Adrienne Rich Essay, Research Paper

"What I know, I know through making poems" Passion, Politics and the

Body in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich Liz Yorke, Nottingham Trent University,

England This paper is largely extracted from my book Adrienne Rich, which is to

be published by Sage in October this year…What I have tried to do for the

paper is to track one thread explored by the book, which I feel runs through the

whole span of Rich’s thought, a thread which links desire, passion, and the body

- to politics, to activism, and to the writing of poetry. Writing poetry, above

all, involves a willingness to let the unconscious speak – a willingness to

listen within for the whispers that tell of what we know, even though what we

know may be unacceptable to us and, sometimes, because we may not want to hear,

the whispers may be virtually inaudible. But to write poetry is to listen and

watch for significant images, to make audible the inner whisperings, to reach

deeper inward for those subtle intuitions, sensings, images, which can be

released from the unconscious mind through the creativity of writing. In this

way, a writer may come to know her deeper self, below the surface of the words.

Poetry can be a means to access suppressed recognitions, a way to explore

difficult understandings which might otherwise be buffeted out of consciousness

through the fear-laden processes of repression – through avoidance, denial,

forgetting. She identifies here the impulse to politics and protest as emerging

from our unconscious desires, a kind of knowing arising within the body which

impels us towards action to get our needs met. When the poem reminds us of our

unmet needs it activates our drives, our libido – towards what we long for

-whether that is individual, social, communal or global. Rich offers here a

basic premise of her thought, that we need to listen within for this language of

the body, this way of knowing,. Indeed, our lives depend on such ways of

knowing: ‘our skin is alive with signals; our lives and our deaths are

inseparable from the release or blockage of our thinking bodies’.(1) In the

sixties Richworked hard to create a poetry and a language which would reach out

to others, which would allow hera means to release her own passion into

language, and so to forge an activist will for radical change: The will to

change begins in the body not in the mind My politics is in my body, accruing

and expanding with every act of resistance and each of my failures Locked in the

closet at 4 years old I beat the wall with my body that act is in me still(2)

Rich engages directly with the struggle to release herself from a colonising

language, the ’so-called common language’, – a patriarchal language that utters

the old script over and over’, an abstracting, dualistic language that splits

mind from body and tames and disembodies both poetry and passion -a language

that violates the integrity and meanings of its speakers, delegitimates its

underprivileged users and disintegrates identity and coherence – whether of

individuals, groups, races or whole cultures – the scream of an illegitimate

voice It has ceased to hear itself, therefore it asks itself How do I exist? The

transformation of such silences into language and action becomes an underlying

theme which becomes more and more compelling, and her poetry gives voice to a

deep hungry longing for ‘moving’ words, rather than words which fail to

recognise, understand or articulate the meanings of ‘illegitimate users Let me

have this dust, these pale clouds dourly lingering, these words moving with

ferocious accuracy like the blind child’s fingers or the new-born infant’s mouth

violent with hunger (Meditations for a Savage Child) Only the embodied word

speaks from these depths of primal desire and what she actively apprehends

through her senses – a relative, context bound ever-changing truth – is freshly

called into being each moment. From the ‘wildness’ of the unblocked,

impassioned, embodied word a new perspective may be created, different emphases

may be given value, new figures may spring into focus and so the ground shifts.

By the seventies, a commitment to articulating women’s experience will provide

feminists with the material ground for political organisation. The refusal to

limit political perspectives to those produced within a male-defined culture

brings a new focus on women’s bodily specificity: Women’s’ lives and experiences

are different to men’s, and so women’s’ specific, body-based

experiential-perceptual fields will also be different. The task for feminism

became one of ‘hearing’ women into speech; of returning to the writings of women

in history to explore their biologically grounded experience so as to organise

politically. In Of Woman Born, we find Rich pointing to the female body as a

crucial resource for an expanding consciousness: of women’s oppression female

biology….has far more radical implications than we have yet come to

appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow

specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these

reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather

than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life we require not only control

