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Power and Change in Adrienne Rich's Poetry, or Toward a Female Alternative Vision of Power

Patricia Godi

This article discusses the notion of “power” in Adrienne Rich’s poetry and the evolution of the poet’s approach to this notion through the first thirty years of her creation, from A Change of World (1951) to The Dream of a Common Language (1978) and A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981). What will be emphasized is the gradual shift that can be observed in Rich’s work from “power” first conceived of as “power-as-force”—a category provided by Claire Keyes’s reference study The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich (1986) and associated with a patriarchal society and our androcentric culture—, to a feminist and/or female conception, characteristic of the poet’s radical feminism during the second-wave feminist era, more concerned with the values of change and care, or the forces of life. Particular attention will be paid to the notion of commitment in Adrienne Rich’s work.

Dans cet article, il est question de la notion de “pouvoir” dans la poésie d’Adrienne Rich et de l’évolution de l’approche de cette notion par la poète à travers ses trois premières décennies de création, de A Change of World (1951) à The Dream of a Common Language (1978) et A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981). L’accent sera mis sur le passage que l’on peut observer dans l’œuvre de Rich d’une conception du “pouvoir-en-tant-que-force” – une catégorie élaborée par Claire Keyes dans son étude de référence The Aesthetics of Power : The Poetry of Adrienne Rich (1986) et associée à la société patriarcale et notre culture androcentrée –, à une conception féministe et/ou de femme, caractéristique du féminisme radical de la poète à l’heure de la deuxième vague féministe, plus concernée par les valeurs de changement et de soin, ou les forces de vie. Une attention particulière sera portée à la notion d’engagement dans l’œuvre d’Adrienne Rich.

The notion of “power” is a pivotal one in the poetry of Adrienne Rich, as revealed by the reference study *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (1986) by critic and poet Claire Keyes. More recently, critic and biographer Hilary Holladay has made power a central issue in entitling her biography of the author *The Power of Adrienne Rich* (2020). The word itself is a recurrent one in Adrienne Rich’s work, as revealed, for instance, by the title of the essay “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” (1975) or of her 1989 collection *Time’s Power*. And there are good grounds to consider that, for a poet like Adrienne Rich, with six decades of literary creation to her name, power is fundamentally a matter of language, synonymous with the power to write, to write poetry especially. The poet herself draws attention to this fact in “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982), in which she revisits her childhood and, more particularly, investigates her relation to her

father under whose tutelage she began writing. In this essay, Rich describes her discovery of language as a form of power which she then equated with the “ability,” already at a very young age, to “share in” the poetic tradition, and the dominant aesthetics of her time in particular. Describing the influence of her father she declares: “He taught me . . . to believe in hard work, to mistrust easy inspiration, to write and rewrite; to feel that I *was* a person of the book, even though a woman; to take ideas seriously. He made me feel, at a very young age, the power of language and that I could share in it” (Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 113). Discovering and “sharing in” the power of language as a child, Rich began her career as a poet who adhered to the aesthetics elaborated by the Modernist poets and the representatives of American New Criticism, still prevailing in the mid-twentieth century.

At the beginning of the poet’s career, “power” meant sharing the “ability” and “authority”—two levels of meaning of the Latin verb “*potere*”—of some of the most representative figures of the period and their belief that true and good poetry should be impersonal, universal, and, of course, apolitical. However, in Rich’s poetry, power appears to be endowed with a remarkably protean quality, one which any attentive and consistent reader of her work is sooner or later challenged to consider. Indeed, how does power as the power-to-share-in the power of language, the power of those who detain cultural and, more particularly, poetic authority, evolve throughout the first three decades of the poet’s creation, from *A Change of World* (1951) to the poetry of the late 1970s that will be the focus of the present study?

In her work published from the early 1960s onward, Adrienne Rich rejected most of the aesthetic positions elaborated by her Modernist predecessors as the symbol of dominant social values conveying a conservative and oppressive bourgeois ideology. Her poetry would gradually become an instrument calling the dominant social and political order into question. It would also, even more radically, mean breaking with the dominant poetic tradition that she came to identify as male, most notably in the essay of feminist literary criticism “‘When We Dead Awaken’: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971). Another aspect of the evolution of Rich’s approach to the notion of power will lead to considering the poet’s feminist or female redefinition of power as a notion that substitutes the forces of life and of care, regarded as power, for a patriarchal conception of “power-as-force,” a category introduced by Claire Keyes. Through the advent of a woman’s voice and a woman’s vision, through the exploration of a woman’s position in the world and the rediscovery or the reassessment of women’s cultural heritage, power, in Rich’s poetry, becomes synonymous with “language as transforming power,” a category introduced by the poet in the essay “Power and Danger:

Works of a Common Woman” (1977)¹—in other words, with the power of poetry to transform “patriarchal poetry”² and the patriarchal order itself.

