

Adrienne Rich's "Sources" as Re-Vision

Adrienne Rich's poetry is regularly written in conversation with her previous writing as an act of reflection, re-imagination, transcendence of past experience, and evolution of thought. Rich's poem "Sources," published in 1982, is an example of Rich reassessing herself as woman, poet, Jew, American, daughter, ex-wife, and widow. The "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes" in the poem is a reflection and evolutionary extension of the essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," published ten years previously ("When We Dead Awaken" 18). These two texts parallel each other in that Rich's personal mythography is re-imagined. Moreover, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" will step in later on in the essay to illuminate the theme of Rich's Jewish identity in a way that "When We Dead Awaken" cannot.

Although "When We Dead Awaken" and "Sources" are fundamentally similar, the difference in genre is something that must be acknowledged first and foremost. Rich's prose is straightforward without decoration – the essay looks back strictly academically at previous examples of women writers and poets, with a longer section containing Rich's revision of her past poetry including some impersonal (as compared to "Sources") biographical context. "Sources" contains more expressive language and content, such as direct and detailed exploration of Rich's own personal struggles in order to transcend past experience and discover a new perspective. In many ways, "When We Dead Awaken" appears to be a how-to guide for writing "Sources" due to the essay's encouragement of woman as poet, writing as re-vision. Concurrently, "When We Dead Awaken" is academically and universally concerned with woman as poet as a "refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society," while "Sources" furthers this idea as it is taken up with Rich's personal and re-imaginative

investigation of the self (“When We Dead Awaken” 18, “Sources” 115). “Sources” is an imaginative revision of “When We Dead Awaken.”

Before I delve into how these two works are in conversation with each other, I’d like to offer an excerpt of “When We Dead Awaken” as the jumping off point for “Sources” as an act of reflection, re-imagination, transcendence of past experience, and evolution of thought:

Both the victimization and anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society. They must go on being tapped and explored by poets, among others. We can neither deny them, nor can we rest there. They are our birth pains, and we are bearing ourselves. We would be failing each other as writers and as women, if we neglected or denied what is negative, regressive, or Sisyphean in our inwardness (25).

My only initial comment about this prompt is to briefly acknowledge the lack of anger in “Sources” (since it is prominent in the prose), and instead call to attention to the speaker’s main interest in calm exploration of her birth pains. For this purpose, we can assume that the speaker in “Sources” is Rich herself.

On page 21 of “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich writes of women, like herself, who searched for themselves in literature, but were unable to find true connection in poetry or fiction due to the male-domination of literature and society. Rich says,

She goes...looking for *her way* of being in the world...she is looking eagerly for guides, maps possibilities; and over and over in the “words’ masculine persuasive force” of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about...but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together (21).

Rich turned to women writers, but even then, writers like Sappho, Rossetti, and Dickenson wrote of the same things found in the poetry of men.

Rich acknowledges this in “Sources” when she repeats the claim, “in the beginning we grasp whatever we can / to survive” (115). Further, “Sources” in itself is an exploration of the currents of a womanly mind; Rich is an openly absorbed, drudging, puzzled, and sometimes

inspired creature as female poet. In sequence XX, the speaker recalls the “faithful, drudging child,” whose perfectly crafted poems won awards, but this child becomes a woman determined to change history with her writing. The sequence continues:

How she gets this mission
is not clear, how the boundaries of perfection
explode, leaving her cheekbone grey with smoke
a piece of her hair singed off, her shirt
spattered with earth... Say that she grew up in a house
with talk of books, ideal societies —
she is gripped by a blue, a foreign air,
a desert absolute: dragged by the roots of her own will
into another scene of choices (126).

“Sources” responds to the lack of womanly writing spoken of in “When We Dead Awaken” through the exploration of Rich’s personal struggle as writer, raised with talk of literature and ideals, first guided by the craft of male poets, and her later abandonment of those guidelines for a new scene of choices as female poet. The speaker transcends experience with imagery of the boundaries of perfection exploding, injuring the speaker as the roots of her own will drag her in a new direction.

In “When We Dead Awaken” Rich expands on her upbringing in a middle-class family, in a house full of books, with a father who encouraged and supervised her reading and writing as a child. Rich explains, “So for about twenty years I wrote for a particular man, who criticized and praised me and made me feel I was indeed ‘special.’ The obverse side of this, of course, was that I tried for a long time to please him, or rather, not to displease him” (21). The essay continues by universalizing this concept of women writers trying to please “the Man, who was not a terror or a dream, but a literary master and a master in other ways less easy to acknowledge” (21). This universalization is an academic move in Rich’s prose in order to appeal to the audience.

