy for the poem.” Rich draws comparisons between the aesthetic modes which separate personal experience from political context and the limitations of “documentary” films which underestimate personal experience. Eager to re-establish connections, she expresses her reconstructive impulse:

But I find it impossible not to look for actual persons known to me and not seen since; impossible not to look for myself” (CEP 409)

The last stanza aptly phrases Rich’s dilemma. Though she shares the guilt of the passive American audience whose discourse needs to be reconstructed, she is also the victim of that discourse —“Somewhere my innocence is proven with my guilt, but this would not be the war I fought in” (CEP 409).

The next two sections explore the possibility of a reconstructive experience rising out of ashes. The joy of release in the final stanza is also tempered by an awareness of danger paralleled in the joy of the American forefathers whose rebellion against British oppression devolved into the war in Vietnam:

With what joy we lift the woods, swinging our sticks, miming
the speech of noble savages, of the fathers of our country, bursting into the full sun of the uncut field”. (*CEP* 411)

Exploring a voice capable of articulating this joy, section twelve contains several “clauses” that are no longer subordinate in “sentences” devoid of main clauses. Inspired by the experimental work of Robert Creeley, William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, these stanzas suggest an alternative voice for poetry:

Where I give up being paraphrased, when I let go, when the beautiful solutions in their crystal flasks have dried up in the sun when the lightbulb bursts on lighting, when the dead bulb rattles like a seed–pod. (*CEP* 412)

Rich concludes 'Shooting Script' by reiterating her commitment to change involving both deconstruction and reconstruction:

To pull yourself up by your own roots; to eat the last meal in your old neighbourhood. (*CEP* 414)

Rich, then, eats the last meal in her own neighbourhood and prepares to move on, guided by the fortuitous “cracks in the plaster”, the innate “life–line”, the traumatic rays of the “bullet-hole”. Rich is candid – even as she moves from formalism to a new version of truth, a new
revolution, while still being firmly bound to the past that is the environmental past in the plaster, the genetic past in the life-line and the traumatic past in the bullet-hole which signify the fetters of tradition. If it is a revolution, it is clearly one which does not wish to deny the reality of past choices and past modes of life. Rowing off in her boat, Rich watches “the lights on the shore I had left for a long time / each one it seemed to me, was a light I might have lit, in the old days”. (CEP 413)

This journey, a metaphor for attaining complete selfhood, is not merely a private struggle for Rich, but an invocation to all who dare to cross the threshold into the psyche and who have a will to change. This kind of a collective emphasis, informs Rich’s poetry with a mythic dimension, as Albert Gelpi observes:

A myth not because her experience has been appended, by literary allusion, to gods and goddesses, but because her experience is rendered so deeply and truly that it reaches common impulses and springs, so that, without gods and goddesses, we can participate in the process of discovery and determination. It is existentialism raised to a mythic power, and the myth has personal and political implications. (ARP&P 296).

Adrienne Rich, thus, lives out her dream of a society of individual men and women by offering herself, without any pretensions, as the mirror of our consciousness and the medium of our transformation. In the process, the vision she projects is the reverse of Matthew Arnold’s
perception of modern paralysis, of the feeling that everything is to be endured and nothing to be done.

*Diving into the Wreck: Poems, 1971-1972*, Rich’s next volume and the second turning point of her life, garnered accolades, generated much controversy and proved how radically Rich’s mind and poetry were changing at this juncture of her life. With Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, Rich received the 1974 National Book Award for this volume, which she refused as an individual but accepted on behalf of all women. In her speech for the occasion, Rich remarked:

> 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)*

By using the occasion intended to honour her personal achievement for recognizing the work of these black women writers, Rich committed herself to the ideal of cooperation among women. The book voices not only her own indignation and frustration but also speaks of the condition of women generally, that, is “the matrix of need and anger” they endure amidst destructive forces in a male-dominated society. By emphasizing the need for a shared female identity that transcends race and class,
Rich hopes to create a common platform from which an effective political vision can grow.

Although Rich's themes remain consistently familiar, her treatment and her perspective becomes more radically feminist in this volume. She explores the disparity between her personal experience as a creative, thinking, accomplished woman and the priorities of a larger society. Her poems analyse the basic life events — love, sex, marriage, motherhood — from a feminist perspective. A lot of her poems reiterate the need for shared female experience to found a new community. However, Rich's sense of herself as a sexual being victimized in a larger social fabric, assumes the greatest significance in this volume. And what emerges is an angry feminist voice. In general, Rich's attitude towards men, in the volume, is peremptory. After several efforts, she gives up understanding or even sympathising with them.

Whether Rich chooses to denigrate men or to ignore them, her allegiance clearly lies with women. Her audience for these poems would then, primarily be pro-feminist women who derive their primary identity from their essential womanhood, not their relationship with men. In many of her poems she draws on elements women share — experiences such as giving birth, a certain biology, particular kinds of dreams and fantasies. Even while she addresses and invokes men, her subject remains the experience of women. Her sense of community with women galvanizes her energies which lend a "charge" to her poetry, very much in the
manner of Slyvia Plath. Interestingly, this is how Plath described Rich after her first meeting with Rich—“Adrienne Cecile Rich: round and dumpy, all vibrant short black hair, great sparkling black eyes and a tulip red umbrella: honest, frank forthright and even opinionated” (Contemporary Authors 395). Like Plath, Rich is nervy and daring, but her stance is more deeply committed to radical politics.

