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The Unslept Unslept Elsewhere:
Radical Contemporaneity in the Last Poems of Adrienne Rich

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I have never believed that poetry is an escape from history...

—Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There:*
Notebooks on Poetry and Politics

Abstract

There are two perspectives on the commoditized present: one, a reified *now* which is based on a perpetual holiday from social reality and another, a radical contemporaneity which embraces the “foreverness” of the present through a commitment to change. The notion of contemporaneity in Adrienne Rich’s poems written from 2005 onwards especially the volume titled *TNPWS: Poems: 2007-2010* responds ethically and politically to the market version of the eternalized ‘now’ which is self-induced forgetting. In choosing to be part of a political community, the *contemporary* in Adrienne Rich embraces the *now* as a life lived through, in and for the others. The sense of being one with the age in which you live through its social and political problems and the demand that these issues be addressed dominate Adrienne Rich’s poet-persona in her last work. Illness and coming of death offer an insight into the nature of the contemporaneous; they throw light on the idea that the present continues as life moves from the past into the future. In contrast to a notion of the “contemporary” as one who forgets and then drifts into nostalgia, the contemporary in Rich is one who, though falling asleep, is “not oblivious/ of the unslept unslept/ elsewhere.”

Keywords

Contemporaneity, history, poverty, sickness, radical

Başka Yerlerdeki Uyumayan Uyumamışlar: Adrienne Rich'in Son Dönem Şiirlerinde Radikal Eşzamanlılık

Şiirin tarihten bir kaçış olduğuna asla inanmadım.

—Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There:*

Notebooks on Poetry and Politics

(Orada Bulunanlar: Şiir ve Politika Defterleri)

Öz

Metalaştırılmış şimdiki zamana yönelik iki bakış açısı vardır. İlki, sosyal gerçeklikten ve başkalarından ebedi uzaklaşmaya dayanan şeyleşmiş şimdi; ikincisi ise içinde bulunulan anın “ebediyetini” değişime adanmışlıkla kucaklayan radikal eşzamanlılıktır. Adrienne Rich’in 2005 sonrası şiirlerinde, özellikle *TNPWS: Şiirler: 2007-2010* başlıklı eserinde, eşzamanlılık kavramı pazarlanmakta olan ve tercihe bağlı unutmaya olarak da düşünülebilecek ebedileştirilmiş “şimdi”ye etik ve politik bir tepkidir. Bu şiirlerdeki çağdaş persona, politik bir topluluğun üyesi olma seçimiyle, şimdikiyi geçirilen, içinde olunan ve başkaları için yaşanan bir hayat olarak kabul eder. Ele alınmasını istediği sosyal ve politik sorunların yaşandığı dönemle bir olma Adrienne Rich’in son eserindeki şiir personalarında baskın bir eğilimdir. Hastalık ve yaklaşan ölüm eşzamanlılığın doğasını kavramaya yardımcı olur; hayat geçmişten geleceğe ilerlerken, şimdiki zamanın eşzamanlı olarak devam etmekte olduğu düşüncesine ışık tutar. Unutan ve nostaljiye kapılan “çağdaş” kişi kavramının aksine, Rich’in çağdaş personası uykuya dalsa bile “bihaber değildir/başka yerlerdeki/uyumayan uyumamışlardan.”

Anahtar Kelimeler

Eşzamanlılık, tarih, yoksulluk, hastalık, radikal

1. Poetry makes history happen

“A poem may be written in the moment but it does its work in time” (xv), is how the foreword to *The Fact of a Doorframe* begins. The selected poems from 1950 to 2001 is dedicated “for my teachers-present and gone.” The moment of the creation of the poem is different from “its work in time” though it is difficult to separate one from the other. The former is of significance to the poet because of its potential to alter things in the present; the latter happens in the course of time. “Radical contemporaneity” is the *present* of creation, a politicization of time through a consciousness of the world around oneself. The point of contemporaneity is where a language rooted in ambiguity and paradox struggles against metaphor and conceit in the poetic discourse. What makes the contemporaneity radical is its ability to see the present as the bearer of the past marching towards the here and now, a present that is “political” because it seeks to emancipate the body from the clutches of power. Contemporaneity is not radical when the present is commoditized to give an illusion of “forever” to things as happens in a fantasy where someone could stay in one time-frame for all times. The Jennifer Lopez song “On the Floor” (2011) which stands in the list of most viewed YouTube videos, celebrates a fantastic kind of forgetting, where you “Dance the night away/ Live your life and stay young on the floor/ Dance the night way/ Grab somebody drink a little more.” The present in which you “dance the night away” and seek to “live your life and stay young on the floor” is an apolitical present because one chooses to forget for the sake of forgetting. It is a forgetting that obliterates one’s memory of who one is; where one does not examine the consequences of a struggle-free holiday to one’s selfhood and dignity. The memory of pain is “liberating” when it produces empathy towards suffering in the form of compassion and when a painful past can be used as platform for legitimate claims to social and political justice. The ecstasy of forgetting is a refusal to accept the reality of pain and instead leave it to time without confronting the source of the pain. Remembering “pain” is a complex act and as Krista Ratcliffe notes that in the case of women living in patriarchal order

Remembering, telling stories, and describing serve similar functions. These invention strategies foreground the concrete experiences of a woman living within patriarchy and imagining other kinds of living. In the process, they enable each woman

to remember, or put together, the fragmented pieces of her life, to offer readings of her experiences that present her truths; they also conceptualize the patriarchal structures in which a woman's experiences occur. (130-131)

Neither pain nor remembering is to be "romanticized;" they must be questioned in the interests of self-preservation in the face of violence and brutality. The struggle for a victim is not to revel in a victim status but to act bearing in mind the body's wholeness. Consumerist utopias are flooded with notions of permanence and promises of forever. What makes them reactionary is the conspicuous absence of struggle in the formation of a self.

