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"Insane for the destination:"
Disrupting the Teleological Impulses of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* and Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Despite the astute insights that Paula Bennett offers in her book, *My Life, A Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics (1986),* she nonetheless oversimplifies both the lives and works of two of her primary subjects: Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. As Bennett demonstrates when she writes, "[Rich] managed…to negotiate successfully a complete transition from dutiful daughter to woman poet," she clearly positions Rich as the superior writer (Bennett 9). By contrast, she depicts Plath as never being "able to give up entirely her desire for the sexual and social rewards that come in our culture with being a good girl and a loving wife and mother" (Bennett 9). Such statements underscore the importance of biography in Bennett's evaluation; Rich's work remains superior because she was able to break away from her masculine influences and write about the experiences of women from an explicitly feminist perspective. Plath, on the other hand, is merely a victim: a brilliant writer who was never entirely able to exorcise her patriarchal demons and, consequently, destroyed herself. While biographical scholarship has undoubtedly provided much fruitful analysis, Bennett's comparative study accentuates the limits of her own form of criticism, revealing the way that it ignores the nuances of Plath's and Rich's complex texts by effectively eliminating any aesthetic distance from writer and oeuvre. To counter the oversimplified readings typified by Bennett, I intend to examine Plath's *Ariel (1965)* and Rich's *Diving into the Wreck (1973)* in a post-structuralist feminist context that emphasizes the text itself. Not only does such a framework challenge pre-existing critical assumptions of both poets' writings, but it also draws attention to key differences in their treatment of selfhood and history. In *Ariel,* Plath's rejection of a final, transcendent telos informs a poetics that challenges the romantic humanist view of the innate, sovereign subject predicated on logocentrism. *Diving into the Wreck*, on the other hand, relies on a teleological view of history and language in order to reify a stable subject necessary for liberation.

Although a post-structuralist framework has the potential to elucidate the nuanced texts of both writers, it may initially appear contradictory to apply this critical perspective to these poets, especially Adrienne Rich. This seeming inconsistency is in large part a result of a particular brand of American feminism that dominates Rich scholarship. As Rita Felski notes, "The criteria for a feminist reading of women's literature within American criticism as a whole remain largely anchored in a reflectionist model which measures the work's ability to reproduce realistically female experience" (Felski 1989: 26). According to Felski, this type of American feminism emphasizes the representations of women in literature, implicitly privileging a mimetic view of language that is seen as being able to replicate a monolithic women's experience. Rich herself even points to a similar relationship between language and experience when she declares, "To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of woman's body and experience, to take women's existence as theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. . . I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman" (Rich 1994: 182).

Not only does this declaration reveal Rich's acceptance of this form of cultural feminism, but it also underscores her own privileged position as the interpreter of her work. Alice Templeton underscores this position when discussing the reciprocal influence between Rich's theory and poetry. She writes, "The practice of poetry itself provides a testing ground for [Rich's] feminism…since the early 1970s Rich has negotiated feminist critique with poetic practice" (Templeton 1). For Templeton and likeminded scholars, Rich uses her poetry to test her own feminist ideas, and, therefore, the meaning of her poetry can, at least partially, be read through her theoretical writings. Implicit in this critical framework is the notion that Rich, as the author, has the power to determine the meaning of her own work. It should be no surprise, then,

that so many critics are hesitant to take a critical position other than the specific type of feminism that Rich herself embraces.

However, not only does this position threaten to reduce Rich's nuanced oeuvre to a singular interpretation defined by her own authorial intent, but it is also philosophically at odds with contemporary theories of language. While structuralists, like Ferdinand de Saussure, believe that the linguistic sign is composed of two distinct parts, the signifier and the signified, which only have meaning through a system of difference, post-structuralists, like Jacques Derrida, assert that meaning is never self-present in a sign because there is no inherent connection between the two. Derrida's conclusions arise from his own radical reinterpretation of Saussure's ideas. While Saussure argues that the connection between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, he nonetheless concludes that a relationship between the two exists in order to, as Art Berman states, "maintain an empiricist link to reality" (Berman 127). Derrida, by contrast, asserts that if a signifier is arbitrary, then it must have no "natural attachment to the signified within reality" (Derrida 1974: 46). For Derrida, Saussure's belief in the necessity of a fixed relationship between the two is logocentric, for it relies upon a "transcendent signified," a final truth that exists prior to language that allows for a unified relationship between signified and signifier (Derrida 1974: 20). Derrida rejects this logocentrism, believing that it only serves to allay anxiety by giving individuals a link to a shared "history and system of metaphysics" (Derrida 1974: 19).

In the place of this logocentrism, Derrida puts forth a theory of différance, which posits that words only have meaning in reference to the words from which they differ, and this meaning is constantly deferred through an endless chain of signifiers, never to reach a final, transcendent telos. Consequently, the meaning of linguistic signs is intrinsically unstable; the signifier never

comes to rest on a transcendent signified, but is constantly deferred. As a result of this instability, Derrida insists on a new form of criticism: deconstruction. Although deconstruction defies definition, for any attempt to define it would be to place it within the confines of a logocentrism that it inherently rejects, the critical practice is most notable for the way that it draws attention to a text's lack of fixed meaning. Instead of singularity, deconstruction focuses on the text's constant play of signifiers and contradictions in order to account for its plurality of meanings and, by extension, to challenge seemingly stable notions of a unitary truth and meaning.

While this paper is not a deconstructionist reading of *Ariel* and *Diving into the Wreck,* the implications of such a theory and critical practice have radical consequences not only for the state of Rich scholarship but also for feminist criticism as a whole. As Berman observes, if "language is a chain of signifiers that does not point to independently existing signifieds, texts do not portray a real world that exists independently of language" (Berman 208). The dominant theoretical position of Rich scholarship, which implicitly posits a mimetic view of language that relies upon a transcendent signified in order for the signifier, the language of poetry, to represent the signified, women's experience, is, therefore, at odds with Derrida's theory of différance. Not only does his theory challenge the prevailing assumption of Rich scholarship that she decides the meaning of her work, but it also provides the philosophical legitimization of readings of texts that differ from the producer's intent. Critics that assume the author decides the meaning of their work ignore the deferral of the signifier and instead impose a false unity and stability on language. Rather than a Derridean chain of signifiers, wherein meaning is perpetually deferred, these critics assume a transcendent signified that determines meaning: the author herself. Accordingly, the notion that Rich's theoretical texts in any way determine the meaning of her poetry is not only reductive, but also philosophically unsound. Indeed, by applying a post-

structuralist approach, one can see how a reliance on Rich's theoretical writings leads to a logocentric fallacy that, as Felski notes, betrays a longing for a metaphysics of presence by threatening "to suppress the polysemy of language by attributing a fixed and unified meaning to the text in relation to an illusory concept of a determining subject" (Felski 1989: 44).

A post-structuralist approach can remedy a similar issue in Plath criticism, a field where biographical scholarship similarly dominates. This type of criticism shares a preoccupation with the life of the author at the expense of the text itself, and, as a result, it tends to create an image of Plath as a despairing, death-obsessed victim. Al Alvarez exemplifies this mode of criticism when he writes, "The achievement of her final style is to make poetry and death inseparable…in a curious way, the poems read as if they were written posthumously" (Alvarez 57). M.L. Rosenthal, the poet and critic who coined the term the Confessional School, a movement with which Plath is often associated, reinforces a similar idea, observing," [Plath] threw herself into that last passionate burst of writing that culminated in *Ariel* and in her death, now forever inseparable" (Rosenthal 60). Such language even appears in *Ariel* itself in the form of Robert Lowell's foreword. He declares, "In these poems, written in the last months of her life…Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created – hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another "poetess," but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines" (Lowell xiii). As Lowell draws attention to her early death and positions Plath quite literally as a legendary heroine, while simultaneously stripping her of her identity as a woman, it is unsurprising that so many readers view her in this sort of mythologized fashion. In writing this piece and placing it at the beginning of the book, Lowell has helped to produce this death-obsessed image of Plath that he presupposes to be inherent in the work itself.

Given the troubling view of Plath and her work that often results from this biographical criticism, the appeal of a post-structuralist perspective that highlights the indeterminacy of the text is obvious. Nonetheless, post-structuralism remains a controversial critical perspective within the broader field of feminist criticism. The contentious nature of such an approach should not be surprising: How can a post-structuralist framework, with its emphasis on the perpetual play of signifiers that denies any fundamental telos, prove to be of any use to a practice that seems so focused on a final goal: the liberation of women? How can feminist theory function if the subject – woman – is deconstructed and revealed to be nothing more than a logocentric illusion? Is this emphasis on textuality that erases the role of the author a return to a sort of New Critical apoliticalism? What makes Plath such a significant player in this continuing debate is how critics have frequently read her through a traditional feminist perspective, yet her complex poetry anticipates key post-structuralist ideas. In other words, her work can provide a bridge between the two methods of criticism that often seem at odds.

The first challenges to earlier biographical readings that view Plath's poetry as always pointing to her death come from the second wave of Plath critics in the 1970s. These critics attempted to destabilize the concept of Plath's fatal telos by utilizing feminist criticism to present a more complete picture of Plath that highlights her defiance to the masculinist intellectual culture in which she lived. While the importance of this scholarship should not be ignored, the emphasis on themes of transformation and revival that appears in this criticism is just as troubling as the work of earlier writers like Alvarez and Rosenthal. The distinguished feminist critic Sandra Gilbert, for instance, asserts that Plath escapes enclosure and restrictions through myths of transcendence and liberation. In Gilbert's words, "The great poems of *Ariel* often catapult their protagonists or speaker out of a stultifying enclosure into violent freedom" (Gilbert

1979: 251). Yet, this type of reading differs very little from the earlier critics whom she is supposedly challenging. Gilbert still reinforces a teleological reading; she merely replaces the telos from one of death to one of transformation and rebirth. Despite this attempt to break from their predecessors, feminist critics like Gilbert belong fundamentally within the same teleological framework.

Moreover, these early feminist critics fail to fully understand the complexity of transcendence in *Ariel.* Far from embracing the liberatory potential of transformation, the poems themselves explicitly reject concepts of finality and destination upon which such teleological narratives rely. As Jacqueline Rose states, "Transcendence appears…not as a solution, but as repetition…these late poems offer one of the most stunning indictments of the very image for which Plath has become most renown" (Rose 149). The anti-teleological strain of *Ariel* is best exemplified in "Getting There," a poem that depicts a speaker on a train that is "Insane for the destination / The bloodspot / The face at the end of the flare" (Plath 1999: 42). The text's emphasis on the objective in these lines clearly marks the train as moving toward an ultimate telos, and this search has significant consequences for the speaker. By identifying with the train, the narrator effectively treats all that does not move her forward as impediments and explicitly declares, "The place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles – / the body of this woman, / Charred skirts and deathmask" (Plath 1999: 42). Such a depiction foregrounds the destructive effects of the train on women's bodies, for the vehicle annihilates the feminine as an obstacle to the final destination. In highlighting the extermination of women's bodies that results from the train's search for an end, the poem underscores the implicit costs of teleological narratives: the often violent rejection of all that does not further the final goal.

Despite the emphasis on the consequences of an ultimate telos, Gilbert and likeminded critics have mistaken "Getting There" for a poem of transformation due to its finale image of the speaker "[stepping] to you from the black car of Lethe / Pure as a baby" (Plath 1999: 43). However, far from being a symbol of redemption and rebirth, this pure baby actually offers little hope for transcendence. Throughout the poem, the speaker repeatedly draws attention to images of death and annihilation, such as "Legs, arms piled outside / The tent of unending cries – / A hospital of dolls" (Plath 1999: 41). However, the speaker does not ignore these images, but rather attempts to mitigate the destruction in the poem. She declares, "I shall bury the wounded like pupas, / I shall count and bury the dead. / Let their souls writhe in a dew" (Plath 1999: 43). As Rose indicates, the transformative final lines actually undermine these attempts at mitigation. A literal rebirth, she writes, "is self-defeating, for it can work only by means of the very forgetfulness which allows – which ensures – that those same horrors will be repeated…the pure baby who steps from [the black car of Lethe] will perpetrate murder because she has forgotten the world's past history of murderousness" (Rose 149). A figure of transformation may exist in the poem, but its very existence is antithetical to the speaker's attempts to redeem the world around her.

