

A Real Wreck: Lacan in Rich's "Diving Into the
Wreck"

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If students learn one thing in their high school literature classes, it is to pay attention when trees, mountains or large bodies of water show up on the printed page. Water, especially, springs up all over English literature and carries a host of connotations along with it. As expected of things that fall under the category of Nature, one of those is of reality and authenticity. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Adrienne Rich's famous poem, "Diving into the Wreck," the water provides a medium of reality. Rich uses this common allusion to construct a Lacanian analysis of how the real, the imaginary and the symbolic intertwine, and how the imaginary and the symbolic fall short in codifying reality's complexity. When language, i.e. the symbolic, or projected identities, a.k.a. the imaginary, show up, they always fail to match up with reality; the diver is alienated from herself as well as from the symbolic "book of myths."

Before we consider the distortions that the symbolic and imaginary systems of identification bring about, we need to have a solid grasp of what the baseline, reality, actually is. Rich's descriptions of the ocean provide a sense of the difficulty inherent in using symbolic language to describe the real: the ocean, like reality, can only be described in terms of its vast size and subtly, using words that are hopelessly unequal to the task. Here, the sea is not described in terms of what it is so much as in terms of what it is not. As Rich writes, "Rung after rung and still/the oxygen immerses me... there is no one to tell me when the ocean will begin"¹ Put differently, it is impossible to tell where reality starts, because it is so difficult to define and, consequently, to demarcate

¹lines 23-33

from un-reality. Rich is purposely ambiguous in her descriptions of the initial descent in order to highlight how insidious the shift between reality and our common models of it are. As she puts it, “First the air is blue and then/it is bluer and then green and then black.”² As readers, we don’t hear a splash as the diver passes into the ocean; there is only a smooth gradation of color to suggest that the diver has, at some point, entered the water. Later, Rich alludes to the sea as a place where “you breath differently,”³ and “have to learn alone to turn [your] body without force.”⁴ Again, Rich does not describe the sea per se; she falls back on describing the effects it has on the diver. Rich also implies that the sea is a “real” medium by demonstrating how overwhelming it is. As the diver descends into the ocean, the mounting pressure causes her to start “blacking out.”⁵ There is too much water, too many details, for the diver to handle without the aid of a “grave and awkward mask.”⁶ The swimmer cannot interact directly with reality; without a breathing aid and “armor of black rubber,”⁷ she would drown in the vast and random ocean of events that comprises reality. Thus, by depicting the ocean as enormous and indescribable, Rich correlates the sea with reality.

Throughout the poem, a series of references to the symbolic illustrates how it breaks down in interactions with the real. As the diver becomes immersed in water, references to symbolic elements, such as ship’s log and the book of myths,

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grow increasingly negative. Aboard the schooner before the initial descent, the diver declares herself ready, “having read the book of myths.”⁸ The diver has done her homework; she has read up on the wreck, and knows what to expect once she hits the sea floor. Rich goes on to state, “The words [of the book] are purposes./ The words are maps.”⁹ Here, these linguistic symbols provide a “map” and “purpose” for the diver. In other words, they are her guides through the shifting matrix of the ocean. A few lines later, however, Rich reveals that the diver seeks “the wreck and not the story of the wreck/ the thing itself and not the myth.”¹⁰ Reality, then, is more true and more valuable than the symbols that are used to represent it. As the diver probes the reality of the wreck, she discovers “the half-destroyed instruments/ that once held to a course/ the water-eaten log/ [and] the fouled compass.”¹¹ In these lines, the navigational symbols that were designed to keep the ship afloat prove utterly useless: the wreck never reached its intended destination. Moreover, the compass and log book serve no purpose now that the ship is resting on the bottom of the sea. In the realm of the real, those collections of symbols are completely irrelevant: the ship isn’t going anywhere. At the end of the poem, the diver describes the book of myths as “a book...in which/ our names do not appear.”¹² The symbols, then, that seemed so meaningful on board the schooner prove useless when they fail to hold up in the reality of the ocean.

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¹⁰62-63
¹¹83-86
¹²93-95

Swimming through the ocean has a similarly eye-opening effect on the diver's awareness of her own barely acknowledged imaginary identifications. In the clear air above the water, Rich speaks, with a certain sense of foreboding, of a seemingly innocent ladder hanging off the side of the boat. That ladder forms the first part of the path leading to the schooner's counterpart on the ocean floor below. The relationship between the schooner, which clings to the water's reflective surface, and the wreck, with its "ribs of... disaster/ curving their assertion,"¹³ echoes that of the young child with his reflection. The schooner and the wreck both are boats, but one's place is on the surface, while the other lies submerged below. The former corresponds to the ideal-ego, while the latter provides the nautical version of the ego. Without the schooner, the diver would not have access to the older, more 'valuable' boat; without seeing one's reflection, one cannot be aware of one's ego. Humans react to the mirror stage by trying to bring their 'submerged,' internal state closer to that of the reflection they see in the mirror. They often remain unaware of how large the gap between those two is. With the two boats, however, reality (in the form of saltwater) ensures they remain apart— and forces the diver to take time to swim between them. Once she reaches the wreck and realizes how far it is from the surface, the diver becomes aware of the ideal-egos she has tried to internalize. As she hovers above the ship, she realizes she is "the mermaid whose dark hair/ streams black, [as well as] the merman in his armored body."¹⁴ In other words, she has tried to integrate the gaze of the male Other into her

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own identity. Only with the awareness foisted on her by the distance between the ships, however, does she become aware of this. Rich goes on to notice that “I am she: I am he/ whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes.”¹⁵ In other words, the diver identifies with the none-too-encouraging wreck, which gazes perpetually upwards at its ideal surface image. Here, again, the vastness of the ocean makes the diver aware of how her imaginary identifications have fractured– and possibly scuttled– her identity. Just as the ocean proves humans’ structured systems of symbols inadequate for navigating its profound depths, it proves humans’ imaginary identification with an ideal-ego can fracture their sense of identity.

Lacan’s ideas relating the symbolic and the imaginary to the real can seem abstruse and unwieldy. “Diving Into the Wreck”, however, provides a well-phrased example of how those different registers interact. Rich builds on the common association of the sea with profundity of all kinds. In under a hundred lines, she exposes problems with adopting imaginary identifications and symbolic linguistic systems. The former, as demonstrated by the two boats and the diver’s fractured gender identity, produces a poorly integrated sense of identity. The latter sacrifices accuracy for efficiency. The book of myths and the half-destroyed navigational instruments prove too crude to help one negotiate the fathom-less complexity that constitutes reality.

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