In Adrienne Rich's last poems, poetry is not an innocent bystander gazing at the world, but a participant that refuses readers the pleasure of empathy. The politicized present is about action. It is about reinventing oneself in relation to one's own position in the world. Refusing to give any conclusions for the essay, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), Rich speaks of "enlarging the range of accountability" (*Blood, Bread and Poetry* 123). She further adds:

I know that in the rest of my life, the next half century or so, every aspect of my identity will have to be engaged. The middle-class white girl taught to trade obedience for privilege. The Jewish lesbian raised to be a heterosexual gentile. The woman who first heard oppression named and analyzed in the Black Civil Rights struggle. The woman with three sons, the feminist who hates male violence...The woman trying as part of her resistance to clean up her act. (*Blood, Bread and Poetry* 123)

Rich's poetry is a lifelong attempt to respond, argue and wrestle intellectually with Auden's statement "For poetry makes nothing happen...it survives, A way of happening, a mouth." Poetry not only can make something happen, it *must* make it as well. Poetry cannot be merely surviving or just be "a way of happening." That's the kind of banal poetry which is not rooted in the lives of the masses. It is incapable of commenting on the world around with a *poetic* insight; in the sense in which Baldwin refers to poets as "the only people who know the truth about us" (51). As a poet of the dispossessed, Rich's last poems stand out as testament giving voice to the indignation of the oppressed. Poetry makes history happen by speaking for someone

who is in need of a voice. To a question on the relationship “between poetry and politics,” Rich responded, “I define “politics” in this sense as the on-going collective struggle for liberation and for the power to create—not only works of art, but also just and nonviolent social institutions. There is no way I can see that the poet can stand outside all that. How to make poetry adequate to the crisis we’re now in, is another question” (Edwards). Creating a work of art complements the making of “just and nonviolent institutions.” The “political” in the poem or the work of art is not about “politics” in the limited sense of the term which would be the functioning of governments or the shaping of agendas in protest movements. To be neutral is the securest way of being apolitical; by not endorsing any agenda one supports power and privilege. There is no work of art that could be apolitical because its claims to neutrality are rooted in a specific political culture. A committed poet like Adrienne Rich translates the political into a way of life through a personal ethic, and uses the way of life as basis to articulate emotional issues. Poetry does not exist in the void of mental space but operates as a force through which social relations are constituted in meaningful ways. “I knew/ how to make poetry happen” says the poet-persona to “Axel Avákar: fictive poet, counter muse, brother” in the poem “Axel: backstory” (TNPWS 43). Poetry has to be made to “happen” rather than be written using empty, clichéd phrases that dissociate aesthetics from politics. The “happening” is about poets choosing a perspective that takes the position of the marginalized in order to look at emotional issues. A popular term such as “love” for example is treated as universal irrespective of time and space in popular culture and through ritualistic behavior associated with something like the “Valentine’s Day” with its heterosexist connotations. Poetry that *happens* uses the affective value of words to respond to moral crises in specific ways to challenge power. Through the happening, poetry becomes alive to the presence of others. “*If not with others, how?*” (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 209) is the last line and the title of the 1985 essay that is a one-line synopsis of the poetry that makes the world happen.

2. Last or Final Poems

What does the poetry written before one’s own death stand for? Does it have to be a “will and testament” for readers to take the position of judges and jurors as to the lasting value of the work as a whole? What term would appropriately describe the poems written close to

one's death? These are not rhetorical questions with a prepared answer. These are questions that determine how to approach Adrienne Rich's poetry as a whole; whether to place them at the end of her career as a writer or view them as a final announcement for a radically different understanding of the world emerging from illness and the proximity to death.

"Last" or "final" poems: poems that either testify, as in the former, to a future looking at the past, or, as in the latter, to a sense of finality intrinsic to any work. Either way, these are external terms, attached to a writer's work and not something that the writer is attempting to give the work. A "later" poem is a euphemism that combines what is the last with what ought to be the final. Apart from the editorial decision on what term should be used to describe a writer's work composed at the end of her life, the fact remains that these works are placed under a different scanner in comparison to the rest of the work done at different points of her life. An approach that uses age as barometer to measure a writer's last works, especially one who lived to be eighty-two, will insist on using age as vantage point to speak of what makes her work different from anything she wrote earlier. If it is not about age or aging it is an acknowledgment of a world that is moving on despite the poetry and because of it. The paradox is sustained when time is seen within a social context as human experience occurring in relation to others and not a metaphysical feature of a life lived in and through the mind. Social relations define time as they do everything else. If social relations are fluid and revolve around meanings attributed to experience of the world, time can only be relative and dependent on how those relations are forged.

