

DIVERTISSEMENT

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'A Common And Acute Particularity' - The Radical Wisdom of Adrienne Rich

Browsing through the library shelves the other day, I picked up a review essay on modern poetry. Joseph Brodsky, hand stuck in vest Napoleon-fashion, loomed from the cover. His look was dispassionate, perhaps bored. The essay announced two lines of development in recent Anglo-American poetry — the asphasic (Wallace Stevens' camp) and the aggregative (Auden and Brodsky's). "Silence or anecdotes; the old dualities," I thought. "The discontinuous realities, the ever-present either-or." For men have always taken themselves as the norm, the fully human, Dale Spender reminds us. They have done so both in the construction of a body of knowledge and in formulation of the rules for encoding that wisdom. Where, after all, did a fifty-two year old lesbian poet fit into this particular scheme? One who began her career in 1951 as a Yale Younger Poet praised by Auden for her "gracefulness," and who arrived last year naming the unnameable: "two women, eye to eye / measuring each other's spirit, each other's limitless desire, a whole new poetry beginning here"?

Two volumes of her poetry come to mind, *The Dream of a Common Language* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1978-81). In these Adrienne Rich seeks to know how women imagine themselves, how they turn that "grammar of mute insistence," silence, into a rhetoric of self-presentation that considers, at once, the tyranny and entrapment of language as well as its liberating and cathartic role. From the artfully chiselled and universally impersonal mid-century verses, Rich has developed a new meditative poetic mode that formally reconstitutes the meanings of women's lives and silences. Renaming, reviewing, even re-memorizing have become acts of survival for the women poet, as well as skillful experiments in cultural revision.

Exploring the mechanics of silence has been a concern central to Rich's poetry over the years. But she is not alone. As Michelle Clif has said, "Our silences originate in interruptions, our silences lead to interruption." And major advocates of female culture — Kate Stimpson, Dale Spender, Susan Griffin and Tillie Olsen — want to know how women are made to disappear, or be partially erased, by culture. The answer to how we inherit these resonant and multiple silences leads us to the burned manuscripts of Olive Schreiner; the banned ones of Lillian Smith; the women who were not anonymous, but "painters of the school of . . ."; the Sartons, Boyles, Plaths silenced by the publishing industry; the interruption of women's work — Woolf, Bronte, Wolstonecraft.

Rich flirts with an aesthetic of silence, not absence, as a rite of passage in her progress toward a poetry so powerful and tangible in its clarifying vision that it is ". . . a thing / a granite flank laid bare, a lifted head / slight with dew . . ." "What kind of beast would turn its life into words," Rich asks as she challenges the validity and efficacy of language.

Silence can be a plan
 rigorously executed
 the blueprint to a life
 it is a presence
 it has a history a form
 Do not confuse it
 with any kind of absence

As she charts the "Cartographies of Silence," she ends in a choice *for* words. ("Only where there is language is there world," Rich said in *Leaflets* nearly a decade earlier.)

Silence, unlike absence, can be a choice for solitude of self that purifies — a choice that gets past the "film of the abstract," theatrical performances, conversational lies, all manner of contradictions. (Rich reminds us that Swift loathed woman's flesh as he praised her mind; Claudel vilified Gide; literary history gagged women, deviants, witnesses of all sorts.) One of the first to comment on an aesthetic of silence, Susan Sontag reminds us that every work of art needs to be understood not only as something rendered, but a rendering, also, of "the ineffable." In other words, the moment of critical recognition is never a disinterested "hermetic reflexivity," but rather that powerful silence a work evokes. When a writer or critic can name this moment, according to Sontag, he or she understands the work. A number of postmodern writers and critics have named this resonance of silence "yawning finitude," "historiographic lacunae," or even "authorial reserve," as they stand humbled before the powerful vision of the silence of art. But not Adrienne Rich.

