

The Recent Poetry of Adrienne Rich: 1991-2004
by Gregg Mosson

Adrienne Rich's poetry from *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991) to *the school among the ruins* (2004) has taken on the epic challenge of describing the diverse life of America—beyond the rhetoric—in language that can move and even change the reader. In turn, the social, political, and technological changes since the early 1990s have had a forceful impact on Rich's poetic methods. The project of presenting a society in transit has forced Rich to abandon the imagistic style, personal subjects, and somewhat optimistic beliefs found in her earlier poems. Her work of the last decade and a half undertakes a radical questioning of the purpose of poetry in America today—especially its self-centered lyric orientation—in order to reenvision it. Adrienne Rich has gone back to the drafting table late in life, and her brilliant poems display courage in facing both herself and the world.

As Rich writes in “An Atlas of the Difficult World”:

A patriot is one who wrestles for the soul of her country.
as she wrestles for her own being, for the soul of his country . . .
as he wrestles for his own being.

Rich's historical, observational, and intellectual research helps her gain perspective on “the soul of her country,” and this research in some instances becomes part of the subject of her poems. One of the first things she does in “Atlas” is envision her writing life as part of the problem. In a world of people intertwined in a complex social, economic, and

political fabric but living increasingly isolated lives, the danger of writing is that it reflects isolation back; it hides the larger structures affecting people's lives. This is the failure of lyric poetry today, Rich argues. As she notes in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* and later, this self-oriented mode of poetry mirrors the "segregate republic," spotlighting the individual while obscuring the democratic vista.

Rich questions this narrow approach by looking at her own experience as a reader:

One hot afternoon I sat there reading Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*—
the remote
upland village where snow lay long and late, the deep-rutted roads, the dun
and grey moorland
—trying to enfigure such a life, how genius
unfurled in the shortlit days, the meagre means of the house. I never
thought
of lives at that moment around me, what girl dreamed
and was extinguished in the remote back-country I had come to love,
reader reading under a summer tree in the landscape
of the rural working poor.

The line break separating the "landscape" from the possessive phrase "of the rural working poor" highlights the opposition between a literary romanticism and the actual rural world. Rich uses this scene as a synecdoche for intellectual life in America at the end of the twentieth century, blaming this divorce of intellect from life partly on the self-absorption of

writers and intellectuals. Later, in “Midnight Salvage,” she also blames it on academia’s isolation from the rest of the U.S. economy. Even later in “Usonian Journals 2000” from *the school among the ruins*, Rich witnesses compartmentalization of thinking as practiced by a professor who offers technical commentary useful for academic papers, as if academia is simply another type of factory, producing academic products. In the same poem, she also views this widespread divorce as stemming from people’s private worlds framed by technology: people living behind cell phones, email, portable music players, and other entertainment and communication devices.

This separation of intellectuals and artists from each other and from society as a whole is tragic, in Rich’s view, because these are the people who can “bind, join, reweave, cohere, [and] replenish” society. As she writes in part 4 of “An Atlas”:

Waste. Waste. The watcher’s eye put out, hands of the builder severed,
brain of the maker starved
those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish
now at risk in this segregate republic
locked away out of sight out and hearing, out of mind, shunted aside
those needed to teach, advise, persuade, weigh arguments
those urgently needed for the work of perception
work of the poet, astronomer, the historian, the architect of new streets
work of the speaker who also listens
meticulous delicate work of reaching the heart of the desperate woman, the
desperate man

—never-to-be-finished, still unbegun work of repair—it cannot be done without them
and where are they now?

The problem of American poets absorbed in their isolated egos becomes even more clearly articulated in *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995). In “What Kind of Times Are These,” Rich notes that indirect lyric speech dominates American verse. This indirection is not innovative, in Rich’s view, but inarticulate, in fact an evasion of articulation. She says now she must write somewhat lyrically:

Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it’s necessary
to talk about trees.

But then Rich shatters expectation to make it convey what we normally do not see—or do not want to see. She cannot abandon all the romantic poetic devices like “trees” in *Dark Fields of the Republic*. Nor can she abandon the I-centered poem, because then people would not “listen.” Instead, Rich simultaneously utilizes and fractures pastoral conventions in the opening poems to reveal what is hidden behind them.

“In Those Years” states that “we lost track/ of the meaning of *we*, of *you*.” As a result people are reduced to understanding the world only through themselves. In the most personal sequence in *Dark Fields of the Republic*, “Six Narratives,” Rich shows how this lack of engagement with others enters our most intimate relations. A cold “nothing” creeps in, she notes in a dialogue with a lover:

No you said you are talking about feelings

.....

Then a shadow skimmed your face

Go on talking in a normal voice you murmured

Nothing is listening

As always for Rich, there is a broader social dimension as well. She makes both the rising isolation and the economic unfairness in America explicit in the long poem “Inscriptions”: “I found a faux-marble sarcophagus inscribed/ HERE LIES THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE.”