Writing or Sharing in the “power of the fathers”

As shown by the passage from “Split at the Root” quoted above, as an apprentice poet, Adrienne Rich had inherited the Modernist vision, derived from French Symbolism, of the poet as a “poïétès,” from the Greek verb “poiein,” “to make.” From this perspective, poetry is a “discipline,” the poet a technician who masters poetry conceived of as a matter of “craft.” This heritage goes back to the theories of “art for art’s sake,” to the belief, expounded by Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, in his famous essay “The Poetic Principle” (1850), that “there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem’s sake” (Poe 1435-36). In the early years of her career, Rich can be associated with a tradition of American poetry descending from Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson—the latter in particular, independently from his revolutionary defense of the Americanization of American poetry, having theorized the split between poetry and politics several decades before the French Symbolist poets, as indicated by his famous “Ode, *Inscribed to William H. Channing*” (1846). In this poem, Emerson expresses his suspicion of the priest’s jargon, the statesman’s diatribe and “their politique”: “Which at the best is trick” to the “angry Muse” (Emerson 65).

Adrienne Rich’s first two collections of poems, *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), show her adherence to the Modernist aesthetic belief in the autonomy of the work of art and of language itself, in the necessity to circumscribe language for the purpose of art, which still prevailed in the mid-twentieth century. They illustrate the poet’s mastery of her poetic medium, a mastery praised by W. H. Auden who prefaced her first collection of poems, which he had personally chosen for the Yale Younger Poets Series. In his foreword to *A Change of World*, Auden underlines Adrienne Rich’s “craftsmanship,” which “includes, of course, not only a talent for versification but also an ear and an intuitive grasp of much subtler and more difficult matters like proportion, consistency of diction and tone, and the matching of these with the subject at hand” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 340). He praises her for her “modesty, not so common at that age, which disclaims any extraordinary

¹ Cf. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978*. As for Claire Keyes, she introduces the notion of “power-to-transform” in her study.

² To paraphrase Gertrude Stein in her poem “Patriarchal Poetry.”

vision” and for the tribute her poems pay to her Modernist predecessors, Robert Frost, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, whose voices her poems resonate with. Last but not least, Auden emphasizes the presence in the young poet’s work of “the evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible” (340), a statement directly echoing T. S. Eliot’s well-known aphorism in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), according to which “the emotion of art is impersonal.” An heir to the Modernists, Adrienne Rich could not avoid the influence of American New Criticism³ either that established a method to interpret poetic texts which would have an influence on generations of poets, by ranking form over content, as well as by insisting on the timelessness and universality of poetic writing.

The poems published in Rich’s first two collections are essentially composed metrically and show her expertise at composing in the iambic foot, sometimes even using the heroic couplet, though not systematically using the fixed forms of the poem inherited from the European tradition. They also undeniably possess an abstract or meditative quality without necessarily sounding excessively artificial to the reader familiar with her later work. It is easy to perceive the poet’s keen intelligence and talent at assembling words melodiously, at composing poems that develop like abstract meditations, notably through the recourse to extended metaphors or elaborate comparisons, as immediately revealed by “Storm Warnings,” the opening poem of *A Change of World*, where a parallel is drawn between “[w]eather abroad / And weather in the heart [which] alike come on / Regardless of prediction” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 3). Some poems are endowed with a pronounced metapoetic quality, showing the young poet’s interest in theorizing the art of poetry, as exemplified by the poem “At a Bach Concert,” in which poetry is presented as an “antique discipline,” and “[a] too-compassionate art” is seen as “only half an art” (Rich, *Poems. Selected and New, 1950-1974* 7), a statement that once more conjures up T. S. Eliot’s theory of the superiority of impersonality in poetry; as also illustrated by the eponymous poem of her second collection, “The Diamond Cutters,” which amazingly resonates with Théophile Gautier’s “ars poetica” embodied within the poem “L’Art” at the very end of *Émaux et Camées* (1852). In this title poem, also the final poem of Rich’s collection, in which the poet, like her French predecessor, uses the metaphor of statuary to turn the poet into a skilled expert at questions of form, one reads a series of injunctions through which poetry is equated with the practice of an erudite literary elite, such as: “Be serious, because / The stone may have contempt / For too familiar

³ New Criticism started with a group of conservative Southern scholars and formalist poets, for whom poetry was an art valuable for its own sake that was not supposed to serve any *extrinsic* purpose.

hands” ; or else “Be hard of heart,” “Be proud, when you have set / The final spoke of flame” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 7-8).

