"Catch if you can your country’s moment"
"Catch if you can your country’s moment": Recovery and Regeneration in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich

Edited by

William S. Waddell

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
To my mother, Avis,
and the memory of my father, Bill
(1922 – 2007)
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I would like to thank all my fellow contributors to this collection, who were unfailingly cooperative and enthusiastic, as well as smart, and to thank Lisa Perdigao in particular for the friendly push that actually got the project started. Sincere thanks also to Mary Lynn Broe (Rochester Institute of Technology) and Guy Rotella (Northeastern University) for their generous and immensely helpful readings of the whole manuscript, and to Liz Vanderhoff, my student assistant, whose dependability has been so valuable and whose good humor has been invaluable. Above all, and always, my deep gratitude to Linda Rubel, for these many wonderful years of love, inspiration, and support.

The authors are grateful for permission to reproduce passages from the following:


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INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM S. WADDELL

Adrienne Rich has been publishing regularly, both poetry and prose, since 1951, and is one of very few American poets sure of a substantial audience both inside and outside the academy. She is a major writer by any standard, and if there were anything to be gained by such an implied competition, one could readily argue that hers is the defining career in American poetry for the second half of the twentieth century, now pressing purposefully into the twenty-first. She has earned this stature in several ways. She has worked out and away from formalism but never from craft. She is deeply identified with social and personal liberation movements of the sixties and seventies, and her continued commitment to such movements through the eighties and nineties, after they largely vanished from Western headlines, forms part of the foundation of this collection’s overall perspective. As a poet and a public intellectual, she has remained seriously focused, in both poetry and prose, on the reconstruction of poetry’s place in public as well as private life, nationally and globally. She sees that place absolutely dependent on language and a defense of language in an age of mass media and a degraded, if not deliberately dishonest, public discourse. Her own comments on this last topic have been published not only in traditionally academic and activist venues but in numerous popular outlets as well, including Bill Moyers’s The Language of Life and the Los Angeles Times and other newspapers, reflecting their editors’ recognition of her reputation and broad audience.

The eight essays in this collection all address, in different ways, Rich’s negotiation of the boundary between public and private spheres. Taken together, they argue for a shift in the perceived center of gravity of Rich’s career, from the passionate and eloquent poems of a largely personal feminist awakening, from the mid 60s to the early 80s, to the equally (if differently) passionate and eloquent poems of a more broadly public re-imagination of our country and its history, beginning with her work of the mid 80s. The pivotal volume in this scheme is An Atlas of the Difficult World (1991), the primary focus of four of the pieces. Piotr Gwiazda has pointed out that the appearance of Atlas, Rich’s most explicit
Introduction

turn toward public and national significance for her work, coincides with
the origins of the recent “death of poetry” debate (2005). Dana Gioia’s
made this compact lament about poetry’s marginalization and insularity
the keynote to a full collection of essays the next year. In the context of
such concerns, Rich’s work represents a complex middle ground informed
by both traditional methods and epistemologies (of the kind apparently
preferred by the “conservative” death of poetry observers, like Gioia
himself or Joseph Epstein) and more revolutionary aspirations. She insists
upon (in her prose) and enacts (in her poetry) the potential of poetry as a
revolutionary medium and alternate epistemology, a means, as our title
expresses it, of recovery and regeneration.

Exploring her achievements in this effort—through her craftsmanship,
through the spaces her poems create and inhabit, through the ways of
seeing they embody and the communal ethic they reach toward, through
the language itself, its contradictions and its powers—is the central aim of
this collection. The processes of recovery and regeneration can, of course,
have both personal and public expressions and effects, and Rich’s poetry
often represents the former as the necessary precursor of the latter. Though
the collection as a whole emphasizes the public elements, it sees the
personal and public phases as continuous, as the very design of the
volume—with the essays on Atlas framed by wider ranging ones—is
intended to suggest. The shift is an evolution and not a sudden break, but
documenting this shift and assessing its significance are crucial to our
appreciation of one of our major poets.