Her radical, feminist stance has invited quite a few hostile critics who see her as an irrational feminist railing against all things male. Robert Peters, whose two Great American Poetry Bake-off volumes frequently elaborate serious issues through the use of satire, reduces Rich (renamed Adrienne Poor) to a stereotypical feminist who refuses to answer a question about poetry and baseball because “so far as I can tell a male asks it” (109). Even more amusing is David R. Slavitt’s “The Griefs of Women”, which presents Rich as a poet who subordinates all concerns to her hatred of man. The critique concludes with the cynical “Men are bums/We’re really better than they are” (388). However each of these attacks simplifies or ignores important elements of Rich’s position. Many of her confrontations with patriarchy are in the form of dialogues/conversations with men (‘Trying to Talk with a Man’, Section Fourteen of ‘From an Old House in America’). She is also aware that men and women share various psychic and emotional problems (‘For L.G.: Unseen for Twenty Years,’ ‘Sources’).

However, it was only in Diving into the Wreck that Rich directly
confronts the connection between patriarchal images and women's experience of the "tragedy of sex". In the title poem, Rich regards men as nihilistic and masculinity as "spreading impotence upon the world". Part of her revulsion against man is also the result of her sexual reorientation towards and love for women, which also forms the subtext of the volume. In the poem 'Incipience' she explores the primordial origins of patriarchy and contrasts the life negating fatalism of males with the idealism and sisterhood of women:

A man is asleep in the next room
He has spent a whole day
standing, throwing stones into the black pool
which keeps its blackness
Outside the frame of his dream we are stumbling up the hill
hand in land, stumbling and guiding each other
over the scarred volcanic rock. (DW 12)

Like Emily Dickinson, Rich turns to the community of women to sustain her as a writer and a woman, but her vision transcends Dickinson's close knit circle of friends to include women as a national, even transnational force. Her awareness of this community goes back to her first transitional work, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. In the late sixties and early seventies, her political activism evolved into a concern for women's issues and a love for women. As a result, she embraced feminist ideology and became a spokesperson for the movement. Primarily, the poet wants to develop in other women a sense of women power different
from the kind of power that has resulted in the wreck of civilization that she sees all about her. This women power is personal in that it stresses the development of individual strength and vitality in women. It is transformative in that it involves a change, within women, concerning certain societal notions about feminine passivity and submission. Bonding amongst women can transform this personal power to a political power capable of making changes on a larger scale in terms of a radical shift in the power structures of patriarchy. In articulating the concerns of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”, Rich prepares us for the poetry of visionary anger in Diving into the Wreck. Like Emily Dickinson, she is having it out “on her own premises” – those of a radical feminist, dedicated to challenging patriarchal solipsism. Based on the subjugation of women and of the feminine, patriarchal power can be defined as the power to control. In her poem 'Merced', Rich writes “of a world masculinity made unfit for women or men”. As a radical, Rich wants to get back to the root and find the source of power-that-does-not-destroy. For her, that power is located in women.

Although, for Rich, only women possess the necessary spark that makes transformation possible, at times she also envisions an androgynous ideal. But this comes across as a transitional stage in the formulation of Rich’s developing aesthetic of female power. 'Diving into the Wreck' is an attempt to synthesise the masculine power-to-control with the coming into consciousness of the female power-to-transform. Rich adopts as her motif the actions of a fully equipped
scuba diver who goes alone “not like Cousteau with his/assiduous team”, to explore a sunken ship. The wreck of the ship becomes a multivalent metaphor for the remains of Western culture, the poet’s past, and her subconscious life.

Rich’s handling of the speaker – diver defies any easy sexual categorization. At first, Rich describes the diver’s careful, methodical preparations for the dive, emphasizing the extreme consciousness of the diver’s activity:

First having read the book of myths,  
and loaded the camera,  
and checked the edge of knife blade  
I put on  
the body armour of black rubber  
the absurd flippers  
the grave and awkward mask. (DW 22)

This journey is necessary for the diver to confront “the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth” (DW 23). As Alicia Ostriker observes, this watery submersion is an inversion of heroic male ascents and conquests (Signs 72). The loaded camera and the sharpened knife represent artifacts of the diver’s culture to help her survive and understand her journey. Like an “insect down the ladder”, she has descended alone, becoming free of conventions and trappings. “there is no one / to tell me where the ocean/ will begin”.
(DW 23) She doesn’t even feel the need to categorize her perceptions and responses, to separate night from day, dusk from dawn, chaos from order, hate from love, “I have to learn alone / to turn my body without force / in the deep element“ (DW 23). For Rich, a distinct mode of female perception is to move “without force” but with sensitivity to the context. The site of the wreck in fact symbolizes the psychic and cultural origins and the diver experiences, that primal wholeness that pervades the dualities, the distinctions of Western psyche:

This is the place
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she : I am he. (DW 24)

The mermaid and the merman represent the feminine and the masculine elements. Only in their harmonious balance, the poem asserts, do we attain our full humanity. The poet has learnt “where the spirit began” in the Judeo-Christian heritage of a divided world where light is separated from darkness, earth from water, female from male – a world full of dualities in which mind is divorced from body, spirit from matter, self from society. But at the primordial centre, the diver poet regains a wholeness unimpaired by arbitrary splits in which everything unites into an integral resonance. This psychic and integral unity also forms
a part of the vision of writers like Blake and Whitman who wanted to do away with dualities heightened by artificial social distinctions. Rich however, is particularly concerned with the effects of gender polarity on women because women have traditionally been excluded from larger social processes. The poet ironically observes that there is no historical connection between women and the wrecked civilization the cargo represents: "a book of myths/in which/our names do not appear". (DW 24) Rich implies that if our names do not appear in the myths, they have no significance for us. If the wreck constitutes "the failures of the race" we failed because we allowed the myth of sexual difference to influence us. In her foreword On Lies, Secrets and Silence, Rich speaks of the present as:

... a moment in history when women, the majority of the world's people, have become most aware of our need for real literacy, for our own history, more searchingly aware of the lies and distortions of the culture men have devised, when we are finally prepared to take on the most complex, subtle and drastic revaluation even attempted of the condition of the species. (LSS 12)

Nevertheless, the poet diver has completed the archetypal journey to reclaim her energy and the right to name her own experience. In her review of Diving into the Wreck, Margaret Atwood detects anger and hatred as the predominant emotions in the poems. She observes that the book is "not a manifesto, though it subsumes manifestos; nor is it
proclamation, through it makes proclamations". (ARP&P 280)

In her review of the volume, Helen Vendler comments:

> the forcefulness of *Diving into the Wreck*, comes from the wish not to huddle wounded, but to explore the caverns, scars and depths of the Wreckage. At first these explorations must activate 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. (ARP 170)

The first step to make the self autonomous is to define or name its experience. This can only be possible if women free themselves from habits of dependency on men, take charge of their lives and interpret their own experience. In her declarative essay written in 1971, "When We Dead Awaken: Writings as Re-Vision", (Discussed comprehensively in Chapter 1) Rich discussed the need for women to look afresh at their lives and examine the cultural and societal assumptions that prevent them from having an access to their most basic energies. One of the key emotions that would help women to recharge their lives is the emotion of anger, which women should learn to experience as well as express. In *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich has learned to use anger as a source of energy, "my visionary anger cleansing my sight" (DW 19)

Rich discovers that within the patriarchal system, a woman is a marginal figure, though capable of seeing what men in power cannot
see because women do not participate in the kingdom of fathers. The underlying dynamics can be visualized in terms of the dominant group versus muted group dynamics described by Edwin and Shirley Ardener in their anthology *Perceiving Women* and adapted by Elaine Showalter in her excellent essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”. Showalter presents the relationship between the experience and expression of dominant and “marginal” groups in a model in which the experience of the dominant group is represented by a solid circle, while the experience of any group not recognized by the dominant group is represented by a dotted circle. (30)

![Diagram](image)

While much of the muted circle Y falls within the boundaries of dominant circle X, some part of Y is outside the dominant boundary and hence “wild”. This wild zone of women’s culture can be interpreted spatially, experientially and metaphysically. Spatially, it stands for an area forbidden to men (Corresponding to the X-zone off limits for women). Experientially, it stands for the aspects of female life style unlike men (Corresponding to the zone of male experience alien to women). But metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding female space, since all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure, and thus accessible to or structured by language.
In terms of cultural anthropology, women know what the male crescent is like because it is the subject of legends. But men do not know what is in the wild. (30)

Inevitably, any generalization generated primarily in response to the experience of those with access to the institutional power reduces wild zone experiences to superficial stereotypes and dependent functions of dominant group needs. Rich's explorations into sexual politics bring her to the conclusion that men are guilty of crimes against women and against life on this planet. The poem 'Trying to Talk With a Man' (DW 2) explores the breakdown of communication between men and women that results from the concept of men as dominant and masterful and women as powerless, passive and receptive. The political climate of the nuclear age provides Rich with the metaphor of disjunction in the relationship between a man and a woman and she opens the poem with — "Out in this desert we are testing bombs". It becomes clear that the war between the sexes is at the core of the larger political abyss. The "deformed cliffs" and the "condemned scenery" picture a ruined civilization. The man and the woman in the landscape have several options — build more effective bombs, commit suicide or explore the cause of destruction — the cause being the breakdown of relationship between the sexes.

For Rich, a woman can begin to have a better understanding of her feelings and perceptions, if she succeeds in identifying her physicality with the natural world:
Sometimes I feel an underground river
forcing its way between deformed cliffs,
an acute angle of understanding
moving itself like a locus of the sun
into this condemned scenery (DW 13).

The image of the “underground river” suggests a birth passage
whose difficulty is conveyed by the relationship of the “river forcing
its way between deformed cliffs” (DW 4) as a child along a birth canal.
The identification of the speaker with the sun emphasizes that she is
not a destroyer, but the bearer of light, enfused with the creative power
of the sun and the earth. Rich reiterates the theme of woman’s physicality
in the prose work she was researching and writing during this period,
Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution:

I have come to believe . . . that female biology - the diffuse,
intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus,
vagina, the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and
fruition of life which take place in the female body has far
more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate
. . . we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality,
our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of
our intelligence. (OWB 21)

According to Rich, woman’s vital connection with Nature gives the
female sex a distinct advantage in healing the mind – body bifurcation,
which is the bane of modern civilisation.
The poem contrasts the female speaker as aware of the regenerative forces within her and the paranoid male who concerns himself with the destructive forces outside:

Out here I feel more helpless with you than without you
You mention the danger and list the equipment we talk of people caring for each other in emergencies - laceration, thirst – but you look at me like an emergency. (DW 3)

The woman’s reminder that the danger is “ourselves” reiterates the personal as political. The curious simile “You look at me like an emergency” (DW 3) reflects the man’s paranoia and the speaker’s recognition of his irrationality. The woman’s power, on the other hand, flows into, and purges “this condemned scenery”. (DW 3)

Whereas Leaflets and The Will to Change propounded an aesthetic based on fragmentation and disunity, Diving into the Wreck, pulls all the pieces, like a periscope into a coherent whole. This “one whole” is an inclusive feminist vision that sees the exaggerated forms of masculinity as evil and the evolution of a personal political female power as good. Rich condemns the lies women speak in defense of male superiority (ARP 107), the secrets women hold that hamper their forming a community and the silences that negate a woman’s emergence into power as a counterforce to male power. Rich’s 1979 collection of selected prose,
On Lies, Secrets and Silence, evidently echoes the same concerns.