If it is not a time dedicated to the idea of "forever," it has to be a time dedicated to the here and now. The sentimental time of romantic love as embodied in popular films such as the Mel Gibson starring *Forever Young* (1992) uses the tagline, "Time waits for no man, but true love waits forever." The notion of "true love" as waiting forever is false because it does not incorporate the changing nature of human relations where a person is affected by the people one meets at different points in one's life. Just as a person changes in relation to the kind of people one meets, the nature of the love too necessarily alters. The idea that one waits or one must wait "forever" in order for true love to happen is a fantasy that takes away the role of agency in changing one's life. To

say that one's love is "forever young" is fine as long as one is making choices in creating relations that enhance one's sense of selfhood. True love that insists that one must wait forever is anything but true because it reinforces passivity when it comes to how one ought to think about one's emotional life. Unlike the fantastic forever where people are supposed to wait for their lives to change, in the political time of Adrienne Rich's poetry, transformation is about creating the conditions for a just social order. It is not a time that looks for "afterlife" in the present through constructed notions of what constitutes "true love" and why it is "forever." In an earlier poem "Living Memory", the question is posed as: "Time's/ power, the only just power-would you/ give it away?" (*Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* 140-41). Time's power is the power of labor that cannot be given away for wages; it is the power to create and be creative. The power to imagine and transform is rooted in present time without any attempt to discover God in that present. In recognizing the transitory nature of the present, a present that is not attached to a notion of "forever," a present that is not connected to afterlife, we see the politicized present of Adrienne Rich's end poems. I insist on using the word "end" rather than "last" or "final" or the more euphemistic "later" poems for the reason that the poems are written to denote a sense of completion. The poems do not complete in the sense of a revelation coming at the end, but complete as in offering a sense of immediacy to the present that we don't see in the earlier poems. Though the article uses the year 2005 and the poem "Letters Censored Shredded Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send" to denote everything after that as "end" poems it is purely a distinction reflecting a sense of urgency in Rich's work as a whole. Rich's passionate need to reflect on change is as old as the poetry itself and the line "Life has the final word" from the poem "Life and Letters" in the collection *A Change of World* (1951) (*Collected Early Poems* 53), offers a glimpse into the later Rich who is contemplating the politics of a changing world with the youthful immediacy of her early work. The difference is that the immediacy invested in the present becomes intensive in an epigrammatic way in the end poems.

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 (*Later Poems* 512)

“The signature to a life” (2011) and whatever it “requires,” – is a way of making a statement on the past while connecting with the future. Signature is a short form to a name but reveals personality more than a name could do. Signatures are creative acts whereas names are given. Names belong to the past since one is born with one, unconscious of the processes that go into the naming; signatures are invented to fill the void of the future through memory that one creates for oneself in the imagination of others. The “search for a method” Rich talks about involves a “rejection of posturing” and “trust in the witnesses” which is not just a way of looking for coherence within the chaos of experience. The “search” moves beyond the role of economic contradictions, which form the basis of class society, as the “engine” of history. It is the role of the individual as “writer” who consciously works to undo the contradictions. The reality of class as the principal contradiction around which revolves every other contradiction rooted in misogyny and racism dominates Rich’s poems written towards the end of her life. The “Ballade of the Poverties” is filled with haunting images of the victims of class society, alienated in their condition as have-nots and left to perish without choice.

There’s the poverty of cheap luggage bursted open at
immigration
The poverty of the turned head, the averted eyes
The poverty of bored sex of tormented sex
The poverty of the bounced check the poverty of the dumpster
dive
The poverty of the pawned horn the poverty of the smashed
reading glasses
The poverty pushing the sheeted gurney the poverty cleaning up
the puke
The poverty of the pavement artist the poverty passed-out on
pavement (*TNPWS* 55)

In *Search for a Method*, Sartre speaks of “the role of the individual in the historic event” (130) in determining his or her existence. The

poverties that Rich condemns are not a static condition where time comes to a grinding halt. The search for a method has a strong Marxist-existential orientation to it; to quote Sartre it is a recognition of what the individual does while being within history and acting against historical forces.

It is the individual, alienated, reified, mystified, as he has been to be by the division of labor and by exploitation, but struggling against alienation with the help of distorting instruments and, despite everything, patiently gaining ground. The dialectical totalization must include acts, passions, work, and need as well as economic categories; it must at once place the agent or the event back into the historical setting, define him in relation to the orientation of becoming, and determine exactly the meaning of the present as such.

(Search for a Method 133)

The individual struggling against alienation is the “girl finding her method: you want friends / you’re going to have to write / letters to strangers” (*TNPWS* 20). The method lies in identification with the minority and the marginalized through “letters” written to “strangers.” The early formation of a method which reaches out to the alienated is at the heart of Rich’s politics. The “signature to a life” like Rich’s own determines the “meaning of the present” through a poetry that refuses to serve.