Rich's silence — what she calls "this inarticulate life" — leads her back to re-vision, to entering an old text from a new direction ("When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision") to discover what is possible among women in this world. Unlike so many confessional writers of the past decade who have glorified their pyrrhic victories, Rich refuses a "career of pain" that might capitalize on victimization, or on inventories of old wounds. She is reluctant to ally herself with the Emersonian Representative man or the Whitmaniac who blithely assumes a common humanity as he hears, with satyr's ears, America singing. Foregoing a romp in the "great diurnal roll" of nature, she harbors her dreams of self-reliance, not wanting to be the daughter of a culturally broken home. For the most part, she shuns the romantic purity of the lesbian outsider whose marginality might lend special cultural visionary powers. On the contrary, Adrienne Rich would challenge the compulsory heterosexists who assume without questions their own centrality and her deviance. In much the same way, in her book *Of Woman Born*, Rich defends the primary physical passion of the mother-daughter bond over social construction and institutionalization of such a relationship. Departing from such allegiances, Rich savors a sense of

. . . where her solitude
 shared, could be chosen without loneliness,
 not easily nor without pains to stake out
 the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light.
 (XXI, "Love Poems")

Yet Rich does not ignore the connections between women's lives and their histories. "History is a spider thread spun over and over though brushed away," she claims. Nevertheless, it is difficult to talk of form or themes in books where the poet enters history through an act of memory, a series of empathic dialogues or meditations that attempt to mend the ways women have been robbed of the reflective space within and the social context without. To make her life continuous with other women, she counterpoints foremothers — whether Emily Dickinson, Mary Colter (Grand Canyon architect) or the

Hohokam desert shamaness — with the “ordinary valor” of her love for another woman, typing rough drafts, raking leaves, sweeping floors. She knows that restoring women to their context, routing them backward to their particularity is to “forget the archetypes, forget the dark / and lithic profile.” She writes about Ethel Rosenberg, who was executed the day Rich married:

I must allow her to be at last
 political in her ways not in mine
 her urgencies perhaps
 impervious to mine.

And in a long eight-part poem on the making of false history, she announces that “nostalgia is only amnesia turned around.” As Mary Colter, the Grand Canyon architect, drew more frequently on native arts, her work became inextricable from the violation of native American culture by white colonizers:

What rivets me to history is seeing
 Arts of survival turned
 To rituals of self-hatred.

Living with rich contradictions, Marie Curie’s wounds came from the same source as her power, her body bombarded for years by the element she purified.

The overwhelming strength of the poetry is Rich’s ability to re-create from women’s sources (diaries, journals, letters) a fictive poetic meditation on some aspect of women’s lives forgotten or omitted from history. In this poetic retrieval, conventional time yields to perceptual time, centrifugal and centripetal forces merge. For example, the original facts of experience are unearthed in the lives of Clara Westhoff and Paula Becker who, in 1900, spent half a year together in Paris, painting and sculpting, soon their private lives were subsumed in their marriages to Rilke and Otto Modersohn. For that brief half-year together, Clara and Paula share thoughts about their work (“I’m looking everywhere in nature / for new forms, old forms in new place, / the planes of an antique mouth”) and clarify values lost to men whose art was provided, and protected, by women:

And how I’ve worked since then
 trying to create according to our plan
 that we’d bring, against all odds, our full power
 to every subject. Hold back nothing
 because we were women. Clara, our strength still lies
 In things we used to talk about:
 how life and death take one another’s hands
 the struggle for truth, our old pledge against guilt.

The effect? Women tell the underside of their lives, the unofficial beginnings. Rich’s form heals the interruption of women’s ideas, the bluntness of linear time:

Freedom is daily, prose-bound routine
 remembering. Putting together, inch by inch
 the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.

Rich’s poems are “translations into different dialect / Of a text still being written / in the original.”

Revising that classic “Culture and Anarchy,” the rarefied attempt to uplift the role of poet and cast him as one of the “Children of Light,” not a materialistic Philistine, Rich offers her own version of Victoriana. Significantly, she misreads the heavy, gilt-lettered volume, “History of Woman Suffrage” for “History of Human Suffering.” Stitching

together past and present, the letters of Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Barrett to Anna Jameson with the present seasonal and life cycle changes, Rich manages to revalue those lost records (usually "not considered / of sufficient value to be / officially preserved") and, at the same time, explores the limits of her own empathy. Too, she weaves together her lover picking chard in the garden, herself slicing beetroot and shuffling rough drafts. Anarchic? Perhaps. Yet the separate fibers of the poem — part of one, integral weaving — resemble the Colcha embroidery. They are made of ravelled yarn from old wool blankets, what Rich terms "our ancient art of making out of nothing / or is it making the old life serve the new?"

