

POETRY IN
REVIEW



W I L L A R D S P I E G E L M A N

The *Collected Poems* of Adrienne Rich is a heavy book, in several senses. With more than twelve hundred pages, including annotations and a solid, sympathetic introduction by Claudia Rankine, it tips the scales at four pounds, more than most new personal computers. It is not suitable for airplane travel. It would be difficult to prop up on your chest in bed at night.

Most of all, it bears the considerable weight of its author's concerns, passions, furies, obsessions, and artistic experiments throughout the sixty-two years of her fecund literary career. Rich died in 2012 and never got to see what Wallace Stevens called a "planet on the table" (his term for his *Collected Poems*), or to express her valedictory gratitude as clearly and happily as Stevens did: "Ariel was glad he had written his poems." This is too bad. I hope she realized that her work had enriched the lives of many individual readers as well as the state of American letters during the tumultuous second half of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first. Rich's formidable presence on our national

Collected Poems, 1950-2012, by Adrienne Rich (Norton, 1,216 pp., \$50)

literary and larger cultural/public scene reflected and, in turn, produced changes in the zeitgeist. She not only was affected by every major political crusade of the past half century – the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the women’s movement, gay liberation – but she also became, as few poets ever do, the living embodiment of the causes she fiercely fought for. Her poetry, like her prose, is the living testimony to her life. Most people who attended her public readings of her work came away, as I did, with feelings of considerable appreciation. For a writer who said she loathed mere theatricality, she gave memorable, numinous performances.

Rich’s unwavering political commitment and her refusal to separate life and work came at a cost, at least with regard to her poetry: It’s not easy to warm up to her. She was never a light-hearted poet. Reading her can be a burden. She may be the most important poet after Wordsworth who lacks a genuine sense of humor. (Ezra Pound, before he went totally mad, was able to maintain an acid, sardonic touch in *Mauberry*. And even Wordsworth occasionally affects joviality if not wit in some of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*.) Her importance as a poet is in inverse proportion to any quality of nimbleness she brought to her work. Reading through this volume, one wishes for a bit of levity. At all stages of her career, Rich serves up heaps of humane feeling, compassion, and tenderness to accompany her anger, heroism, educational zeal, and political outrage. But of wit, irony, the pleasures of ordinary, casual, easy secular life, there’s not a lot of evidence. This is not her major key. Her tones, like her concerns, are mostly serious, often somber, and occasionally grim. Mounting the barricades does not profit from, or encourage, a light touch.

The primary question for a literary critic, rather than a sociologist, cultural historian or feminist theorist, is, How does this work fit into the vast panorama of American poetry in the post–World War II era? Regardless of its author’s public persona, how does it change the genus we call poetry, to which it belongs? The answer, not surprisingly, is that Rich’s oeuvre is greater than the sum of its parts. Rich started as one kind of poet and then seemed to become another kind of poet, all the while maintaining intellectual and stylistic continuities that extended through the arc of her long career. As with any person, so also with any artist: it all comes

down to how things change and how they remain the same. We discover coherence as well as seemingly seismic shifts. The “author,” the person whose life story we infer from the work, develops.

Consider beginnings and endings. Hindsight is easy, of course, but one can look back to the precocious start of Rich’s career, her Yale Younger Poet accolade from W. H. Auden, whose introduction of the talented prizewinner was both condescending and accurate. The poems in *A Change of World* (1951) are indeed polite – in Auden’s words, “neatly and modestly dressed.” They practically sit up and beg for approval from the elders (Auden, Yeats, Frost) who were Rich’s earliest role models. One hears an echo of T. S. Eliot, still very much the major spokesman for literature and culture in the middle of the past century, when Auden praises Rich’s book for “its detachment from the self and its emotions.”