"Getting There" is certainly not the only poem in *Ariel* to reject transcendence, however. Indeed, many poems that critics often point to as embracing transformation, such as "Daddy," are actually more complex than they initially seem. The typical critical response to "Daddy" is exemplified by Alicia Suskin Ostriker, who views the poem in triumphalist terms and describes it as, "The earliest and most famous of female vengeance poems in our time" (Ostriker 1986: 140). According to Ostriker, the poem depicts, "Plath's imagined ritual slayings of the father she loves and hates" (Ostriker 1986: 140). Such statements suggest a reading of the poem that is

predicated on a linear narrative of transformation, one where the speaker goes from victim to avenger. Ostriker even compares the poem to "Lady Lazarus," another poem frequently misinterpreted as a work of transcendence, when she writes that both poems "follow this pattern of symbolic death and avenging resurrection" (Ostriker 1986: 144).

However, these readings are confounded by the poem's temporality that resists conventional linearity. This abnormal temporality manifests itself early in the poem when the speaker declares, "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time –" (Plath 1999: 56). These lines suggest that that the eponymous Daddy is already dead at the beginning of the poem, before the speaker can even attempt to avenge herself by killing him. It is precisely because the father is already dead that allows for the ghostly psychodrama of the narrative to play out indefinitely and never culminate in a final ending. In other words, the absence of the father is indicative of his timeless power. Whereas in life the father was finite, in death, he is as infinite and omnipresent as a god. The speaker's assertion that she "thought every German was you" provides evidence for this claim; the father's absence results in the speaker's eternal search for him in human avatars (Plath 1999: 57).

In Freudian terms, the speaker experiences a sort of transference as a result of her father's premature absence. She becomes so obsessed with the father figure that she begins not only to see him in others but also attempts to actively resurrect him in order to gain the satisfaction of killing him herself. Her desires remain the same, but the object is transferred from the literal father to the substitute paternal figure. For example, the narrator not only sees her father in others, but actively attempts to revive this father in a different form by "[making] a model of you / A man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw" (Plath 1999: 58). This attempt underscores the repetitious nature of transference. Indeed, as Freud himself

notes, repetition is an integral part of transference, "Transference is itself only a piece of repetition, and that the repetition is a transference of the forgotten past not only on to the doctor but also on to all the other aspects of the current situation" (Freud 370). Thus, the poem takes on a ritualistic aspect as the speaker paradoxically attempts to resurrect her father, only to kill him again.

Although the concluding line of the poem, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," threatens this reading by offering a sense of finality, it is actually this very line that is indicative of the poem's cyclical nature (Plath 1999: 59). While the speaker may claim to be finished with her absent father, it is not the first time she makes such an assertion. Just a few stanzas earlier, she makes the exact same declaration, "So daddy, I'm finally through" (Plath 1999: 58). Yet, this earlier account is undermined by the very fact that the speaker is clearly not finished; twelve lines of the poem remain. In these lines, the speaker focuses on the necessity to kill yet another resurrected father figure, "[The] vampire who said he was you" (Plath 1999: 58). That the father returns in the guise of the vampire suggests that she is far from through; she must inevitably kill him again by driving "a stake in your fat black heart" (Plath 1999: 58-59). Her repeated compulsion to kill indicates that the earlier assertion of finality is illusionary. If this proclamation cannot be trusted, how, then, is the reader supposed to have faith in the same declaration of conclusiveness in the closing line? Indeed, the later statement seems destined to follow the same cyclical path as the first. There is no finality to this ritual of revenge; it is simply an endless cycle of revival and murder.

The rejection of transformation has even broader implications than one may initially realize. As Rose notes, there is a connection between the teleological readings of transcendence and logocentrism in *Ariel*. She writes that such readings rely upon "a specific, unitary conception

of language as tending, like the subjectivity that it embodies, towards the ultimate fulfillment of itself" (Rose 144). In other words, this conception of language relies on a transcendent signified and is, therefore, inherently logocentric. Thus, in rejecting and problematizing narratives of teleological transcendence, *Ariel* implicitly defies logocentric conceptions of language. Just as language can never truly fulfill itself and embody the signified as presence, so too can the speakers of *Ariel* never truly reach their final goal of transformation.

Ariel's rejection of logocentrism is most evident in "A Birthday Present," a poem that lends itself to a Derridean reading. In the poem, the speaker presents the titular present as a Christ-like object when she compares the scene to Mary's Annunciation and asks, "Is this the one for the annunciation?" (Plath 1999: 48). As Christina Britzolakis notes, the religious language of this line suggests an "encounter with an overwhelming, transcendent truth" (Britzolakis 130). That the object of the poem is so overwhelming explains why it eludes description and classification, for the speaker can never fully comprehend the present, and questions from the very first lines, "What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful? / It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?" (Plath 1999: 48).

Yet, Britzolakis's explanation cannot fully account for the complexity of the gift. Indeed, after the speaker compares the present to Christ, she undercuts this association by stating, "My god, what a laugh!" (Plath 1999: 48). This line indicates that the gift does not represent a transcendent truth, but, rather, it parodies the very concept of truth itself. The reason that the speaker cannot fully describe the gift is not because it is so overwhelming but precisely the opposite; it lacks value and meaning. There is, in other words, no truth that lies behind the gift; it only signifies a series of endlessly contradictory metaphors and attempted descriptions. The speaker observes that the present could be "bones" or "a pearl button" and that she does "not

mind if it is small. // Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity" (Plath 1999: 48-49). The narrator is able to describe the present in all of these contradictory ways precisely because there is no transcendent truth or reality to which the words refer. The present does not exist independently of language but, rather, exists precisely because the words used to describe it are always deferring their meaning between the pairs of opposites (bones/pearls, small/enormous). The primary focus of the poem, then, is not on the present, but on language itself. The inability to describe the gift is not a result of some flaw in the speaker, but is indicative of language's nature; it is always in deferral, never to come to rest on a transcendent signifier. Consequently, "A Birthday Present" defies mimetic notions of language, and, instead, emphasizes a constant deferral of signifiers that are never able to accurately reflect the object of their description.

Yet, what is perhaps most interesting in this analysis is how Rose links this rejection of logocentrism to a rejection of a sovereign, innate self, thereby further positioning *Ariel* in a post-structural context. While humanist perspectives tend to rely on the assumption that the subject is cohesive and autonomous, post-structuralists, like Jacques Lacan, question this fundamental supposition. Indeed, for Lacan, the idea of a cohesive subject resembles the imaginary order, a stage of development which corresponds to what he calls the mirror stage. During this mirror stage, the pre-linguistic child sees him or herself in the mirror and identifies with this singular, unified image. The child, in other words, conflates their perceived self with a representation in the mirror, essentially gaining a view of themselves as complete and cohesive. However, for Lacan, such an image is merely a temporary illusion, for the subject must eventually enter into the alienating symbolic order of language. Upon entrance into language, the subject inevitably takes up a subject position offered by the symbolic. Subjectivity is, therefore, a linguistic construct, for one can only take up a position that can be articulated in language. Yet, because of

language's differential nature, it rejects the mimetic self-identification that was possible in the mirror phase. Instead, one's identity, like language itself, is determined precisely by what one is not. In other words, the "I," or the self, only has meaning in relation to the "not I," the other. Like the language that produces it, so too is subjectivity inherently unstable. The subject, far from singular and cohesive, is purely a fragmented and multiple construct.

Throughout *Ariel,* the speakers of the poems contest the humanist assumptions of self and, instead, adopt subject positions that refuse to be unified. In "Daddy," the speaker is not merely the vengeful daughter, as critics often assume but, recalling Lacanian theory, is actually a fragmented and contradictory figure produced by language. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker talks in simple rhymes, saying, "You do not do, you do not do not do / Any more, black shoe," which suggests an attempt to enact a childlike identity (Plath 1999: 56). Linked to this identification with the child is the speaker's identification with the Jewish people, for she infamously states, "I think I may well be a Jew" (Plath 1999: 57). The child-speaker imagines herself to be Jewish because both are oppressed by the similarly conflated Nazi-father. Indeed, throughout the poem, the speaker continuously emphasizes the oppressive Nazi-like qualities of the father, like his "German tongue" and "Aryan eye," in order to draw attention to her own subjugation (Plath 1999: 57). Such a distinction between German oppressor and Jewish victim appears, at least initially, to suggest two cohesive, humanist beings in the poem.

However, the nature of the speaker's identification with the Jew undermines this simplistic reading. In the first explicit identification, the speaker notes, "I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew" (Plath 1999: 57). In these lines, the speaker equates speaking and being; to talk like a Jew is to *be* a Jew. Such a statement underscores the centrality of language in the poem, and situates it in a Lacanian context, for it is only through language that

the speaker can take up the subject position of the Jewish victim. Yet, this linguistic identification is inherently unstable because the language itself is unstable in the poem. Although the speaker attempts to distance herself from the language of the father, stating, "the language obscene," she nonetheless remains linked to it (Plath 1999: 57). For instance, she describes the father's language as "gobbledygoo," which connects the German language of the father to her own child-like identity (Plath 1999: 57). More explicitly, the speaker utilizes the German language herself, particularly the pronouns "du" (you) and "ich" (I). That the speaker switches languages makes it impossible for her to fully identify with the victim; her "I" necessary for identification is constantly moving from "I" to "ich." As Rose observes, "the dispersal of identity in language follows the lines of a division or confusion between nations and tongues" (Rose 226). In other words, the English "I" and German "ich" play out in a form of Derridean difference; they are continuously moving back and forth, never coming to rest on a final position, and, therefore, make linguistic identification with a singular position, like that of the Jewish victim, impossible.

As a result of this linguistic instability, there exists a thin line between the oppressor and the oppressed in "Daddy." Even in the first stanza, the speaker's fantasy identification with the child is undermined when she discusses the "black shoe / in which I have lived like a foot" (Plath 1999: 56). As Mary Lynn Broe notes, the rhythmic break that characterizes this line in relation to the previous one "interrupts the insistent and mesmeric chant" through which the speaker defines her identity as a child (Broe 173). Indeed, far from the passive child-victim that she initially seems, the speaker actually takes on the role of the brutal aggressor, a guise linked with the father, when she describes driving a "stake in your fat black heart" (Plath 1999: 59). That the speaker adopts a similar combative role as the father indicates the close relationship between the

two; this aggression, quite literally, runs in her blood. The unstable boundary between victim and victimizer is even more notable when the speaker states that she "made a model of you / A man in black with a Meinkampf look" (Plath 1999: 58). While the speaker may literally be referring to how she remade the image of her father, her ambiguous wording suggests that she has internalized him in some way as well. The dual meaning of "model" illustrates this internalization, for it not only conjures up the image of a replica, but also the idea of a role model, someone whose example she will follow, effectively blurring the line between father and daughter, Nazi and Jew, victimizer and victim. It is especially telling that this line follows the speaker's reference to herself as a sort of model, "They stuck me together with glue" (Plath 1999: 58). That these lines are so near to each other suggests an unsettling connection between the speaker and the father; both are models, and, therefore, the two figures are related.

Such a reading of "Daddy" challenges the concept of the innate humanist self. No longer is there a unified sovereign subject in the poem; instead there is a markedly fragmented one created by language's perpetual instability. Consequently, the teleological readings that culminate in the rebirth of the "I" are unattainable. How can the "I" transform if it is nothing more than an illusion designed to hide a fragmented and unstable subjectivity? How can the "I" transcend if it is nothing more than a logocentric fiction?

Some critics have challenged these conclusions, arguing that it is precisely this fragmentation that makes Plath's transformation not only possible, but politically necessary. For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar:

> self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is. But for the female artist, the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself. (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 17)

In other words, for the type of feminist criticism that Gilbert and Gubar practice, women are fragmented not as a result of the unstable nature of language but because of manmade images of women that distance them from their true selves. While such an assertion suffers from the logocentric assumption that the "I" represents a stable, innate self, as well as ignores Plath's own rejection of transformation, Gilbert and Gubar's argument nonetheless deserves attention because this idea of a true feminine self that exists outside of "patriarchal definitions" has come to play a significant role in Plath scholarship. Bennett, for instance, similarly argues that in *Ariel*, Plath "uncovers the true self within, in all its hardness and rage, in its desire for revenge and aggression," thereby indicating the ontological goal of Plath's poetry is to bring into being an authentic subjecthood that transcends the conventional and compliant façade she previously wore (Bennett 6).