Everywhere in these late volumes is the metaphor of light, the model of the photographic process that has characterized the power to transform, not coerce; "I am trying to hold in one steady glance / all the parts of my life." Light becomes one register or verification of her relationships, "that photographic plate we are eternally exposing to the universe." Central to her poetic has been the use of light, camera, lens — a process having the catalytic force to "impress" vision with objects themselves. Herein lies power redefined, quite apart from the will to mastery or to force. Power catalyzed by the light of the photographic plate is the power to receive images and transform them. (In her third volume, *Snapshots of a Daughter in Law*, we are told that "eye" and "see" recur over thirty times. "To be is to see; I an eye," is Rich's ethic, according to Albert Gelpi.) Even in that early volume, Rich aimed to

... spongelike press my gaze
 patiently upon your eyes
 hold like a photographic plate
 against you my enormous question. ("Merely to Know")

This seeing again — re-viewing — includes not only the integral relation of culture to language, but to nature as well. The poet tries to "see again" the "immense fragility of all this sweetness / this green world already sentimentalized / photographed, advertised to death . . ." And although men try to thief women's keen perception from her, "It is only she who sees; who was trained to see." Light takes on many nuances — at once it is indestructible, changing sharpening, uncontrollable, incandescent, a diamond flash of sunlight, a "farmstead / slanting its planes calmly in the calm light," or "sister gazing at sister . . . reaching through mirrored pupils / back to the mother." "Hazed light off fogged planes" illumine the spaces between women, while even history is the "steadying and corrective lens" to the pictograph. The poet chooses not to yield to circumstance:

I choose to be a figure in that light
 half-blotted by darkness, something moving
 across the space, the color of stone
 greeting the moon, yet more than a stone:
 a woman.

It must also be noted that *transforming* as opposed to *coercive* power is the power to "dwell in mute insistence" and untangle or "study" our lives, Rich insists. In such a study, woman's experience has an integrity, an accuracy of language and a transforming power

that permits contradictions. Woman must practice "a severer listening / in the middle of things":

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
 make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
 or music, that we should begin
 with the simple exercises first
 and slowly go on trying
 the hard ones, practicing till strength
 and accuracy became one with the daring
 to leap into transcendence, take the chance
 of breaking down in the wild arpeggio
 or faulting the full sentence of the fugue.
 — And in fact we can't live like that we take on
 everything at once before we've even begun
 to read or mark time, we're forced to begin
 in the midst of the hardest movement,
 the one already sounding as we are born.
 At most we're allowed a few months
 of simply listening to the simple line . . .
 ("Transcendental Etude")

Often the power to control is also the power to disguise the violence of its subordinating, a trait that Rich sees in music, art and language — perhaps more than in individuals like Mme. Curie who denied her wounds came from the same source as her power:

I can never romanticize language again
 never deny its power for disguise for mystification
 but the same could be said for music
 or any form created
 painted ceilings beaten gold worm-worn Pietas
 reorganizing victimization frescoes translating
 violence into patterns so powerful and pure
 we continually fail to ask are they true for us.
 ("Images")

So, a simple *accuracy* is important to Rich ("ourselves as we are / in these painful motions / of staying cognizant"), whether it be a refusal to be divided from one's own perceptions or a matter of discovering the limits of empathy. In "Heroines," as Rich talks about the early suffragists who "drew their long skirts / deviant / across the nineteenth century" and whose lives were informed by "a collection / of circumstances / soon to be known as / class privilege," she wants to be able to, with stump and stagger of her own poetic line,

honor your exact
 legacy as it is
 recognizing
 as well
 that it is not enough.

For Rich, the real common language remains the "solitude of self," made nameable, possible, and finite by another woman. The common language is the untangling one's life, clear-eyed, with the "grammar of mute insistence" borrowed from a past history *not of one's making*. In trying to clarify and connect, Rich finds "the passion to make and make again / where such unmaking reigns." This is her method, the one she keeps choosing, the

. . . return to the concrete and everlasting world
 what I in fact keep choosing
 are these words, these whispers, conversations
 from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green.