The first three essays establish a foundation in Rich’s practices for
employing and challenging poetic methods—from versification to
historical and mythic allusion—and the ideological substrata they imply.
The “spider’s genius” in Emily Merriman’s title refers both to the ability
to spin the threads—or “lines”—of its web and to its awareness of its own
needs. Taking the line as the chief medium of written verse, whether
traditional or open in form, Merriman explores the ways that Rich’s
linguistic and poetic structures are redeployed to suggest the subversion of
some ideological structures. Pamela Matthews’ essay follows Merriman’s
opening by applying a similarly “transformational” analysis to recurrent
references in Rich’s poetry to Joan of Arc. Matthews observes that Joan’s
death by burning provides Rich with a cluster of incendiary images that
synthesize Rich’s historiographic practice—burn the past to clear away the
debris of received knowledge and to imagine history anew using what
remains. But Joan’s complex existence at the blurred edge of history and
myth reminds Rich and her audience that any new construction of history
must not itself be oversimplified. Matthews examines Rich’s use of a traditional figure to point the way toward a more inclusive and revolutionary sense of history, and of history as a conceptual ground humans cannot escape. Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega’s invocation of mythological figures connected to spiders, from both European and non-European traditions, recreates and extends Merriman’s link of the “spider’s genius” and poetic creation. At stake are different models for realizing and representing both orientations within and connections among locations, in Rich’s complex sense of that term. As Matthews’ essay speaks to Rich’s concern with our ways of understanding a collective past, Ortega’s speaks to her parallel concern with our means of understanding and achieving agency in a collective present. Both perspectives are critical to the poetic project described in the collection’s next set of essays.

In the first of the pieces on An Atlas of the Difficult World, Phyllis Franzek focuses on the qualities of the voice in the title poem from that volume, especially its opening section. Her concerns complement those of both Merriman (the expressiveness of technique) and Ortega (the key question of agency), and anticipate those of Perdigao (the consequences of a flight from the material realm). Franzek argues for a developmental, heuristic structure for “Atlas,” in which its speaker, its organizing intelligence, projects an increasing understanding of the double-edged role of language in creating horrors and in confronting them, and of the necessity to embody human(e) values in that language. William Waddell centers his analysis on Rich’s embodiment, as an observer, of Trinh Minh Ha’s “inappropriate other/same.” He traces that perspective from “Sources” (1983/86) through poems from Time’s Power (1989) to “Atlas,” describing the special ability of that perspective to reconstruct national or imperial ideologies by replacing definition—in virtually its etymological sense of boundary drawing—with empathetic recognition. Combining attention to that transformation with attention to Rich’s revisions of epic, especially in “Atlas,” as a narrative form often tied to national definition, his essay addresses, at the level of genre, some of the same concerns Merriman addresses in the line.

The similarity of the titles suggests real parallels between Lin Knutson’s essay and Waddell’s, but the relation is more complementary than repetitive. They share a panoramic perspective, both explore the links between an individual and a larger, public identity, and both recognize an existence characterized by greater freedom as the goal of Rich’s project. Knutson’s panorama, however, ranges through poems in Atlas and forward to Rich’s next volume, Dark Fields of the Republic (1995). Her argument, rooted in complex senses of individual and cultural identity from Rich’s
well known essay, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” (1984), and from postcolonial theory, examines Rich’s strategies in representing and interrogating the exploitation and violence that have marked America’s past and present, and in projecting a national identity that could be more inclusive, free, and creative. After Knutson’s essay opening Atlas toward a psychology of identity and Waddell’s opening it toward a revised version of epic, Jeannette Riley returns to a concern with poetry as a particular kind of language. In this way, her essay looks back through Franzek’s toward Merriman’s opening. Invoking a number of vivid statements about poetic language from Rich’s prose, Riley focuses on two qualities: the ways that language evades containment and the ways it both registers and generates desire, continually propelling itself and its audience onward toward fuller realizations of freedom. She demonstrates these effects primarily in poems from Atlas, but also looks back to Your Native Land, Your Life (1986), and forward to Dark Fields.

In the final essay, Lisa Perdigao focuses on poems that go back, in Rich’s career, to The Diamond Cutters (1955) and forward to Midnight Salvage (1999), thus bracketing the poems that have been the primary focus of the “Atlas section.” She mounts an argument addressing Rich’s response to poststructuralist theory and its questioning of the form and function of poetic language, thus taking the volume’s concerns back to Merriman’s beginning with craft. She traces a shift from metaphor toward metonymy in Rich’s models of poetic representation to demonstrate Rich’s evolving conviction that material bodies cannot be abandoned for stories—transformations—of their experience, of their wreck. Perdigao’s essay thus provocatively concludes the collection with a perspective that challenges and rigorously tests the transformational arguments of most of the others.

