

Lynne Segal

Obituary: Adrienne Rich, May 16, 1929 – March 27, 2012

‘She opened doors for us’, fellow American poet and writer Erica Jong said, learning of Adrienne Rich’s death. Fortunately, they are doors that will now never close. Most of those ageing feminists who have been inspired by her thoughts for almost half a century, as well as all the new admirers she gathered throughout her long life, will be returning to her poetry and essays again and again, and pondering her legacy. I know I will. Born in Baltimore, USA, in 1929, not only was Rich a poet and writer whose early and continuing literary success led to wide acclaim as one of America’s best poets, but she was a key dissident voice right up until her death, earlier this year, at 82, from complications of the rheumatoid arthritis that restricted her movement, and brought pain into most of her adult life. In particular, she will be remembered for her landmark 1976 text on motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.ⁱ

Rich had been an established poet for two decades when *Of Woman Born* was published. The book was groundbreaking in so many different ways, yet quintessentially feminist in its combination of the personal, political, cultural and historical, as it presented its vivid analysis of the shifting institutions of motherhood, alongside women’s deeply ambivalent, often isolated and troubled experience of its joys and anguish. Of course, it also included her own struggle to be both a mother and a poet, as a young woman in a fraught marriage. What so many loved about Rich’s early work was its call for women to ‘think through the body’, separating off the actual potential of mothering from the difficult situation so many found themselves in under capitalist patriarchy: alone, ill-prepared and with nowhere to turn when trying to handle the ubiquitous needs of little children.ⁱⁱ It was Rich, above all, who was rightly seen as the writer who most publicly managed to separate off all that could and should be changed to liberate women from the existing constraints of patriarchal history and compulsory heterosexuality, in which they had been defined first and last simply through their role as wives and mothers, and to celebrate instead the potential wisdom and wonder of motherhood alongside its inevitable demands and anxieties. This was a path quickly trodden by others, from Jane Lazarre’s *Mother Knot* that same year,ⁱⁱⁱ to Nancy Chodorow’s *Reproduction of Motherhood* two years later.^{iv} Readers of *Studies in the Maternal* will know more about the rest

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of this journey of motherhood than I do, so here I want to look at the whole, extraordinary trajectory of Rich's life and legacy, much of it involving the connections she saw between life, art and politics.

To the very end, neither Rich's poetic timbre nor its political power ever weakened, but rather expanded and intensified. Yet her confidence in possibilities for political change waxed and waned over the years. At the height of the women's liberation movement, in the early 1970s, Rich's confidence in social change was enormous. She wrote of the movement as ushering in a women's renaissance 'far more extraordinary and influential' in shifting perspectives than the earlier European Renaissance from theology to humanism'.^v In her eighties, Rich still often spoke of her high hopes that poetry might prove a useful tool in struggles for social change, suggesting again in an interview only last year, in 2011, that the words of poetry, in their 'abruptness, directness and anger', can 'act physically on the reader or hearer'.^{vi} In poetry, words say more than they mean and mean more than they say, their affect can linger and their effect prove contagious. Thus, at her most optimistic Rich felt: 'In a time of frontal assaults both on language and on human solidarity, poetry can remind us all of what we are in danger of losing – disturb us, embolden us out of resignation'.^{vii} Yet at other times her optimism wavered, always balanced by equal amounts of pessimism. She feared that because of the general 'whirlpool of disinformation and manufactured distraction' that 'some North American ears have trouble with poetry'.^{viii} Other ears too. Her radical ambivalence is what has always been so important about Rich. Here in Britain one could imagine her fears quickening were she to witness the ongoing assault on the humanities, where even the study of poetry is no longer valued in higher education.

In the last three decades of her life Rich consistently attacked the harsh drift towards 'neo-liberalism' in the USA and beyond, with its unbroken commitment to private enterprise and its hostility towards welfare spending, as fiercely articulated in her collection from the 1990s: *Dark Fields of the Republic*.^{ix} Witnessing accelerating inequalities since the 'Reaganomics' of the 1980s, Rich reported losing much of her former critical confidence that social movements might manage to push the USA into becoming a more democratic and peaceful country, one able to confront its own racial, military and other oppressive legacies. Unexpectedly, it led her to read Marx and to re-think some of her earlier visions, noting the uncomfortable fit between the marketing of feminist-sounding solutions to personal problems and a corporate system that mocked collective action as pointless and sterile. Continuously self-critical, Rich mentioned her own involvement in helping to unleash the

‘demon of the personal’ in feminist celebrations of women’s experience, unaware then of how words of personal liberation could be ‘taken hostage’ to become ‘a horribly commoditized version of humanity’.^x