Tonight I think
no poetry
will serve

Syntax of rendition:

verb pilots the plane
adverb modifies action
 verb force-feeds noun
 submerges the subject

noun is choking

verb disgraced goes on doing

now diagram the sentence (*TNPWS 25*)

A poetry refuses to serve – if “serve” should mean, “work for, be a servant to,” an order dedicated to taking away individual autonomy is a poetry that declares the autonomy of the written word. Poetry thus refuses to decorate “the dinner table of the power which holds it hostage” (Nichols). The reference to time is important because the refusal to serve must happen “tonight” itself – “on or during the present or coming night” (*The Free Dictionary*). If tonight poetry will not serve the status quo, tonight is when the “poverties” of the world will come to an end.

3. Poetry that Refuses to Serve

Poetry that refuses to assist in the subjugation of the “noun” by the “verb”; the “force-fed” noun chokes in the face of the violence of the verb; the power to act belongs to the oppressor, the power to hold on to themselves through minor acts of resistance belongs to the oppressed. What are the choices given to the noun to fight back when passive resistance is crushed through force-feeding whenever it comes close to challenging state power! Poetry cannot serve a system that force-feeds in order to legitimize its own existence, though “disgraced” in the public eye. From the family to the law to prisons, the politics of force-feeding becomes the basis for institutional life. Junk food which is a manifestation of global consumerism uses “force-feeding” as a technique of ideological persuasion. “Force-feeding” is the face of neoliberal economy and a method of torture used by repressive apparatuses such as the army, police and medical professionals in state-run hospitals instrumental in executing a policy that keeps people alive without recognition of human dignity. The violence of institutional power and what happens to individuals in it is at the crux of a system that thrives on “force-feeding” either food or lies manufactured through media. The physical nature of the violence is based on either incarcerating dissenting individuals or reducing them to bodies without a will or choice to determine for themselves the kind of life they wish to lead.

In “Fragments of an Opera” from “New and Unpublished Poems,” we catch a glimpse of the Marxist Antonio Gramsci persecuted by poverty, illness and imprisonment.

A kind of mind
That would address
Duress
Outward in larger terms

A mind inhaling exigency
From first breath
Knows poverty
Of mind
As death

Whose body must
Find its own mind (*Later Poems* 498)

The prosecutor aware of what the revolutionary imagination is capable of achieving in terms of influencing public opinion, adds, “We must prevent this mind from functioning for twenty years” (*Later Poems* 498). In the General Introduction to *Prison Notebooks* Quintin

Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith note

At his (Gramsci’s) trial in 1928, the official prosecutor ended his peroration with the famous demand to the judge: “We must stop this brain working for twenty years!” But, although Gramsci was to be dead long before those twenty years were up, released, his health broken, only in time to die under guard in a clinic rather than in prison, yet for as long as his physique held out his jailers did not succeed in stopping his brain from working. The product of those years of slow death in prison were the 2,848 pages of handwritten notes which he left to be smuggled out of the clinic and out of Italy after his death...(xviii)

An earlier poem of Rich, dated 2005, titled “Letters Censored Shredded Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send” ends with the line “[*prevent this mind*]” (*Later Poems* 440). The physical suffering of the revolutionary Marxist produced through the isolation of prison life, whose mind feels “exigency,” makes fascism a reality. The sense of exigency we see in Gramsci dominates Rich’s end poems, especially the bitter and indignant revulsion at the “poverties” of the world. The “princes” of “predation,” “finance” and “weaponry” who make the poverty real, the “princes” “who will never learn through words,” (*TNPWS* 56) to them, the poem is a “mirror/ you can look into” (*TNPWS* 56). Art provides a mirror for the powerful to examine their narcissistic obsession with power. Art in a non-violent way uses criticism as weapon to awaken the social and moral conscience. The effort of the will in sustaining the body despite all odds is important not just because the “princes” need those bodies for their own selves. Where wealth and power are viewed as “natural” to members of a certain class who enjoy privilege, it becomes imperative for them to convince the poor that the condition of the latter as the exploited is a natural one. If the exploited are bodies deprived of emotional or social existence by virtue of their condition as the “wretched of the earth” caught in a system of isolation and deprivation that complement one another, Rich’s end poems look at the body as having the revolutionary potential to fight an unequal system. In the end poems it is the body making decisions for the mind and not the other way round.

The abstract conceptual nature of time and history are challenged in the face of the body’s reality. In the poem, “Benjamin Revisited,” Rich gently mocks the apocalyptic vision of history with messianic overtones that he espouses in his “On the Concept of History” (1940):

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [*verweilen*: a reference to Goethe’s *Faust*], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed.

But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm.

In Rich's version of history we see an anti-messianic tone because revolutions do not happen in the apocalyptic manner through the storm called "progress" which blows from a timeless "paradise" into the future. Revolution is a physical thing like the body itself. It is the bodies of the poor and the downtrodden that are at stake and not merely their minds which are dehumanized with the body's enslavement. There is no angel to bring them out of their despondency; notions of time built around this one moment when the whole world is expected to dramatically change are nowhere close to the real world.