“Catch if you can your country’s moment,” Rich writes at the beginning of the fifth section of “An Atlas of the Difficult World” (1991, 12). The injunction is imperative, the deed tactile—not merely to observe, or even to understand, but to grasp and hold. But success is not certain (“if you can”) or, perhaps, lasting (a “moment”), and in her poetry of the last twenty years she has worked diligently to meet this challenge. A poet who has aimed always, as the concluding lines of “Planetarium” (1968) have it, at “the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind,” has extended the reach of that healing motive across a continent and a culture (1975, 148). The essays in this collection work to describe that effort, hoping, in the process, to send our readers back to Rich’s poems.
Works Cited


During Adrienne Rich’s career her formal poetic skill and evolving technical strategies have served, exemplified and sometimes even embodied her social and political goals. Over more than fifty years, from such early verse as “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (1951) through “Planetarium” (1968), “An Atlas of the Difficult World” (1991), and “Terza Rima” (2001), the prolific Rich, driven by “inner necessity” (2001, 141) has used her ability to compose exquisite English verse in service of her aim of reorganizing social structures, liberating the oppressed, and establishing connections between marginalized groups of people. Her prose writings, too—the highly influential feminist treatise Of Woman Born (1976), for example, as well her direct comments on the development of her own craft in short essays like “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” (1971)—articulate her sociopolitical analyses and her hopes for change. They provide a useful but non-determining frame of reference for comprehending her poetic themes and methods. Rich’s poetry consistently demonstrates her desire to marry her remarkable technical abilities to a transformative political vision that will bear the fruit of “freedom.”1

Ideally, there exists a productive partnership between poetic technique and the poet’s values; the technical features simultaneously enable the poet to express her values and serve as a concrete example of what she holds true.2 The notion of language as a potentially liberating force lives at the heart of Adrienne Rich’s poetic endeavor, but Rich is well aware that language can also be used as an instrument of oppression: “one of the underlying themes of my poetry is that tension between the possibilities in language for mere containment and the possibilities for expansion, for liberation” (1992, Gelpi, 258). This struggle between containment and
liberation is manifest in her poetry partly through her variety of verse forms, which are often inventive but engaged in dialogue with traditional forms. While she values experimentation, she is suspicious of innovation so extreme that it risks solipsism: “The most self-consciously innovative, linguistically nonlinear poetry, whatever its theory, can end up as stultifying and as disintegrative as the products of commercial mass media” (2001, *Arts*, 113).

By breaking new ground in an old landscape, Rich struggles to rework the American English language so that it can be more honestly and freely spoken by women, lesbians, Jews—or anyone for whom the vocabulary, grammar and ordinary discourse of standard English may also constitute a large part of the sociopolitical matrix that restricts their own power and speech. In Rich’s verse, linguistic and poetic structures are recast in order to move in the direction of recreating social structure. Her developing feminist vision is incarnated again and again in the whole and broken lines of her poems.

The way a poet consciously assesses the importance of the relationship between poetic form and social purposes acts as one shaping force on the poetry itself. In prose, Rich explicitly resists a reductionist focus on craft. She writes of the genesis of her own poetic career, “I was exceptionally well grounded in formal technique, and I loved the craft. What I was groping for was something larger, a sense of vocation, what it means to live as a poet—not how to write poetry, but wherefore” (1993, 195-96). She expresses little patience for the New Critical notion of the poem as autotelic artifact, or the idea of art for art’s sake.

Despite this opposition to narrowly aesthetic understandings of form, the sound of poems was what mattered first to Rich when her parents, especially her father, introduced her to them: “I had grown up hearing and reading poems from a very young age, first as sounds, repeated, musical, rhythmically satisfying in themselves…” (1986, 168). As a child she discovered “[t]he power of words is enormous; the rhythmic power of verse, rhythm meshed with language, excites her to imitation” (1993, 182).

The adult Rich is inevitably involved in the American poetic obsession with “form” (most recently incarnated in the battle between the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and the New Formalists). She directly enters the debate in her discerning essay “Format and Form” (1993), which distinguishes “format”—one of the controlling mechanisms of advanced capitalism—from poetic “forms.”

She sees poetic forms as organic and ancient and, by implication, politically neutral in essence. But when they become automatic they turn into “formula,” and when they become required or coercive they turn into
“format.” She perceptively, if parenthetically, observes that free verse is no more inherently exempt from the oppressiveness of formatting than closed forms. It is worth quoting Rich’s distinction in full:

Poetic forms—meters, rhyming patterns, the shaping of poems into symmetrical blocks of lines called couplets or stanzas—have existed since poetry was an oral activity. Such forms can easily become format, of course, where the dynamics of experience and desire are forced to fit a pattern to which they have no organic relationship. People are often taught in school to confuse closed poetic forms (or formulas) with poetry itself, the lifeblood of the poem. Or, that a poem consists merely in a series of sentences broken (formatted) into short lines called “free verse.” But a closed form like the sestina, the sonnet, the villanelle remains inert formula or format unless the “triggering subject,” as Richard Hugo called it, acts on the imagination to make the form evolve, become responsive, or works almost in resistance to the form. It’s a struggle not to let the form take over, lapse into format, assimilate the poetry; and that very struggle can produce a movement, a music, of its own. (1993, 218-19)

That formal—and simultaneously anti-formal—struggle drives Rich’s poetry, the music and movement it creates. This struggle with verse is intimately entwined, as her above analysis of the effects of poetic forms and formats illustrates, with the political struggles in which she is also engaged.