From the perspective of American feminist literary criticism, and in particular of Elaine Showalter’s theory of the three phases—“Feminine, Feminist, Female”—of a tradition of literature by women expounded in *A Literature of Their Own: British Novelists from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1978), the poet’s attitude, while showing some self-assuredness, can be regarded as “feminine.” In other words, to quote Elaine Showalter’s study, it is marked by the “*imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art” (11). In order to be recognized as a true poet by those who are endowed with the authority or the power to determine the acceptability of a subject or the quality of a poem, the young poet had no choice but to conform to and adopt the dominant aesthetic beliefs of her time. To repeat Suzanne Juhasz’s words in the feminist essay *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women* (1976), when commenting on the achievements of Modernist women poets, Adrienne Rich could not avoid playing “by the boys’ rules” (4). In “Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading” (1964), Rich would later describe “control, technical mastery and intellectual clarity” as “the real goals” in her first books of poems (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 181), while in “‘When We Dead Awaken’: Poetry as Re-Vision,” her groundbreaking essay of poetic introspection and feminist literary criticism applied to poetry, she would insist that: “[her] style was formed first by male poets: by the men [she] was reading as an undergraduate” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 187). She was simultaneously “sharing in” the power of the mighty ones under patriarchy, since cultural authority has traditionally been synonymous with political and social dominance. The mastery of linguistic discourse has always been a form and an instrument of power, “power-as force,” to use the category provided by Claire Keyes to designate the prevailing idea of power under patriarchy.

Poetry and Commitment: The Transforming Power of Poetry

The 1960s were years of tremendous changes in the life and work of Adrienne Rich, then a married woman who had brought three sons into the world before turning thirty. They were years of growing social consciousness and of political commitment, a central issue for the poet as emblematically revealed in *Poetry and Commitment* (2007), a text initially given as a plenary lecture at the Conference on Poetry and Politics of 2006 at Stirling University, Scotland. In this lecture, Rich explores the relationship between two notions that the Symbolist poets in the nineteenth century and Modernist poets at the turn of the twentieth

century chose to oppose by simultaneously rejecting the Romantic belief in the mission of the poet, be it moral, didactic, or political. In this text, the poet, “scanning the terrain of poetry and commitment” (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 5), draws attention to a tradition of poets who, from Percy Bysshe Shelley to the Scottish Marxist bard Hugh MacDiarmid, to the Greek Communist poet Yannis Ritsos, and to the South African anti-apartheid poet Dennis Brutus, took the opposite view of modern poets by rejecting the split between poetry and politics and considering it the duty of the poet “to be concerned about the politics of [his/her] country” (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 9).

In the late 1960s, Adrienne Rich became a political person, an activist, and began to write “political poetry.” The essay “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” testifies to the poet’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, when she writes, for instance, that: “Most of the political work [she] was doing [in those years] was on racial issues, in particular as a teacher in the City University during the struggle for open admissions.” (Rich, *Bread, Blood, and Poetry* 119). In 1968, Adrienne Rich started working for the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) program for disadvantaged young people at City College of New York, an experience retraced in the essay “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” (1972). As a poet-teacher involved in the open admissions struggle, Rich’s “job” with “black and Puerto Rican freshmen from substandard ghetto high schools” was “to turn the students on’ to writing by whatever means [she] wanted—poetry, free association, music, politics, drama, fiction—to acclimate them to the act of writing, while a grammar teacher with whom [she] worked closely outside of class, taught sentence structure, the necessary mechanics” (Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 55).

Rich’s commitment to and support of the Civil Rights and Peace movements reverberate in many poems of the period as a whole new attitude emerging in her work. It was an attitude that revived the political stance advocated by Walt Whitman, the first and one of the most political American poets, as emphasized by Whitman scholars like Betsy Erkkila; Whitman indeed positioned himself as the “bard of democracy” in its radical, egalitarian and proletarian version, throughout the poems of his monumental *Leaves of Grass*. To Whitman, the poet fails “[i]f he does not flood himself with the immediate age . . . and if he be not himself the age transfigured,” as written in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (633). For him, just as for Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of the “revolutionary-minded” poets in Rich’s own words (*Poetry and Commitment* 6), “Presidents shall not be [the people’s] common referee so much as their poets shall” (Whitman 619). Whitman started writing during the American Romantic period, which critics agree spanned a period of fifty years, between approximately

1810 and 1865. He started writing at the tail end of European Romanticism, which was placed under the sign of “Revolutions.” The question of the relationship between English Romantic poets and their revolutionary historical context, the radical positions of William Blake, for instance, and the revolutionary ideas of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, have been often commented upon. Unlike his British counterparts, Whitman never really lost his faith in revolution, his admiration for the French Revolution, nor his faith in agitation and revolt, due to his belief in a radical form of democracy.