The angel
of history is
flown

now meet the janitor
down
in the basement who
shirtless smoking

has the job of stoking
the so-called past
into the so-called present. (2007) (TNPWS 17)

It is not the "angel of history" who changes the world, but the janitor whose sense of time is neither a philosophical nor an intellectual one¹. Working "in the basement," "shirtless" and "smoking," the janitor's vision of time is connected to the existence of his body. What we see is poetry that refuses to fall back on a sentimentalized version of the past; poetry that refuses to give time a "metaphysical" dimension outside the domain of human experience²; poetry that refuses to see time other than in human action and through praxis; or, in simpler terms, poetry

that refuses to be disconnected from the body. The body undergoing persecution for attempting to liberate the world and the body writing “From Sickbed Shores” (TNPWS 35) are one and the same body.

From shores of sickness: skin of the globe stretches and
snakes
out and in room sound of the universe bearing
undulant wavelengths to an exhausted ear

(sick body in a sick country: can it get well?)

*what is it anyway to exist as
matter to
matter?)*

All, all is remote from here (TNPWS 35)

The remoteness of the body in a state of sickness complements the remoteness that the body experiences while in prison. The sick, broken body of a child coming out of poverty and growing up to be a revolutionary fits the ideal image for a dying poet to associate her selfhood with.

Scene One: Ales, Sardinia, 19-

Child's voice (Antonio):

from this beam
the doctors think
I can hang straight
In this har
Ness dang
ling

dai
ly
grow how
I
should be (*Later Poems* 496)

The revolutionary and the artist are enemies of an authoritarian regime, “sick body in a sick country,” that cannot get well unless an unequal system comes to an end. “The serious revolutionary, like the serious artist, can’t afford to lead a sentimental or self-deceiving life. Patience, open eyes, and critical imagination are required of both kinds of creativity” (*A Human Eye* 67). The body that resists violence of state power and the body that resists illness and dying through creative art thrive on a similar politics. In both cases, mortality is taken as the basis for looking at one’s relation to time and life itself. In one of his last letters, Gramsci writes to his son “Darling Delio,”

I think you must like history, as I liked it when I was your age, because it deals with living people, and everything that concerns people, as many people as possible, all the people in the world in so far as they unite together in society, and work and struggle and make a bid for a better life, all that can’t fail to please you more than anything else. Isn’t that right? (*Prison Letters* 290)

The same deep and poignant vision of “living people, and everything that concerns people, as many people as possible, all the people in the world” dominates Rich’s understanding of poetry in relation to the future of the world. The importance of history is the connection it has with masses; how they strive to improve their condition despite being compelled to live a subhuman existence. The appeal of history is not because of its universality where every individual or group discovers a relation with the past but rather for the attempts people make to transform their lives. While speaking of his own love of history, Gramsci sees in it an opportunity for the son to explore human condition which is a struggle for betterment in the face of nature and other human-made inequalities. History’s aesthetic value is not fundamentally different from poetry. There is a poetic aspect to history; likewise, there is a historical dimension to poetry. Poetry is the subtext to history because it provides with the language of struggles

that the past is all about. Poetry is the argument that the oppressed classes will propose in the face of glaring inequalities.

For now, poetry has the capacity—in its own ways and by its own means—to remind us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future: a still-uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession, the subjection of women, torture and bribes, outcast and tribe, but on the continuous redefining of freedom—that word now held under house arrest by the rhetoric of the “free” market. This ongoing future, written off over and over, is still within view. All over the world its paths are being rediscovered and reinvented: through collective action, through many kinds of art. Its elementary condition is the recovery and redistribution of the world’s resources that have been extracted from the many by the few. (*A Human Eye* 125)

If art has one aim it ought to be “the recovery and redistribution of the world’s resources;” poetry counters the propaganda of “free” market which is freedom for the few as opposed to enslavement of the many. It is through poetry that history is rewritten in a manner that includes the weak and impoverished. The language of the “free” market is about persuading people to consume with their bodies and their minds leaving no space for critical reflection; it is in poetry that one could discover an antidote to consumerism. An earlier essay “Notes toward a Politics of Location” (1984) makes reference to Rich as a very young girl thinking in the same almost universal terms in a childlike spirit.

When I was ten or eleven, early in World War II, a girlfriend and I used to write each other letters which we addressed like this:

Adrienne Rich
14 Edgevale Road
Baltimore, Maryland
The United States of America
The Continent of North America
The Western Hemisphere

The Earth

The Solar System

The Universe

You could see your own house as a tiny fleck on an ever-widening landscape, or as the center of it all from which the circles expanded into the infinite unknown.

(*Blood, Bread and Poetry* 211-212)

“Adrienne Rich,” whose address is traced to the universe; the need to be part of a social and mental universe greater than the one she is born into is seen in the last part of “From Sickbed Shores.” Illness creates an intense awareness of the present where one becomes conscious of oneself as body on a stage with the mind playing the role of spectator. It is time manifesting itself as *itself* in and through the human person without the mask of health or happiness inducing a kind of self-forgetting. Through the sense of remoteness or of being far from “life” there is at once boundlessness combined with the poet-as-spectator looking at her own experience of time as if happening to another person.