Rich argues that finding specific answers to formal questions is not the ultimate goal. Her “Format and Form” essay continues, “...what really matters is not line lengths or the way meter is handled, but the poet’s voice and concerns refusing to be circumscribed or colonized by the tradition, the tradition being just a point of takeoff” (1993, 225). Under the influence of Rich’s own most clearly and frequently stated values, her critics have tended to concentrate on the content of the poetry: what the poems are doing rather than precisely how they are doing it. Even works of criticism that focus on “poetic method” seem more interested in theme than in verse technique. Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz displays a translator’s intimacy with Rich’s patterns of language usage: out of practicality Díaz-Diocaretz has been obliged to engage with vocabulary, syntax (including subordination and superordination), rhyme, rhythm, meter, intonations, lineation, punctuation and all the other resources available to the poet. Diaz-Diocaretz is well aware that there is a symbiotic relationship between poetic technique and political commitments: “Translating a feminist text demands consideration of the modes used by its author to challenge the already established and received ideological structures, and the preexistent norms and values....” (1985, 138). However, her analysis of formal details
narrow down to her primary concern, which is the rendering of Rich’s poems into Spanish.

Despite this relative lack of critical attention to Rich’s verse technique, and despite Rich’s own apparent dismissal of the specifics of line length or meter, there is much valuable information to be gleaned by studying Rich’s actual poetic practice and examining the relationship in Rich’s work between *how* to write poetry and *wherefore*.

That Rich’s outlook and vision change significantly over time is a commonplace of the critical discourse. Her life and career have gone through a series of marked shifts, with her attention moving from heterosexual marriage, to radical feminism, to lesbian feminism, to consciousness of her Jewish heritage and an enduring deep commitment to radical politics—although to summarize in such broad terms is to do injustice to the difficulties, nuances, and overlaps of each transition. It is not that the poems are to be read as testaments about the life, or that the prose is merely a commentary on the personal experience, but that the changing opinions and circumstances provide contextual counterpoint to the published texts. Rich herself has expressed opposition to the treatment of poems as “personal biography or as paraphrasable narratives” (2001, *Arts*, 139), yet also, earlier in her career (in “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” for example), she sought to establish the importance of the personal as a necessary ground for understanding the social.

During these personal, intellectual developments, Rich has written in both prose and poetry, and a reading of each can inform a reading of the other. The prose work that has had the greatest social impact is *Of Woman Born*, an autobiographical, anthropological, sociological, historical book-length critique of patriarchy and how it has created an oppressive institution out of motherhood. Rich’s focus was primarily on motherhood in the West. Her analysis has been extremely important for feminism in the United States, and even when other writers disagree with what they have understood Rich to be arguing, they often use her book as a springboard for launching their own perspectives. The ideas in *Of Woman Born*, and the various verse practices that also constitute ways of moving towards a formulation of her radical argument, had a long gestation period. Although *Of Woman Born* was not published until 1976, Rich became a mother in the nineteen-fifties.

The earliest poems, written before her marriage and motherhood, are the most traditionally formal, with the most conventional lineation. The much anthologized and commented upon “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” for example, consists of three iambic pentameter quatrains rhyming AABB. Rich herself criticized this poem twenty years after its composition: “In
those years formalism was part of the strategy—like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up bare-handed” (1979, 40-41). In a 1991 article, Helen Dennis agrees with Rich’s self-assessment and speaks of how the poem, even if its content prefigures feminism, contains its analysis “in a patriarchal verse form which is successful according to the masculinist preoccupation with style and formal considerations; but from a feminist point of view is a failure” (1991, 183). Whether particular verse forms are inherently patriarchal is open to debate. What is certain is that the mainly male writers Rich had been influenced by up to this point wrote mainly formal verse. Until the twentieth century, regular form was the norm, and publishing poetry was primarily a male activity, so the two factors have become associated for contemporary woman poets who have a historical and feminist consciousness.