Rich’s authority figures were also, significantly, father figures; they set the dominant cultural standard for post–World War II America; they were the poets whom the precocious Radcliffe student was sedulously imitating. But these early poems also contain hints of trouble within their elegant formats. A titular “uncle” who “speaks in the drawing room” (in a poem of that title) speaks also for an uneasy poet, perhaps the imagined niece we might name “Adrienne,” when he allows that in a time of nuclear fear, “We stand between the dead glass-blowers / And murmurings of missile-throwers.” The world is nervously trapped between the “crystal vase and chandelier” handed down from generations past, and an explosion about to happen. These poems, like their author, seem to be biding their time.

For several decades, au courant theorists have dismissed the idea of a unified organic self, an inner self of any sort, but there’s no stronger proof of how individuals, like organizations or nations, can remain the same through a life of change than the complete work of a writer like Rich. The first poem in her first book issues its own “storm warnings”; we can see that things are not easy, that danger and foul weather lie ahead. And from “Storm Warnings” to “Endpapers,” more than eleven hundred pages later, we watch her grow and change, all the while remaining true to herself. By “self,” I mean “style,” that which allows us to measure an artist. And by “style,” I mean how she selects and then deals with her subjects.

Her *Collected Poems* begins with an impending storm, caught in four seven-line stanzas of mostly, but not quite, lockstep iambic pentameter. Even in the prosody we can hear muted sounds of distress. “I leave the book upon a pillowed chair,” “I draw the curtains as the sky goes black / And set a match to candles sheathed in glass” are matched by final lines that cut everything off: “Boughs strain against the sky,” “We can only close the shutters,” “Who live in troubled regions.” Some slack lines contain extra syllables. It’s as if the poet wants to show us that she can maintain perfect regularity, but that she would prefer not to. (Picasso was an accomplished painter at the age of eighteen. Then he went on to become “Picasso.”) A falling rhythm matches the falling barometer. Neither the poet nor her readers could know, at this point, what was in store, but something certainly was.

More than sixty years later, “Endpapers” implies closure, the elegance of a printed book, and a feeling of compactness, and gives – in fact – a very modest version of Ariel’s contentment with his own planet on the table. Rich never actually says she was glad to have written her poems, but a hopeful, sanguine reader can make such an inference. Here are her last lines, part iii of her last poem:

The signature to a life requires
 the search for a method
 rejection of posturing
 trust in the witnesses
 a vial of invisible ink
 a sheet of paper held steady
 after the end-stroke
 above a deciphering flame

There’s no rhyme, no steady standard rhythm (but perhaps a three-beat line), no punctuation: just a pared-down list of the five items required for a life, a poetics, and an artist’s signature, putting paid to everything. Finality comes without even a period to indicate an ending. The search, the ciphering and the deciphering, goes on.

What comes between the storm warnings and the endpapers is a volume of extraordinary richness and variety. It has (whose collected work does not?) its longueurs. Many of the poems in

Rich's slim final books lapse into vagueness and repetition; sentences break down into phrases, and complete thoughts to bullets of images; complex ideas are reduced to formulas. There's even, starting in the mid-1990s, new punctuation. She becomes enamored of a double colon, something that seems to offer a longer division or pause than a traditional single colon, but also perhaps a termination less final than a period. Was she trying to outdo A. R. Ammons? We can forgive her.

Rich began as a lyric poet. She remained one. Her "Twenty-One Love Poems" (from the 1977 *The Dream of a Common Language*) are important because of their subject matter, a frank and open depiction of a same-sex love affair. They are also important for the way they continue the tradition of erotic poetry that began with Petrarch and reached a climax in Shakespeare's sonnets. They are sonnet-like; they make a sequence; they treat middle-aged rather than youthful ardors. The lesbianism is, especially in retrospect, a historical fact but not a poetic one. The poems speak to and for all lovers who find themselves in the throes of a surprising new passion. In the same volume, "Transcendental Etude," the first poem dedicated to Michelle Cliff, who became Rich's partner for almost four decades, extends what M. H. Abrams once called "the Romantic nature lyric." Rich altered poetic genres as much as she plumbed the depths of personal identity.