Rich’s poetry of the mid- and late 1960s seems to be particularly in tune with the positions of her anglophone Romantic predecessors for whom “there was no contradiction among poetry, political philosophy, and active confrontation with illegitimate authority” (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 6). It is interesting, moreover, to draw a parallel between her political stance and Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of commitment in literature expounded in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948). And this even though, as underlined by Benoît Denis in *Littérature et engagement: De Pascal à Sartre* (2000), the existentialist philosopher and novelist does not consider the genre of poetry as particularly compatible with commitment, which he essentially associates with prose. Indeed, as can be read in the chapter “Qu’est-ce qu’écrire?” at the beginning of Sartre’s essay, to him: “poets are men who refuse to *use* language” (Sartre 17, my translation).⁴ The purpose of this article is not to discuss Sartre’s viewpoint regarding poetry and commitment, but rather to show the particular resonance of the philosopher’s conception of the “committed” writer in Rich’s work, despite his ideas about poetry. To Sartre, the aesthetic aim cannot be sufficient in and of itself. In his essay, he emphasizes, for instance, that “the function of the writer is to act in such a way that no one can be ignorant of what happens in the world and that no one may say that he did not know”⁵ (Sartre 31, my translation). To him, writing means to “disclose” the world in order to “change,” to transform it, through the power of language: “The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action: he knows that to reveal is to change”⁶ (Sartre 30, my translation). One knows the importance of the notion of “change,” which is in fact intertwined with that of “power” in the poetry of Adrienne Rich.

In Rich’s poetry written around 1968, power gradually becomes synonymous with the power to break with the pretension to neutrality and universality of the Modernist tradition and the advocates of American New Criticism. In “Poetry and Commitment,” she goes as far

⁴ “Les poètes sont des hommes qui refusent d’*utiliser* le langage”

⁵ “la fonction de l’écrivain est de faire en sorte que nul ne puisse ignorer le monde et que nul ne s’en puisse dire innocent”

⁶ “L’écrivain ‘engagé’ sait que la parole est action : il sait que dévoiler c’est changer.”

as to declare: “There is no universal Poetry . . . , only poetries and poetics, and the streaming, intertwining histories to which they belong” (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 21). To her, integrating social and political issues into poetry was becoming a “necessity,” as evidenced by the eponymous poem of her 1966 collection, *Necessities of Life*. In this poem, the speaker in the act of metaphorically giving birth to herself again declares that “[she]’ll // dare inhabit the world / trenchant in motion as an eel, solid // as a cabbage-head” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 18). Adrienne Rich gradually developed a belief in the responsibility of the poet and in poetry as an instrument to act upon the world, as revealed by the essay “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet” (1987), in a passage in which she introduces herself as belonging to a community of American poets sharing her own growing political stance:

. . . I was writing at the beginning of a decade of political revolt and hope and activism. The external conditions for becoming a consciously, self-affirmingly political poet were there, as they had not been when I had begun to publish a decade earlier. Out of the Black Civil Rights movement, amid the marches and sit-ins in the streets and on campuses, a new generation of Black writers began to speak—and older generations to be reprinted and reread; poetry readings were infused with the spirit of collective rage and hope. As part of the movement against United States militarism and imperialism, white poets also were writing and reading aloud poems addressing the war in Southeast Asia. In many of these poems you sensed the poet’s desperation in trying to encompass in words the reality of napalm, the “pacification” of villages, trying to make vivid in poetry what seemed to have minimal effect when shown on television. (Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 180-181)

The poet’s voice in this passage echoes those of many of her contemporaries, and in particular that of Denise Levertov who expounded her conception of “political poetry” in the essay “On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry” (1975) published in the collection of essays *Light Up the Cave* (1981). Like Rich in the passage quoted above, Levertov provides an approach to the power of “political poetry” which she describes as capable of “indirectly hav[ing] an effect upon the course of events by awakening pity, terror, compassion and the conscience of leaders” (168).

The political quality of the poetry of Adrienne Rich, who did not fear the reticence and criticism of those who saw an inherent contradiction between the spheres of poetry and politics, is most explicitly illustrated in *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968* (1969). In this collection, such poems as “To a Russian Poet,” written in support of the dissident poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya confined to a psychiatric hospital after participating in a demonstration to

protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union⁷, and “Jerusalem,” resonating with the war opposing Palestinians and Israeli, appear to be inseparable from political issues and their political context. As for the poem “To Frantz Fanon,” written in homage to the West Indian Marxist theorist of colonization, it can be regarded as one of the poems of the period most explicitly showing the poet’s hostility to colonialism and racism. In Part III of *Leaflets*, in the long sequence poem “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib,” the classical poet from India who wrote in Urdu and in Persian, who was a witness to the establishment of the British Colonial Rule in India and of British colonialism in the nineteenth century, one finds, for instance, the statement: “Last night you wrote on the wall: Revolution is poetry” (Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe* 107). Such a poem, which revisits the traditional ghazal form⁸, also draws our attention to the deeply experimental quality of the poetry of the period, which will be tackled further down. Composed during the same decade as the poems included in *Leaflets*, the poem “Tear Gas” seems to bear witness to the poet’s activism, providing an example of her writing emanating from her involvement in the anti-war protest. This is emphasized by the epigraph that introduces the circumstances that prompted the composition of the poem: “(October 12, 1969: reports of the tear-gassing of demonstrators protesting the treatment of G.I. prisoners in the stockade at Fort Dix, New Jersey).” The opening line of the poem also immediately refers to some form of activism: “This is how it feels to do something you are afraid of. / That they are afraid of” (Rich, *Poems. Selected and New, 1950-1974* 139). From this point on, Adrienne Rich’s poems will be endowed with a two-fold political dimension questioning both her mentors’ positions on the social function of poetry and American mainstream politics. The collection of poetry which best conveys this double attitude may well be *The Will to Change*, the poet’s sixth collection, published in 1971.

The political and experimental breadth of the poems collected in *The Will to Change*, influenced by the revolutionary poetics of Charles Olson’s “theory of projective verse,” an influence commented on in detail by Claire Keyes in her essay, is particularly noticeable in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” One of the major poems of the book, in which Adrienne Rich “will not create any polished form; [in which] she will do away with ‘form’ in the old sense—and work with her ‘notes’” (Keyes 123), “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” echoes the poet’s involvement against the Vietnam War and brings into relief her

⁷ For more details on the poet’s relation to Natalya Gorbanevskaya and analysis of the kind of oppression that women are subjected to under patriarchy, see “Caryatid: Two Columns” in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (116-19).

⁸ The ghazal is a lyric love poem which originated in Arabia in the sixth century before spreading to Persia and India. It is composed of couplets characterized by the repetition of the same word or group of words rhyming at the end of each second line throughout the poem.

belief in the responsibility of the artist and his or her mission to act upon the world through the power of words. The prose paragraph which opens the long free verse poem made of five interrelated sections and a total of ninety-seven lines, reads as an illustration of the interpenetration of the personal and the political, one of the essential characteristics of the political vein in Rich's poetry:

1. My neighbor, a scientist and art-collector, telephones me in a state of violent emotion. He tells me that my son and his, aged eleven and twelve, have on the last day of school burned a mathematics textbook in the backyard. He has forbidden my son to come to his house for a week, and has forbidden his own son to leave the house during that time. "The burning a book," he says, "arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book." (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 34)

In this introductory section, a parallel is drawn by one of the speaker's neighbors between the burning of a "mathematics textbook" and the tragic episode of Nazism. The reference to the traumatic events of contemporary history conjures up the words of critic M. L. Rosenthal in *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (1967): "War is more than a theme or subject for modern writers. It is a condition of consciousness, a destructive fact that explodes within the literature as without it" (410). For the critic "many poets are grappling with a world fundamentally changed by the holocaust." The poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," however, is more immediately and deeply rooted in the historical context of 1968, the year of its composition. The poem was actually written from the height of the turmoil and the violence of the Vietnam War, and the title immediately rings like an allusion to the napalm burning of Vietnamese villages. The violence of the war will be directly targeted in the fifth and last section of the poem, another prose paragraph and a response of sorts to the opening one, which reads as a radical critique of the language at the disposal of the poet necessarily engaged in a process of transformation:

I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language. (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 37)

The energy of active protest against the war in Vietnam is omnipresent in the text as an essential background, even though the issues of social injustice and of poverty are also raised in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children." In section three, in one more prose paragraph "written [this time] by one of Rich's students in the Open Admissions Program at

City College of New York,” as specified in a footnote and suggested by several grammatical mistakes, one reads that

“People suffer highly in poverty and it takes dignity and intelligence to overcome this suffering. Some of the suffering are: 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 tears in your eyes.” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose*, 35)

The poems of the 1971 collection *The Will to Change* cannot be read as propaganda and “remain poems,” as emphasized by Albert Gelpi in the essay “Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 292-298). They draw the reader’s attention to the importance of the notion of “sight,” of “vision,” acting as the metaphor for the quest for awareness, for becoming aware of the assumptions, the values and beliefs, which determine and limit an individual’s existence and position in the world and, more particularly, women’s existence in a patriarchal society. Like the image of the “camera” in the poem “Diving Into the Wreck,” the title poem of the 1973 collection marking the breakthrough to a feminist poetics in Rich’s work, the poems gathered in *The Will to Change* draw attention to the quest for awareness concerning “sexual politics” or, in other words, from Kate Millett’s perspective in *Sexual Politics*, “a set of stratagems designed to maintain a system” in which male ascendancy operates and is ensured under the institution of patriarchy (Millett 23). As Kate Millett elaborated her theory of patriarchy as a system in which men possess power over women in all fields, the issue of power relations between the sexes was to become a key focus in Rich’s poetry.