of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and

resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal

ground of our intelligence.(3) This stance was to call forth a chorus of

critical condemnation. Elaine Showalter, in her important essay ‘Feminist

Criticism in the Wilderness’, was to see Rich’s emphasis on ‘confession’ and the

body as ‘cruelly prescriptive. She comments: ‘there is a sense in which the

exhibition of bloody wounds becomes an initiation ritual quite separate and

disconnected from critical insight.’(4) Back to the body: essentialism and the

political task Many saw Rich’s strategy as biologistic and essentialist, and

therefore unhelpful to the cause – but how far is writing which explores female

specificity to be condemned? To Hester Eisenstein, ‘the view of woman as a

eternal "essence" represented a retreat from the fundamentally

liberating concept of woman as agent, actor, and subject, rather than

object’.(5) And yet, as Diana Fuss has suggested, ‘essentialism can be deployed

effectively in the service of both idealist and materialist, progressive and

reactionary , mythologising and resistive discourses.’(6) The conceptualisation

of our own bodies is not some kind of fixed absolute, but rather, is a construct

that is being continually reformulated, and whose meanings may, for well or ill,

be culturally engendered. The female body is of course always already mediated

in and through language. How we understand our bodies is continually being

shaped within the psychical and social meanings circulating in culture, just as

our view of ourselves is constructed in relation to specific temporal and

geographic contexts. We all may internalise disparaging and harassing myths and

messages to our continuing distress. However, ‘the body’ as such is far from

being a conception, ‘beyond the reaches of historical change, immutable and

consequently outside the field of political intervention.’(7) To take such a

view is itself ultimately reductive and deterministic in that it refuses the

very possibility of political intervention. In Braidotti’s words: ‘a feminist

woman theoretician who is interested in thinking about sexual differences and

the feminine today cannot afford not to be essentialist.’ Neither can women

afford to disembody sexual difference in any project concerned with female

subjectivity. As the ‘threshold of subjectivity’ and ‘the point of intersection,

as the interface between the biological and the social’, the body is the site or

location for the construction of the subject in relation to other subjects.(8)