Rich does not directly address why the will of the people seems absent today. From reading her post-1990 work, one might assume it is a byproduct of the physical and social distance in modern society. She does allude to the conservative philosophy in ascension in our country since the election of Ronald Reagan, one that has promoted individual liberty beyond all else. As she remarks in “And Now,” this is an era

when the name of compassion

was changed to the name of guilt

when to feel with a human stranger

was declared obsolete.

In *Dark Fields of the Republic*, Rich opposes this social policy of denying

sympathy with her vision of a wellspring of feeling. "Sending Love" shows us love's abundance, cataloging people interchanging it and sketching what happens as a result. This life-giving force wrestles with commerce in the title poem of *Midnight Salvage*. And later, in the title poem of *the school among the ruins*, love helps children rebuild their war-torn schoolhouse as they come together in caring for a stray cat.

Midnight Salvage (1999), *Fox* (2001), and *the school among the ruins* (2004) form a triptych delineating Rich's increasingly dire view of social and political conditions in America. In part 4 of "The Art of Translation" (*Midnight Salvage*), she describes poetry as "contraband." Poetry, and literature in general, have become unintelligible and subversive because they are not fundamentally engaged with commerce. They also do not assume a fixed position, nor function as tools for single purposes. Here Rich tries to articulate a framework for poetic goals and practice that would enable poetry to confront the problems of contemporary life. In *Fox*, however, as our public celebration of commerce deepens, she chooses instead to concentrate on evasiveness and personal replenishment. Then in *the school among the ruins*, she returns to navigating and confronting a rapidly changing social landscape.

Throughout this triptych her writing becomes increasingly fragmented and experimental. The "trees" of partial lyricism are left behind. Starting with *Midnight Salvage*, Rich almost entirely abandons the short lyric poem for the multipart series and thematically centered book. In *Fox*, she also expunges identifiable settings. These stylistic innovations, combined with a present-tense voice, push her work toward a sense that it unfolds as one reads. The work is challenging but never merely opaque, and these stylistic changes are essential to enable her writing and concerns to communicate. The school she

speaks of in the title poem of *the school among the ruins* is one of poetic survival: writing that keeps the human spirit alive. It is rooted in discipline, attentiveness, risk, and community.

As her triptych begins, Rich finds herself staring into the face of the unexpected:

But neither was expecting in my time
to witness this :: wasn't deep
lucid or mindful you might say enough
to look through history's bloodshot eyes
into this commerce this dreadnought wreck cut loose
from all vows, oaths, patents, compacts, promises ::

("Midnight Salvage")

For Rich "this commerce" describes the interactions among people in a modern technological society where economic forces, among others, are fraying all ties. The profit motive has become elevated over all other bonds: personal as in "promises," political and social as in "compacts," and even commercial as in "patents." As a result, a father in the poem pushes his daughter onto a dance floor with "traffickers/ in nerve gas." He says, "*Get with it.*"

That phrase captures a dominant ethos of early twenty-first-century America. Rich notes that to speak about "commerce" effectively she had to leave the university, because in academia a poet can "declare anything at all/ since in that place nothing would change." In "Midnight Salvage," Rich looks at a bust of Keats and remarks how a university setting

tends to make things seem timeless. Rich is interested, rather, in how intellectual life, poetry, and literature can affect our own time. In fact, her ambition for poetry is closer to the democratic ideals and hopes of British romantic literature, or later Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, than to the changeless world of the ivory tower. But Rich does not idealize liberation from the status quo. She warns that the pursuit of independence and genuine change can tear one from one's family; it is dangerous to the experienced and the novice alike. She states in "Midnight Salvage" that her art requires a "horrible patience" and concludes: "*I will/ submit to whatever poetry is / I accept no limits.*"

Rich's recent body of present-tense, fragmented, and explorative poetry is rooted in Whitman's fundamentally optimistic vision for poetry, despite Rich's doubts. In "Letters to a Young Poet," Rich finds the current situation for all poets "ineluctable." This word highlights the necessity of engaging the world, no matter how difficult that may be. She writes in "Camino Real" that while the scholar may "list collate commensurate to quantify," the artist must understand through empathy. An artist, argues Rich, must be able to say—quoting Whitman—"I was the one, I suffered, I was there."

Though her most recent book, *the school among the ruins*, leans toward pessimism, Rich's work of the last fifteen years repeatedly discovers the core force of love. Her embrace of Whitman is sometimes skeptical, as in "Midnight Salvage" she witnesses his dream of democracy bought, sold, and prostituted. Yet Rich herself becomes a true heir to Whitman's poetics and vision. Like her predecessor, Rich seeks a unique, experimental language that can make fundamental human communication possible. In the poem "Tendrils," near the end of *the school among the ruins*, contemporary life seems a mere remnant, a "vestige" of a once coherent world:

She had wanted to find meaning in the past but the future drove

a vagrant tank a rogue bulldozer

rearranging the past in a blip

coherence smashed into vestige

Rich knows the difficulties, but she also believes that a school of imaginative possibility, compassion, and coherence among our current ruins is possible. She writes to clear the drafting table, and prompt others to begin the rebuilding process.