However much the youthful Rich may be capitulating to formal and societal expectations in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” the poem’s structure does not fully cool its material heat. Dennis asserts, “Rich’s verse form holds no surprises and is perfectly balanced” but this claim is questionable (1991, 181). Most importantly, the poem may be broadly speaking in iambic pentameter, but the thrice-repeated name “Aunt Jennifer” is not. The name “Jennifer” is a dactyl, and the “Aunt” carries an ambiguous amount of stress. Conventionally scanned with five-stress lines, the poem gives “Aunt” a weak position, but a reader doesn’t know this in the first line of the poem, and a definite iambic pattern is not firmly established until the third and fourth lines. The first two lines could be read as alexandrines, opening with dramatic spondees (and by extension, even the opening pronouns of lines three and four could be given an intriguing emphasis):

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

The first line of the second stanza opens in the same ambiguous way: “Aunt Jennifer’s fingers fluttering through her wool.” So Jennifer, by her very name, resists the poem’s controlling iambic pattern, even if the woman herself submits to the masculine oppression of her heterosexual marriage. Curiously, the name Jennifer is a version of “Guinevere,” a mythical archetype of the unfaithful wife.7 The “chivalric” tigers and their “world of green” hint at a connection between Jennifer’s needlework and medieval tapestry, and therefore between the two strikingly different female characters.
The uncertainty about the degree of emphasis to place on “Aunt” creates a curious ambiguity about the place of this particular imagined woman in the supposedly firm hierarchical structures of familial relations. The word receives an unquestionably heavy stress only in the third stanza, “When Aunt is dead,” and her status cannot be revised. In another destabilizing metrical feature, two words in the poem, “fluttering” and “ivory,” hover oddly between two- and three-syllable readings. The line that is most difficult to scan, however, is the concluding line of the second stanza: “Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand.” “Sits,” as the main verb of the sentence, demands a stress, and the first syllable of “heavily” requires one—which once again creates a spondaic opening to the line, almost a Hopkinsian sprung rhythm, that could be read as either a mimetic equivalent to the stress of the husband’s domination, or as a moment of formal resistance: a failed attempt to break out. Embodied in the form, this interpretive ambiguity surrounding Jennifer’s status as powerless and powerful is the same one that surrounds the poem’s embroidered tigers: are they symbols of miserably imprisoned energy, or evidence of indestructible and eternally free Blakean creative spirit? The poem asks, subtly through content, and even more subtly through metrical maneuvers: what is the hope for female creativity in an apparently masculine world?

The word “hand” in the context of a pictorial representation of tigers continues the text’s echo of one of the earliest poems that Rich absorbed, Blake’s “Tyger”—“What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” Jennifer’s hand is mortal and she is afraid, and yet she has undertaken this act of daring. In this way she, as textile artist, can be more closely identified with her textual maker than the later Rich is willing to acknowledge when she writes, “It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible—distanced by the formalism of the poem…” (1979, 40). That “formalism” is far from free of agitating inner forces. They save the poem from being a metrically competent rendition of a sad dramatic situation, and surreptitiously turn it into a pressure cooker poem hissing with caged steam.

So Rich’s skill with poetic technique is evident from her first collection, *A Change of World* (1951). Auden has been criticized for his patronizing tone in the foreword, but he does speak accurately, if patriarchally, of what he terms her “craftsmanship”:

Craftsmanship 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; Miss Rich’s poems rarely fail on any of these counts. (1992, Gelpi, 278)
Much later in her career, another of Rich’s many reviewers and critics, Albert Gelpi, summarized succinctly how the changes in Rich’s poetic forms over time are reflective of her changing personal-political perspectives: the “formal symmetry” of the fifties gave way to “an unmetered, unrhymed line and an open form” for exploration in the sixties. In the seventies, when “stresses come to crisis and breakthrough,” the language becomes “more knotted and fragmented...line breaks and gaps between lines spacing the pieces in arrested juxtaposition and bold confrontation.” Gelpi sees in the “sustained and cumulative rhythms, longer and more capacious lines of the eighties” a manifestation of Rich’s greater surety of vision and her desire to find a shared language (1992, 297-98). While it is important to avoid a simplistic correlation of “free verse” with freedom from patriarchy, a close examination of Rich’s changing use of verse “punctuation” broadly conceived—line-breaks, internal gaps, marginal white space, Dickinsonian dashes, lack of periods, lack of commas at line-endings, parentheses that open but do not close, variations in line-length—can illustrate much of how she tries to put her political agenda into poetic practice.