Rich was initially drawn to the body of woman to formulate her strategic

response to misogyny with what Braidotti was later to call ‘the positive project

of turning difference into a strength, of affirming its positivity’.(9) but was

later to withdraw from this trajectory of her thought. I think she could have

trusted the intelligence of her earlier political instincts. – But lets explore

this charge of essentialism more deeply: In Of Woman Born, Rich is clearly not

suggesting that women are born to be mothers or that our biology is our destiny

- far from it. Being a good mother is most emphatically not a natural,

biologically determined given – Rich is at pains to stress that ‘We learn, often

through painful self-discipline and self-cauterization those qualities which are

supposed to be "innate" in us: patience, self-sacrifice, the

willingness to repeat endlessly the small, routine chores of socialising a human

being’.(10) In no sense is any biologically essentialist assumption made that

women possess in their natures the qualities of nurturant caring. In Rich’s

thought, as we have seen, it is a quality learned only with difficulty, often at

the cost of a serious loss of self:, especially the self of the writer: As she

points out: ‘..it can be dangerously simplistic to fix upon

"nurturance" as a special strength of women, which need only be

released into the larger society to create a new human order.(11) Biology has

not endowed women with an essential femininity, there is no biologically given

essence that determines that the mother will be a nurturant caregiver, or be

virtuous and loving towards her children. To present Rich’s arguments, as Janet

Sayers did in her book, Biological Politics, as grounded in ‘the celebration of

female biology and of the essential femininity to which it supposedly gives

rise’, is to seriously misread her work.(12) Rich’s arguments, rather, imply

that the maternal body, as she sees it, is lived: it is bound up in its

specificity with the realms of the social and the political and is a crucial

site of struggle in which psychoanalytic, sexual, technological, economic,

medical, legal, and other cultural institutions contest for power. Sayers

addresses her own failure to give due recognition to the importance of

psychoanalytic theory in her later book Sexual Contradictions (1986), yet

continues to condemn Rich (as she does Irigaray) for the sin of essentialism

and, in so doing, compounds the slippages of her position. Rich is again

criticised for ‘affirming a particular cultural representation and image of

femininity…of woman as a plenitude of sexuality’ – which seems to me to miss

the point on a grand scale.(13) Sayers reductively dismisses Rich’s breadth,

complexity and multidimensionality, in focusing on a fragment of a much larger

statement when she states categorically that ‘women’s supposed

"complicated, pain-enduring, multipleasured physicality" hardly seems

a very hopeful basis on which to build resistance to their social

subordination…’ (14) Well no, it wouldn’t be, if that were actually what Rich

was proposing. I turn to a fragment from Integrity, from A Wild Patience to

illustrate something of the complexity to be found in the poetry This extract is

from ‘Integrity’, collected in A Wild Patience: Anger and tenderness: my selves.

And now I can believe they breathe in me as angels, not polarities. Anger and

tenderness: the spider’s genius to spin and weave in the same action from her

own body, anywhere – even from a broken web.(15) In my book I argue how Rich

moves beyond dualism in her poetry – an argument I cannot go into – but here

‘Experience’ can be both private and public, personal and political – anger and

tenderness, despite being contradictory emotions, need not be mutually exclusive

terms. A tension-filled conflict may live and breathe in a woman’s body as

different aspects of her experiencing, yet it is integral to the processes and

struggles of being female. Just as the image of the spider spinning and weaving

simultaneously suggests the indivisibility of these polar opposites, so too

culture and nature, subjectivity and objectivity, social and psychological, body

and mind, are inter-implicated with each other – in Rich’s non-dichotomous

understanding of the mind / body. These few lines point to a radically

subversive process. Identifying herself and other women who fall short of the

nurturing ideal woman – Rich transgressively restores to language that which had

been silenced and delegitimated within a patriarchal culture and tradition. Her

culturally unacceptable anger becomes acknowledged and empathically recognised,

rather than condemned. To profoundly accept her own split ’selves’ (and those of

other women) is to validate and to transform her sensory experiencing, her

self-esteem, her sense of her own power, the meaning of her existence. Women

have long been engaged in a vigilant and exacting process of bringing to

critical awareness the contradictions, ambiguities and impositions of our

diverse experience so as to reach a realm where such incoherences can become

rendered conscious and intelligible within language so that they may be thought.

This invitation to transform thinking, I would argue, constitutes a very

different project to that envisaged by Sayers. From being framed within

essentialist injunctions that insist that woman’s nature is to nurture, women

may now move from a position of disempowerment and self-castigation towards a

greater sense of integrity – a discursive shift has occurred that significantly

permits new identifications to be made, different positions to be taken up, new

inner and outer perspectives to be considered, and thus a new future may become

conceivable, other potentials may be rendered possible. I want to leave the

seventies behind and pick up my argument around the body in a later chapter of

the book – during the eighties Rich begins to see the ‘core of revolutionary

process’ as ‘the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction’, and

urges a close focus on materiality, on geographical location and voice. (16) the

need to locate the historical and social moment – the context, the precise

location in time and space, the ‘geography’ of a particular statement – the

‘When, where, and under what conditions has the statement been true?’.(17) She

brings us back to ‘the geography closest in – the body’ and in so doing, Rich

works out her strategy to bring feminist theory ‘back down to earth again’.(18)

Theory – the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees -

theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and

returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn’t smell of the earth, it isn’t