Rich's parallel between the oppression of women and the industrial destruction of the environment continues to evoke her angry response throughout the volume. For her, both tendencies reflect the masculine need for mastery and dominance. A poem of the same title as Rich's essay suggests the importance of Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken* to her. To Rich the play is "about the use that the male artist and thinker-- in the process of creating culture as we know it -- has made of women in his life and work; and about a woman's slow struggle awakening to the use her life has been put". (ARP 90) As in the play, the dead in Rich's poem are women whose lives have been used by men, and Rich deplores this use of women as "the tragedy of the sex". 'When We Dead Awaken' can be seen as a companion poem to 'Trying to Talk With a Man' in which she is trying to talk with a woman/ women in general. The opening line "Trying to tell you how" echoes the syntax of the earlier poem, but here Rich's imagined audience is a woman who has not yet awakened to the truths around her -- the truth of man's domination of women as the primal fault that predetermines his disrespect and violation of nature, "everything outside our skins is an image of this affliction" (FD 150). In the last section of part I, Rich addresses her "fellow-creature, sister"; while Rich's terms of address are intimate, her persona adopts a superior position with regard to her listener:

   everything outside my skin

   speaks of the fault that sends me limping
even the scars of my decisions
even the sunblaze of the mica vein
even you, fellow – creature, sister,
sitting across from me, dark with love,
working with me to pick apart
working with me to remake
this trailing knitted thing, this cloth of darkness,
this woman’s garment, trying to save the skein.

(FD 150-51)

The other woman is “dark with love”, while the speaker cannot love anything which is flawed— even herself. Although disabled by her own fault that "sends (her) limping,” she can work with the other woman to remake “this trailing knitted thing”. Rich uses the traditional image of a woman as a weaver and spinster to suggest that women must recreate themselves using their traditional powers, and also a new power that precludes this power – female bonding.

A long poem in five parts, 'Waking in the Dark' is the last call of an old belief for Adrienne Rich - the idea that women and men could work together to make a better world. Though in consideration of poems like 'Merced' and 'Rape', the dream appears tainted, Rich tries to find out “where the split began”. The poem begins with images of violence and contempt for life in the twentieth century (“the man from Bangladesh/
walks starving / on the front page”) and ends with a dream and a wish—a dream of men and women loving one another (“there is no dismay / we move together like underwater plants”) and a wish that the dream materialises into reality.

The third section of the poem advances the metaphor of “the tragedy of sex”:

> The tragedy of sex
> lies around us, a woodlot
> the axes are sharpened for.
> The old shelters and huts
> stare through the clearing with a certain resolution
> – the hermit’s cabin, the hunter’s shack-
> scenes of masturbation
> and dirty jokes
> A man’s world. But finished
> They themselves have sold it to the machines

*(DW 8)*

“The tragedy of sex” is rendered metaphorically as “a wood lot” waiting to be cut down. Otherwise natural and vital, sex becomes tragic when used in a perverse way for “masturbation and / dirty jokes”. Men are the perpetrators of this tragedy and they must bear the heavy burden of guilt for the despoliation the woman sees all about her. The woman does discover the “strange smell of life” in the “unconscious forest”, but it is too late for anything but speculation about what might have
been:

Nothing will save this. I am alone,
picking the last rotting logs
with their strange smell of life, not death,
worried what on earth it all might have become

(DW 8).

_Diving into the Wreck_ expresses the concerns of the feminist movement of the 1970s, and Rich writes with the passionate intensity of a convert. In contrast with _Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law_, published a decade earlier, the poems in _Diving into the Wreck_ present a major shift in attitude. Her poetry becomes less ironic, instead concentrating on emotional awareness and forceful self-perception. While the poems in the _Snapshots_ volume are written from the perspective of an outsider who merely observes and does not affect the world around her, the personae in _Diving into the Wreck_ engage in direct public confrontation.

In _Diving into the Wreck_, Rich has learned, to use her anger as a source of emotional and psychic purgation. In a conversation with Barbara and Albert Gelpi, Rich has stated, “I think anger can be kind of genius if its acted on.” (ARP 111). Acting on anger establishes a necessary ground for identity – emotional and poetic – and ironically, this identity becomes the fountain head for other gentler emotions. The cathartic function of anger can be aptly expressed in the words of Julia Kristeva in _Powers of Horror_—“I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to
establish myself” (3). Rich turns to poetry as a form to express her anger and in doing so, creates a simultaneously expelling and establishing self. Rich’s anger, however, has to be seen in terms of the more constructive emotion of rage which is subtly different from anger, in that having been acquired over a long period of time it is more enduring. In her piece “Rage Begins at Home”, Mary Ann Caws makes clear the difference between these two allied emotional states:

Rage is general, as I see it and is in that quite unlike anger - specific or motivated by something which can, upon occasion, be calmed by some specific solution, beyond what one can state or feel or see. Rage, is I have came to think, one of the great marvels of the universe, for it is large, lithe and lasting . . . . (65-66).

Rich’s rage stems from the realization that women have been subjected to aeons of tyranny and patriarchal oppression and this has alienated them from their own selves. Women have always visualized men as charismatic wielders of power but have never realized that this charisma is the result of a negative power, that is, the tendency to dominate, to tyrannize, to choose or reject a woman as they please. Their yardstick of accepting a woman is related to the extent of her conformity to the tenets of patriarchy. The moment she begins to speak in her own voice, she becomes “harpy”, a “shrew” and “a whore”.

