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"Language Cannot Do Everything": Ekphrasis as a Strategy of Re-vision in Adrienne Rich's Poetry[1]

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Images are, and always have been, a paradoxical source of fascination and anxiety. Throughout cultural history, the sensory effects and illusory presence of the visual have frequently led to idolatry, iconoclasm, and iconophobia. Depreciated by Plato as mere imitations of the real, images own nonetheless an immense irrational force, expressing what Régis Debray describes as the human need to overcome the fear of nothingness, "le néant" (15-43). Ultimately powerful and attractive, images create the illusion that the visible is accessible and present; as Umberto Eco emphasizes, the "image possesses an irresistible force," producing "an effect of reality, even when it is false" (Wagner 30).[2] Although visual language has been with us since the onset of humanity, truth is that we are presently saturated with images, since ours is the era of the "image-world," as Susan Sontag puts it, where pictures have an almost unlimited authority, threatening to replace reality and substitute firsthand experience (153-80).

Amidst this cultural context, Adrienne Rich's position on the visual becomes particularly striking. In 1987, during an interview with David Montenegro, the poet is asked about language and its double edge character, simultaneously "a means of containment" and "a means of liberation" (6). Though considering that her poetry feeds on the tensions generated by the paradoxical nature of language, Rich stresses as well the difficulties of dealing with words and their historical imprints. Working with the "dead language, the oppressor's language," as she puts it, is rather strenuous to her as a citizen poet, i.e., someone who sees in poetry a "common language" capable of establishing unforeseen connections (Montenegro

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2 Wagner quotes Eco from his 1993 interview with Jean Daniel, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*. The "effect of reality" that Eco mentions was coined by Roland Barthes (141-148).

7). If words are exhausting, then images can be easily perceived as "great sources for refreshment," tempting in their apparent immediacy and straightforwardness: "There really are times when, as a poet, I feel I would simply like to be able to create something like a monumental head, some kind of great unitary visual image that would possess its own force and power, and stop all this struggle with words and meanings" (qtd. in Montenegro 7).

Rich's odd yearning for a "great unitary visual image" is further complicated by her fascination with images as "pure annunciations to the eye," as mentioned in "Cartographies of Silence" (*The Dream* 20). The belief that images are simple, refreshing, and pure clearly clashes with the overall cultural perception of pictures as illusory and dangerously mesmerizing. Rich's longing for the visual can be understood as the poet's search for a natural language, a sign capable of solving the signifier/signified dualisms so as to bring forth a unitary realm where word equals thing. Murray Krieger deems this semiotic desire for the natural sign a plain naïveté, as it expresses an impossible and utopian "search for a tangible, 'real' referent that would render the sign transparent" (11-12). Though Krieger does have a point, I prefer exploring Rich's use of images in her poetry as a manifestation of her need to rewrite culture and test the limits of language by opposing it to the visual image. This essay will address Rich's use of ekphrasis from the mid-1960s till the late 1970s as a literary strategy serving both feminist and aesthetic ends, conveying her desire to find a language capable of "doing" something.

A self-described "omnivorous" poet, Rich has frequently acknowledged the influence that multifarious expressions have had on her writing, ranging from "poetries of many kinds and periods" to "films, histories, political philosophies, song lyrics, visual art, pamphlets," and so on (*Arts* 137). The dialogue with nonverbal arts, such as painting, sculpture, tapestry, and cinema, is thus very common in her work, with various poems expanding into ekphrasis by carrying out what Heffernan has defined as verbal representations of visual representations (3). Ekphrasis, literally meaning "description," is an ancient poetic genre whose origins date back to Homer's depiction of the shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*. Relying on *enargeia* ("action"), and *sapheneia* ("clarity"), an ekphrastic account should be able to overcome the stillness and silence of the image, reanimating through words what was lost or was never there at all (Avelar

45-49, Krieger 76). Nevertheless, as W. J. T. Mitchell points out, ekphrasis entails a sense of impossibility, because "[w]ords can 'cite,' but never 'sight' their objects" (152). As an intermedial space between words and images, ekphrasis poses numerous questions of representation, visibility, and silence; its work, as described by Peter Wagner, is intrinsically paradoxical, since it is "a performance that promises to make the silent image speak even while silencing the unspoken (and, perhaps, unspeakable) or imposing verbal rhetoric . . . upon the image" (32).