The Powerful Language of Women’s Powerlessness

Years of commitment in the poet’s life and work, the 1960s were also a decade during which the poet began to consider her experience in society as gendered and as inseparable from the wider situation of women in a society identified as patriarchal. The publication of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* in 1963, eight long years after the publication of *The Diamond Cutters*, had already constituted a watershed in the poet’s career. It coincided with the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the United States, marked by the coming out, the same year, of Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking sociological essay *The Feminine Mystique*, which threw light onto “the problem which [had] no name” (the title of the opening chapter of the book) and gave a voice to thousands of white American middle-

class women feeling trapped in “the new religion of femininity and the Wife-Mother goddess,” as emphasized by Ginette Castro in *American Feminism: A Contemporary History* (14-15). At the end of World War II, with the return of the G.I.s, and hence the return of a male workforce, the idea that “a woman’s place is in the home” was back into circulation. Most middle-class American women were once more confined to the traditional role of housewife and mother, even though many among them had graduated from high school or from college and could legitimately aspire to a profession. Betty Friedan’s book, which was one of the first attacks on the conservatism of Freudian theories regarding “femininity,” as underlined by feminist critics and historians, had the effect of a catharsis for many of its female readers.

Moreover, as can be read in “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” Rich’s third collection *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* had coincided with the poet’s beginning to write “directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience, to take women’s existence seriously as theme and source for art”; it had coincided with her beginning to feel “for the first time the closing of the gap between woman and poet” (Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 182). From the perspective of feminist literary criticism, she was overcoming the traditional antagonistic relationship between “poet” and “woman,” one first theorized in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf, in the now widely quoted parable about the tragic lot of Judith Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s imaginary sister. According to Susan Stanford Friedman in the essay “Adrienne Rich and H. D.: An Intertextual Study,” the author of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* was “gradually changing from a poet who had erased all traces of gender to one who explored the dailiness of a woman’s life” (qtd. in Cooper 174). In her third collection, in the eponymous poem more particularly, Rich began to explore the situation of the female artist and, more broadly, of all women in the ultraconservative post-World War II American society, in which true womanhood was equated with marriage and motherhood, a limitative norm arousing in many women a feeling of powerlessness.⁹

The issue of the experience of powerlessness in the institutions of patriarchal marriage and motherhood runs throughout the poems of *Necessities of Life* (1966) and *Leaflets* (1969), some of which are endowed with a particularly personal vein reminiscent of the poetry of

⁹ In her study of American feminism, Ginette Castro comments on the fact that the post-World War II period, with all its conservatism, saw the appearance of a new societal problem, “the housewife’s syndrome,” designated as such by historians, by psychologists, and in the media. The problem, regarded as a kind of “epidemic,” as “a national catastrophe,” was taken so seriously that a sociologist, Ferdinand Lundberg, and a psychologist, Marynia Farnham, devoted a study to it: *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947). In this study, which became a best-seller, the women suffering from the so-called syndrome were stigmatised as “neurotic” and as showing the symptoms of “feminist illness.”

American confessional poets, and in particular of the voices of Adrienne Rich's female counterparts, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. In these two collections, poems abound which show the lyrical self's attempt to relate the experience of women confined in the patriarchal matrimonial system with their situation of exclusion from the public sphere. These collections of poems resonate with Simone de Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex*, echoes and reverberations of which could already be found in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." Poems on the speaker's sense of powerlessness and, even more radically, on the exploration of the destructiveness generated by the limits imposed on the female subject by traditional female roles, are recurrent in *Leaflets*. This is revealed by poems such as "Night Watch," "Picnic," or "Implosions," and most strikingly by "Orion," the opening poem of the 1969 collection. In "Orion," lines such as "Indoors I bruise and blunder" or "A man reaches behind my eyes / and finds them empty," are emblematic of the poet's "necessity for life," as emphasized by Albert Gelpi, for her own survival, "of re-ordering social values and structures" (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 293). And yet, as revealed by deeply personal poems, by a poem such as "Orion," which refers at once to a constellation and to Greek mythology, the poet's commitment to the social function of poetry always involves the elaboration of striking and powerful images, particularly skillful linguistic and stylistic choices, a deep concern with form and with the experimentation with new forms, a characteristic of the poet's artistry in all her "political poetry."