“Sources” furthers this concept, but functions in a more personal manner. In sequence VII, the speaker reprimands her father for “the cruelty which came inextricable from [his] love” (117). Sequence VII is a rupture from the previous format of the work; it is a critical prose poem containing a differential analysis of the suffering both inflicted and endured by the speaker’s father. In the first paragraph, Rich writes “I saw myself, the eldest daughter raised as a son, taught to study but not to pray, taught to hold reading and writing sacred: the eldest daughter in a house with no son, she who must overthrow the father, take what he taught her and use it against him” (117). The speaker delves into the pain inflicted by her demanding father who challenged her as if she were a son that must supersede him. Although the content of this section is condemning, the tone is not angry. The tone is matter of fact, explanative, blunt, and carries through to the second paragraph. Here, she comes to understand her father’s place in the world:

After your death I met you again as the face of patriarchy, could name at last precisely the principle you embodied, there was an ideology at last which led me dispose of you, identify the suffering you caused, hate you righteously as part of a system, the kingdom of fathers. I saw the power and arrogance of the male as your true watermark; I did not see the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore, because you had deliberately arranged that it should be invisible to me. It is only now, under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of it my own (117).

Rich uses her position as woman and poet to identify her father as the oppressor, as the patriarchy, but her understanding of her father is not one-dimensional. Rich also identifies him as the oppressed in his own personal suffering as Jew, which she also recognizes within herself. Presently in this essay, Rich’s relationship with her father as patriarchy takes precedence, but Rich’s identity as Jew, including her relationships with her father and husband, is a point that I will bring into conversation later in the essay.

It is clear from this excerpt that “Sources” reflects upon and re-imagines what is discussed in “When We Dead Awaken” through Rich not only baring the birth-pain of her

complicated relationship with her father, but also furthering the conversation by dismantling his control over her through her own understanding that he is the face of patriarchy, allowing her to hate him as part of a system. The speaker acknowledges the negative, regressive, and Sisyphean of her inwardness by transcending her past experience with her father.

Rich, later in her life and work, often criticized housewifery as being a regressive state. At first, Rich was “determined to have a ‘full’ woman’s life” including marriage and children, but she was ultimately dissatisfied with the isolation and selflessness that was required (“When We Dead Awaken” 22). “If there were doubts, if there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps a monster... I had thought I was choosing a full life: the life available to most men, in which sexuality, work, and parenthood could co-exist” (23-24). Rich’s poetry recurrently touches on this idea of motherhood as sacrifice. In Rich’s later work, for example *Diving Into The Wreck* (1972) published the same year as “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich is more personal and forward with her criticism. By the time we arrive at *Your Native Land, Your Life*, published ten years later, Rich is ready to move on from that facet of her identity, which is why I believe “Sources” contains very little commentary on life as a housewife, though it is discussed briefly and poignantly.

In sequence XIX, the speaker calls upon the “genetic code” of “half-chances, unresolved / possibilities, the life / passed on because unlived” (125). The tone of this poem is much darker, but also much more matter-of-fact than Rich’s earlier work. Moving forward, the speaker thinks of “the women who sailed to Palestine” as pioneers searching for a new life, desperate for equality,

carrying the broken promises
of Zionism in their hearts

along with broken promises

of communism, anarchism – (125).

To the speaker, these women are not unlike the housewife in that they hope, but they cannot fully escape. In the 50s and 60s, being a housewife provided a sense of freedom that could not be obtained as a single woman, yet ignorance and fantasy that political conditions will improve is not enough. The sequence concludes with the claim:

makers of miracle who expected miracles
as stubbornly as any housewife does

that the life she gives her life to
shall not be cheap

that the life she gives her life to
shall not turn on her

that the life she gives her life to
shall want an end to suffering

Zion by itself is not enough (125-126).

Zion by itself is not enough because oppression exists objectively, outside of one's control, and independent of one's personal beliefs. Oppression stems from social metaphysics, which stems from history. This is not to say that the attempt to break the construct is impossible, but women have been oppressed throughout history and it will take much more than stubbornness and the hope of a new life for a woman's place in the world to change.

Rich seems to be deeply aware of this on page 23 of "When We Dead Awaken" when she explains, "But to write poetry or fiction, or even to think well, is not to fantasize, or to put fantasies on paper. For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive." In order for society to change, there has to be reflection, there has to be re-imagination, there has to be transcendence of past experience, there has to be evolution of thought. Women must "enter the currents of [their]

thought like a glider pilot, ... if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life [a woman] is living at that moment” (23). Rich presents these ideals through allegory and imagery in sequence XIX of “Sources.”

The awakening of the consciousness is not a brisk shock to the system, it is something that protrudes over time through one’s active questioning and challenging of one’s own knowledge and society’s limitations. Early on, Rich struggled to write alongside being a wife and mother, so she wrote in scraps (“When We Dead Awaken” 24). Through these jolted attempts to create, Rich noticed something:

I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be “universal,” which meant, of course, non-female. Until then I had tried very much *not* to identify myself as female poet ... I hadn’t found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even to use the pronoun “I” (24).