“Planetarium” (1968) contains representative examples of some of these technical features. In terms of the look on the page (and this is a poem full of references to the “eye” and to “seeing”), the poem’s somewhat fragmented verse passages of short four, three, two or single lines coalesce in the closing lines into a more compact form. The final section of “Planetarium” reads:

```
I am bombarded yet    I stand
I have been standing all my life in the
direct path of a battery of signals
the most accurately transmitted most
untranslatable language in the universe
I am a galactic cloud so deep         so invo-
luted that a light wave could take 15
years to travel through me          And has
taken   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.          (2002, 74)
```

Although these twelve lines are more compact than the earlier parts of the poem, and—at a distance—could almost be mistaken for a not-quite-finished sonnet, they have by no means abandoned the challenge of using the resources of an experimental poetic style. For mimetic chutzpah, it is
hard to beat the line-break on “invo-/luted”; the very word curls inward.\textsuperscript{11} The line-break on the numerically written “15” insists on a dramatic visual pause that reinforces the length of the time it takes the light wave to travel. Such moments of pregnant pause are felt even more strongly in the internal breaks of lines six, eight, nine, and eleven. Rich intentionally writes from the intelligence and feeling of the body, particularly the female body. The internal poetic gaps can function as fertile intervals, potent uterine spaces where silence may gestate truth. I do not mean to suggest by this critical analogy a biological essentialism, or that only a woman poet could make use of this capacity within the poetic line, but that Rich has found a way to do so that is beautiful and powerful. Silence can of course have negative as well as positive valence. Rich believes that poetry has a role as a breaker of silences, especially silences around the oppressed, the invisible, the unheard. She has written: “The impulse to create begins—often terribly and fearfully—in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence, and the first question we might ask any poem is, \textit{What kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?}” (2001, \textit{Arts}, 150). These are certainly useful questions to ask any of Rich’s poems, and I would add this one: what use does the poem make of the interplay between words to be spoken or read and the intervals of silence or space, including the internal line gaps and the line-endings?

As in this section of “Planetarium,” from the late nineteen-sixties onwards the absence of periods marking the end of grammatical sentences, except at the very end of the poem, is another characteristic feature of large sections of Rich’s verse. (And coincidence of vocabulary cannot help but bring to mind that pregnancy is also marked by an absence of periods—the whole poem becomes something that the author conceives, carries and gives birth to. Rich herself spoke of being the “parent” of a poem, an idea present also in poets as various as Anne Bradstreet and T.S. Eliot.\textsuperscript{12}) “Implosions” from 1968, for example, with its “wild and wavering” potentialities (Gelpi, 34), has no periods, and concludes with a question mark. By contrast, “5:30 A.M.” (1967), which begins by talking about menstruation, punctuates even its sentence fragments with periods: “Birds and periodic blood. / Old recapitulations. / The fox, panting, fire-eyed, / gone to earth in my chest” (Gelpi, 33). In “Planetarium,” the complete absence of periods—until the final full stop of the poem—manifests Rich’s conviction that meaning is not closed; the content of our human thought is always incomplete and therefore provisional, and the poetic utterance is therefore subject to “re-vision,” and the social order is capable of re-birth.
This acceptance of provisionality and openness to revision are implicit in *Of Woman Born*’s critique of the static, false dualisms of traditional Western thought, the most damaging of which has been the dualism of “rational” (associated with the male principle and with “culture”) and “irrational” (associated with woman and “nature”). Rich explains why this sharp division is such a mistake: “the term ‘rational’ relegates to its opposite term all that it refuses to deal with, and thus ends by assuming itself to be purified of the nonrational, rather than searching to identify and assimilate its own surreal or nonlinear elements” (1976, 62). The challenge for feminism is less the difficult task of asserting women’s rightful place in the male “rational,” than the seemingly impossible task of overcoming the universally oppressive, stagnant dualism of rational versus nonrational altogether.

Fortunately for Rich, verse provides one medium in which this task can be begun, because poetry has the potential either to reinforce or to dismantle dualistic thinking. One of Rich’s concerns is rationality’s failure to “assimilate its own surreal or nonlinear elements” (1976, 62). The exigencies of traditional poetic form—meter, rhyme—often generate such surreal elements in poetry, and indeed, the whole enterprise of creating figurative language runs counter to a purified rationality. However, the medium of written verse as we know it is the line, and therefore poetry must be “linear” at least in this sense. The flow of discourse moves in a single direction: left to right—over and over again, marching across and down the page. But this description does not tell the full story, because the line of verse—and indeed this is what most distinguishes it from a line of prose—is broken. The progress of the syntax is continually disturbed by line-endings that stare over into blank space. The line-endings of verse therefore provide a powerful artistic resource for Rich, in her concern for the mutual relationship between the rational and the irrational, and also in her desire to make intense connections across divisions, to create lines of relationship between the margins. Speaking of the history of the Civil Rights movement, Rich said:

I think that all of that early splitting and fragmentation has made me hungry for connections to be made. Where connections are being made always feels to me like the point of intensest life. So, there was no way that all of that wasn’t going to affect me as a poet because the point of intensest life is where I write poetry. (1992, Gelpi, 263)

For political reasons Rich forsakes what have been considered “elite” verse forms, eschews dense literary allusiveness, and tries to adhere to what Paul Goodman calls “the artistic imperative to make it as clear as
possible," so it is easy for critics to underestimate the complexity of Rich’s presentations. Claire Keyes, in *The Aesthetics of Power*, surveys the major influence upon Rich of Charles Olson’s 1950s “theory of projective verse,” in which the poet comes closer to natural speech rhythms, but Keyes then falls into the dualistic trap: “Turning toward the female principle—the nonrational or instinctual in the human psyche—and finding it a source of power, Rich increased her receptivity to projective verse” (1986, 112). Keyes associates this female principle with “nonlinear associative techniques” (1986, 114). Rich, however, has been more interested in overcoming the dichotomy between linear and nonlinear—and the “broken” lines of the contemporary poem are an ideal environment in which to explore ways in which linear forces and nonlinear forces can work productively together.

Rich’s essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” underscores the importance of looking again at what is given in the past and present, and also of looking ahead, with vision, to gain a prophetic sense of the future: “[w]hat is changing is the availability of knowledge, of vital texts, the visible effects on women’s lives of seeing, hearing our wordless or negated experience affirmed and pursued further in language” (1979, 34). Inherent in the very structure of poetic lineation is the need to look back in order to look forward, as the writing hand or reading eye repeatedly reaches the end of one line and then returns to the margin in order to follow the flow of sense, or at least the flow of syntax. This effect of reversal is not unlike what Rich describes, and illustrates, in her poem “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus” (1968) as “walk[ing] backward against the wind” (Gelpi, 43)—something that Orpheus, the dead poet of the poem, the real poet’s personified animus, must learn to do.

Like most of Rich’s poems, “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus” is resistant to exhaustive paraphrase. The opening dream-like line narrates the speaker’s fast progress through a metaphor for the appearance of Roman characters on the printed page: “I am walking rapidly through striations of light and dark thrown under an arcade” (Gelpi, 43). The poem considers the relationship of a strong woman poet to a world of poetry ruled by invisible masculinity, and the line-breaks highlight the necessary revisions in her intrapersonal awareness:

I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers  
and those powers severely limited  
by authorities whose faces I rarely see.         (Gelpi, 43)

These lines suggest a recurring thought cycle—and, indeed, the next line repeats, “I am a woman in the prime of life…..” Although the line breaks
fall at some of the syntactically obvious points, they set up a dynamic counterpoint to the unfolding of meaning. The woman of power in the first line (“certain” could be understood as “unfailing,” rather than signifying merely that the powers remain unspecified) turns out to be relatively powerless in the second line. Then in the third line, the agency responsible for the limits of her power is revealed (in the indirect object of the passive construction) to be external to the woman herself: “authorities whose faces I rarely see.” (It would be intriguing to compare and contrast this poem’s narrator with “Aunt Jennifer,” another woman of circumscribed power.)

The ensuing allusion allows Rich to incorporate her feelings of love and hatred for male poets. The narrator fantasizes herself in the role of the Maria Casahares character (the Princess, Death) in Jean Cocteau’s film Orphée (1950), in which Orpheus visibly struggles to advance against the internal winds of the underworld. This backward movement of the “dead poet” against the wind also suggests the contrary aspects of Rich’s own relationship to literary tradition: for the space of the poem Rich is both the “Death” of the poet, and a poet herself (no wonder her powers are inherently circumscribed). The wind, breath, pneuma, has often been used as a symbol for poetic inspiration—in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” to give but one example. In a prose meditation that examines how she was enculturated into racist American society, Rich, writing of her childhood self in the third person, makes use of this trope:

Early on, she experiences language, especially poetry, as power: an elemental force that is with her, like the wind at her back as she runs across a field.