From a Feminist to a Female Alternative Vision of Power

At the beginning of *The Will to Change*, in the poem "Planetarium," one of the poems opening the collection and which resonates with the poet's involvement as a theorist and activist in the Women's Liberation Movement, Rich's poetry positions itself as deliberately invested with a mission, a metaphorically "archeological" one. It will consist in rediscovering the memory of women whose names have been erased from History, also "his" story, as pointed out in American feminist criticism. Written while "[t]hinking of Caroline Herschel, 1750-1848, astronomer, sister of William; and others," "Planetarium" can be read as a tribute to all women stigmatized or persecuted for audaciously breaking with women's traditional social roles:¹⁰

a woman "in the snow
among the Clocks and instruments

¹⁰ Still an issue in contemporary debates and publications as revealed, for instance, by the essay *Sorcières : La puissance invaincue des femmes* (2018) by Mona Chollet.

or measuring the ground with poles”

in her 98 years to discover
8 comets

she whom the moon ruled
like us
levitating into the night sky
riding the polished lenses

Galaxies of women, there
doing penance for impetuosity
ribs chilled
in those spaces of the mind (Rich, *The Will* 13)

In “Planetarium,” where the poet dares to use the first-person pronoun “I” pointing to herself as at once a circumstantial self and a political subject, the voice becomes overtly committed to the rediscovery of women’s accomplishments as a response to the prevailing ideology equating true femininity with self-abnegation and renunciation:

. . . 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. (Rich, *The Will* 14)

In a vibrating and visionary statement, the poet inaugurates her new mission, one very similar—in its poetic version of impressive body and cosmic imagery and of quest for a new poetic language—to the commitment of numerous scholars and critics, historians and publishers in the last fifty years, to recover the forgotten history of women’s creations in all its diversity.¹¹ This mission will be carried on in Adrienne Rich’s next collection, whose eponymous poem, “Diving Into the Wreck,” can be read as the expression of the poet’s radical position as the explorer, among a community of women, of a patriarchal society and of our androcentric culture metaphorically represented as a “wreck”:

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done.
. . .

¹¹ One of the best instances of this kind of commitment can be found in a recent publication: *Dictionnaire Universel des Créatrices*, eds. Béatrice Didier, Antoinette Fouque, Mireille Calle-Gruber (Paris : *Des femmes*-Antoinette Fouque, 2013).

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear. (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 44)

If in this poem, as underlined by Claire Keyes, the poet still sees “[the] androgynous ideal as a vision of human wholeness and the health of the race” (Keyes 133), as revealed, for instance, by the central affirmation “I am she: I am he,” nevertheless, in the essay “Caryatid : Two *Columns*,” published the same year as *Diving Into the Wreck* (1973)¹², she provides a theoretical complement to her poetic stance. From a feminist perspective, she declares: “We need a poetry which will dare to explore, and to begin exploding, the phallic delusions which are now endangering consciousness itself” (Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 116). The reconstruction of a female memory, if it leads to the reassessment of women’s power through the rediscovery of the creations of women of note, may also lead to a new approach to the notion of power itself: to an alternative to the definition of “power-as-force” in the “Kingdom of the Fathers” (Rich, *Of woman Born* 56).

The rediscovery and reappropriation of women’s cultural heritage and, to begin with, of the accomplishments and creations of reputable women, characterize Adrienne Rich’s poetry of the 1970s, as most explicitly revealed by the poem “Power” dedicated to Marie Curie, and placed at the very beginning of the collection *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978). It is now well-known that Marie Curie, who had discovered the vital properties of radium and was awarded two Nobel Prizes for her research on radiation phenomena, died from radiation poisoning, as alluded to in the last lines of the poem:

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source
as her power (Rich, *The Dream* 3)

Is the implicit equation of “power” and death, in this “hesitant, ambivalent poem in its handling of Marie Curie,” to repeat Lynda K. Bundtzen’s words (qtd. in Jones 46), a way of

¹² In the second section of the essay entitled “Vietnam and Sexual Politics”.

calling into question scientific “power” when it is unscrupulously instrumentalized by powerful nations? Is “power” according to the dominant patriarchal ethos called into question here? In the article “Power and Poetic Vocation in Adrienne Rich’s *The Dream of a Common Language*,” Lynda K. Bundtzen actually mentions the tragic consequences of the appropriation of Marie Curie’s contribution to the study of radium and radiation for military purposes, which led to the invention and tragic use of the atomic bomb during World War II, as well as to the arm race of the Cold War and other disastrous situations. And yet, even though Marie Curie could neither master nor control the tragic impact of her discoveries, she may nevertheless stand as a symbol of the traditional, cultural dedication of women to the forces of life against the culture of war, identified by Rich and other radical feminists, especially the ones associated with the differentialist pole of second-wave feminism, as one of the trademarks of male-dominated society. During World War I, the scientist’s research enabled her to courageously promote the use of X-rays on the battlefields, to help surgeons operate on the wounded soldiers. Dedicated to an exceptional woman who was committed to the forces of life, “Power” is also symbolically placed at the beginning of a collection of poetry that exudes with the utopian spirit and the political drive to “change the world” which marked the 1970s. It is emblematic of the elaboration, by some radical feminist thinkers and poets of the period, of a renewed vision of life and of an alternative ethics standing in sharp contrast to the patriarchal dominant values of authority, hierarchy, competition or “competitiveness” (a notion clearly called into question in the poem “Transcendental Etude” in particular), and designating the domination of women by men as a template for all the other forms of domination (see Ramond). Adrienne Rich’s poem, while celebrating the intellectual power of an exceptional woman, seems to provide the vision of an alternative definition of power, one identified with the positive values of care and solidarity.