good for the earth.(19) In putting her case for a focus on material bodily

difference, Rich subtly returns to Lacan’s hardly earthy formula for

understanding sexual difference, in theorising her politics of location. She

expands on her earlier attempts to counter the dominance of the phallus through

an emphasis on the sexual specificities of the female, but now highlights race

as equally important in the construction of identity.(20) Possessing Black or

white skin colour assigns ‘my body’ to a particular social status and position

within the specific cultural hierarchy (North American) operating in a specific

locality (Baltimore). Just as in Lacan, this designation begins in infancy: Even

to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than

one identity. When I was carried out of the hospital into the world, I was

viewed and treated as female, but also viewed and treated as white – by both

Black and white people. I was located by color and sex as surely as a Black

child was located by color and sex – though the implications of white identity

were mystified by the presumption that white people are the center of the

universe. To locate myself in my body means more than understanding what it has

meant to me to have a vulva and clitoris and uterus and breasts. It means

recognising this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not

let me go(21) However, not like Lacan, this is accessibly written, Rich’s

language always refusing the temptation to soar skywards into elevated

theoretical abstraction. In this passage, with its silent, unreferenced echo of

Lacanian theory, possessing whiteness and possessing the phallus are directly

comparable in the sense that they have been designated a superior position at

the centre of the regulatory practices of North American culture. And so, though

it is necessary, it is not enough for feminist theory merely to recognise and

affirm the specificities of the femaleness of the body as a countering strategy

- skin colour, racial background, cultural and other locational differences all

matter, in that they function to differentiate one body from another and to

organise diverse bodies towards serving the powerful imperatives of

heterosexism, imperialism, post-colonialism, and white male dominance in

whatever form it manifests itself. In the course of my book, I try to identify

the complexity of these poetic and political strategies in action – the

interweaving of that ‘geography closest in’, the history – with the emerging

‘truths’ of dreams, desires, sexualities and subjectivities. For her, it is as

important to examine the individual dream life as it is to address the politics,

for even the dreamlife is situated within and emerges out of unconscious

experience which, of course, also has a history. Inescapably personal but also

political, dreams are bound to their historical moment of production. Being

endlessly subject to re-interpretation, they are themselves an interpretation.

Rich calls here for the necessity to be vigilant, to be aware that limits,

boundaries, borders – whether to feminist theory, to politics, to poetry or to

dream – can operate even at this deepest image-making level of the psyche: When

my dreams showed signs of becoming politically correct no unruly images escaping

beyond borders when walking in the street I found my themes cut out for me knew

what I would not report for fear of enemies’ usage then I began to wonder. (22)

Accountability, responsibility – asking these profound questions – ‘What is

missing here? how am I using this? – becomes part of the creative process’.(23)

I agree with Rich when she claims that ‘poetry can break open locked chambers of

possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire’. (24) If desire

itself becomes boundaried within the systems and coercions of corporate

capitalism, our power to imagine becomes stultified. If the poet’s ‘themes’ are

delimited through the fear of ‘enemies’ usage’, and even her role as witness

inhibited through fear of comebacks, then the vital role of the revolutionary

writer to know words, to use words, to rely on words to imagine and to convey

the necessity to create a just, humane society, may be undermined. As Rich

suggests A poem can’t free us from the struggle for existence, but it can

uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our

lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us, have accepted as

our own. It’s not a philosophical or psychological blueprint; it’s an instrument

for embodied experience. But we seek that experience or recognise it when it is

offered to us, because it reminds us in some way of our need. After that

rearousal of desire, the task of acting on that truth, or making love, or

meeting other needs, is ours.(25) ‘The wick of desire’ always projects itself

towards a possible future – and, in this revolutionary art ‘is an alchemy

through which waste, greed, brutality, frozen indifference, "blind

sorrow" and anger are transmuted into some drenching recognition of the

what if? – the possible.’(26) However, the knowledge that comes from out of our

embodied experience is, in Rich’s work, inextricable from the languages in which

it is spoken, thought, imaged, dreamed. It is a theme which recurs and recurs

throughout Rich’s work to date – our concrete needs, the passionate urgency of

our desires, the intensity of women’s diverse struggles – these are identified

and identifiable, just as our differences can be identified and are identifiable

as continually in process and are always to be held up to question. Taking

nothing for granted, maintaining a continual vigilance against taking anything

presumed to be ‘true’ at its face value, Rich constantly questions the premises

of her own thought, working critically with the language she uses. If ‘language

is the site of history’s enactment’, then it is also for Rich the site for

questioning that history of experience; for evaluating the impositions and

alienations that are the outcome of domination; for plumbing the depths and

analysing the complexities of what constitutes identity. Throughout these four

decades, Rich has found herself interpreting and re-interpreting the

contradictory social realities of our lives always critically conscious of the

workings of power – not only ‘possessive, exploitative power’ but also ‘the

power to engender, to create, to bring forth fuller life’. (27) These are large

aims, befitting the work of this major feminist theorist and revolutionary poet.