From the shores of sickness you lie out on listless
waters with no boundaries floodplain without horizon
...
Somewhere else being the name of whatever once said your
 name
and you answered now the only where is here this dull
 floodplain
this body sheathed in indifference sweat no longer letting
the fever out
but coating it in oil You could offer any soul-tricking
 oarsman
whatever coin you're still palming but there's a divide

between the shores of sickness and the legendary, purifying
river of death You will have this tale to tell, you will have
 to live
to tell
this tale (*TNPWS* 37)

While power consolidates structures of authority, illness radicalizes the mind at the same time that it slows down the body. Sickness violates the possibility of an identity because of its ability to disorient body and mind. Spontaneity or the attempt to produce feeling seem unnatural to “this body sheathed in indifference.” There is a divide separating the “shores of sickness” from the “river of death;” the sickness is an existential as well as a social condition refusing to “escape from history.” Sickness reinforces the historicity of poetry as much as it poeticizes history bringing it out of the clutches of a one-dimensional view of the past as an objective record of events. To write through one’s illness and the prospect of dying is not about reducing them to a metaphor but to discover the creative potential of the body experiencing gradual breakdown to read the past and put it in perspective . It is not a struggle for meaning or identity but for clarity, a need to “live to tell this tale.” If clarity is what the “shores of sickness” provide through an insight into the “floodplain without horizon,” it acknowledges that there is only a “present” which is shared by the past and the future and the nature of writing is that you are functioning within that present. As Hagglund notes,

The function of writing in general is to mediate between past and future through inscriptions that are characterized by the becoming-space of time as well as by the becoming-time of space. On the one hand, the written is always already an inscription of memory, a trace of the past that spatializes time. On the other hand, the written can only be read after its inscription and is thus marked by a relation to the future that temporalizes space. The reason for writing in the first place is to preserve what happens as a memory for the future, which constitutes both the possibility of repetition and its inevitable counterpart: the threat of extinction, of forgetting. (Hagglund72)

If the writing of history finds fertile expression through poetry, it is because the latter has the power to straddle memory and “the threat of extinction, of forgetting.” The question is not whether human memory can be separated from the experience of dying. The question is how the experience of dying uses memory as a tool for the artist to look beyond and explore other possibilities of life. The attempt towards some kind of a contemporaneity where one is always already with the present is not just a way of dealing with grief. It is political in its endeavor to make a community to which one belongs, and radical in its choice of people who will be members of that community.

4. Writing History Backward

While contemporaneity in Rich extends from the past into the future, it refuses to fall into a linear narrative of time but instead uses the present as a podium to articulate a poetics of resistance. The rejection of the verb is rejection of the idea of action as intrinsically bound to *tense*. The politics of *tense* is related to how grammar becomes the basis of language in its standardized forms which is at variance with language used by the “woman of the citizen party” who “is writing history backward” (TNPWS 76). Grammatical correctness complements political correctness in day-to-day speech. The established use of *tense* is the basis of the social and political order. Legalism and bureaucracy as the machinery of the state are rooted in a language that stands for “moral” authority with the power to inflict punishments. Nietzsche says, “I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in grammar” (170). If “tonight no poetry will serve,” it is because the authority of grammar as God used to control meaning(s) is challenged. If a social order uses grammar as weapon to control meaning, political art radicalizes how we look at the past by deconstructing the grammar of time, the grammar used to argue and justify work as a social value in the bourgeois world, the same value that defends a system based on wage-slavery and the politics of consumption rooted in the grammar of advertisements. Grammar becomes the ideological substructure to unite diverse kinds of oppression embodied as law and government. The opposition of poetry to grammar is more than for stylistic purposes. Poetry refuses to be in the service of grammar because the latter functions to justify the use of violence. The poeticizing of history is not only a way of thinking about operations of power through the eyes of victors but also about narrating the past to include victims of the violence of power.

Though the term “radicalization” has become fashionable in media discourse to connote gradual extremization towards a particular ideology, political art is not merely about ideology but what Baldwin calls “the artist’s struggle for integrity” which, according to him, “must be considered as a kind of metaphor for the struggle, which is universal and daily, of all human beings on the face of this globe to get to become human beings” (50-51). Radical poetry like radical politics works to defeat the ideological agenda of a bureaucracy of grammarians. The poet’s struggle for integrity is to refuse to submit to the need to write for a market in exchange for a false sense of security. Radical politics by definition involves having a personal moral code and going through private struggle keeping public transformation in mind. The ability to go through the struggles defines the nature of the politics as well because any expectation of change demands an exorbitant price to be paid at the personal level. Rich is conscious of what it means to live one’s life without making compromises with the powers that be.

Z: I hated that job but You’d have taken it too if you’d had a family

Y: Pretty filthy and dangerous though wasn’t it?

Z: Those years, one bad move, you were down on your knees begging for work

Zz: If you’d had a family! Who’d you think we were, just people standing around?

Yy: Filthy and dangerous like the streets I worked before you ever met me?