Due to its reliance on the image as a silent "other" waiting to be colonized by the poet, ekphrastic literature is conventionally wrought from images invoking female otherness which, according to Mitchell, constitutes ekphrasis as a deeply gendered tradition, for it is "a genre that tends to describe an object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective, often to an audience understood to be masculine as well" (168). In this point, however, ekphrasis is not any different from other genres, since the Western lyrical tradition is itself broadly based on the heterosexual paradigm Mitchell describes.[3] As evidenced by William Wordsworth's much quoted passage, the poet is "a man speaking to men" (37), and the topic is usually women who, in Rich's words, are "all beautiful, and preferably asleep" (qtd. in Gelpi 115), hence relentlessly appropriated as voiceless muses. Yet, and as argued by Joan Retallack, the literature of images has indeed taken a heavier toll on women, who have for centuries been "subject/ed" to the idealized images disseminated by novels, poetry, movies, and magazines (352). Furthermore, the structure of the gaze sustaining ekphrasis reflects and reinforces sexually differentiated locations, in which men are the active gazers, as accounted by Laura Mulvey, and women the passive objects of the male gaze (436). "From Keats's rounded urn," writes Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, expanding Mulvey's reasoning, "through Rossetti's enthroned brides and William Carlos Williams's 'Portrait of a Lady,' practitioners of ekphrasis have worked the trope of the active male poet gazing on the silent, passive, female image, and having his verbal way with her" (121).

Although ekphrasis might sound particularly inhospitable for women writers, there is a substantial literary corpus of ekphrastic poetry written by women. Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, and

3 Western literary tradition refers here to the classical and Judeo-Christian tradition.

Adrienne Rich, for example, have frequently resorted to ekphrasis as a way of reconfiguring the relation between the poetic subject and the gazed object, so as to test and create different roles in the politics of the gaze. This "feminist ekphrasis," as Loizeaux puts it, "recognizes that a woman's place as viewer is established within, beside, or in the face of a male-dominated culture, but that the patterns of power and value implicit in a tradition of male artists and viewers can be exposed, used, resisted, and rewritten" (122). "Feminist ekphrasis" is thus deeply rooted in Rich's concept of "re-vision," put forth in her groundbreaking essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971) as an essential methodology to feminist criticism for enabling women to reassess their position *vis-à-vis* conventional (mis)representations: "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (*On Lies* 35). In the light of this methodology, women become active gazers who question their traditionally ascribed places and strive to free themselves from a constraining heterosexual paradigm. As a feminist lesbian poet, Rich plays a leading role in this awakening by refusing the male gaze and by deconstructing the heterosexual performance.[4]

Seeking to challenge the conventional depiction of women in literature, Rich sees in ekphrasis an invaluable approach due to its capacity "to expose the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire," as Mitchell describes (180). "Mourning Picture" (*Collected* 230-31), written in 1965, exemplifies the poet's use of ekphrasis with the aim of disclosing these power dynamics. As mentioned in the poem's epigraph, "Mourning Picture" is based on a conversation with the homonymous painting by Edwin Romanzo Elmer, a nineteenth-century portrait and still-life painter from Massachusetts who created this visual elegy for his daughter Effie, tragically dead at the age of nine. The painting features Elmer and his wife in the background, almost disappearing into its darkness while mourning their lost daughter. The couple's dim bereavement sharply contrasts with Effie who, despite being dead, is the liveliest element in the picture: bathed in sunlight, she stands confidently in the foreground with her toys and a lamb, symbols of her innocence and perpetual childhood. The painting is rather puzzling, not only for this contrast between the girl and her grieving parents, but also for

4 See Rich's "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," *On Lies* 185-94.

her location in the canvas: even though she is on the left side, she becomes the absolute center of the picture.

Rich's poem elaborates on this destabilizing position, presenting Effie as the sole speaking subject. Resorting to prosopopoeia and ekphrasis, the poet is capable of giving voice to the girl once multiply silenced: by her untimely death, by her father's painting, and by her gender (Heffernann 136-37, Loizeaux 137). Instead of dictating Effie's absence, death translates her into a powerful omnipresence endowed with omniscience; in the poem, she is fully knowledgeable of the past ("This was our world" 230), and the future ("They will move from the house" 231). Empowered by death and by the poem, Effie finds the strength to challenge her father's authority as maker of the painting:

> I could remake each shaft of grass
> feeling its rasp on my fingers,
> draw out the map of every lilac leaf
> or the net of veins on my father's
> grief-tranced hand. (230)