In her essay "A Fine, White Flying Myth: The Life/Work of Sylvia Plath," Gilbert applies this argument to Plath's oeuvre, focusing on the many images of an authentic self that appear in the poet's work, including that of the acetylene virgin in "Fever 103" (Gilbert 1979: 253). For Gilbert and likeminded critics, the poem takes the form of a personal and spiritual linear journey that begins in a hellish underworld, as indicated by the references to "the tongues of hell" and the mythic Cerberus (Plath 1999: 61). For the speaker of the poem, this atmosphere seems to impede the development of a pure sense of self, as she explicitly underscores when she claims that "Tongues of dull, fat Cereberus" are "incapable / Of licking clean / The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin" (Plath 1999: 61). Only when the speaker ascends is she able to cleanse herself:

> I, love, I
>
> Am a pure acetylene
> Virgin

> Attended by roses,
>
> By kisses, by cherubim
> By whatever these pink things mean.
> Not you, nor him
>
> Not him, nor him
> (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) –
> To Paradise. (Plath 1999: 63)

These stanzas seem profoundly liberatory; the speaker not only exorcises her old, impure selves, but also escapes from the many masculine figures, the repetitious and multiple "hims," that have kept her from discovering herself. The speaker even utters the quintessential humanist dictum, "I am," an affirmation of self that seems to make the profound ontological claim of an authentic, pure identity.

While the American feminist perspective that Gilbert and Gubar exemplify may conceive of this reading in positive terms, it is deeply unsettling from a post-structuralist feminist perspective. As Gilbert goes on to explain in another essay, "In Yeats' House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath," the speaker of "Fever 103" "regresses to a virginity that, like the innocence of the baby, predates difference" (Gilbert 1994: 299). In other words, for Gilbert, the speaker transcends gender categories, and this assumption is precisely the problem with her reading. If, as Pam Morris states, the fundamental Lacanian argument is that language "confers on us our social and gender identity," then to be outside of gender difference is to be outside of language itself (Morris 100). Gilbert's reading, therefore, inevitably makes recourse to a reality independent of language, an idea that is fundamentally at odds with a post-structuralist notion of language as constituted by a chain of signifiers with no stable center. The incompatibility of Gilbert's reading with this type of post-structuralist argument is demonstrated by Derrida himself when he famously observes "there is no outside-text" (Derrida 1974: 158). Instead of language

producing identity, Gilbert's reading suggests some manner of inherent selfhood that exists prior to the social and symbolic order, an identity to which the speaker inevitably returns once she liberates herself from language and, by extension, sexual difference.

　　To understand precisely what makes such an argument troubling from a feminist perspective necessitates a move to Michel Foucault. Although he fundamentally rejects psychoanalysis, Foucault's work elucidates the explicit relationship between language and power that is often implicit in the oeuvres of Lacan and Derrida. Indeed, Foucault states, "Discourse transmits and produces power" (Foucault 1980: 100). As Judith Butler indicates, this Foucauldian power is not restrictive but, rather, is constitutive. She observes that power "inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent" (Butler 2006: 3). For instance, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the conception of sexuality as identity is a consequence of "proliferation of discourses, carefully tailored to the requirements of power" that "created an entire organic, functional, or mental pathology arising out of incomplete sexual practices" (Foucault 1990: 72, 41). In other words, identity, in this case, sexuality, is not an inherent part of one's being, but rather is produced by language, discourse, and power.

　　Like Lacan and Derrida, Foucault rejects the idea of an originary, cohesive self that exists prior to language. Yet, it is Foucault's conception of power as explicitly related to language that makes his arguments the most effective against the assertions of Gilbert. For Foucault, a key function of power is that it necessarily hides itself, "[Power] is tolerable only on the conditions that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms….Secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation" (Foucault 1990: 86). It is exactly this secrecy which Gilbert both fails to recognize and to which she unintentionally contributes. In other words, she ignores Judith Butler's observation, "The law

produces and then conceals the notion of a "subject before the law" in order to invoke the discursive formation that subsequently legitimizes the law's own regulatory hegemony" (Butler 2006: 3).

Yet, how exactly does the notion of an inherent selfhood contribute to an oppressive hegemony? Is there political value in rejecting such a conception of the self? That Gilbert presumes a stable, cohesive self onto whom culture inscribes gendered meanings suggests a possibility for selfhood outside of language. This conception is a marked difference from Foucault, who argues that power is always implicit in the discourses that produce identity and subjectivity. Gilbert's underlying assumption, therefore, removes power as a fundamental category of analysis in the formation of subjectivity For Gilbert, power and language likely influence the production of subjectivity, but they do not entirely constitute it. This presumption of a cohesive, humanist self that is ontologically pre-discursive, then, obfuscates epistemological concerns of how one conceives of the very idea of selfhood. For many feminists, the very concept of a universal self is inherently masculine, as Simone de Beauvoir demonstrates when she writes, "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself, but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (de Beauvoir 13). The pre-discursive self for whom Gilbert advocates ignores this form of criticism; it assumes a natural self that is androgynous, disregarding the way that power functions to produce the idea that a natural self is male. As a result, Gilbert colludes in the very power she hopes to overthrow, for she precludes an analysis of power, thereby making it seem invisible. In other words, a cohesive, humanist subject tends to be gendered male, and Gilbert's notions limit the feminist analysis of the universal subjecthood by assuming a natural state of androgyny outside of power.

Not only is Gilbert's reading philosophically unsound and politically troubling, but she also ignores the fragmentary nature of the speaker. Although the "I am" of the final stanzas seems to indicate a sovereign and coherent subject, the speaker's emphasis on her multiple selves that dissolve like "old whore petticoats," undermines the stability of this claim (Plath 1999: 63). These multiple selves of the subject contest the static sense of self upon which teleological narratives rely. In these lines, no longer is selfhood something that one *is*, but, rather, it is something that one puts on or performs. The metaphor is, then, the ultimate rejection of humanism, for not only does it destabilize a unitary "I," but it challenges the very existence of an inherent inner self. Effectively, the speaker of "Fever 103" is reduced to the purely exterior: she is what she does; she is what she wears.

As a result of this multiplicity, the speaker of the poem does not adhere to a single subject position and, instead, takes on a protean nature. The fluidity of the speaker is most evident when she compares herself to a candle and declares, "I have been flickering, off, on, off, on" (Plath 1999: 62). As this line indicates, the speaker's identity is in a constant state of motion, flickering between on and off, never truly coming to rest on one position or the other. As Britzolakis observes, the movement present in this image, a movement which recalls the Derridean chain of signifiers, is symbolic of the speaker's role as a whole. She states, "[The speaker] oscillates between positions of artist and artefact, consumer and commodity" (Britzolakis 141). Such an assertion is evident when the speaker compares herself to the artist Isadora Duncan. Although she seems to identify with Duncan when she declares, "the low smokes roll / From me like Isadora's scarves," the speaker undermines this assertion later in the poem when she compares herself to the objectified art piece: the Japanese lantern (Plath 1999: 61). She claims:

> I am too pure for you or anyone.
> Your body

Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern –

My head a moon
Of Japanese Paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive. (Plath 1999: 62)

The contrasting nature of these stanzas is revealing for it draws attention to the subjugation of the speaker as an object. Whereas in the first stanza, the narrator states she has the divine power by explicitly comparing herself to God, this power is undermined in the following lines when she underscores her frailty through the reference to the delicate lantern. Unlike a divine creator, she is reduced to an art object whose only power is that of a commodity: to be expensive. Thus, as in "Daddy," the identity of the speaker is in a constant state of tension, for there is a thin line that separates powerful artist from powerless art object.

While Britzolakis's analysis is useful for understanding the unstable nature of the narrator, her argument falls apart when she discusses transcendence. For Britzolakis, the tension of identity culminates in an ironic moment of transformation that she considers a "parody of catharsis" (Britzolakis 141). While elements of parody are certainly present throughout the poem, to assert that the ending of the poem is simply ironic is to vastly oversimplify its nuances. Indeed, the concluding "I am" is not merely a parody; it is actually a false transcendence. While the phrase "I am" seemingly functions as a quintessential example of a unified, coherent self, the enjambment between stanzas contradicts such a reading. By literally separating the lines between subject and verb, the speaker challenges the connection between the "I" and the ontological status that the word "am" seems to signify. As the enjambment suggests, there is always a separation between the "I" and the state of being that it purports to represent, a separation, in other words, between the signifier, the letter "I" on the page, and the signified, the cohesive subject that simply *is.* Far from representing a singular, sovereign self, the speaker reveals that

such an "I" is only an illusion that attempts to mask an unstable, fragmented being that results from language's own absence.

These readings of "Fever 103" and "Daddy" may contest the politically unsettling humanist interpretations that rely on a pre-linguistic subject, but they nonetheless fail to offer a political solution. Given the repetitious nature of "Daddy" especially, is it so unsurprising that feminist critics desire a culminating telos where the speaker successfully annihilates the oppressive male patriarch rather than leave her stuck in an endless cycle of transference? Indeed, these readings fall into the same criticisms that many American feminists have of post-structuralism as a whole: that its central tenets, like the deconstructed subject and a rejection of teleology, cannot truly provide the basis for any sort of liberatory politics. Such criticisms explain the high esteem with which feminist critics regard Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*. While the poems of *Ariel* destabilize unified notions of identity by rejecting logocentrism that such static conceptions require, *Diving into the Wreck*'s focus is on embracing the stable identity category of woman.

The poems in *Diving into the Wreck* reinforce the stability of this identity category by emphasizing the inherent difference between men and women. As de Beauvoir states, "Following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed" (de Beauvoir 14). While de Beauvoir may be working in an existential framework that embraces a sovereign Cartesian subject that post-structuralism rejects, her Hegelian reading nonetheless arrives at a similar conclusion as Lacan. If, according to Lacanian theory, one only comes to form subjectivity through a linguistic system based on difference, then, like Hegel, identity itself relies on an other. An other is needed to constitute the subject, and, therefore, for the speakers in *Diving into the*

Wreck, women need to know what they are not (men) in order to know themselves. Yet, the constancy of woman may not seem evident at a cursory glance of the work. Indeed, a poem like "Waking in the Dark," rather than draw attention to the differences between men and women, seems initially to unite them in androgyny. In the very first lines of the poem, the speaker states, "The thing that arrests me is / how we are composed of molecules" (Rich 2013: 7). Such a declaration accentuates the shared biological makeup between men and women, thereby reinforcing their similarity, rather than their difference. A similar proclamation occurs near the end of the poem:

> All night dreaming of a body
> space weighs on differently from mine
> We are making love in the street
> the traffic flows off from us
> pouring back like a sheet
> the asphalt stirs with tenderness
> there is no dismay
> we move together like underwater plants. (Rich 2013: 10)

While the speaker of this stanza may draw attention to the difference between herself and the subject of the body by stressing their differing weights, her repeated utilization of the plural pronoun "we" and her emphasis on togetherness in the final line seems to indicate a hope for unity.

The speaker, however, ultimately rejects unity and admits that such an idea is nothing more than "a dream" (Rich 2013: 10). Despite her desire for a place where "we could stand / handing the power-glasses back and forth," which implies a certain degree of harmony (quite literally, equal footing), she ends the poem with an image of separation, "the split" (Rich 2013: 10). The implication of this division is clear: no matter how much the speaker may dream of equality with men, such a dream is destined to remain unrealized. The speaker of "Waking in the Dark" places the blame for the failure of this dream entirely on men. For her, men's domination

of women is at fault; equality will remain a dream so long as men continue to subjugate their other: women. The speaker emphasizes this subjugation in the second part of the poem when she states:

> You worship the blood
> you call it hysterical bleeding
> you want to drink it like milk
> you dip your finger into it and write
> you faint at the smell of it
> you dream of dumping me into the sea. (Rich 2013: 8)

The active voice that the speaker uses in these lines demonstrates the supremacy of the repetitious male "you;" he is the literal subject of the sentence. In all of these instances, the "you" is the one performing the action; he is the doer of the sentence; nothing is being done to him. The speaker, by contrast, seems dominated. She even goes so far as to equate her menstrual blood with ink, further stressing the authority of the "you" by drawing attention to how his artistic genius necessitates her subjugation. He may rely on her, yet his dream is not for their unity, but for her destruction.

With such unequal power relations, it is no surprise that the speaker feels she lives in "a man's world" (Rich 2013: 8). Yet, the implications of this statement are more profound than they may initially seem. The speaker is not merely suggesting that it is a man's world because men are dominant but, rather, theorizes that it is a man's world because, recalling de Beauvoir, humanity is implicitly gendered male. Such a notion is evident when the speaker declares, "I walk the unconscious forest, / a woman dressed in old army fatigues / that have shrunk to fit her" (Rich 2013: 8). That these clothes must be shrunk to fit the speaker clearly indicates that they, like the world itself, are designed for men; a woman could never truly be the subject for such garments. She lacks a description of her own, and, instead, she is defined purely through the clothes of men that do not fit her. According to the poem, it is precisely this subjugation and

inability to take up a subject position on their own terms that necessitates the speaker's final rejection of unity in favor of the emphasis on the split between men and women. With this final split comes the differentiation necessary to reinscribe woman as a stable, singular identity category.

