

Judith McDaniel on: "Diving into the Wreck"

"Diving into the Wreck" is Rich's most complex use of an image of rebirth. This time her tools are carefully chosen: she has "read the book of myths, / and loaded the camera, / and checked the edge of the knife-blade." It is necessary to know the old stories before embarking on a journey to change them. This journey is to record the sources of our origin, hence the camera. The knife is less obvious, until one remembers Rich's frequent earlier warnings--that the journey is dangerous. As the narrator descends, the water turns from blue to green to black, There is the effect of "blacking out," becoming unconscious, while still remaining in control. As she begins to move in this new element, the swimmer learns that "the sea is not a question of power." It is, rather, the all encompassing "deep clement" in which she must learn "to turn my body without force." She has come "to explore the wreck. . . / the see the damage that was done/ and the treasures that prevail." The wreck is a layered image: it is the life of one woman, the source of successes and failures; it is the history of all women submerged in a patriarchal culture; it is that source of myths about male and female sexuality which shape our lives and roles today. Whichever, the swimmer came for "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth." She explores the wreck and records for us her experiences of the cargo, "the half-destroyed instruments ... the water-eaten log/the fouled compass." But no questions are answered here for those who have not found their own way to this place; we are given no explanation for why the wreck occurred. Nor is there any account of the swimmer's return, the use to which she puts this new information. It is as if Rich still found herself in the dilemma at the end of "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" when it seemed impossible to record an image of the "new woman." Indeed, she said in 1974, two years after "Diving into the Wreck,"

I absolutely cannot imagine what it would be like to be a woman in a non-patriarchal society. At moments I have this little glimmer of it. When I'm in a group of women, where I have a sense of real energy flowing and of power in the best sense--not power of domination, but just access to sources--I have some sense of what that could be like. But it's very rare that I can imagine even that.

From *Reconstituting the World*. (Spinsters, Ink: 1978).

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