Zz: Those years you never looked at any of us. Staring into your own eyelids. Like you saw a light there. Can you see me now? (TNPWS 29)

The struggles interestingly are not made on public platforms or before the media but in private spaces where there is neither camera nor stage. Unless those struggles are made in one’s conscience, with friends, neighbors, family, at home, in the workplace or on a street, what happens on a more visible platform in the glare of public eye could be cynical politics aspiring to piecemeal changes with governments playing the role of a public “charity” without the required social program to register meaningful and lasting progress. This becomes obvious in the case of

the rights of women and working classes. Politics of resistance must invariably be different from the politics of power. Politics of power relies on reinterpretation of the past to suit the agenda of specific interest groups. Resistance looks at the future and the present for its politics while it strategically approaches the past to avoid excesses that in the end replace one tyranny with another. The self-serving nature of power makes it different from resistance. Refusal to submit to “illusions” determines the meaning of weapons used to struggle against inequality.

—*No illusions at this table.* Spoken from her time back into mine. I’m the dreaming ghost, guest, waitress, watcher, wanting the words to be true.

Whatever the weapons may come to mean (*TNPWS* 32)

Being radical is not just about ideologically positioning oneself in relation to reality. Radical contemporaneity is about creating connections outside one’s own self while acknowledging the contingent nature of human experience. It is “radicalized” because it looks beyond identity and it does not seek transcendence or any kind of wish-fulfillment through a simplistic view of the future as harbinger of change outside human effort. The point in “writing history backward” is not to rewrite the past or to revise it but to look at “Every built thing with its unmeant / meaning unmet purpose” (*TNPWS* 80) and to ask questions and seek answers. What are the unmeant meanings of aesthetic accomplishments in architecture or in technology? Were the accomplishments meant as a display of human ingenuity or concealed within them is an “unmet purpose” of human liberation? If the meaning lies in the appropriation of human labor, the answer is revolutionary socialism which espouses perpetual revolt as the means for a purpose to be met sooner than later. Simpson notes, “Memory and meaning are the materials of history. Enmeshed with who we are and can be, they operate at individual, group, societal, national, cultural, and civilizational levels. They underwrite the institutions of human life—the various ways that human life is accomplished and cared for” (255). If remembrance is the “unmeant meaning” behind “every built thing” underwriting “the institutions of human life” it has to be combined with an acknowledgement of labors of the nameless masses along with an insight into the possibility of distributive justice at all levels.

Radical politics as manifested in revolutionary socialism through

enlarging the scope of the participation includes the weak and the powerless. As Rich points out, “radical politics is a great confluent project of the human imagination, of which art and literature are indispensable tributaries” (*A Human Eye* 96). Revolutionary socialism, especially in its artistic and literary avatars, avoids pitfalls of the category called “human” such as the privileging of masculinity or whiteness though it uses the idea of a human being with its multiple connotations to include the subaltern and the minority. Being revolutionary is a meaningless enterprise without emotional contact with humanity. Rich notes in her poem “Itinerary,” “In a physical world the great poverty would be to live insensate” (*Later Poems* 493). The most terrible form of poverty is emotional deprivation and the aim of a revolution is to enable the possibility of a life that moves around the heart as much as the mind. To be physically connected to the world is a response to the alienation of an unequal social order which has no space for an emotional or a creative life.

In an earlier poem “To Frantz Fanon” (1968), Rich recognizes the evergreen character of mass revolt going on “year after year” in the sense in which Fanon imagined the revolution.

...your death
a black streak on a white bed
in L’Enfant’s city where
the fever-bush sweats off
its thick
petals year after year
on the mass grave
of revolt (*Collected Early Poems* 319-20)

Like Gramsci’s, Fanon’s death is connected to the life of the revolution. As a medicinal plant the fever-bush is a metaphor of a life-sustaining force enabling the masses to revolt though they pay for it with their lives. Fanon’s death accentuates the pride of the black man lying on a “white bed,” a blackness that does not disappear because the person is dead. The “black streak” retains its distinct identity as response to the racist politics of colonialism whose agenda is to make

mass graves out of revolutionaries. In the “Preface” to *The Wretched of the Earth* Sartre describes in detail the nature of the revolution that Fanon espouses. It is a struggle with oneself as much as it is a struggle with an unequal system.

Fanon hides nothing: in order to fight against us the former colony must fight against itself: or, rather, the two struggles form part of a whole... This is what Fanon explains to his brothers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: we must achieve revolutionary socialism all together everywhere, or else one by one we will be defeated by our former masters. He hides nothing, neither weaknesses, nor discords, nor mystification... No; he fears nothing. Our methods are out-of-date; they can sometimes delay emancipation, but not stop it. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 11-12)

The essence of “writing history backward” is recognition that emancipation can be delayed but cannot be stopped. Whether it is Fanon or the later Gramsci, the attempt is to reach out to struggles everywhere which include anti-colonial battles and class conflicts uniquely situated in their own regional contexts; the struggles have to be along with “all together everywhere, or else one by one we will be defeated.” Struggles do not necessarily happen through a violent overthrow of the social order but also through “politics” by which the existing resources within any system are examined for solutions and in victories that seem insignificant on a wide canvas but are milestones on the path to social transformation. Hobsbawm observes,

Politics for him [Gramsci] is the core not only of the strategy of winning socialism, but of socialism itself... It is partly implicit in the concept of praxis itself: that understanding the world and changing it are one. And praxis, the history that men make themselves, though in given – and developing historical conditions, is what they *do*, and not simply the ideological forms in which men become conscious of the contradictions of society... In short it is what can be called political action. But it is also partly a recognition of the fact that political action itself is an autonomous activity... (*How to Change the World* 321-22)