No longer entrapped in Elmer's painting, Effie claims agency as creator by threatening to remake his work and make it her own: "Should I make you, world, again" (231). The dialogue between the poem and the painting does not follow the Horatian "ut pictura poesis" dictum, since the girl's claim for agency causes tension between the verbal and the visual. Indeed, the poem succeeds in transferring the creator's authority from father to daughter, for the scene is now a projection of Effie's dream, located on the reverse of Elmer's painting: "Out of my head, half-bursting, / still filling, the dream condenses"; "I am Effie, you were my dream" (230-231). The ultimate speaker and maker in the poem, the girl positions herself as subject, repeating her name in order to reinforce a sense of self: "I am Effie, visible and invisible, / remembering and remembered" (230). Effie becomes the vanishing point where opposites meet, the subversive creator who finds herself as such in the realm of ekphrastic poetry.

Ideas of female authorship and authority are also at the core of "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus" (*The Will* 19), a poem seeking to undermine the quintessential myth of Orpheus which, as a cornerstone of the Western literary tradition, has established sexually differentiated roles in the lyric since the classical era, with Orpheus embodying the archetypal

male poet, and Eurydice the female muse. Written in 1968, Rich's poem is widely acknowledged as one of the most iconic compositions of the women's poetry movement, since it expresses the constraints afflicting women who have the ambition of being poets in a tradition that only accepts them as muses. As Irene Ramalho Santos reminds us, in the lyrical convention, a woman is expected to play the role of the muse, "an intermediary figure for the radically inhuman 'other' that grounds lyric poetry," hence devoid of any creative power herself: "she merely *transports* it and makes it available to the poet" ("Remembering" 181). This principle is utterly challenged in Rich's composition, as it is charged with ideas of female potential that destabilize the classical myth and, consequently, the tradition.

The poetic subject, the Death of Orpheus, is homonymous with one of the main characters in Jean Cocteau's 1950 *Orphée*, a modern adaptation of the Orpheus myth whose imagery is appropriated by Rich's poem. In the film, Death (also referred to as Princess) is played by the Spanish actress Maria Casarès, the ultimate femme fatale whose charismatic presence, long black dress and sleek dark hair render her character powerfully phallic, thus potentially unsettling. If, according to Mulvey's psychoanalytic reading, the female protagonist in cinema, besides being visually pleasing to the male gazer, is also the source of a castration anxiety due to her absent penis (438), then for the protagonist herself to stand as an embodiment of the phallus becomes even more disturbing. The threatening appearance of the Princess is further reinforced by her conventionally masculine demeanor, confident and assertive, completely in charge of the plot and in control of other characters—male and female. Although she is the domineering element in the film, she falters in the end due to her love for Orpheus, sacrificing herself to enable his immortality. Despite her strength to unsettle the law of the father, Death eventually succumbs in the film, painfully abiding by gender conventions.

The poetic speaker in Rich's poem is similarly ambiguous: though mature, dominant and strong, she is restricted in her potential for not being allowed to use it: "I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers / and those powers severely limited / by authorities whose faces I rarely see" (19). Overwhelmed and constricted by an anonymous system, both women stand nonetheless as a menace for their subversive potential which threatens to disturb the tradition. The poetic subject is swift and brave, capable of successfully coping with danger; she is a "woman with the nerves

of a panther / a woman with contacts among Hell's Angels" who walks with assurance and sees through the dark: "a woman sworn to lucidity / who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires / of these underground streets" (19). Actually, it is only a matter of time till her potential is finally released and put into action, as the speaker is driven by a risky mission, yet to be fulfilled, but on the way of effectively happening: "A woman with a certain mission / which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact" (19).

Being the death of Orpheus is deeply evocative of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, a poetic theory perceiving the lyrical tradition as an oedipal relationship between male poets seeking to overthrow their predecessor, the father, by misremembering him and interrupting the continuous flow of the tradition. In Rich's poem, however, Orpheus is implicitly killed not by a male poet, but by a woman, which ironically interrupts Bloom's own understanding of the tradition as a disruptive (and exclusively) father-son relationship. In fact, and as Santos puts forth, "the woman poet is the great interruptor [sic] of the tradition" ("Misremembering" 297); for women to claim the power of poetic creativity, asserting themselves as makers rather than carriers, the lyric has to be misread, misremembered, and interrupted.