Rich’s awakening of her female consciousness, as woman poet, was born out of her struggle to obtain what society deemed a ‘full life’ for a woman. We see Rich’s voice as a woman grow throughout her poetry. In her *Collected Early Poems* “formalism was part of the strategy – like asbestos gloves, it allowed [her] to handle materials [she] couldn’t pick up barehanded” (22). This trait is abandoned in her later work as she re-imagined and challenged the restrictions of male-dominated writing. Rich’s identity as female poet is the collective consciousness that drives “Sources,” which is evident throughout the work, but especially in the conclusion of the poem.

The final sequence ruptures again into critical prose, dissecting the speaker’s desire to rest universally, to know both the world and her place in it, and to root her strength in identity as woman poet. Rich writes,

I have wished I could rest among the beautiful and common weeds I can name, both here and in other tracts of the globe. But there is no finite knowing, no such rest. Innocent

birds, deserts, morning-glories, point to choices, leading away from the familiar. When I speak of an end to suffering I don't mean anesthesia. I mean knowing the world, and my place in it, not in order to stare with bitterness or detachment, but as a powerful and womanly series of choices: and here I write the words in their fullness: powerful; womanly (129).

It is vital to note the speaker's turn to gender in the conclusion. Here, the speaker claims an identity for herself; she clings to this female identity first and foremost. It is the common consciousness that threads though not only "Sources," but the majority of Rich's poetry. Rich is no longer afraid of claiming "I" as woman poet. Through Rich's re-vision of what universal poetry should be, she combats the self-destructiveness of male-dominated writing and the mythography of what women writers can be.

Although "When We Dead Awaken" prescribes most of the major themes exemplified in "Sources," a vital facet of Rich's identity is missing from the prose: her Jewishness. "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," published the same year as "Sources," facilitates Rich's contemplation of her relationship with the Jewish religion as birth-pain. The essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" explores Rich's experience growing up in a predominantly Gentile society as a half-Gentile, half-Jewish woman. Through personal storytelling, including information about her mother and father's past, Rich posits that there are people all over the world who must hide one or more facets of their true identity in order to be accepted in society.

Rich writes,

Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once married, lesbian, middle class, feminist, exmatriate Southerner, split at the root, that I will never bring them whole. I would have liked, in this essay, to bring together the meanings of anti-Semitism and racism as I have experienced them and as I believe they intersect in the world beyond my life. But I'm not able to do this yet. I feel the tension as I think, make notes: *If you really look at the one reality, the other will waver and disperse* (122).

The philosophy of intersectionality presented in this excerpt is also present in “Sources,” in which Rich reflects, re-imagines, and transcends her experience as half-Gentile, half-Jew, especially in relation to her father, her husband, and the Holocaust. “Sources” comes to no conclusions; it is purely an exploration of the self as past and present as re-vision.

As addressed earlier, the speaker in sequence VII acknowledges her father’s suffering as both inflicted and endured. Rich understands her father in a multidimensional manner, as both the oppressor as the patriarchy and as the oppressed as Jew. “I saw the power and arrogance of the male as your true watermark; I did not see the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore, because you had deliberately arranged that it should be invisible to me. It is only now, under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of it my own” (117). Through Rich’s imaginative revision of her relationship with her father as an intersectional and multifaceted being, Rich can come to a better understanding of her father’s place in the world, and therefore a better understanding of herself and her own place in the world.

The speaker’s sense of her Jewishness is spattered throughout the poem, Rich’s idea of destiny is something that pulled at me, something that was beautifully explored in both “Spit at the Root” and “Sources.” Rich writes of her experience in high school when she saw a Holocaust film. “It came to me that every one of those piles of corpses, mountains of shoes and clothing, had contained, simply, individuals, who had believed, as I now believed of myself, that they were meant to live out a life of some kind of meaning, that the world possessed some kind of sense and order; yet this had happened to them” (106-107). Rich has the realization of collective suffering, of racism and oppression on a grand scale, and of *sonder*, at a very young age. This concept is developed further and more personally in Sequence XV of “Sources,” commenting on

how fate for the suffering may be oldfashioned, but faith that all that pain could mean something someday, is not. The speaker explains,

It's an oldfashioned, an outrageous thing
to believe one has a "destiny"

— a thought often peculiar to those
who possess privilege —

but there is something else: the faith
of those despised and endangered

that they are not merely the sum
of damages done to them (122).

Rich refuses to be the sum of the damages done to her. She combats this through her writing, through always looking back with fresh eyes with faith that she will learn something new each time.

In many ways, "When We Dead Awaken" appears to be a guide to "Sources" due to the essay's encouragement of woman as poet, writing as re-vision. "When We Dead Awaken" is a passionate call to action for women to write of themselves, to begin to break down and re-invent what universal writing can be, to explore the depths of woman poet. "Sources" reflects and re-imagines this call to action through her own life and through themes such as the desire to identify oneself in literature, the male and fatherly influence, and the expectations of wife and mother. "Split at the Root" deserves its own praise for illuminating what "When We Dead Awaken" could not, for "Split at the Root" broaches a whole new facet of Adrienne Rich that does not erupt openly until after 1972. With the help of "Split at the Root," "Sources" is an imaginative revision of "When We Dead Awaken."

Works Cited

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