A later poem in the volume, "Translations," arrives at a similar conclusion as "Waking in the Dark." However, unlike "Waking in the Dark," the primary focus of "Translations" is on the linguistic element of women's oppression. For the speaker of "Translations," there is a significant difference between the speech of men and women, and she even goes so far as to theorize that women have access to a specifically female language. From the very first lines, the speaker draws attention to this hypothetical linguistic difference. She states, "You show me the poems of some woman / my age, or younger / translated from your language" (Rich 2013: 40). By literalizing the difference between men and women's language, the speaker not only draws attention to the dissimilarities between these two identity groups, but also suggests a commonality shared between all women. If, in other words, there is a language shared by men, implied by the speaker's emphasis on the pronoun "your," then, according to the logic of the poem, there must be a monolithic language of women against which this language of men must define itself. As a subject needs an other to define itself in opposition to, so too does a homogenous male language necessitate a similarly homogenous female language. While this notion of a shared female language is not fully highlighted until Rich's next volume, *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), the seeds for such a project were clearly planted in poems like "Translations."

The linguistic dominance of men, however, threatens to destabilize the unity that this theoretical women's language engenders. The speaker states:

> The phone rings
> in a man's bedroom
> she hears him telling someone else
> *Never mind. She'll get tired.*
> hears him telling her story to her sister
>
> who becomes her enemy
> and will in her own time
> light her own way to sorrow
>
> ignorant of the fact that this way of grief
> is shared, unnecessary
> and political. (Rich 2013: 40-41)

What is particularly revealing about these stanzas is how this vague masculine figure utilizes his vocabulary to distort communication between women; he is the one who "[tells] her story to her sister," thereby making them enemies (Rich 2013: 40). The word "becomes" is notable in this regard, for it suggests that no hostility between the two women existed prior to the man's intervention. That they are enemies is an explicit result of his misrepresentation of the woman's story.

According to "Translations," the man not only creates this sense of animosity, but, as the final lines reveal, it is his linguistic distortion that isolates the women from each other, resulting in their ignorance of a common political struggle. Therefore, the poem not only theorizes a shared female language, but also underscores a common linguistic oppression as well. Indeed, it is this very linguistic oppression that paradoxically keeps them from uniting based on their shared identity of woman. Bennett reaches a similar conclusion, writing:

> It hardly needs saying that "Translations" is a quintessentially feminist poem. It is spoken by a woman. It is about a woman. It describes a situation with which virtually all women, at least in our culture, are familiar and from which many, if not most, have suffered one way or another at one time or another in their lives. (Bennett 213)

Such a statement draws attention to the importance of the stable identity category of woman in *Diving into the Wreck.* In contrast to the celebration of destabilization that occurs in *Ariel,* the poems in the volume emphasize the importance of unity among women based on common experience, thereby reifying a shared identity that relies on a stable conception of an innate self. Indeed, for the speaker of "Translations," destabilization functions as an anti-liberatory tool, an instrument of a monolithic patriarchy, represented in the poem by the male figure, designed to keep women separate.

Yet, it is precisely the prominence of commonality and a shared oppression, the very qualities that critics like Bennett praise, which makes "Translations" so troubling. As Bennett posits, poems like "Translations" are mimetic; they represent an event which all women have experienced during their lives. However, by assuming that the language of poetry can represent the reality of women's experiences, such a statement implies a unified relationship between signifier and signified that is necessarily at odds with Derridean theories of language. It is this philosophical error which makes Bennett's assertion so politically problematic, for the mimesis of her claim fails to take into account the constitutive nature of "Translations" and, more generally, language itself, on a Foucauldian register. In other words, a poem like "Translations" does not represent a category of women, but rather is part of a larger discursive practice that helps to produce and define the very notion of what a woman is and what their experiences are. Woman, far from being an independent category that exists outside of language, is a very product of discourse.

If discourse constitutes the identity category of woman, then it must necessarily produce its limits as well. These limits are precisely what make Bennett's ignorance of the productive power of discourse so dangerous from a feminist perspective; she ignores how the subject of

woman, as Butler observes, is "formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements" of larger discursive structures that include literature and poetry (Butler 2006: 3). Mimetic readings of a poem like "Translations" necessarily exclude any individuals from the identity category of woman who do not conform to the standards of womanhood set out in advance by the text. Bennett insists that the experiences mentioned in "Translations" are ones which *all women* have experienced. If a woman has not experienced such a situation, must one conclude that she is not a woman?

Exclusion, therefore, is an inescapable consequence of any attempt to reify an identity category predicated on universally shared experiences. This exclusion is precisely why unity, either as a means to an end or an end unto itself, must be interrogated. Indeed, unity, far from a neutral standard, is a concept that is intricately bound up with questions of power. Butler especially draws attention to the power implicit in unity:

> Despite the clearly democratizing impulse that motivates coalition building, the coalitional theorist can inadvertently reinsert herself as sovereign of the process by trying to assert an ideal form for coalitional structures *in advance*, one that will effectively guarantee unity as the outcome. Related efforts to determine what is and is not the true shape of dialogue, what constitutes a subject-position, and, most importantly, when "unity" has been reached, can impede the self-shaping and self-limiting dynamics of coalition. (Butler 2006: 20)

As this passage indicates, one of the reasons for Butler's concern is that a writer or theorist can effectively decide the standards for an identity category. If, to recall de Beauvoir, men define their experiences as universal, Butler emphasizes that certain groups of feminists rely upon the same practice: defining their experiences as universal standards for all women. Consequently, such tactics reinscribe dominant discourse rather than creating truly oppositional ones, and the effect of this reverse-discourse is to constitute the subject based on the experiences of the most privileged.

These exclusionary tactics draw attention to the key flaw of "Translations" and, more generally, to the poetics of *Diving into the Wreck* as a whole that accentuates a common identity based on universally shared experiences. Such a universalizing claim is fundamentally essentialist, for it presupposes an ahistoric, cross-cultural masculine patriarchy responsible for a similarly monolithic women's identity. Not only does this assumption ignore how gender is constituted in different contexts, but it fundamentally disregards the intersectional differences among women and, instead, subsumes diverse experiences under a smokescreen category of woman in order to obfuscate the differences that exist within this category. In other words, a specifically or uniquely female experience requires foreclosing gender from various other cultural categories, such as race, class, and sexuality. This decontextualization fails to account for the manner in which these cultural categories all intertwine to create a unique experience of oppression based on multiple aspects of identity.

Given the troubling implications of essentialism that arise from the way that "Translations" thematizes language and linguistic oppression, it may be tempting to read the poem as espousing some form of l'écriture féminine as theorized by Luce Irigaray. Working from a post-Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, Irigaray views the symbolic order as inherently phallogocentric. For Lacan, entrance into the symbolic order is predicated on the separation from the maternal body; words allow individuals to represent absent objects, and this separation leads to language, for only in language can one represent the absent maternal. According to this theory, the absence of the maternal body forces the child into the symbolic order. Lacan conceives of this absence as explicitly masculine, for it is only through the paternal fear of castration that the child separates from the mother. Consequently, the symbolic order represents the paternal law that results in separation from the mother, and Lacan views the

phallus as the signifier of this absence. As a result of this masculinist language, as Ann Rosalind Jones notes in her discussion of Irigaray, "women, because they have been caught in a world structured by man-centric concepts, have no way of knowing or representing themselves" (Jones 359). Indeed, in order for the phallogocentric signifying economy to function, the feminine must be excluded all together, and, therefore, as Irigaray explicitly states, "neither women's sex…nor their language can exist" (Irigaray 329).

"Translations" arrives at a similarly bleak conclusion. Although the speaker examines one particular instance of men's distortion of language, the implications of the poem are much more profound. Indeed, the poem emphasizes not merely a single instance of distortion but, rather, focuses on the difficulty for women to take up a speaking position more generally. While the first lines of the poem theorize the existence of a uniquely feminine language, it is telling that the speaker never actually experiences this language. The speaker stresses this detail when describing how the poem was "translated *from your* (emphasis mine) language" (Rich 2013: 40). The inclusion of this detail implies that the female subject of the poem never had access to her own language; she, instead, had to write in the language of men.

For Irigaray, like the speaker of "Translations," women can never truly come to access a speaking position. However, despite this shared interest in language, Irigaray and the speakers of *Diving into the Wreck* diverge on a number of key issues. As Jan Montefiore notes, "[A] post-Lacanian like Irigaray would agree that [the split between the self that says "I" and the word "I" that is spoken] is fundamental… to the existence of meaning" (Montefiore 137). By contrast, she observes that the ambitions of *Diving into the Wreck* "[are] to re-integrate inner divisions" in a manner that denies the Lacanian split (Montefiore 137). In other words, while both Irigaray and the radical poetics that inform *Diving into the Wreck* similarly emphasizes a shared connection

between women, they work within fundamentally different frameworks. Irigaray stresses

women's return to the pre-Oedipal attachment of the mother in order to express themselves in

their own language, while the poetic strategy of *Diving into the Wreck* is based on a common

experience rather than the shared pre-Oedipal femininity of psychoanalysis.

These differences between Irigaray and *Diving into the Wreck* are most evident in one the

earlier poems in the volume, "When We Dead Awaken." In this text, the speaker draws

particular attention to the alienation and destruction which women face as a result of this

masculinist culture. The reader first encounters these ramifications when the speaker compares

women's experience in contemporary society to that of war, stating:

> guerrillas are advancing
> through minefields, the trash
> burning endlessly in the dump
> to return to heaven like a stain. (Rich 2013: 5)

Such a comparison recalls Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas (1938)*, a seminal text which

explores the parallels between war abroad and the subjugation of women at home. In her work,

Woolf explicitly links fascist dictators to oppressive social rhetoric that positions the domestic

sphere as the natural realm for women. She writes:

> Are they not saying the same thing? Are they not both the voices of Dictators,
> whether they speak English or German, and are we not all agreed that the dictator
> when we meet him abroad is a very dangerous as well as a very ugly animal? And
> he is here among us, raising his ugly head, spitting his poison, small still curled up
> like a caterpillar on a leaf, but in the heart of England…And is not the woman
> who has to breathe that poison and to fight that insect, secretly and without arms,
> in her office fighting the Fascist or the Nazi as surely as those who fight him with
> arms in the limelight of publicity? (Woolf 65)

Although the emphasis on words like guerillas and minefields in "When We Dead Awaken" may

initially seem to indicate a literal war, Woolf's analysis offers the theoretical framework that

allows for an alternative reading. From this Woolfian perspective, the war in the poem is merely

a metaphor that the speaker utilizes to draw attention to the subjugation of women in the private

sphere. Such a reading is bolstered by the speaker's references to domestic objects and routines

throughout the first part of the poem (the table, the act of knitting, etc.), implying that this war is

situated not in some far off country but, rather, in the home itself. The rhetorical impact of such a

metaphor cannot be understated; for the speaker of the poem, women literally live in a

destructive warzone as a result of men's continuous need to dominate.

       As this first part indicates, unlike Irigaray, the speaker of "When We Dead Awaken" does

not emphasize a pre-Oedipal shared femininity, but rather stresses the alienating nature of the

hegemonic masculine culture. According to the speaker, it is precisely this culture that is

responsible for their common identity. This shared identity is most evident when the speaker

states:

> …fellow creature, sister,
> sitting across from me, dark with love,
> working like me to pick apart,
> working with me to remake
> this trailing knitted thing…(Rich 2013: 5)

That the female speaker comes to identify her fellow sister as a result of their shared domestic

labor indicates the cultural construction of identity; what the sister and the speaker have in

common is their household duties that result from their confinement in the private sphere at the

hands of men.

       The remaining sections expand on the precise consequences of this patriarchal

destruction and complicate the metaphysics of the poem by suggesting an ontologically innate

femininity that is pre-cultural. In the third and final segment, for instance, the speaker thematizes

this annihilation not in the language of war but, rather, in environmental terms. She describes,

"The lovely landscape of southern Ohio / betrayed by strip mining, the / thick gold band on the

adulterer's finger" (Rich 2013: 6). In her book *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Mary Daly indicates that women and the earth share a natural connection and writes, "[We] feel a deep communion with our natural environment. We share the same agony from phallocratic attack and pollution as our sister the earth" (Daly 409). If one works from Daly's ecofeminist perspective, the above lines not only describe environmental destruction but also metaphorically express the violence that women face as a result of oppressive patriarchal ideals. The speaker further connects patriarchal violence and the annihilation of the environment through the image of the adulterer's wedding ring, implying that this environmental destruction, like the institution of marriage, has harmful consequences for women.