Her greatest achievement as a poet may have been the multiple ways in which she expanded the very idea of lyric well beyond the neat stanzas and proper rhythms of her first efforts, beyond the variations on love sonnets and Romantic meditations on place. Howard Nemerov once wittily observed that most American poets "start out Emily and wind up Walt." He was thinking of men, of course, but Rich, along with the far different Jorie Graham, several decades her junior, was able to become more expansively Whitmanian while remaining true to her instinctive Dickinsonian intensities. She abandoned primness and propriety; she never abandoned intense condensation even as she continued to break through borders and to violate the boundaries of the poetic line as she did the boundaries of gender. She became an experimenter, an androgyne of technique as well as the mermaid/merman of "Diving into the Wreck," the much anthologized title poem of her 1973 prize-winning volume. Organic wholeness gives way to the claim

that “the notes for the poem are the only poem” (“Images for Godard,” 1970).

It is natural, even inevitable, to return in age to one’s youthful preferences. I still find myself most moved – much to my satisfaction as well as surprise – by Rich’s poems from the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s, poems that were important to me as a reader and a critic developing an interest in the poetry of my time. I think that few contemporary political poems remain as powerful as the 1968 “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” as relevant today as it was half a century ago. From *Necessities of Life* (1966), through *Leaflets* (1969) and especially *The Will to Change* (1971), then *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), *The Dream of a Common Language* (1977), *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981), and *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1985): these seven volumes in a score of years at the center of the poet’s life allow us to take the measure of her greatness. The best poems here test both the limits of poetry and the limits of human relationships.

These books follow her break-through third volume, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), in which Rich began her disentanglement from both poetic and social norms, as in the heart-breaking “A Marriage in the ’Sixties” (1961), which contains the lines:

Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock,
 may have at last the perfect hour of talk
 that language aches for; still –
 two minds, two messages.

Notice: two lines of iambic pentameter making a couplet, followed by two six-syllable lines. Style matches subject. Couplets and couples begin to separate, to fall apart. In the great poems of the following decades, they separate even more explosively. Iambic pentameter will be in short supply. Rich had no patience with such equilibrium. Thus, in “Implosions” (1968, *Leaflets*), concerning human separation and togetherness, things change, and *are* changed, from an opening ten-syllable line, which is echoed almost randomly by another one, several lines down: “I wanted to choose words that even you / would have to be changed by // Take the word / of my pulse, loving and ordinary / Send out your signals, hoist // your dark scribbled flags / but take / my hand[.]”

These poems initiate Rich's major phase. I wish to call attention to two prominent features, both formal and thematic, that define most of the poetry of her maturity. These are poetic choices that will move, frustrate, persuade, or infuriate readers to different degrees. They inspire us to ask questions. The first has to do with a central fact of all lyric: the nature of poetic address. Who is speaking, and to whom? The answers are complicated. *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth* (2006) contains three epigraphs, the second from the poet Michael S. Harper, quoting Sterling Brown: "Poetry is not self-expression, the I is a dramatic I." Here we have an act of ventriloquism, one writer speaking through another, on the pages of yet a third. And the third epigraph, the most surprising, is from "A. R." herself: "To which I would add: and so, unless / otherwise indicated, is the You."

Rich's suggestive couplet, and the line to which it responds imply an ample poetics of address. Personal identities are always tricky, but in Rich's pages we can find very few poems in which the speaker is not Rich herself. The work always exhibits its maker's strong sense of self. She is, at heart, a Romantic poet, but often she wants to be more or other than Adrienne Cecile Rich, born to privilege in Baltimore in 1929.