Rich is particularly concerned about the pain and rage of a creative thinking woman artist in a culture that has denied her the most essential
aspects of her experience. Traditionally caught in a double-bind, the woman writer had hitherto a limited range of themes to choose from and write on. She either wrote on love as the source of her suffering, or chose to wholly refrain from sexuality and tried to generate ‘dry’, ‘intelligent’ verse. These themes happened to be validated in a male dominated culture and hence women writers adopted a tone of “dogged tentativeness” to restrain and suppress their basic emotions. Describing the tone of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Rich makes an astonishing observation:

> It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willling herself to be calm, detached and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity. . . . She drew the language out into an exacerbated thread in her determination to have her own sensibility and yet protect if from those masculine presences. (ARP&P 169)

Even which addressing women, a lot of women writers have chosen their theme and their language with an imagined male audience in mind. Conversely, no male writer has written primarily for women or with a consideration for women’s criticism. Rich tries to analyse this position in her essay “When We Dead Awaken” and realizes that the reason lies in the traditional “roles” that the sexes have played in each
other lives:

Where woman has been a luxury for man, and has served as the painter’s model and the poet’s muse, but also a comforter, nurse, cook, bearer of his seed, secretarial assistant, and copyist of manuscripts, man has played a quite different role for the female artist. (*ARP&P* 169)

Rich’s rage aggravates on realizing that these roles are not natural but conferred by a society and a culture primarily male. A “woman” is not an essence but a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture— a dispersed subject, historically variable, socially feminized and a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted. This Nature - Culture bifurcation is epitomised in Simone de Beauvoir’s aphorism ‘One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman’. (*Second Sex* 273)

Re-visioning helps Rich to examine patriarchal structures and myths and observe how they have been used to denigrate women and trap them, over the ages, in the confines of rituals, roles, systems and language. This provides the woman writer with a gamut of new themes, a whole new “psychic geography” as Rich calls it, which has to be explored. Anger is one of the stages in arriving at the shore of consciousness and it is very important for women writers to experience and express this anger to relieve themselves of destructive states of mind.

As Rich has repeatedly observed, anger is a creative force that
women have not been permitted to experience:

Women’s survival and self-respect have been so terribly dependent on male approval. I almost think that we have a history of centuries of women in depression: really angry women who could have been using their anger creatively . . . . And therefore its not only that there are unwritten books, but many of the books that were written are subdued, they’re like banked fires – they’re not what they might have been. (ARP 111)

Rich suggests that women have not had access to their full powers because their fury has been converted into self-hate and despondency. Anger, then, becomes a great medium of empowerment, not a cause of paralysis. Rich’s treatment of anger is counteractive to the romantic mythology that suffused Emily Dickinson’s ‘Master’ - letters in which internalized rage became grovelling humiliation and abject depression. Rich’s rage, on the other hand, sustains her during her solitary journey toward personal and cultural origins as she collaborates in ‘Song’:

If I’m lonely
it’s with the row-boat ice-fast on the shore
in the last red light of the year
that knows what it is, that knows it’s neither ice nor mud nor winter light
but wood, with a gift for burning. (DW 120)

The image of wood or logs with a “gift for burning” occurs frequently
in Rich's poetry. In her early poems, the logs are "half rotten" or dead, while in her later works, as she comes to comprehend and act on her anger, the logs burn with a fierce intensity. She is then able to express herself more spontaneously and more lithely without holding back. In other words, getting in touch with her anger helps her to express herself with an astonishing sincerity which provides her with an immense sense of relief, a "catharsis", leaving her body and mind poised for the purpose of reconstruction, for laying the foundation of a new social order.

The whole process of re-visioning can be seen as a journey in which several frontiers have to be traversed in order to arrive at the destination of a purged state of mind. An awareness of being suppressed in a patriarchal society leads to a fresh assessment/reviewing of the institutions that have been regulating women over a course of time. This, in turn, results in a concomitant experience of betrayal, anger and pain and the expression of this pain results in catharsis. These, then, would be the essential phases of this journey towards self-realization.

Adrienne Rich sees rage as a tool and language as a blow torch to cleanse the mind and achieve a state of awakened consciousness. In her "Review on Robin Morgan's Monster", Rich, while explaining the function of rage expands the metaphor:

.... If it is unnerving it is also cathartic, the blow torch of language cleaning the rust and ticky-tacky and veneer from an entire consciousness. (3)
The pertinent question which one might be tempted to ask is that, for whom is the emotion of rage a cathartic experience? Is it for the writer who has used it as a medium, or for the reader who comes to newer insights after perusing these 'raging expressions'? The answer would be, both, since both the writer and the reader are involved in the creation and interpretation of the text. Expression of anger is a healthy exercise which, if denied, degenerates into self hate and despondency. The emotion of anger leading to catharsis has its genesis in the Aristotlean theory of catharsis which the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines thus:

Historically the most famous supposition about the moral effect of art on its audience is Aristotle's theory of catharsis... Art acts as an emotional cathartic and achieves 'purification of the emotions'. Certain emotions man would be better off without are generated during the course of daily life. Art is the principal agency that should help to dispel these emotions. By observing works of art (witnessing a drama or reading a poem) or by creating them (writing a poem) the person can work off these emotions. Art siphons off these disturbing inner states rather than letting them grow rancid within men. (Vol. 2).