By using such ecofeminist language, however, the speaker of "When We Dead Awaken" presents patriarchy as a monolithic and homogeneous system. As Butler notes, such a configuration "[threatens] to become a universalizing concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts" (Butler 2006: 48). In other words, a monolithic patriarchy ignores intersectional, historical, and cultural differences in order to present women as fundamentally suffering the same form of oppression. Despite the troubling aspect of this universalizing gesture, it nonetheless holds great appeal for a text like *Diving into the Wreck,* for it further reinforces the stability of the singular identity category of women by suggesting that all women experience the same form of oppression.

To return to the text, given the speaker's emphasis on the destructive nature of a monolithic patriarchy, the third section of the poem seems to repeat the basic themes of the first part. Yet, the prominence of this strip-mining draws attention to the precise nature of this destruction that was not present in the first segment. By equating strip mining, a type of mining that focuses on the surface of the land, with patriarchal domination, the speaker indicates that

this annihilation only harms the external. This suggestion is not an attempt to mitigate the

devastating impact of such a practice but, rather, to imply that the destruction is necessarily

limited; it cannot affect that which is interior. In other words, despite the constant attacks against

women, there still exists a vibrant and resilient interiority that remains unaffected by these

exterior assaults. The speaker furthers this analysis of patriarchal violence when she declares in

the final lines of the poem:

> yet never have we been closer to the truth
> of the lies we were living, listen to me
> the faithfulness I can imagine would be a weed
> flowering in tar, a blue energy piercing
> the massed atoms
> of a bedrock disbelief. (Rich 2013: 6)

As Alice Templeton states, these lines illustrate the necessity for the speaker "to unmake her life

and loyalties in order to "remake" them "more honestly than ever"" (Templeton 41).

Templeton's brilliant reading elucidates the harrowing implications of the poem: women's lives

are defined by lies. The speaker's utilization of motifs of truths and lies, therefore, suggests the

primary consequence of this destruction is not necessarily material annihilation but, rather, the

alienation of women from the truth of their own lives.

While Templeton, borrowing from Charles Altieri, asserts that it is impossible for women

to breach this gulf between truth and lies, the text of the poem seems to undercut this claim

(Templeton 41). Despite the speaker's emphasis on alienation, her primary focus is actually on

the powerful interiority of women that survives in spite of this masculine destruction and

deception. This inner resilience is most notable in the figure of the "weed / flowering in tar," for

such an image implies the endurance of life that can literally blossom in spite of horrendous

conditions (Rich 2013: 6). The continuation of the environmental imagery suggests an

association of the tar with the similarly devastating strip mining earlier in the poem, implying

that this flowering weed does not indicate any type of stamina, but, rather, it represents the endurance of a specifically feminine interiority against the destructive force of hegemonic masculinity. However, the mere existence and survival of this inner feminine core is not enough for the speaker. What she truly desires, as the final lines of the poem demonstrate, is not just the flowering of the weed; she longs for it to pierce through the façade of masculinist lies. Like Gilbert's interpretation of Plath's "Fever 103," the speaker of "When We Dead Awaken" longs for women's authentic feminine selves to arise from the hidden interior to the visible exterior in order to contest the patriarchal violence that surrounds them.

Like Irigaray's theories, "When We Dead Awaken" ultimately makes recourse to essentialism by theorizing an ontological pre-linguistic and pre-cultural specificity that distinguishes women from men. However, despite the speaker's insistence on this authentic, innate feminine self that pre-exists culture, it would be a mistake to view the poem as espousing an Irigarayan position. Far from the post-Lacanian celebration of fragmentation as not only a condition for existence, but also necessary for meaning, "When We Dead Awaken" emphasizes the reintegration of the self. This need for reintegration, according to the poem, is the consequence of an all powerful, ahistoric patriarchal force which alienates women from their true selves. As Felski states, the conclusions of a poem like "When We Dead Awaken" typifies the gynocritical position that "operates with a conception of patriarchal ideology as a homogeneous and uniformly repressive phenomenon masking an authentic female subjectivity" (Felski 1989: 27). Therefore, the speaker makes recourse to an ontologically cohesive self which Irigaray's framework fundamentally rejects. Instead of highlighting the recovery of the maternal body, the speaker stresses the necessity for women to return to a pre-patriarchal origin before hegemonic

masculine culture had obfuscated their identities. Such a return is the only way to achieve wholeness.

This nostalgia for origins is most prominently thematized in one of the final poems of the volume, "August." In the poem, the speaker envisions a primeval patriarchal moment:

> My own are becoming clearer, they open
> into prehistory
>
> which looks like a village lit with blood
> where all the fathers are crying: *My son is mine!* (Rich 2013: 51)

As Lena Petrović claims, these lines indicate that the speaker "locates the source of suffering in that primordial act by which woman was dispossessed of her mother right and her son snatched away from her and claimed by the father" (Petrović 260). In other words, the moment that the speaker recalls is not just any instance of patriarchal violence; it is the inceptive act of masculine domination, the source of all female anguish to come.

The religious allusions of the poem support Petrović's assertion. Such language is notable from the poem's initial lines, when the speaker describes:

> Two horses in yellow light
> eating windfall apples under a tree
>
> as summer tears apart   milkweeds stagger
> and grasses grow more ragged. (Rich 2013: 51).

The speaker's portrayal of the eaten apples under a tree conjures an image of *The Book of Genesis* when Adam and Eve commit the original sin by eating the fruit of tree of the knowledge of good and evil in direct disobedience of the Lord's orders, thereby unleashing disorder and death into the world. A similar consequence occurs in the poem, for, as the second stanza reveals, the natural flora are dying, furthering the poem's Biblical parallels. This sort of parallelism foregrounds the notion of an originary fall and suggests that one should read the act

of maternal dispossession as a similarly primordial moment. The violent language of the summer that "tears apart" provides evidence for this connection between the religious language and the final depiction of patriarchal violence. By describing the summer in such terms, the speaker implies that this event is analogous to the final moment of violence in the poem when the father similarly tears the child from the hands of the mother (Rich 2013: 51). In other words, the religious allusions that run throughout the poem clearly figure the final lines as a type of fall from an Edenic state into an alienating patriarchal world.

As the speaker's emphasis on this Edenic origin indicates, patriarchy did not always exist, but rather was brought into being through this sole act of male subjugation. Therefore, although the speaker does not explicitly describe it in the text, this originary act of violence necessarily implies a pre-patriarchal era. Before original sin, there was Eden, and, accordingly, there must exist a similar idealic epoch before patriarchal domination. Simply put, one cannot experience a fall without having something from which to fall. Even the title of the poem supports this analysis and foregrounds the notion of a time before the fall. August, as the last month of summer, is quite literally the season that precedes Fall; it is the last of the long days, the last moments of energy and vitality that the season traditionally signifies. The season of Fall and the fall from grace, in addition to their linguistic similarities, share archetypal implications: the coming of death and destruction. Thus, the season of Fall and the fall are linked in the poem, and, consequently, the title suggests the possibility of an era not only before the literal season Autumn but also before the symbolic fall.

While rhetorically potent in the context of the poem, this notion of an originary act of violence is the most philosophically and politically unsettling aspect of the text. As Foucault demonstrates in his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," such a conception oversimplifies the

complexities of the past and ignore how history and time "[operate] on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times" (Foucault 1984: 76). Foucault's emphasis on the entanglements and confusion of historical documents implies that history is messier and more disorderly than often assumed, and, therefore, one cannot rely on a single point of origin. Foucault affirms this very notion later in the text when, borrowing from Nietzsche, he formulates a genealogical methodology that attempts to study not a singular genesis but, rather "the numberless beginnings" (Foucault 1984: 81). This conception of multiple beginnings is meant to contest single master narratives of history that necessarily depend on a solitary genesis. However, such a nuanced view is completely absent from a poem like "August" which relies on a sole beginning and, consequently, presupposes a single, historical narrative.

For Foucault, not only is a search for origins reductive, but it is fundamentally a humanist gesture motivated by romantic nostalgia. He writes:

> …it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities… this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to "that which was already there," the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity. (Foucault 1984: 78)

In other words, Foucault is skeptical of origins because they presume an ontologically innate essence that is formulated outside of discourse and power. The appeal of this rhetorical move for a work like *Diving into the Wreck* should be obvious; it permits a form of essentialism, an inherent femininity that all women share that pre-exists patriarchal power structures. Because "August" describes not only the primordial patriarchal moment but also refers to a time before this moment, then there must be some sort of femininity that pre-existed this first act of male violence. Given the religious allusions that imply an Edenic epoch, the speaker of "August"

implicitly figures this original femininity as pure and authentic because a destructive patriarchal society has yet to alienate women from the truth of their lives. Far from the post-structuralist notions that language and power form subjectivity, the implications of "August," suggest not only the existence of an intrinsic feminine essence that pre-exists power, but also that this femininity is at its most pure precisely before culture can exert its influence on it.

The poem immediately following "August," "Meditations for a Savage Child," makes explicit this nostalgia for origins that is merely implicit in its predecessor. Although the multipart poem ostensibly focuses on the real life story of "The Wild Boy of Aveyron," the speaker emphasizes that this feral child acts as a symbol for women. The speaker draws attention to the parallels most noticeably at the end of the poem, when she describes:

> At the end of the distinguished doctor's
> lecture
> a young woman raises her hand:
> *You have the power*
> *in your hands, you control our lives –*
> *why do you want our pity too?* (Rich 2013: 62)

As this stanza indicates, the speaker clearly associates the experiences of the wild child with those of women; both lack agency as a result of men's control. Yet, as Templeton notes, implicit in the connection between feral child and woman is the association of the scientists with a more general patriarchal force. She states that the doctor is a broader "masculine stereotype" and suggests that he is no single personage but, rather, an archetypical figure of male domination (Templeton 48). As a result of these associations, one should read the early life of the feral child before his capture by scientists as a metaphor for women's time before their indoctrination into patriarchal culture. Like "August" implies, this pre-patriarchal existence is an idealic state of autonomy and joy. The nature of this reality is evident in the opening section of the work when the speaker, borrowing from J.M. Itard's writings, describes how the child before its capture and,

by extension, women before their entrance into culture, have "so intense a passion for the freedom of the fields" (Rich 2013: 55).

"Meditations for a Savage Child," therefore, confirms the existence of a pre-patriarchal femininity within the internal logic of *Diving into the Wreck*. Yet, the poem goes further: this identity is not only pre-patriarchal; it is also pre-linguistic. The speaker indicates this aspect of the child's personality when she describes how the scientists attempt "to teach you language," implying that the boy had no previous linguistic capabilities; he must be taught by others (Rich 2013: 56). This recourse to a reality that is pre-linguistic is not only necessarily at odds with the theories of Derrida and Lacan; it also confirms Foucault's assertion that the search for origins is irrevocably bound with humanist ideals of innateness. Indeed, poems like "August" and "Meditations for a Savage Child," fall into a similar trap as Gilbert's reading of "Fever 103." By presupposing an origin independent of language and power, they obfuscate the role that these concepts play in the formation of subjecthood. Butler reaches a similar conclusion, writing, "Recourse to an original or genuine femininity is a nostalgic and parochial ideal that refuses the contemporary demand to formulate an account of gender as a complex cultural construction" (Butler 2006: 49).

However, the implications of "August" and "Meditations for a Savage Child" and the conclusions which Gilbert reaches in her interpretation diverge in one key aspect. While the pre-discursive identity that Gilbert describes is one that is completely outside of traditional gender categories, these poems imply the exact opposite: that gender, far from being a linguistic construction, actually precedes culture and language. As Butler observes, the reliance on a pre-cultural state of the authentically feminine "[constitutes] an exclusionary practice within feminism, precipitating precisely the kind of fragmentation that the ideal purports to overcome"

(Butler 2006: 49). In other words, the rhetorical attempt to define women based on an inherent essence is just as exclusionary as the endeavor to define women based on common experience. Whereas the latter excludes those who do not conform to hegemonic conceptions of women's experience, the former creates a hierarchy based on those who can most effectively represent this genuine femininity, thereby ignoring all of those who do not conform to normative standards of authenticity. As Elizabeth Freeman states, such rhetorical moves betray a longing for a unified signifier/signified relationship by assuming that femininity has "a given form…a stable referent, a prior wholeness locatable in a time and place we ought to "get back to"" (Freeman 498-499). Any femininity that fails to properly signify this original and authentic femininity, therefore, is somehow less legitimate and, consequently, less valuable. Despite its reputation as a radical work, these essentialist implications of *Diving into the Wreck* suggest, on the contrary, an adherence to a deep-seated conservatism.