But who is her "you?" Sometimes, but not often, we can identify or at least infer the person to, or about, whom she is speaking (her husband, first alive, and then dead; her father, mother, mother-in-law; occasional friends or lovers mentioned by name or initials). As she discovers herself, she discovers as well her audience. The details of her personal life occasionally come clear as her work expands from and includes them. But among the addressees, the generic "you" is more prevalent. Frequently it is a stand-in for "you, my reader." Often she seems to address a real person, but someone whose identity she hides from us. (See the 1970 "Shooting Script," for example, filled with addresses to we know not whom.) For a poet so deeply invested in other individuals, she frequently places a cloak of anonymity around her mysterious subject and the objects of her address.

How does, how should, a poet depict herself and other people? The question has no correct answer. One of Rich's most anthologized poems is the early, eminently teachable, seemingly objective "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." All is observed in the third person. Mari-

tal oppression is muted, contained within the poet's agile stanzas and the eponymous character's sublimation of anger through crewel work. Everything, in art and life, appears compact and arranged. Aunt Jennifer and her rhymed quatrains maintain order, at least on the surface. Rich's later, first-person lyrics are more complex. By the time of "Necessities of Life" (the title poem of the 1966 volume), the self, formerly "a small, fixed dot," "begins to ooze." It multiplies: "whole biographies swam up and / swallowed me like Jonah." In Rimbaud's famous formulation, "je est un autre."

Rich's other most republished poem is "Diving into the Wreck," in which the line, the stanza or paragraph, and music itself all break open, as the protagonist dives into the chaotic freedom of an underwater adventure. Neatness of articulation gives way to openness, sentences to phrases, grammatical integrity to parts of speech. A new expansiveness – perhaps even chaos – includes the pronouns that mark identity. We know who Aunt Jennifer is. We know the identities of most of the subjects and speakers in Rich's early poems. Here, now, the self expands through its descent into the dangerous ocean. In the famous last three paragraphs, the speaker both loses and gains identity, as she conjures a new language, with new pronouns. She is both merman and mermaid, whose armored body hides rather than advertises gender: "I am she: I am he," and the diver also becomes the ship's figurehead, indeed the ship itself, its instruments, log, and compass, as the expanded speaker becomes a hero of many faces and voices:

We are, I am, you are
 by cowardice or courage
 the one who find our way
 back to this scene
 carrying a knife, a camera,
 a book of myths
 in which
 our names do not appear.

What had begun as an ordinary underwater scuba adventure has metamorphosed into an existential reimagining of the self. "We" become "the one." Singularity and plurality are no longer in opposition.

Whitman-like, Rich wishes to contain multitudes, and to ad-

dress, as Whitman does in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” unseen readers, both present and future. One of her longest poems, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” (the title piece of her 1991 volume), ends with a series of “Dedications” to a range of possible readers, all unnamed, all speculative. It’s an almost hallucinatory list of a dozen addressees. Each new claim begins the same way: “I know you are reading this poem.” A less confident poet might have said, “I hope you are reading this poem,” but at this stage of her life Rich has moved beyond timidity and uncertainty. Her imagined readers include an office worker, a bookstore habitué, a subway rider, the young, the old, a youthful mother, and a non-English speaker. Rich communicates her frank understanding of the way in which all of us are looking at one another, finding sameness in difference, identity in separation: “I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room // of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.” Here is a Whitman for our age. The list concludes with someone who seems to be at the end of a road, perhaps at the end of all time:

I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

See, also, the earlier “Contradictions: Tracking Poems” (1983–85), where the “you” is her ideal reader, and where she identifies, like Whitman, with her country, its landscape, and her countrymen and women. Such identification, in Rich, is a form of sharing, not aggressive or narcissistic projection. She seldom imposes herself upon others.

The question “whom is Rich addressing?” in a single poem, in a sequence, or through the entirety of her work is matched by an analogous question, *For* whom is she speaking? The woman who began as an intellectual, bookish Cliffie, eager to please her elders and hungry for high culture and the life of the mind, came to think of herself as a radical spokesperson for the silenced and the disenfranchised. In “Natural Resources” she stakes her claim clearly:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those
 who age after age, perversely,
 with no extraordinary power,
 reconstitute the world.