It would be simplistic to say that Rich’s end poems veer towards revolutionary socialism. But, there is no doubt that with Rich, an insight into reality is a way of transforming the reality as well. Most

women might be “conscious of the contradictions” imposed on them by patriarchal society; how they respond to contradictions will define the scope of “political action.” What however cannot be ignored is the revolutionary character of Rich’s writing as a whole, which is constantly evolving and critiquing patriarchy, racism and classism from multiple vantage points. If the core of revolutionary socialism is writing history from the bottom, a perspective on how “class war lives on” (*TNPWS* 76) is vital for political action. “Writing history backward” is a way of reversing the linear narrative of the past “standing on its head” with its great men and ideas battling one another, and turning it the right side by looking at the world from the materialistic standpoint of the oppressed. It is a combination of a need for the poor to have an “ordinary life” along with the possibility of a “good life.” Hobsbawm notes:

Commitment to revolution thus depends on a mixture of motives: the desire for the ordinary life, behind which, waiting to emerge, is the dream of the really good life; the sense of all gates closing against us, but at the same time the sense of the possibility of bursting them open; the sense of urgency, without which appeals to patience and reform or piecemeal improvement do not lose their force. (*Revolutionaries* 296)

The “motives” for a revolution are built into a commitment towards political action. What is important is the presence of the poet in the background of revolutionary transformation as “the dreaming ghost, guest, waitress, watcher, wanting the words to be true” (*TNPWS* 32). Does that make poetry and the poet ineffectual as all writing inevitably would be in the face of the real world of power and wealth? Is the poet merely a propagandist for a revolution in the making? “The revolution is live” is how Gil Scott-Heron ends his song “The Revolution will not be Televised.” What has happened since 1970 since Gil Scott-Heron’s revolutionary song is the making of a system of surveillance through proliferation of “seeing” technologies in the form of accessible cameras that with uncanny zeal record live any social change or upheaval taking place. The refugees fleeing into Europe is “live” recording; that does not change the condition of the refugee; it also does not change the fact that the refugee is created by the destructive intervention of powerful nations that refuse common people the chance to determine their lives. Visual technologies have a significant role to play in how people visualize themselves. As an art

form the poem requires the technology to make a point; but, that is not the only thing a poem does; it operates in a realm that is visual without submitting to the power of the technology. Poetry cannot be subsumed under technology; in times of crises the powerless rely on their power to see things for themselves rather than be assisted by the radio and television. One's own perception of the world is innately poetic because it has a critical component to it in the form of self-reflection. Poetry is never obvious enough as an image on television that could be reduced to one interpretation. Poetry must be "live" in a different sense from the camera. Poetry does not merely add an existential component to the truth. Poetry is *the* truth that is radically contemporaneous with the making of history. The poetic imagination provides the alternative to rhetoric of power. It is "life" because, of

"The dead" we say as if speaking
of "the people" who

gave up on making history
simply to get through

...

Who
are these dead these people these

lovers who if ever did
listen no longer answer

: *We* : (TNPWS 50)

Poetry is about "We" and not about "I" or "you" as is made through a grammatical distinction. Poetry is about "we" because we cannot think of a writer without at the same time imagining a reader. The ones who "gave up on making history/ simply to get through" are the "dead" who refused the opportunity to participate in changing the world. The proof of living is not simply to stay alive or survive but to be

a part of other lives in need of emotional, moral and political support. History is made through sharing just as poetry is born out of that sense of life that comes with history.

Notes

¹ However, Benjamin's views should not be viewed as being fundamentally at odds with those of Adrienne Rich. Stéphane Mosès and Ora Wiskind note: "The task of remembrance, Benjamin writes, is to "save what has miscarried," just as Redemption for him signifies, not a tangential relationship to the future, but the ever-present possibility "to achieve what had been refused us." As for the messianic hope, it need not be conceived as gazing toward a Utopia destined to be realized only at the end of time, but rather as an extreme watchfulness, a capacity to detect what, at every moment, allows a glimpse of "the revolutionary energy" of the new" (13). It is likely that Benjamin would endorse Rich's view of the janitor as possessing the agency to make history in the present instead of waiting for a "helpless" angel to do something about it.

² Henry Giroux makes a similar point as Mosès and Wiskind in "In the Twilight of the Social State: Rethinking Walter Benjamin's Angel of History" that the angel of history is not a symbol of "messianic hope" but someone who "recognized that the past, present and future were inextricably linked in a constellation of ideas, events, social practices and relations of power that mutually inform each other. History offered no guarantees, and while it could often paralyze and punish, the potentially revolutionary ideal that gave it mythic status was organized around an understanding of social improvement that was partly connected to the unfinished business of human possibility and betterment. Of course, Benjamin rejected such a view. His angel of history is caught up in a storm that paralyzed human agency while putting the myth of the inevitability of progress to rest. But storms pass, and hope as a condition for conceptualizing a future of sustainable progress can offer space and time for reflection, for developing modes of individual critique and collective agency capable of addressing and dismantling those sites of agony and wretchedness made visible in the afterglow of historical consciousness."

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