Consequently, one should not believe that the origins described by the speakers of "August" and "Meditations for a Savage Child" exist in a vacuum and that they have no effect on the present or future. As Butler notes: "the postulation of the "before" within feminist theory… constrains the future to materialize an idealized notion of the past" (Butler 2006: 49). What Butler's statement suggests is that the story of a pre-patriarchal past limits *current* acceptable gender practices by deeming unconventional presentations to be inauthentic. However, the text of *Diving into the Wreck* emphasizes a much more positive influence of a pre-patriarchal era. For the speakers of the poems, the existence of a pre-patriarchal time is the best argument against the inevitability of patriarchy; if it did not always exist, then there may come a time in the future when it ceases to be. What has a beginning can have an end, and it is this telos – the end of patriarchy – that the work ultimately seeks to highlight. While many critics assert that *The*

Dream of a Common Language is the volume where Rich most fully articulates the utopian vision of a post-patriarchal era, images of this future are actually present in *Diving into the Wreck.* The representation of a pre-patriarchal past in the volume functions not only as a strategy to justify the coming future, but also to provide an image of it: a utopia where women are free from their oppression. Elaine Showalter summarizes this notion best, "only the Jeremiahs of the feminist critique can lead us out of the 'Egypt of female servitude' to the promised land of the feminist vision" (Showalter 93).

The hopeful aspects of *Diving into the Wreck* are most evident in "For a Sister." However, the hope in the poem may not be notable at first; like "When We Dead Awaken," the speaker initially stresses the alienating nature of patriarchy. For instance, she describes how the subject of the poem cannot act like herself and, consequently, that she must "trace nonexistent circles with [her] finger, / try to imitate the smile of the permanently dulled," because expressing any intelligence "could get you twenty years" (Rich 2013: 48). Much like "Translations," the speaker connects this inability to express her "true" self with the inability to take up a speaking position in language. Until the final stanza, the subject of the poem completely lacks the ability to describe herself on her own terms; instead, others write about her. The speaker accentuates this facet of the subject's story when she states that the only information that remained of her were "A few paragraphs in the papers, / allowing for printer's errors, willful omissions" (Rich 2013: 48). These lines not only highlight the subject's linguistic deficiency, but the speaker's emphasis on the errors of the papers also suggests that, like "Translations," the language of men cannot fully account for the veracity of her story.

However, whereas a poem like "Translations" draws attention to women's inability to access their own language and their subsequent reliance on the language of men to define

themselves, the speaker of "For a Sister" imagines a female linguistic alternative at the end of the poem. Instead of keeping the protagonist in her alienating patriarchal prison, the speaker portrays her, "Coming home after years / to light the stove, get out the typewriter and begin again. / Your story" (Rich 2013: 48). In contrast to the earlier stanzas, these lines clearly illustrate the subject in charge of her own narrative. No longer is she literally and figuratively bound to and misrepresented by the language of men; here she takes up the speaking position and becomes the active agent of her own story, completely outside of men's control. That one can escape from the patriarchal prison, come home, and be free to write one's own narrative indicates the hopeful possibility of the end of oppression.

"Incipience" provides an even more explicit connection between a pre-patriarchal origin and a post-patriarchal utopia. As Wendy Martin notes, the title of the poem thematizes "the primordial origin of patriarchy," and the speaker's emphasis on the ice that is beginning to "[form] over the earth," an image of a prehistoric ice age, supports this analysis (Martin 188, Rich 2013: 11). Indeed, throughout the first section of the poem, the speaker associates this past ice age with a dominating patriarchal force. She links this ice with "an hour when nothing can be done / to further any decision," suggesting that this ice quite literally freezes women, trapping them in a state where they completely lack agency (Rich 2013: 11). The absence of a literal subject in these lines bolsters this reading; the subject does not say, "I can do nothing" but, instead, states, "nothing can be done" (Rich 2013: 11). This grammatical configuration makes the subject invisible, thereby denying her any power of her own.

As the second section of the poem demonstrates, however, it is possible for women to escape from this frozen state. The speaker, thematizing women's captivity in terms of dreams, claims, "A man is asleep in the next room / We are his dreams" (Rich 2013: 11). This

deceleration indicates a familiar theme: women only exist in relation to men because they lack the ability to define themselves on their own terms Yet, like "For a Sister," the speaker depicts a world outside of these dreams where, as Marianne Whelchel notes, "New female roles outside those assigned by patriarchy" are present (Whelchel 61). The speaker declares, "Outside the frame of his dream we are stumbling up the hill / hand in hand, stumbling and guiding each other / over the scarred volcanic rock" (Rich 2013: 12). Not only do these lines indicate the existence of a post-patriarchal world, but it offers the most sustained vision of what such an existence entails. As Wendy Martin illustrates, this passage foregrounds "the need for a female community to enable women to express their true power, which lies submerged like Dickinson's dormant volcano" (Martin 188). In other words, this utopia that the speaker envisions is a specifically feminist utopia, one where women are not only able to express their true selves free from patriarchal constraints, but also one that is sustained by a group of people who share a common female identity.

The trajectory of *Diving into the Wreck,* is, therefore, a teleological master narrative; it tells the story of an originary moment of masculine violence that puts an end to a pre-patriarchal Edenic epoch and the subsequent escape from patriarchy to a future feminist utopia that is free of male power. The alpha and the omega are fundamentally the same, and, consequently, the utopian ideal presented in the work suffers from the same shortcomings as that of the origin. This utopian telos, like the origin, assumes a reality independent of language and power that not only ignores how discourse produces gendered subjectivity but also reifies the stable identity category of woman through the essentialist presumption of an ontologically innate, pre-cultural femininity that all women share.

While the exclusionary implications of this form of essentialism have been previously discussed, it is worthwhile to examine how the very concept of utopianism is similarly predicated on the prohibition of difference. Foucault has taught us not only to challenge singular origins but also to contest the unsettling aspects of teleology. He specifically mentions that his genealogical method "rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies" (Foucault 1984: 77). For Foucault, genealogy must be anti-teleological in order to fully account for the complex, multifaceted nature of history. He writes that such a project

> … must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. Finally, genealogy must define even those instances when they are absent, the moment they remain unrealized. (Foucault 1984: 76)

In other words, Foucault argues that one must not ignore periphery experiences in an attempt to form a coherent narrative. Instead, he claims that it is necessary to focus on the multiplicity of narratives present to understand those who exist on the margins. Yet, this attention to the periphery is precisely what *Diving into the Wreck* fails to accomplish in its teleological conception of history. The text's emphasis on the need to reach a post-patriarchal epoch necessarily disregards those figures that do not conform to the hegemonic standards of "authentic" femininity that such a utopia requires, thereby effectively pushing these individuals to the margins and ignoring their existence in order to create a unified narrative of history. For the speakers of the volume, the differences among women must be erased in order to sustain this utopia that relies on a single definition of femininity and womanhood.

Recent feminist and queer scholarship, however, has challenged the anti-utopian conclusions of post-structuralists like Foucault. For Seyla Benhabib, despite the flaws of

utopianism, it is nonetheless essential for feminist theory because it offers a sense of futurity and hope necessary for liberation. She argues that the post-structuralist and post-modern retreat from utopia "[undermines] the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women…Without such a regulative principle of hope, not only morality but also radical transformation is unthinkable" (Benhabib 29-30). Benhabib's emphasis on hope, however, should not be mistaken as an uncritical acceptance of any form of utopia. Indeed, she rejects grand master narratives upon which the utopian vision of *Diving into the Wreck* relies. For Benhabib, any narrative of this sort inevitably "becomes an excuse either for the crassest instrumentalism in the present – the end justifies the means – or to the extent that the coming utopia exempts the undemocratic and authoritarian practices of the present from critique" (Benhabib 30).

While Benhabib may reject the utopianism of *Diving into the Wreck,* her argument presents an interesting dilemma in the continued debate between American cultural feminism and post-structuralist feminism represented by Rich's volume and *Ariel* respectively. Does one pledge allegiance to the grand master narrative of utopianism that the former presents, despite its exclusionary nature and reductive conception of history? Despite these flaws, does it not offer a necessary sense of hope that the latter lacks? What could possibly be gained from Plath's work that seemingly refuses to offer a vision of the future? In other words, what pragmatic alternatives can post-structuralism offer in place of utopia or the future?

Perhaps this ostensible need for futurity explains the telologically inclined readings of many *Ariel* poems, including Plath's renowned "Lady Lazarus." Gilbert typifies this form of feminist interpretation, claiming that "Plath's flaming red-haired revenant threatens a resurrection of the feminine that will explode the older order by destroying the power of the

patriarchal enemies ('Herr God, Herr Lucifer') who had mistakenly identified her as their 'opus'

in the first place" (Gilbert 1994: 299). Gilbert's analysis, like Ostriker's interpretation of

"Daddy," is predicated on an interpretation of the poem as a narrative of power reversal wherein

the speaker begins powerless only to rise and defeat her enemies. Such a reading should not

come as a surprise, for, at an initial glance, there is much evidence to support it. For instance, the

speaker describes her face as "a featureless, fine / Jew linen," reusing the same Holocaust

imagery as "Daddy" that ostensibly positions her as a powerless victim (Plath 1999: 6).

      For Gilbert and likeminded critics, however, a shift occurs in the lines:

> Ash, ash –
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –
>
> A cake of soap.
> A wedding ring,
> A gold filling. (Plath 1999: 9)

The images of the cake of soap and the gold fillings refer to Nazi practices of making soap from

corpses and extracting the gold from their teeth, thereby furthering the speaker's connection with

the powerless Jewish victims of the Holocaust. However, these images of subjugation, violation,

and extermination are not forever bound to the speaker. She is able to separate her body, the

"flesh and bone" which are no longer present, from these representations of victimhood and

domination (Plath 1999: 9). By detaching herself from these symbols of her oppression, the

speaker is able to rise "out of the ash" and transform into a more powerful version of herself that

can "eat men like air" (Plath 1999: 9).

      Such a reading recalls "When We Dead Awaken" in its emphasis on the emergence of an

interior self that is able to ascend and free itself from an oppressive patriarchy. Consequently, the

reading shares the same flaw as Rich's work: an exclusionary essentialism that fails to account

for power's role in the production of subjectivity. Yet, this interpretation of "Lady Lazarus"

relies too heavily on the concluding stanzas of the poem and fails to properly situate them in the

context of the entire work. Whereas these sections seem to indicate the existence of a self outside

of power, the poem as a whole suggests just the opposite: that one cannot escape power because,

as Foucault states, "power is everywhere" (Foucault 1990: 93). This failure to escape is evident

in the speaker's description of her suicide attempt:

> The second time I meant
> To last it out and not come back at all.
> I rocked shut
>
> As a seashell.
> They had to call and call
> And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (Plath 1999: 7)

As Susan Gubar notes, shell and pearl imagery in the Western artistic tradition has "feminine

evocations. From the medieval poem *Pearl* to Botticelli's famous painting, whether associated

with Virgin or Venus, the shell enclosing the pearl is a common image of female genitals, just as

it may also represent pregnancy, because the pearl is a kind of seed in the womb" (Gubar 204).

Yet, this image is not just any emblem of femininity; it symbolizes a specifically interior

femininity, one where the pearl is a feminine "self or soul safely ensconced with the person or

body" (Gubar 203). The speaker's retreat to the shell, therefore, is an attempt to withdraw into

her own feminine interior sphere, one outside of patriarchal oppression that her exterior body

experiences. However, the speaker's emphasis on the worms challenges the notion of the shell as

an interior femininity that exists outside of power. Indeed, the phallic associations of the worms

imply that this shell is not an image of pure femininity that protects its inhabitants, but, rather, it

is a sphere implicated in masculine power just as much as the outside world. More precisely, it

collapses the interior/exterior binary and reveals them to be one and the same, for masculine power pervades both spaces.

Gubar also draws attention to the transformative associations of the shell imagery. She claims, "The implied hope of rebirth is supported by other associations, for instance the traditionally termed "resurrection shells," and by the mythic story that Hermes creates the lyre from the shell on the very day of his birth" (Gubar 204). This analysis suggests that the speaker's retreat into the shell is not merely a suicide attempt, but also an attempt to transform herself. Such an endeavor clearly prefigures the concluding stanzas where the speaker similarly attempts to rise from the ash. Yet, this retreat into the shell fails; the speaker makes a "Comeback in broad day / To the same place, the same face, the same brute" (Plath 1999: 8). Given such a failure, how is the reader supposed to trust that the final moment of rebirth is legitimate? Britzolakis arrives at a similar conclusion when she declares, "Lady Lazarus's culminating assertion of power – 'I eat men like air' – undoes itself through the suggestion of a mere conjuring trick. The attack on patriarchy is undercut by the illusionistic character of this apotheosis which purports to transform, at a stroke, a degregated and catastrophic reality" (Britzolakis 155-156). If the transcendence of "Lady Lazarus," is nothing more than an illusion, then one can trust neither the teleological nor humanist conclusions of critics like Gilbert.