The death of Orpheus opens an alternative space where man is no longer the absolute creator, and woman the passive muse. In this sense, the poetic speaker is related not only to Cocteau's character, Death, but also to Eurydice, the archetypal muse annihilated by Orpheus's gaze and whose absence enabled his poetic presence. As the gaze is reversed, the muse becomes the maker of the poem, looking at "her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind / on the wrong side of the mirror" (19). These lines resonate once again with *Orphée*, in which the mirror serves as a doorway into the underworld, a windy realm where the half-dead walk backwards. Rich appropriates the surrealist ambience of Cocteau's film so as to express the subversion of the tradition: normalcy is gone, order is reversed, and Eurydice is now the gazer, looking at herself on one side of the mirror, and at Orpheus on the "wrong side" of it. Orpheus is completely "othered," and his death symbolizes a change, both for the poet and the muse. Bearing in mind that the wind is a common symbol for poetic inspiration, then learning to walk against it means that the poet should now get his inspiration elsewhere, for the muse is no longer conveniently mute.

Nevertheless, despite the subversive potential of the poem, its title converts it into mere wishful thinking by circumscribing it to the sphere of the dream. In fact, it thoroughly illustrates Loizeaux's previously mentioned "feminist ekphrasis," since it exposes and challenges the power dynamics constitutive of a male literary tradition while simultaneously acknowledging the restricted location ascribed to women inside that tradition. The poem is profoundly ambiguous, as it entails both possibility and containment, projecting and restricting the poet's desire at the same time. Rather than changing the patterns of power in the poem, Rich's aim is to disclose them and open new possibilities through her poetry, empowering and motivating the readers to pursue and affect changes by themselves, outside the composition.

"I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus," as well as other poems in *The Will to Change*, clearly express the interest that Rich had in cinema during the 1960s. Particularly enthusiastic about postwar Italian movies and French cinema, the poet was especially appreciative of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean-Luc Godard: "I was very much struck by Godard's use of language and image in films . . . It suggested a way of making images work" (qtd. in Montenegro 17). Rich's comment on Godard's use of images manifestly reflects her concerns as a prominent feminist poet in the 1960s, trying to find a language that "worked" by entwining poetry with political activism. Driven by an ethical aesthetics, *The Will to Change* incorporates images with the purpose of meticulously exploring verbal language and its (in)capacity to do something while intersecting the political with the lyrical. Poems such as "Pierrot Le Fou," "The Photograph of the Unmade Bed," "Images for Godard," and "Shooting Script," are strongly expressive of Rich's use of ekphrasis with an ethic and aesthetic purpose.

"Shooting Script" (51-67), for example, is completely based on techniques that are specific to cinema. The poem follows the process of shooting a film, (apparently) immediate and growing into unexpected directions. The title itself, "Shooting Script," conveys a sense of cinematic impermanence; here, Rich puts into practice what she had previously written in "Images for Godard," namely that "the notes for the poem are the only poem" (49). Choosing notes over traditional forms, according to Claire Keyes, creates a fragmented composition made up of different parts that work as a jigsaw puzzle, combining into multiple meanings and forming a pattern similar to a montage (123-25). The appropriation of film

techniques such as montage, close-ups, fade-outs and fade-ins, besides disrupting the logic and sequence of verbal discourse, has the effect of urging the reader's participation; as Keyes comments, "while she [Rich] writes the script, we create the 'movie' in our minds by assembling the various shots" (125). By resorting to ekphrasis as a social practice, Rich asks the reader to participate in the poem not only by actively constructing it, but also by acting outside of it. Indeed, the verbs in the final section incite to action and change—"to see," "to read," "to reread," "to find," "to know" (67)—expressing the poet's political activism of the 1960s and her ethical desire to inspire change through poetry.

Despite the stimulating possibilities offered by the visual arts, "Shooting Script" ends with the affirmation that words should be chosen over pictures, and that the "temptations of the projector" (67) must be resisted. Written in 1975, "Cartographies of Silence" (*The Dream* 16-20) returns to and reinforces this point, elaborating on the difficulties of working with the arduous "film of the abstract" (17) and conveying the poet's attempt to escape it by seeking refuge in the visual image. In the poem, this soothing image is borrowed from Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent film, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. Produced in 1928, *La Passion* is considered a cinematic landmark for its camera-work, given that most of the film is shot in close-ups, a device commonly used by silent cinema in order to magnify the face of the speaker and enhance the expressive content of the words, transforming "the human physiognomy into a huge field of action," as put by Erwin Panofsky (157). Though devoid of words, the silent film has a language of its own, based on movement and on the expressivity of the actors' faces:

> The silence that strips bare:
> In Dreyer's *Passion of Joan*
>
> Falconetti's face, hair shorn, a great geography
> mutely surveyed by the camera (18)

The ekphrastic dialogue with Dreyer's film focuses on its leading actress, Maria Falconetti, playing Joan of Arc. In spite of *La Passion* being a silent film, its silence is filled with meaning; as Panofsky points out, silent films are never mute, and their absence of sound only enhances the presence and strength of the visual (156-157). The close-up on Falconetti

turns her face into the absolute center of both the screen and the poem, featuring her "great geography" as the perfect signifier dismissive of words. Is this the materialization of Rich's utopian natural sign, the previously mentioned "monumental head" and "great unitary visual image" capable of doing away with words? The poet is indeed profoundly mesmerized by the sight of "Falconetti's face," to the point of yearning for an alternative poetry:

> If there were a poetry where this could happen
> not as blank spaces or as words
>
> stretched like a skin over meanings
> but as silence falls at the end
>
> of a night through which two people
> have talked till dawn (18)

Were such poetry possible, then words would be unnecessary, hence releasing the signified from the confinements of the signifier. Still, despite these limits that make visual images so tempting, the poet chooses words: "No. Let me have this dust, / these pale clouds dourly lingering, these words / moving with ferocious accuracy" (19). Adamantly refusing the visual temptations in a quasi-religious catharsis, the poet confirms her choice for verbal language. Even if words are sheer abstraction, this is the "method" she has elected:

> If from time to time I envy
> the pure annunciations to the eye
>
> the *visio beatifica*
> if from time to time I long to turn
>
> like the Eleusinian hierophant
> holding up a simple ear of grain
> for return to the concrete and everlasting world
> what in fact I keep choosing
>
> are these words, these whispers, conversations
> from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green. (20)

Instead of reflecting a simplistic view on images, Rich's ekphrases serve the purpose of putting words and images into conflict so as to reinforce her faith in language. Rich's choice for the verbal is in line with Krieger's argument that, in the twentieth-century, "ut pictura poesis" gives way to "ut poesis pictura," as the natural-sign representation is outshined by the unpredictability and ambiguity emanating from the arbitrariness of language, especially in poetry (24). Drawing on Edmund Burke, Krieger describes how words, unlike the pictorial arts, are exempt from the faithful description of external reality, hence "freer to give us emotionally" (100). As the "aesthetics of distance" gives way to the "aesthetics of empathy," poetic language, with all its vagueness and obscurity, becomes a powerful medium "to work upon the reader's *emotions*"; in Krieger's insightful conclusion, "[t]he very weakness . . . of language as a surrogate natural sign is the source of its strength as a stimulus of emotion" (102-103). Verbal language, no matter how ambiguous and strenuous, is absolutely essential to Rich because, as a political poet, it is what allows her to foster the aesthetics of empathy required to connect with the readers: "this is the oppressor's language // yet I need it to talk to you" (*Collected* 364).

During the 1960s and 1970s, ekphrasis reinforced Rich's faith in poetry to make things happen. Besides allowing her to instigate a transformative cultural re-vision of conventional female representations ("What we see, we see / and seeing is changing" *The Will* 14), ekphrasis enabled her as well to test the boundaries of her artistic medium, giving her the chance to "experience language as language" (Santos, "Trans-Nationalism" 49). It is the conflict between the visual and the verbal that drives the poet "to the limits / of the city of words" (*The Will* 47), creating an intermedial gap that allows her to know her artistic medium. Although Rich has always been aware that "[l]anguage cannot do everything" (*The Dream* 19), her work from this period was driven by a firm belief that poetry could actually transform society: in her own words, "the moment of change is the only poem" (*The Will* 49). However, and as Cynthia Hogue points out, it is not easy to find a language capable of impelling the reader to action; in the end, "[w]ords do not translate unproblematically into material change" (184-185). It is true that language cannot do everything, and that poetry itself does not change anything; as bitterly (and ironically) put by W. H. Auden, "poetry makes nothing happen" (940). In fact, poetry is not supposed to do nor say anything; according to Santos, "the wondrous

power of poetry" is "not to say, but to question" ("Trans-Nationalism" 56), and here lies the invaluable cultural work that Rich's poetry did back then, and continues doing today, ceaselessly interrogating language, culture, politics, and itself.

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