

Melissa Marie Bruno

May 12, 2009

Dismounting the Pedestal: An Analysis of Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken:
Writing as Re-Vision"

Adrienne Rich, in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," draws attention to the feminist project of deconstructing the shackles of phallogocentric discourse which binds and reduces women to female tokenism, delegating them as "special" (38). Rich describes how men would "tolerate, even romanticize [woman] as special, as long as [her] words and actions didn't threaten their privilege of tolerating or rejecting [her] and [her] work according to *their* ideas of what a special woman ought to be" (38). In being framed as "special," women are mounted onto a metaphorical pedestal, conditionally elevating their status, giving them praise and respect, only insofar as they do not stray, deviate, or abandon their appointed position. Women are permitted to roam about within the confines and parameters said pedestal affords—a post which is suffocatingly constrictive. Women are isolated and trapped via their "special" "token" (38) status and are ultimately denied movement, play, and life. As such, calling women special is just a sly way of othering them, thus making them a subordinate clause to men.

In this vein, Rich's argument parallels Simone de Beauvoir's critique in *The Second Sex* which asserts that a woman is held in a relationship of oppression to man through her relegation to being man's "Other." Drawing on the Hegelian Master/Slave Dialectic, Beauvoir asserts that the self needs otherness in order to define itself as a subject. In other words, the category of the otherness is necessary in the constitution of

the self as a self. However, the movement of self-understanding through alterity and negation is supposed to be reciprocal in that the self is often just as much objectified by its other as the self objectifies it. Projecting this analysis onto woman's situation with phallogocentric discourse, Beauvoir concludes that woman is consistently defined as the Other by man who takes on the role of the Self. Rich echoes Beauvoir stating that "[t]he enemy is always outside the self, the struggle somewhere else" (49). In other words, in being bound within phallogocentric discourse, woman is othered and "victimized" (49), and this oppressive structure is "everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, [and] the structures of thought" (49).

Rich purposes that "writing is re-naming" (43), suggesting that it is the forum for new meanings and significations to emerge, potentially being the means to reorganize and restructure the power hierarchy. Returning to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir maintains that human existence is an ambiguous interplay between "transcendence" and "immanence." Men, however, have been privileged with expressing transcendence through projects, whereas women have been forced into the repetitive and uncreative life of immanence. In an analysis of the strictures of tradition and domesticity placed on women, Rich delineates how "to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of [...] imaginative activity" (43). In other words, in attempts to satisfy these demands, woman's existence is pathetically immanent. Furthermore, "to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination[,] for "a certain freedom of the mind is needed" "[i]f the imagination is to transcend and transform experience" (43). As such,

tradition precludes woman's ability to be free. In stating that everything is "in need of revision" (47), Rich calls for the rigor of tradition and restrictions placed on women to be reconceptualized; a project which continues to make demands on women, for "[a]s women, we have our work cut out for us" (49).

Works Cited

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: Norton, 1979. 33-49.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. by H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

thus stifling her creative voice and ability to write. as such,

Rich declares that “a new generation of women poets is already working out of the psychic energy released when women begin to move out towards what the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has described as the “new space” on the boundaries of patriarchy” (49).

Women are speaking to and of women in these poems, out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration” (49) In stating that everything is “in need of re-vision” (47), Rich postulates that phallogocentrism which precludes woman freedom needs to be deconstructed and reconceptualized. Rich purposes that “writing is re-naming” (43), suggesting that it is the forum for new meanings and significations to emerge, potentially being the means to reorganize and restructure the power hierarchy.

ambivalent and curious – released, as in purged, or freed
released that political embodiment?

To name (for themselves?)... call themselves by their own title? To be named/labeled.
To break the shackles and write

“for a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed” (43)

Because

“writing is re-naming” (43)

“as women, we have our work cut out for us” (49)

we.. speaking strictly and solely as a female, for female, and to female.

Find that clarity of voice at last, in the final line, as if to end off on a high

“wanted women poets to be the equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same” (390)

Everything is “in need of re-vision” (47)

Revise... to name, and create their own associations, meanings, significations, and signifiers... develop a logos entirely of their own voice

Create meaning outside the phallogocentric nomenclature

Moreover, Rich positions women as being victimized by tradition, and the legacy of phallogocentric discourse that is smeared across the pages in literature as they are represented within the trajectory of the canon and throughout history.

“both the victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structures of thought” (49)

. Playing and assuming the traditional role of a woman in a man’s world, Rich describes how “politics ways not something ‘out there’ but something ‘in here’ and of the essence of my condition” (44).

internalized the anguish of her struggle... politicized the interior space, the body, where one resided, thus, in a sense, contaminating and/or e/affecting everything that is produced within it

Objects denied interiority

internalized, yes, the fragmentative pm ‘condition, but it is gendered, one sided- within this arena

Objects denied interiority

This position brings to mind Simone de Beauvoir’s critique in *The Second Sex* of phallogocentrism which maintains the binaries of immanence and transcendence. Women as framed as static, other, and special cases, this condemning them to a static existence. In this respect, they are also denied interiority and are reduced to being superficial characters.

Women forced into the repetitive non-creative life of immanence

Within her essay, Adrienne Rich discusses how we are all influenced by and “products culture” (39). However, political structures are couched, hidden, and upheld/maintained under the guise of culture; specifically, according to Rich, the “myths and images of women” (39) maintained and supported by phallogocentric discourse.

the limitations and restrictions of the traditional; demands placed on women, according to Rich, not only consume all their

As her time is divided, so is her body of work... it too is fragmented as well
 “reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments” (44)
 internalized, yes, the fragmentative poem ‘condition, but it is gendered, one sided- within
 this arena

INTERNALIZES political struggle

The female space, on a pedestal, as removed

“politics ways not something ‘out there’ but something ‘in here’ and of the essence of my
 condition” (44) as woman in a man’s world

internalized the anguish of her struggle... politicized the interior space, the body, where
 one resided, thus, in a sense, contaminating and/or affecting everything that is produced
 within it

Objects denied interiority

WOMEN ARE VICTIMIZED by TRADITION

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