Unlike "Getting There," "Daddy," or "Fever 103," "Lady Lazarus" does not merely interrogate the concept of transcendence and endings; it also offers a sustained vision of the social construction of gender. Rather than make recourse to an innate femininity, the text draws attention to the regulatory power structures that attempt to control physical bodies, demonstrating how power and discourse produce gendered subjectivities. In other words, rather than hide power, like *Diving into the Wreck*, the poem makes it visible. The radical implications

of such a gesture should not be understated, for, as Butler indicates, such a move "deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essential gender identities" (Butler 2006: 188).

The speaker of "Lady Lazarus" most explicitly thematizes these regulatory structures in her image of the "peanut-crunching crowd" (Plath 1999: 7). What is most immediately apparent about this mysterious group is their visual character; the speaker highlights that they "[shove] in to *see*" her and that they value the "*eyeing* of my scars" (both emphases mine) (Plath 1999: 7-8). The speaker's own utilization of visual metaphors, such as her references to theater and her "strip-tease," draw further attention to the importance of sight by positioning herself as an actor who seems to exist only for the voyeuristic pleasure of her audience (Plath 1999: 7). This emphasis on sight recalls Foucault's book, *Discipline and Punish,* where he claims that vision always contains a degree of power. He writes that modern power is an "ostentatious form of the examination. In it the 'subjects' were presented as 'objects' to the observation of a power that was manifested only by its gaze" (Foucault 2012: 188). Foucault even goes so far as to contend that such surveillance is "a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form" (Foucault 2012: 205). The gaze's ability to turn subjects into objects manifests itself in the poem when the speaker describes how her audience "shoves in to see // them unwrap me hand and foot –" (Plath 1999: 7). The grammatical construction of these lines accentuates the dominance of the voyeuristic crowd; they are the subjects, the ones actively watching her, while she herself is regulated to the role of the passive direct object.

Foucault's work serves to elucidate the speaker's interactions with the audience in the text; she is constantly the object of her spectators' gaze and, consequently, constantly implicated in the mechanisms of power. That the speaker is always under the gaze of her audience implies

that there can be no inherent or authentic femininity (or, more profoundly, no innate identity) that exists prior to or outside of vision and power. In other words, the speaker's passivity in the poem is the result of a gaze that, as bell hooks claims, is an attempt to reinscribe the body "in a narrative of voyeuristic pleasure where the only relevant opposition is male/female, and the location for the female is victim" (hooks 129). While hooks is examining the work of African American film directors, her conclusion is certainly applicable to "Lady Lazarus," for, in the poem, the speaker's identity as an ostensibly passive victim is similarly a product of this powerful gaze.

Despite the text's emphasis on the regulatory structures that not only police bodies but that also produce the conception of womanhood as victim, it is perhaps unsurprising that many feminist critics prefer Gilbert's reading that focuses on an innate femininity that pre-exists culture and power, regardless of its essentialist implications. If power exists everywhere and one can never be outside of it, how can there be any hope for liberation? Are "women" destined to forever be passive recipients of discourse and power that only offers them the subject position of victim? While the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* tends to emphasize the paralyzing nature of this power, he takes a slightly more nuanced view in his later work, *The History of Sexuality,* when he states, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1990: 95). Not only does he highlight the possibility of resistance, but Foucault also stresses that power is not unilaterally exerted, but, rather, it "comes from below, that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations" (Foucault 1990: 94). Accordingly, one should not assume that existence within power necessarily entails dominance. Subjugation may certainly be a possibility, but as a result of the manifold

manifestations of power that exists on every level of society, so too do "redistributions and

realignments" remain possible (Foucault 1990: 94).

Although her primary emphasis remains on the domineering nature of the gaze, the

speaker allows for a few brief moments of agency that signal resistance on a Foucauldian

register. Even as the gaze is most prominent, the speaker notes:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real. (Plath 1999: 8)

Despite the crowd's previous attempts to transform the speaker into a passive object and

spectacle, in these stanzas she is the literal subject of the repeated sentences, "I do." This

grammatical construction indicates that she has some degree of agency. Perhaps an even more

explicit instance of agency and resistance, however, occurs when the speaker addresses her

audience as "Gentlemen, ladies" (Plath 1999: 7). This ability to speak to her audience directly

signals what hooks refers to as an oppositional gaze, a form of vision in which one "can both

interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see"

(hooks 116). This radical gaze not only subverts the normative association of woman as passive

spectacle but also fundamentally reverses the power relations of the poem. The speaker is now

the active subject who talks and looks back; she is no longer an object trapped in the paralyzing

gaze of the audience.

As a result of this agency, it is necessary to re-read the speaker's actions not as pre-

determined by the petrifying vision of her spectators, but as a self-conscious performance.

Although she can never be outside of power or the theater in which she acts, she does have the

agency to choose *how* she will perform. Consequently, as Britzolakis claims, the speaker's act is

not just any performance but, rather, is a parody that functions to further subvert the audience's gaze. She asserts:

> Lady Lazarus… incarnates the 'holy prostitution of the soul' which Baudelaire found in the experience of being part of a crowd; emotional nakedness is itself revealed as a masquerade. The 'strip-tease' artist is a parodic, feminized version of the symbolist poet sacrificed to an uncomprehending mass audience. For Baudelaire, as Walter Benjamin argues, the prostitute serves as an allegory of the fate of aesthetic experience in modernity, of its 'prostitution' to mass culture. The prostitute deprives femininity of its aura, its religious and cultic presence; the woman's body becomes a commodity, made up of dead and petrified fragments, while her beauty becomes a matter of cosmetic disguise (make up and fashion). Baudelaire's prostitute sells the *appearance* of femininity. (Britzolakis 153)

As Britzolakis rightfully argues, when the speaker compares herself to a prostitute, she deprives her audience of her role as a female victim. Instead, all they receive is a distortion of the feminine, its exterior appearance which lacks the authenticity that the audience desires.

One might argue that a parody necessarily presumes the existence of the real. What is a parody if not a comedic distortion of the real? Can parody ever truly be self-sufficient; must it not parody something else? While Britzolakis's reading brilliantly illustrates the parodic nature of the speaker's strip-tease routine, her reliance on Benjamin never allows her to fully answer these questions. Consequently, she fails to recognize the most radical implications of such an act. In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," German critic Walter Benjamin attempts to formulate an aesthetic theory that can account for modernity's effects on art. He argues that while new technologies, like photography and film, can easily copy art, they can never truly reproduce it. For Benjamin, these copies lack an "aura:" the intangible originality and authenticity that a true work of art always contains. According to Britzolakis, the prostitute of "Lady Lazarus" functions as this auraless copy. It is by depriving the real and authentic femininity of its aura that this figure comes to act as a parody that challenges her audience's expectations. However, by applying this conception of the aura to gender, Britzolakis reproduces

a troubling essentialism that is at odds with her larger argument. Just as Benjamin requires an original art with an aura in order for its copy to exist, so too must there be some natural or real femininity that the prostitute distorts. In other words, Benjamin's assertion necessarily presupposes an authentic aesthetic work, and when this argument is applied to gender, it similarly assumes a genuine and natural femininity.

However, in parodying hegemonic conceptions of femininity through the guise of the prostitute, the speaker does not merely sell the appearance of femininity but, rather, parodies the very notion of an authentic and innate feminine interiority. While the speaker's actions in the poem do rely on another concept, the text's rejection of a reality outside of power necessarily denies the possibility of an authentic femininity that pre-exists the audience's gaze. Far from natural or pure, the femininity that is parodied is precisely the product of the power implicit in the gaze. In other words, the femininity which the speaker parodies is not a genuine one but, rather, is the construction of femininity which the regulatory spectators seek to inscribe: that of the docile, constrained victim. By drawing attention to the fundamental absence of an authentic femininity, the performance of the speaker functions as a parody on a Butlerian register, one where "the parody is *of* the very notion of an original….Gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (Butler 2006: 188).

This emphasis on the destabilization of an authentic interior gender continues in the titular poem, "Ariel." Like "Lady Lazarus," the speaker of "Ariel" is constantly implicated in the workings of power through the continued motifs of vision and sight. Although critics like Susan Van Dyne argue that the poem "omits any reference to the male gaze," the speaker undercuts such an assertion when she states, "Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks –" (Van Dyne 121, Plath 29). This unsettling connection between the visual nature of the berries and their violent

character signals their harmful power; the speaker makes the visual gaze of the berries equivalent to the destruction of hooks. Moreover, the speaker's comparison of herself to the "White / Godiva" further situates her as the object of the gaze (Plath 1999: 29). Indeed, the legend of Lady Godiva, wherein the eponymous figure rides her horse naked, unknowingly watched by Peeping Tom, is perhaps the quintessential and original example of male voyeurism.

Even the critics who recognize the spectaclism of the poem fail to fully comprehend the radical destabilizing implications of the text and, instead, interpret it in a teleological fashion that recalls "Lady Lazarus" or "Fever 103," including Gilbert who figures the narrative of the poem as "the story of being trapped…and then somehow escaping" (Gilbert 1979: 251). However, the notion that the speaker escapes at the end of the poem is undercut by the final lines about being shot into the "Eye, the cauldron of morning" (Plath 1999: 30). This emphasis on the eye draws attention to the presence of spectatorship, even at the end of the poem. Consequently, the conclusion of the poem is the same as that of "Lady Lazarus:" to be outside of the power and the gaze is an impossibility.

Despite this analysis, an oppositional gaze similar to the one that appears in "Lady Lazarus" is also present in "Ariel." Whereas the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" speaks directly to her audience, the speaker of "Ariel" more explicitly confronts the oppressive gaze. This confrontation is most noticeable at the end of the poem, when the horse and its rider fuse together and become, "the arrow, // The dew that flies / Suicidal" (Plath 1999: 30). It is only in the form of this hybrid arrow that the speaker can challenge the male gaze by flying directly "Into the red / Eye," thereby expressing her defiance and her refusal to be a passive spectacle (Plath 1999: 30). Like "Lady Lazarus," she may never be outside of the gaze, but she need not be entirely constrained by it either.

This rejection of the archetypical female spectacle in "Ariel" clearly positions the poem as subversive and defiant, yet the transgressive implications of the work go much farther than simply resisting the male gaze. Indeed, "Ariel" troubles the stable distinction between subject and object, self and other, upon which the entire symbolic order relies. By contesting these strict boundaries between subject and object, the speaker is able to express resistance at the level of language itself, and, in doing so, she embodies the Kristevian notion of the abject. For French post-structuralist Julia Kristeva, the abject is precisely that which is neither subject nor object. It cannot be assimilated into strict categories of meaning but, rather, "is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). Kristeva writes that:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject. (Kristeva 4)

The destabilization of identity on a Kristevian register is precisely what "Ariel" achieves. In the poem, the speaker troubles the borders of subject, the speaker herself, and other, the horse, thereby drawing attention to the fragility of the law that demands stable borders. Like Kristeva, she presents the boundaries of identity as increasingly permeable and fluid, even going so far as to mention "How one we grow," signaling a profound disruption of selfhood as she begins to unify with the horse (Plath 1999: 29). This unification culminates when the horse and speaker fuse together to form the aforementioned arrow. That the two form an arrow further indicates that their hybrid identity functions as an image of abjection. The speaker does not merely assimilate the horse into her being; they form an entirely new figure when combined together.

Moreover, this image of the arrow is significant not only because it signals a rejection of boundaries between rider and horse but also because it symbolizes the destruction of gender

borders more broadly. As Gilbert states, this image is a figure of androgyny, one that combines the speaker's femininity with the phallic symbol of the arrow (Gilbert 1994: 299). Such a reading is reinforced by an examination of Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar,* for, in this work, she again associates the symbol of the arrow with masculinity when Mrs. Willard says, "What a man is is an arrow into the future" (Plath 1999: 72). In other words, "Ariel" not only breaks down the barriers between the identities of the horse and its rider, but, more broadly, the poem troubles stable categories of gender by emphasizing the possibility of an androgynous subject. Thus, the speaker's unification with the horse is the precise embodiment of Kristevian abjection, for it functions as a method to defy the fixed, stable, categorizing boundaries upon which the symbolic order depends.