The writer, instead of letting the state of rage 'grow rancid' within the mind uses the medium of art to make constructive use of this rage and thus charges art with positive energy. It is as if an image or a situation arising in the writer's head passes through a kind of a "concentrator", ...
that is, the emotional sphere (in this case, rage) of the creative personality. Experiencing certain feelings and embodying them in artistic images, the writer, in turn, makes the readers re-experience purgation, relief catharsis. This is comparable to the process by which the stormy passions of the great composer Beethoven, expressed in his symphonies and sonatas have been evoking strong feelings in many generations of musicians and listeners, as also the case of some authors who get intensely involved in and painfully respond to their character’s misfortune. The following passage from a letter of Gustave Flaubert to one of his friends would serve as a case in point:

Since two o’clock yesterday afternoon (except for about twenty-five minutes for dinner), I have been writing *Bovary*
I’m in full fornication, in the very midst of it: my lovers are sweating and gasping. (203)

However, the characters and images in Rich’s poem’s are based on a concrete awareness of reality and this makes her rage all the more fierce and virulent.

Aristotle calls anger the emotion closest to reason. *(Rhetoric 2.2).* Paradoxically, anger seems to inhibit articulation and is either manifested in slurred speech or such a rapid outburst of fury that the words cease to have meaning. But Jane Marcus, in her essay, “Art and Anger”, calls anger “a primary source of creative energy” (94) and follows Freud in understanding anger as the ego’s narcissistic defence against threats
to its integrity. She, then, regards this narcissism as a healthy self-preservation in Rich's poetry, and though:

the words
get thick with unmeaning —
yet never have we been closer to the truth
of the lies we were living. \((FD\ 151)\)

Rich's autobiographical poem 'Sources' explores the personal issues that shaped the attitudes we see reflected in *Diving into the Wreck*. Addressing her father, dead for many years, she writes:

After your death I met you again as the face of patriarchy, could name at last precisely the principle you embodied, there was an ideology at last which let me dispose of you, identify the suffering you caused, hate you righteously as part of a system, the kingdom of the fathers. \((ARP&P\ 104)\)

Rich's anger toward her father is further complicated by her husband's suicide which must have left her in a maze of confused feelings. Although Rich chose not to write directly about her husband's death, his suicide and her "sexual wounds" colour *Diving into the Wreck*. Rich's rage can only earn our respect, for in spite of her extreme stance, she is as "wounded" and troubled as any of us. Clearly, Rich's poetic energy flows toward the life-enhancing qualities she sees in women.
In her ten-part poem 'The Phenomenology of Anger' Rich begins the arduous task of unearthing the complex emotional interrelationships that help to achieve the first stage of self-awareness. If these emotions are repressed, they surface in distorted and destructive ways. Denied anger, hatred and despair become madness, murderous rage or suicidal self-hatred and Rich wonders:

Madness  Suicide  Murder.

Is there no way out but these? (DW 28)

The poem explores the effects of individual and social rage and tries to explore the feeling and course of the emotion. Her approach is descriptive rather than abstract, for she is more concerned about describing the process as well as the source of rage. The first two sections juxtapose the difference between expression and repression of anger:

The freedom of the wholly made
to smear and play with her madness. (DW 27)

is contrasted with the cold control of the machinist who limits himself to the measured boundaries of his job:

How does a pile of rags the machinist wiped
his hands on
feel in its cupboard, hour upon hour. (DW 27)

While the oil-soaked rags will smoulder in the cupboard and ignite, the poet realizes that the price of mechanized routines and denied feeling is a loss of eros – the loss of vibrant connection to life.
The next three sections of the poem correlate the emotional and sensual aridity arising from repressed rage, with the masculine attempt to dominate the earth with such geopolitical events as war, the technical subjugation of nature and the oppression of third world countries. In bold, declarative sentences, she acknowledges her hatred for the patriarch, the death carrier who destroys himself and his world in the name of control:

I hate you
I hate the mask you wear, your eyes assuming a depth they do not possess, drawing me into the grotto of your skull the landscape of bone. (DW 29)

Breaking the taboo that requires women to suppress their fury Rich decides to retaliate, imagining herself battling with the man who “(guns) down the babies at My Lai/ vanishing in the face of confrontation”. (DW 29)

However, even at her angriest, Rich’s dream is a charitable one, directed, not at murder but, at transformation. She becomes a modern Amazon, turning the killer’s weapons against him. In a series of sibilant phrases, she uses his weapons not to destroy him, but to transform him:

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

raking his body down to the thread
of existence
burning away his lie
leaving him in a new
world; a changed
man. (DW 28-29)

Rich envisions a super woman, an Amazon, who has transformative energy that can bring forth a new world.

Having identified the patriarchal male as the enemy, the poet imagines an alternative idyllic world - a pastoral vision of a community in harmony with nature - a vision shared by many great artists:

I would have loved to live in 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)

In the final stanza, Rich recalls Hart Crane’s description of the subway, conveying an apocalyptic sense of the inferno of industrial society in fierce, driving phrases:

how we are burning up our lives

testimony:

the subway

hurting to Brooklyn

her head on her knees

asleep or drugged

la via del tren subterráneo

es peligrosa. (DW 31)

The Spanish phrase meaning “the way of the underground train is dangerous” warns of the danger of an increasingly depersonalized and mechanized society that is more concerned with profit than the well-being of its citizens. Rich also makes it clear that it is not the machine that is destructive but the misuse of technology by human beings, that is. The poem concludes with the image of a woman whose work and life have been an act of becoming conscious against the established order:

Every act of becoming conscious

(it says here in this book)
is an unnatural act. (DW 31)

Besides overcoming the fear that hampers the expression of rage women have to rid themselves of certain negative states of mind that prevent them from reaching out to other women. These tendencies have been acculturated into the female psyche over a long period of time and only by overcoming them can women survive as a community. Thus, according to Rich, if women are to survive the damaging effects of the dominant culture they must overcome:

... self trivialization, contempt for women, misplaced compassion, addiction (to love, to depression, to male approval); if we purge ourselves of this quadruple poison, we would have minds and bodies poised for the act of survival and rebuilding (LSS 122-23).