Only much later she begins to perceive, reluctantly, the relationships of power sketched in her imagination by the language she loves and works in. How hard, against others, that wind can blow. (1993, 183)

“I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus” evokes Rich’s mixed loyalties, the apparent impossibility of simultaneous solidarity with the beloved poet (Death loves Orpheus in Cocteau’s version), with her own female powers, and with other groups of outsiders (suggested by “nerves of a panther” perhaps referring to the Black Panthers, and “contacts among Hell’s Angels”). Yet because poetry allows language to move in opposing directions, and to pause, to hesitate, to resist or to let go, Rich’s poems remain a forum where she can struggle with those loyalties, with competing loves and solidarities.

The to-and-fro of the poem’s physical movement as created by the poet is highlighted again ten years later in these lines from the 1978 poem “Integrity,” which looks back to the title of the opening chapter of Of
"Catch if you can your country's moment":
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Woman Born ("Anger and Tenderness") and to Rich’s mixed emotional responses to motherhood:

Anger and tenderness: my selves.
And now I can believe they breathe in me
as angels, not polarities.
Anger and tenderness: the spider’s genius
to spin and weave in the same action
from her own body, anywhere—
even from a broken web. (2002, 172)

Here she once again speaks out against divisive dualism and praises the spider’s ability simultaneously to spin—to create a line—and to weave—to bring lines together in a nonlinear relationship that is more than the sum of its parts. This is a powerful description of the activity of writing poetry, in which the individual lines must hold up on their own, but must also become part of the interdependent web of the poetic whole. It is also an attractive vision of how different parts of the womanly self (anger and tenderness) belong together in integrity, and how human beings may co-exist in non-hierarchical relationship with each other, with the individual and the community each retaining its respective value.15

Rich returns to the image of the spider in section III of the long 1991 poem “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” from the collection of the same title. Once again, the activity of the arachnid is implicitly compared to the activity of the poet, who is sitting at a table with two old star-shaped candleholders:

—now they hold half-burnt darkred candles, and in between
a spider is working, the third point of her filamental passage
a wicker basket-handle. All afternoon I’ve sat
at this table in Vermont, reading, writing, cutting an apple
in slivers.... (1991, 7)

In one possible reading of these lines, the two candles represent the outworn poles of Western patriarchal dualism, whose bloody, enlightening energy is only semi-expired. The female energy of the spider must nonetheless make use of them, but also of a “third point” that transcends the simple dualism: a wicker basket-handle, symbolizing centuries of women’s work gathering and weaving. The poet, like the spider, is at the table, working between the candleholders.

Two and a half pages later, at the end of section III of “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” there is a further meditation upon the spider. The meditation raises more questions than it can answer about what is
individually and communally necessary for transformation, and what the power of poetry can be:

The spider’s decision is made, her path cast, candle-wick to wicker handle to candle, in the air, under the lamp, she comes swimming toward me (have I been sitting here so long?) she will use everything, nothing comes without labor, she is working so hard and I know nothing all winter can enter this house or this web, not all labor ends in sweetness. (1991, 10)

This second passage’s opening line plays with the strong aural resemblance between “candle-wick” and “wicker handle,” as if Rich is now working to disestablish the new dualism that she herself had set up earlier by comparing the “male” pointed candle-holders and sticks to the “female” wicker basket. Without attempting to annihilate difference in a universalizing move, Rich, like the spider, is trying to provide filaments of connection across the fields of difference. This activity mirrors Rich’s explicit political agenda of providing lines of connection across distance: “to fling cables of recognition and attention across the conditions that have divided us” (1979, 260).

The poet-spider, or spider-poet, has been a figure in American verse at least since Walt Whitman, an important influence on Rich. Whitman too was a poet who sought through poetry to make connections between groups of people and to make the inarticulate articulate.16 Piotr Gwiazda, in his examination of “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” contextualizes and illustrates Rich’s desire to create links, especially between the idea of writing for an audience and the goal of writing for a specific community. He notes Margaret Dickie’s observation that Rich’s “spider” is “boldly stolen” from Whitman’s “A Noiseless Patient Spider.”17 Whitman’s long biblical lines of verse inform Rich’s own choice to use such lines in poems like “Atlas.” Long lines visually connect page margin to page margin. Although a long poetic line is not inherently democratic or radical (any more than the justified prose line is), the visual qualities of these lines can be used to mirror the poet’s desire to connect the socially marginalized to the socially marginalized.

Rich’s poetic lines, employing enjambment, sudden breaks, and idiosyncratic punctuation (which can simultaneously bring together and hold apart),18 work indirectly with her central themes of separation and connection, especially as they relate to “identity”—as lesbian, as Jew—at the same time as she addresses them directly: “I will not be divided