By defying the symbolic order, the text implicitly challenges the seeming stability of the poetic "I" that is seen as a signifier behind which there is a coherent, unified subject-speaker. However, as in "Fever 103," in "Ariel" the speaker emphasizes the division between signifier and signified when she declares, "And I / Am the arrow" (Plath 1999: 30). This enjambment that separates subject from being again undercuts the stability of such a claim. As a result of this separation, the speaker of "Ariel" not only draws attention to the instability of the symbolic order; she also troubles the very basis of selfhood. If the kinetic impulses of "Ariel" destabilize the binary of the symbolic order and the stability of selfhood, how, then, is one supposed to take a subject position without a stable other against which to define oneself? The reader is left to wonder: what is the identity of the speaker in a poem with permeable boundaries? Is she the rider or the horse? The self or the other? The subject or the object? Masculine or feminine?

This destabilization, both of the seemingly inherent identity and of the language itself that confers identity, is necessary to account for a nuanced view of subjectivity as produced by

discourse and power and to expose strategies of exclusion and hierarchy that rely upon such

conceptions of innateness. The deconstruction of identity is, therefore, not only a fundamentally

political act but also one that is endowed with a certain sense of futurity: a sense that a new

feminist critique will emerge from the old one and will better be able to account for the

complexity of subjecthood. This futurity counteracts charges of apoliticalism and nihilism often

levied against post-structuralism and reveal that the deconstruction of identity is not antithetical

to feminism but, indeed, is necessary for its survival.

Surprisingly, this destabilizing figure of the abject is also present in the title poem of

Diving into the Wreck, a volume which otherwise stresses the reification of identity, rather than

its destabilization. This abject figure appears when the speaker dives underwater and declares:

> I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
> streams black, the merman in his armored body
> We circle silently
> about the wreck
> we dive into the hold
> I am she: I am he. (Rich 2013: 24).

Like the speaker of "Ariel," the narrator of "Diving into the Wreck" collapses the gender binary

in this stanza through her explicit identification with both the masculine and feminine. However,

one should not characterize this identity as merely androgynous. Indeed, as Cynthia Hogue

writes:

> The famous line from the later "Diving into the Wreck," often understood as
> figuring "the primal wholeness that predates the dualities," as Martin asserts – "I
> am she: I am he" (*DW 24)* – does not simply fuse the line into an image of
> androgynous identity. It con/fuses and doubles identity. The two gender indicators
> are graphically separated as well as associated by the colon between them. The
> line renders the very notion of stable gender identity problematic. (Hogue 178)

As Hogue rightfully argues, there is a lingering instability present in the speaker's identity

signaled through the utilization of the colon. The speaker has not merely assimilated the

masculine into her femininity; she has truly become an abject figure that not only signals multiplicity and fluidity but also interrogates the symbolic order predicated on unequivocal signification.

However, the speaker's disruption of the boundaries between masculine and feminine necessarily negates the definition of a specifically female identity that is constituted in opposition to a monolithic masculinity. With this notion in mind, critics, like Jane Hedley, have rejected the androgynous implications of the poem in favor of the specificity of women's experience that other poems in the volume emphasize. Hedley notes that this seeming rhetoric of androgyny "cannot grasp the specificity of women's experience in the present, and it short-circuits the attempt to rescue a collective past from the oblivion to which the history of "mankind" has largely consigned women's lives" (Hedley 41). Such a response is perhaps unsurprising given Rich's own rejection of androgyny in later poems, like "Natural Recourses," where she herself condemns her previous work on similar grounds, writing, "There are words I cannot choose again: / *humanism androgyny*" (Rich 2002: 166). However, while Rich may wish to leave behind this figure of androgyny, or, more accurately, this image of abjection, why should readers and feminists ignore the most visibly radical and challenging moment of the volume in favor of the unsettling essentialism that characterizes the rest of the work? By ignoring or discrediting this moment that fails to fit into the master narrative of the volume as a whole, do these critics not utilize the same troubling strategy as the work itself, which similarly emphasizes the erasure of difference?

While not all critics follow Rich's lead in her rejection of the androgynous figure, many seem to accept it only to interpret it in a manner that mitigates its destabilizing nature. Rachel

DuPlessis, for instance, argues that the poem both reverses and critiques traditionally masculine

mythical narratives. She asserts:

> In this poem of journey and transformation, Rich is tapping the energies and plots
> of myth, while reenvisioning the content. While there is a hero, a quest, and a
> buried treasure, the hero is a woman; the quest is a critique of old myths; the
> treasure is the whole buried knowledge of the relations between the sexes that
> cannot yet be brought to the surface. (DuPlessis 215)

For DuPlessis, this "buried knowledge" that is "revealed underwater is constructed of opposites

before their split: I and we, she and he, dead and living, individual and collective, cargo and

instruments, seeker and sought" (DuPlessis 214-215). In other words, DuPlessis depicts the

androgyne in a similar way as the speaker of "Waking in the Dark:" a dream of unification

between men and women before the split but one that cannot be brought to the surface, and is

therefore, destined to remain unrealized (DuPlessis 215). For DuPlessis, the only reason that

such a figure can even exist underwater is because the wreck occurs in a space "that no prior

research or instruction can clarify," implying that the sea is an area of pure presence: one that is

outside of power and language (DuPlessis 214). This suggestion that the androgynous figure

could never truly exist in reality, but must remain in the realm of fantasy, diminishes its radical

implications.

DuPlessis's characterization of the ocean indicates the extent to which her argument

relies upon a strict separation between the spaces below and above the sea. If the space

underwater implies a place outside of power, then, by contrast, the area above the sea must be

implicated in its workings. Initially, there seems to be much textual evidence to support such a

distinction. The speaker's emphasis on "our human air," the oxygen that exists before the

speaker's descent, indicates power's contamination of the area above water (Rich 2013: 22).

Cathy Park Hong maintains in a similar reading, "Before the diver descends underwater, there's a

sense of congestion, that everything above-water has already been explored, defined, and measured. Even the "human air" that she consumes is not pure, but already ingested and recycled by the society around her" (Hong 47). In stark contrast to this air "which pumps [her] blood with power," the speaker illustrates that "the sea is another story / the sea is not a question of power," which ostensibly suggests the absence of power under the sea, in contrast to the space above the water where power is present in the air itself (Rich 2013: 23).

However, this reading ignores the instability of the boundary between the spaces above and below the sea. Just as the speaker destabilizes the borders of masculinity and femininity through the figure of the abject, so too does the poem disturb the ocean's limits. This subversion of boundaries occurs most notably when she describes her descent, "there is no one / to tell me when the ocean / will begin" (Rich 2013: 22-23). As such a passage makes evident, there are no demarcated borders between land and sea, and this ambiguity questions the ostensible separation between the two places that is necessary for the readings of DuPlessis and Hong. If the two are not separate, how can the sea be a space of pure presence outside of power and an alienating symbolic order? Is it not implicated in the same workings of power as the space above the ocean?

Far from the interpretations of Hong and DuPlessis, "Diving into the Wreck" actually indicates the omnipresence of power. While the two critics may read a line like "the sea is not a question of power" to suggest that the sea is a space outside of power, an equally valid interpretation implies the unambiguous nature of the power within the sea (Rich 2013: 23). In other words, that the sea is not a question of power suggests that its power is so evident that it is not even a question of whether the ocean contains power or not; it obviously does. The speaker's description of the wreck's destruction further illustrates the sea's power. For instance, she points

to the "water-eaten log" of the wreck and the "evidence of damage / worn by salt and sway" (Rich 2013: 24). While the speaker never makes clear precisely what caused the wreck, these portrayals indicate that the ocean itself acts as a destructive force; the water is the entity exerting power on the remains.

The speaker's emphasis on destruction suggests that the wreck and the creatures which reside in it function as a symbol for the oppressed and the marginal women whose "names do not appear" in the "book of myths" (Rich 1973: 24). As James McCorkle states, it is this absence which necessitates the speaker's journey. He writes, " [The speaker] has journeyed to the center of the wreck, to the ship's log, or the book of myths, to discover the cause of the wreck – the exclusion of her name, of women's names, of their discourses, from the text, dicta, or mythos of culture" (McCorkle 110). For McCorkle, the poem, like other ones in the volume, is the search for an origin prior to a power and an alienating language. The speaker's desire to find "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth" supports McCorkle's assertion, for these lines indicate the speaker's desire for the ontologically pre-discursive: an original wreck that exists prior to the symbolic order (Rich 2013: 23).

However, unlike other poems in the volume, "Diving into the Wreck" underscores the futility of such a search. If power is everywhere, including under the sea, how can there be an original wreck? Indeed, by the time the speaker arrives at the wreck, the seawater has already distorted and eroded it, making it impossible to find the pure and authentic "thing [she] came for" (Rich 2013: 23). As Terrance Des Pres observes, the speaker cannot "yield a comprehensible image of [the wreck] which [she] encounters" (Des Pres 199-200). This failure suggests her inability to truly experience the full presence of the wreck.

Such an analysis, however, seems to be contradicted when the speaker states, "This is the place" (Rich 2013: 24). This affirmation ostensibly indicates the end of her journey and the arrival at the origin, the thing itself. Yet, to read such a declaration as a contradiction would overlook the productive aspect of power that Foucault emphasizes. The reason that the speaker cannot see the power around her is because this power necessarily hides itself; it produces the fiction of the wreck as outside of power only to conceal its true nature. Scholars who uncritically reproduce the myth that the wreck is somehow prior to power as a result of this single declaration not only ignore the complexities of the text but also fail to account for the dual function of power that both regulates and produces.

That the speaker never truly reaches her desired end is further evidenced by the failure of her tools. While a plethora of criticism that explicates the precise nature of the knife and camera that appear in the final stanza exists, little attention has been given to the speaker's use of language. She states, "The words are purposes. / The words are maps" (Rich 2013: 23). This declaration implies that language will somehow help her locate the wreck. Yet, how can language help the speaker reach a final telos when the wreck itself is already located in language? Although many critics stress the pre-linguistic nature of the wreck, the speaker asserts, "[The] sea is another *story* (emphasis mine)" (Rich 2013: 23). This statement indicates the sea's existence within the linguistic sphere. As a result of the linguistic dimension of the poem, the speaker's goal is destined to remain unrealized as a result of différance. Her reliance on language to reach a reality outside of language will inevitably fail, for the signifiers will continue to defer themselves indefinitely, never to reach the transcendent signified that she desires. Templeton argues a similar point, observing, "[The] ending [of "Diving into the Wreck"] returns us to the beginning of the poem and prepares another exploration by again mentioning the knife, the

camera, and the book. As Werner says, the poem continually makes ready "the descent which we are, then and now and perpetually, just beginning" (175)" (Templeton 45). While Templeton never explicitly mentions différance, her emphasis on the poem's cyclical nature clearly lends itself to such a concept. No final destination is ever reached in the poem; there is merely an indefinite cycle of deferral and repetition.

As a result of the text's explicit thematization of language, the poem takes on a self-reflexive hermeneutic dimension. The quest not only becomes a journey for the full presence of the wreck outside of language, but it also symbolizes the critic's dilemma: how to use language to interpret a text that is itself constituted by language in order to reach an original, authentic meaning. Such a predicament recalls Derrida's reading of Franz Kafka's "Before the Law," an essay that arrives at the conclusion that texts "[say] nothing definite and [present] no identifiable content beyond the story itself, except for an endless *différance*" (Derrida 1987: 211). In other words, Derrida asserts that there is no authentic or original meaning to texts; they are constituted entirely by différance. In a rare moment, Rich's poem, with its emphasis on the futility of language to point outside itself, reaches a similar conclusion as that of the post-structuralist. However, while Derrida stresses that Kafka's story ends with a sense of finality when he observes that as the doorkeeper "closes the object, he closes the text. Which, however, closes on nothing. The story *Before the Law* does not tell or describe anything but itself as a text," "Diving into the Wreck" stresses not finality but the continued need to "find our way / back to the scene" (Derrida 1987: 210-211, Rich 2013: 24). This continued need to revisit does not betray a longing for a metaphysics of presence, a hope for the end of an indefinite deferral; rather, this need is a result of a différance that makes meaning unstable. For as long as we can play with signifiers, it is our task, as critics, as feminists, to find our way back to texts, to read in a manner that

destabilizes what was previously thought immovable, exposing presumptions as fictions and, in

the ensuing chaos, rebuild a politics out of the wreck that can direct us towards a productive

future.

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