The power of female bonding can be located in Rich's poems in the dialectic between Rich's female speaker and her more silent listener. This dialectic is most apparent in 'The Mirror in which Two Are Seen as One' written in three parts. The first two sections are about love—a woman's love for her "sister" and "romantic" love that enervates and imprisons women as "Love apples cramp you sideways / with sudden emptiness". (FD 159)

Although the speaker avoids the use of the first—person pronoun, the "you" functions here as "I" who supposes that others share her vision, "She is the one you call sister." Rich uses this device to link
her speaker with other women just as the mirror of the title suggests that the two women in the poem are reflections of one perceiver. In dialectical terms, they become thesis and antithesis. Thus the speaker of the poem is not the “you”, but she who reconciles the two women and the poem is that process of reconciliation.

The two women in the poem are opposites of each other. This incidentally recalls to mind the relationship between the two sisters-in-law, explored with great sensitivity by Deepa Mehta in her controversial film “Fire” as a part of her trilogy of films, the other two being “Earth” and “Water”. The “you” is more dynamic and knowledgeable and her frenetic energy is conveyed in images associated with fire:

you blaze like lightning about the room
flicker around her like fire
dazzle yourself in her wide eyes
listing her unfelt needs
thrusting the tenets of your life
into her hands. (FD 160)

She would like the other woman to catch some of her life, a metaphor for the creative power that the other woman has denied herself. Being of superior intelligence, she unhesitatingly articulates the “unfelt needs” of her sister. In contrast to the aggressiveness of "you", the traditional femininity of the sister stands out:

She moves through a world of India print
her body dappled
with softness, the paisley swells at her hip
walking the street in her cotton shift
buying fresh figs because you love them
photographing the ghetto because you took her there. (FD 160)

She is drawn in words suggesting her physicality and her desire to please another and in this case the "other" happens to be a woman. Here, the dialectic between these two women results in a synthesis as both of them change:

Why are you crying dry up your tears
we are sisters
words fail you in the stare of her hunger
you hand her another book
scored by your pencil
you hand her a record
of two flutes in India reciting. (FD 60)

The "you" becomes softer in her caring and less frenzied. Even so there is "another book/ scored by your pencil", signifying the attempt to influence the other by intellectual means. The last image "of two flutes in India/ reciting" pulls together the two strands of the dialectic – an image of harmony that partakes of the elements of both women. The Indian music recalls her sister's dress in "India print" while the verb "reciting" recognizes
the more aggressive woman’s desire to articulate. The phrase “we are sisters” appropriately signifies the coming together of two opposites – a dialectical synthesis.

In the last section a universal love for “women who died in childbirth” evokes a dream in which the speaker becomes a midwife to herself and other women:

Dreams of your sister’s birth
your mother dying in childbirth over and over
not knowing how to stop
bearing you over and over

your mother dead and you unborn
your two hands grasping your head
drawing it down against the blade of life
your nerves the nerves of a midwife
learning her trade. (FD 161)

The female image projects the speaker as her own midwife. The birth requires no participation of man and is sexless in the traditional sense. As a deliberate, conscious act, it defies the stereotypes of female passivity and submission and transforms the female ability to bear pain as something spiritual.

With its emphasis upon conscious control (“grasping”, “drawing it down”), the last image of 'The Mirror' obviates the mindless, passive
labour of the woman who dies in childbirth. The forcefulness of this image manifests the power-to-control trying to become power-to-transform. However, neither the experience nor the institution of motherhood has accorded many women the birth of the self recounted in reconstruction 'The Mirror.' On the contrary, as Rich recounts in *Of Woman Born*:

... the self–denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother (linked implicitly with suffering and with the repression of anger) will spell the 'death' of the woman as girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies for herself—especially when those hopes and fantasies have been acted on. (*OWB* 161)

When Rich imagines a male listener as her audience, her tone becomes scathing. In 'A Primary Ground' she addresses a man, who is also a husband and a father, "And this is how you live: a woman, children / protect you from the abyss". Rich expresses sympathy for the woman and contempt for the man who allows himself to be shored up this way:

It all seems innocent enough, this sin of wedlock: you, your wife, your children leaning across the unfilled plates passing the salt down a cloth ironed by a woman with aching legs. (*DW* 38)
The family as "the primary ground" becomes a microcosm of the larger political institutions in patriarchy. In the final section of the poem, Rich perceives the results of such a marriage as twofold. First, there is "Emptiness/thrust like a batch of letters to the furthest/dark of a drawer", but then Rich goes on to emphasize the more devastating effect:

Your wife's twin sister, speechless
is dying in the house
you and your wife take turns
carrying up the trays,
understanding her case, trying to make her understand. (DW 39)

These lines indict both husband and wife, as they imprison the "twin sister", the dark, wild side of woman not subservient to man. She is an echo of Charlotte Brontë's Madwoman in the Attic, except that she is speechless. There is no sympathy for the man for he is the oppressor, deadly to the total, human functioning of woman. His power is based upon the submission of his wife and Rich's persona would do everything in her power to transform the woman's silence into speech.

Rich also actively protests against the cultural insistence on father right, grounded in legal possession and territoriality. In 'August' she decides to turn away from this nightmare more:

His mind is too simple, I cannot go on sharing his nightmares.
My own are becoming clearer, they open
into prehistory

which looks like a village lit with blood
where all the fathers are crying: My son is
mine. (*DW 51*)

While Emily Dickinson had built her private world within her father's house, Rich wants to remove herself entirely from the houses and cities of the fathers.