This is an admirable social and political goal; it is a misguided one if judged by the nature of a writer's intended audience, most of whom would have no ability to read, or little interest in reading, these very heady, passionate, sometimes opaque, and frequently didactic poems. Adrienne Rich was a learned woman. The book's endnotes alone attest to her wide-ranging reading, thinking, and frame of reference, which includes everyone from Homer to Anna Akhmatova, from Dürer to Gottfried Benn, from the Hohokam desert farmers of New Mexico to Ethel Rosenberg, from Hans Christian Andersen to Julia de Burgos, from Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane to Annie Sullivan and Muriel Rukeyser. Rich's work is that of an intellectual who wants to think of herself – indeed, *insists* on thinking of herself – as a populist, and of her poems as political, historical, sociological events. The people on whose behalf she is fighting will always prefer, if given the chance, art of a different, simpler sort. Like many other contemporary left-leaning, high-minded intellectuals, Rich was engaged on a mission that a less sympathetic critic might label deluded or at least ironic.

Her major period overflows with evidence of an intellectual's striving to perfect her common touch, her desire to sing in a collective key. Although her early poem "Vertigo" begins with the nonchalantly dismissive "As for me, I distrust the commonplace," the commonplace comes to occupy the largest part of her attention. Even early, in "Stepping Backward," a lovely iambic pentameter ceremonial farewell poem (also from *A Change of World*), she acknowledges: "They're luckiest who know they're not unique." A computer-generated concordance of Rich's work would reveal – I'm relying on instinct – an interesting, recurring use of words like *ordinary*, *simple*, *common*, *commonality*, and their multiple synonyms during these middle years. At the beginning of the early "In the Woods" (1963) she quotes the Dutch poet J. C. Bloem on "difficult ordinary happiness"; in "Natural Resources" (1977) she acknowledges "the enormity of the simplest things." Addressing

her recently dead husband in the moving “From a Survivor” (1972), she acknowledges in the wisdom of age the foolishness of youthful bravado:

The pact that we made was the ordinary pact
of men & women in those days

I don't know who we thought we were
that our personalities
could resist the failures of the race

.

Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special

One thing we all have in common is the thought that we are unique.

In “The Fact of a Doorframe” (1974) she calls poetry “violent, arcane, common,” bringing together three qualities that define her lifelong moods. She longs for the common but she can never resist the arcane. In the “Twenty-One Love Poems,” she is both frustrated and surprised by how language fails her in her new relationship: “we’re out in a country that has no language” (and for a woman who earlier cited with authority and approval Wittgenstein’s dictum “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” being without language, being like an ordinary mute, uncertain person, is equivalent to risking, or even losing, everything). In number XIX of the same series, she first says that being “two women together” is a difficult task, but then adds expansively and more generally, “two people together is a work / heroic in its ordinariness.” In “Natural Resources,” she wistfully acknowledges “the enormity of the simplest things.” In “Cartographies of Silence” (1975), she admits that “Language cannot do everything.” In the long “Culture and Anarchy” (1978), she represents two sides of her person in two parallel columns and puts together “my dream of a common language / my solitude of self.” This “dream of a common language” becomes the title of her 1977 volume. It might as well be her version of Stevens’s *The Whole of Harmonium*. In her “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” Elizabeth Bishop used the phrase “natural heroism,” a strangely ironic oxymoron that is pertinent to the work of these very dissimilar poets. How does a writer square her sense of individuality, even gran-

deur and heroism that can set her apart, with a reaching for connection with others, that most ordinary of human needs? This is a question that all people, not just artists, must answer for themselves.

The impulse is articulated most movingly in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” (1970): “To do something very common, in my own way.” The infinitive in this final, paradoxical, stand-alone line indicates that Rich is thinking theoretically. Her verb has no tense. It is all futurity, hypothesis and desire. “I want to do something,” it says, but also “it may be nothing more than a futile dream to think I can be both my own unique self and also a representative spokesperson for all humanity.”