In *The Dream of a Common Language*, the poet will explore the revolutionary possibilities for solidarity between women presented as “sisters,” and the collection echoes with the works of other feminist poets and activists, like Robin Morgan’s groundbreaking anthology of feminist theory *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), whose title was turned into a slogan. In Adrienne Rich’s poetry of the 1970s, the figure of the sister emerges as particularly significant and central, be it the real biological blood sister, as in the poem “Sibling Mysteries,” or the symbolic one sharing a similar experience in patriarchal society and a similar quest for “a change of world.” Gradually, Adrienne Rich’s poetry will come to depict women acting together, supporting each other, as can be observed in “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 60-61) which tells the story of a Russian women’s

climbing team led by Elvira Shatayev, “all of whom died in a storm on Lenin Peak” in August 1974, as indicated by the poet in the epigraph. In this poem, written from Elvira Shatayev’s viewpoint, the figure of the symbolic sister and the concept of sisterhood as synonymous with union and power regained by women, are essential. Women’s acting together, their supporting each other, is then presented as an audacious and revolutionary response to a society organized to serve men’s needs and which has traditionally conceived of women’s relationships in terms of rivalry, of competition and alienation from each other; a situation that the first two waves of feminism strove to overcome, but that the popularization of mainstream psychoanalytic theories of “femininity,” as underlined by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*, reinforced. As emphasized by Judith McDaniel in the essay “‘Reconstituting the World’: The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich,” such a poem as “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev,” as well as the group of love sonnets “Twenty-One Love Poems” placed at the centre of the 1978 collection, provide “a glimpse of the power generated by love, specifically the love of women for women” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 365).

What is noteworthy and must be underlined is that Adrienne Rich would gradually complement the rediscovery of female scientists, literary or artistic figures, whose experience she could compare to her own, with the reassessment of and a tribute paid to the unwritten, unrecorded, discredited experiences or culture of anonymous women, the traditionally invisible and ignored. Written from an overtly feminist and female perspective, Rich’s volumes of poetry *The Dream of a Common Language* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) strive to restore the value of a female culture marked, since time immemorial, by the transmission of life and a privileged relation to its preservation reappropriated by women themselves. In Rich’s poetry of the 1970s and early 1980s, women’s culture of the preservation of life and care taking is turned into a sort of “counter-culture” or “counter-power” to the masculine institutionalization of “power-as-force.” In the long poem “Natural Resources” placed at the end of *The Dream of a Common Language*, breaking with the notion of androgyny presented in *Diving Into the Wreck* as a response to binary gender oppositions and the traditional denigration of the feminine and the female in our androcentric culture, in section 13:

There are words I cannot choose again:
humanism androgyny

Such words have no shame in them, no diffidence
Before the raging stoic grandmothers (Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe* 262)

Rich also attempts to give back to women their lost past of humble things¹³ or, as expressed by the poet in an oxymoronic mode: “[t]he enormity of the simplest things.” As can be read at the end of “Natural Resources”:

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,

Without extraordinary power,
Reconstitute the world. (Rich, *The Dream* 67)

The poet’s concerns widen in the mid-1980s and the 1990s, and the next phase of her poetry is more connected with “gender as only one of many categories of oppression,” to quote Brett Millier’s words in her introduction to the 2018 Norton edition of Adrienne Rich’s *Poetry and Prose* (xii). And yet, this evolution seems to be inseparable from the poet’s utopian project, running through her work of the 1960s and 1970s, to make the forces of life overcome the forces of destructiveness and “self-destructiveness,” as she writes in “When We Dead Awaken’: Writing as Re-Vision,” “of male-dominated society” (Rich, *Poetry and Prose* 183). It seems rooted, in other words, in her radical feminist vision of power being used by women “differently from men: non-possessively, nonviolently, nondestructively” (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 72), a vision deeply pertaining to Adrienne Rich’s radical quest for a world “without domination,” at the core of her philosophy of life.

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¹³ See the essay by Judith McDaniel quoted above, p. 366.

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