The androgynous ideal that Rich envisions in 'Diving into the Wreck' is re-etched in 'The Stranger', where she focuses on the connection between language and androgyny:

I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the lids
of the newborn child. (*ARP&P 53*)

Finding no words to describe her present state of being, Rich places her hope for wholeness in "the newborn child". While writing poems
like 'Diving Into the Wreck' and 'The Stranger' Rich abandons her quest for female aesthetic and focuses on the ideal of androgyny.

The final section of *Diving into the Wreck*, 'Meditations for a Savage Child', is a series of poetic reflections based on *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* by Jean-Mare Gaspard Itard, a book that documents the systematic attempts of a scientist to civilize a naked child found wandering in the woods in 1799. Rich deplores Itard’s ethnocentric efforts to teach the boy “names / for things / you did not need”. Rich draws a parallel between Itard’s efforts to discipline the boy and those of men to control women:

At the end of the distinguished doctor’s lecture

a young woman raised her hand:

*You have the power*

*in your hands, you control our lives*

*why do you want our pity too?* (DW 62)

'From a Survivor' is a monologue in which the speaker as the “survivor” addresses someone who is dead, perhaps her husband who had committed suicide. From the beginning, it clear that the people involved are a man and a woman and their subject is their marital relationship:

The pact that we made was the ordinary pact
of men and women in those days. (*FD 176*)

The speaker is the poet as widow, the “survivor”, speaking of “the failures of the race” and how she and her husband contributed to these failures because their marriage failed. Her tone is poignant as she recalls her husband:

Your body is as vivid to me
as it ever was: even more

since my feeling for it is clearer:
I know what it could do and could not do

It is no longer
the body of a god
or anything with power over life. (*FD 76*)

In contrast with the dead man who remains dead, the widow is energized. She makes “the leap/ we talked, too late, of making.” Though the widow expresses regret about her husband being “wastefully dead” her ability to evolve and grow comes from the rejection of her husband’s power over her life. She speaks of her life:

which I live now
not as a leap
but as a succession of brief amazing movements
each one making possible the next. (*FD* 177)

This, essentially constitutes Rich’s power-to-transform – the ability of women to join hands and fight against the system – and this allows her to become “the survivor” she clearly is.

In her book *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*, Wendy Martin draws an interesting comparison between the lives of Adrienne Rich and Allen Ginsberg, a poet of the beat generation (198–99). When Rich received the National Book Award for *Diving Into the Wreck* Ginsberg was also honoured for *The Fall of America*, the generic male’s response to patriarchy. Like Rich, Ginsberg also laments the senseless destruction of the planet and its people:

> Oh awful Man! What have we made of the World! Oh Man Capitalist exploiter of Mother Planet!

He concludes with the declaration that “there is no longer any hope of the salvation of America proclaimed by Jack Kerouac and the others of our Beat generation” and then retreats into his subjective consciousness.

Martin then cites the contrast between the lives and careers of Rich and Ginsberg as representative of the male and female gender roles that have formed the basis of feminist protests. While Rich spent the twenties and thirties trying to reconcile her domestic responsibilities and her role as a woman poet, Ginsberg spent those years in pursuit of spiritual illumination travelling through Mexico, Tangiers, Europe, India, Africa, the Arctic, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, the Amazon, Cuba, the Soviet
Union Poland and Czechoslovakia. While Rich ceaselessly wrote poetry between household chores or in the middle of the night after comforting a restless child, Ginsberg was “waking mid-afternoon, day wasted idly—weeks passing idly”. Though the Beats abused alcohol and psychedelics and experimented with orgies and meditation, their poetry and politics often remained egocentric. In the 1970s, when Rich was calling for the feminist re-vision of cultural values based on motherhood and the female body, Ginsberg said, “Sperm is art, poetry, music, yoga. Sperm is kundalini, serpent power”. In 1974, when Rich was writing about relationships and interdependence of human life, Ginsberg was writing—I want to be the most brilliant man in America”. Thus while Ginsberg’s phallocentric poetry is characterised by declaration and egocentricity, Rich’s work is concerned with internal process and relationship.

On the jacket cover of Diving Into the Wreck, Rich describes how she perceives the poems in this volume. To her, they are:

A coming home to the darkest and the best sources of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds, sexual identity, sexual politics: many names for pieces of one whole. I feel the book continues the work I’ve been trying to do—breaking down the artificial barriers between private and public, between Vietnam and the lover’s bed, between the deepest images we carry out of our dreams and the most daylight events “out in the world”. This is the intention and longing behind everything I write.
The juxtaposition of ‘darkest’ with ‘best’ suggests the major thematic concerns that Rich is occupied with as a woman exploring the “wreck” of the unconscious and rewriting patriarchal myths by getting in touch with denied emotions, especially the emotion of rage. Rich, then succeeds in dealing with political issues in poems without letting them degenerate into polemics. William Speigelman aptly commends Rich’s poetic art when he explains:

... only Rich has radically redefined the scope and province of lyric, remaking it into a vessel solid enough to contain anger without bursting, and lucid enough to adduce political themes radically. Emotions – rage, despair, hatred - that almost occupy the far side of articulation become an instrument as well as a subject. (ARP&P 379)

As the reader peruses these jagged rhymes, all negative emotions are dispelled leaving her/him renewed and capable of rewriting and creating myths which would form the basis of a new social order that could go on to trace the primal source of unity:

I wish there was somewhere actual we could stand handing the power–glasses back and forth looking at the earth the wildwood Where the split began. (DW 10)