Rich was always, like the youthful Wordsworth, a revolutionary in search of personal and social wholeness. In “Essential Resources” (1973), she offers a metaphor for her *ars poetica*:

I long to create something
 that can't be used to keep us passive:
 I want to write
 a script about plumbing, how every pipe
 is joined
 to every other

A noble dream, perhaps, but I can hear certain skeptics shaking their heads and calling this delusion. Like Yeats, Rich longed for unity of self and unity of culture, but acknowledged that anarchy always tears at the roots of culture.

One of Rich's late poems, “In Plain Sight” (2004), returns to her lifelong obsession with trying to connect to others. In halting phrases held together (or are they separated?) by spaces instead of punctuation, she watches her neighbor. Thinking as she always does of an individual and the society of which this woman is a part, she also stops to contemplate her own privileged outside position:

It's not as in a museum that I
 observe
and mark in every Face I meet

 under crazed surfaces
 traces of feeling locked in shadow

mance.” As when she dove into the wreck to discover herself, and leaving behind the book of myths, Rich here decides to disavow old music and incantations. Her epiphany comes as the most ordinary revelation. No leap is necessary. “Violent, arcane, common” she had called her poetry earlier. She is always struggling to find new language, and she always, like Stevens, keeps coming back to the real, the specific, the here and now:

No one who survives to speak
 new language, has avoided this:
 the cutting-away of an old force that held her
 rooted to an old ground
 the pitch of utter loneliness
 where she herself and all creation
 seem equally dispersed, weightless, her being a cry
 to which no echo comes or can ever come.

It was always thus: “rootless, dismembered,” separated from women and therefore homesick until finding love and a home with and in another woman, and thereby finding the new language, “a whole new poetry beginning here.”

Except for the fact that the “language” remains the old language. This is not entirely “a whole new poetry.” The cast of characters may have changed, as has the locale. It’s not Wordsworth addressing his sister at Tintern Abbey, and seeing in her an image of what he once was, or Coleridge identifying with Charles Lamb and the others who have gone off for a walk and left him to tend to his burned foot. But it is certainly an updated version of the English Romantics’ desire to base poetry on a landscape with human figures in it. It’s Adrienne Rich and her lover in rural Vermont, turning away from virtuoso performance and competition and seeing as if for the first time the beauties of what used to be dismissively called “woman’s work.” (The 1978 poem “Coast to Coast” begins with the unironic thesis “There are days when housework seems the only / outlet.”) “Transcendental Etude” ends not with an old-fashioned transcendence, a vision of a higher reality, or a bravura, applause-generating performance, but with a kitchen scene, in which scraps of yarn, rainbow-colored shells, wildflowers, and birds’ feathers make an ordinary composition. It is a still life, woven by “experienced fingers”

pulling the tenets of a life together
 with no mere will to mastery,
 only care for the many-lived, unending
 forms in which she finds herself,
 becoming now the sherd of broken glass
 slicing light in a corner, dangerous
 to flesh, now the plentiful soft leaf
 that wrapped round the throbbing finger, soothes the wound;
 and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further
 forming underneath everything that grows.

This poem from four decades ago looks back to “Tintern Abbey.” It also looks back to Rich’s former selves. It is as if Aunt Jennifer has returned to life, no longer weighted down by her heavy wedding ring, and having to find an outlet for her feelings of oppression through her prancing, unafraid tigers. This woman is not an urban or suburban haute bourgeoisie making something ornamental, sublimating desire through artistic creation. On the contrary, she is of the country not the city, and is now both a dangerous piece of glass and the gauze to heal a wound. She is, also, both the patient and the physician, hurting and then healing herself. Here is one of those marvelous images of wholeness, integrity, and complexity, woven from strands of common imagery and ordinary language, that show what Adrienne Rich could do in her pursuit and creation of herself and others.