

## Cary Nelson on: "Diving into the Wreck"

Her better poems always exact a certain price from anyone willing to participate in their vision. The kind of political awareness she advocates may cost a loss of personal freedom. The voyage into new territory may require us to adopt a generalized, mythic identity. The reader who accepts her vision uncritically has probably repressed the real anxieties accompanying self-recognition and personal change. The enthusiasm for her efforts to create a myth of androgynous sexuality is a typical case. To applaud the androgynous psyche or to announce this as its historical moment is easier than actually living out its consequences: "I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair / streams back, the merman in his armored body ... I am she: I am he." We all have more varied sexual impulses than we can act on, but will Rich's romanticized androgynous figure, "whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes," help bring them any closer to realization? While that is not a criterion one would ordinarily apply to all poetry, it is relevant in Rich's case. Unlike Roethke, she cannot take pleasure in the powerlessness of poetic solutions to social and historical conflicts. Her poetry continually testifies to her need to work out possible modes of human existence verbally, to achieve imaginatively what cannot yet be achieved in actual relationships. Moreover, she hopes that poetry can transform human interaction. Yet perhaps that is not, after all, the point, at least in poems like "Diving into the Wreck," despite its call for "the thing itself and not the myth." For what we have here is the myth, as Rich herself has now implicitly acknowledged: "There are words I cannot choose again: humanism androgyny" (DCL, 66). "Such words," she goes on to say, "have no shame in them." They do not embody the history of anguish, repression, and self-control that precedes them. "Their glint is too shallow" (DCL, 66); they do not describe either the past or the life of the present. As Rich has recently written of bisexuality, "Such a notion blurs and sentimentalizes the actualities within which women have experienced sexuality; it is the old liberal leap across the tasks and struggles of here and now." Indeed "Diving into the Wreck" demonstrates that one can suppress difficult feelings by mythologizing them. It may be that both Rich and her readers are relieved to have their fear and their desire conjoined in symbols so stylized and abstract.

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