It is this hindsight that enabled Rich to articulate a new role for the older woman, or older activist, as ‘passionate skeptic’, the person who could look back through time and help explain the continuities, slides, shifts and inevitable ruptures in radical thought and action across the generations, knowing that ‘one period’s necessary strategies can mutate into the monsters of another time’.^{xi} She always sought meaning in the struggles of the past, never wiping out or disowning them, yet she was always ready, she said, to start over again, realizing that intentions can be re-arranged ‘in a blip/ coherence smashed into vestige’. Recalling her involvement in the peace movements and anti-war struggles of the 1960s, for instance, Rich later talked of their limitations, thinking today that being ‘against war’ was too comfortable and easy, compared to developing a critical language that could encompass possession, deprivation, colonial history and, above all, could ask: ‘Who creates the rhetoric of “terror” and “democracy”?’^{xii}

From her middle age to her death, and in an endless variety of tongues, Rich thus stressed the need to keep looking backwards, critically, in order to help see the future, as the title of another book of her poetry, *Midnight Salvage* (1999), suggests. The long poems it contains are all dedicated to citing the disorders of the present, while also recalling ‘the sweetness of life, the memory of traditions of mercy, struggles for justice...casting memory forward’:

it’s the layers of history
 we have to choose, along
 with our own practice: what must be tried again
 over and over and
 what must not be repeated
 and at what depth which layer
 will we meet others

the words barely begin
 to match the desire

and the mouth crammed with dollars doesn’t testify.^{xiii}

It is this political outlook, charting and communicating the constant interchange between past and present, the personal and the political, that guided the whole of her life: ‘Open the book of tales you knew by heart, begin driving the old roads again,/ repeating the old sentences, which have changed/ minutely from the wordings you remembered’.^{xiv} Ageing for Rich thus gained significance as a call to action, if only the action of watching, witnessing, waiting, ready to respond to calls for justice, equality and compassion from around the world. Some have criticized a certain passivity and strategic vagueness in Rich’s rhetorical stance of poetic witnessing. I disagree. Even at the best of times, the space for oppositional voices is a fluctuating one. It makes those who do remain steadfastly insistent on the need for radical transformation of structures that systematically impoverish, harm or humiliate others the most valuable of resources. Breaking the mould of discourse, whether about motherhood, sexuality, welfare, equality, justice, peace or war, was always the point for Rich, allowing her to stress the uses of the oppositional imagination in exposing the follies and violence, wisdom and worries, linking past to present. What never changed was the determination to resist.

Suffering, and resistance to it, opened up for Rich a concept of ‘radical happiness’, a term she developed from Hannah Arendt’s notion of ‘public happiness’, both referring to the shared happiness that can be found in public displays of freedom, or the forging of communities working for better times.^{xv} This is the happiness that Rich saw flowing from a sense of ‘true participation in society’, a condition she longed to see extended to everyone.^{xvi} She talked of experiencing such public happiness in Chile, speaking to the 50,000 people attending the huge poetry festival that followed the arrest of Pinochet in 2001. It was a feeling she could sense around her again, she said, traveling that same year to Seattle where the World Trade Organization was meeting, to witness the collective ‘anti-globalization’ spirit of rebellion, which had grown even larger since its beginnings in November 1999.^{xvii} This is what she was looking for in her old age, both in life and in poetry, as she said introducing a general anthology of American poetry in the mid-1990s: ‘I was looking for poetry that could rouse me from fatigue, stir me from grief, poetry that was redemptive in the sense of offering a kind of deliverance or rescue of the imagination, and poetry that awoke delight...pleasure in recognition, pleasure in strangeness’. Over ten years later, her thoughts were much the same, as she wrote in 2009: ‘Wherever I turn these days, I’m looking, from the corner of my eye, for a certain kind of poetry whose balance of dread and beauty is equal to the balance of chaotic negations that pursue us...A complex, dialogic, coherent poetry to dissolve both

complacency and despair'.^{xviii} This iconic radical, lesbian, feminist poet just kept right on looking, which kept on inspiring me, and the rest of her readers.

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ⁱ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1976).

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.39.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

^{iv} Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

^v Adrienne Rich, 'Towards a Woman-Centered University', in *Lies, Secrets and Silences: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 126.

^{vi} Kate Waldman, 'Adrienne Rich on "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve"', *The Paris Review*, March 2, 2011 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/category/at-work/>>

^{vii} Ruth E. C. Prince, 'The Possibilities of an Engaged Art: An Interview with Adrienne Rich', *Radcliffe Quarterly*, Fall 1998, <<http://www.radcliffe.edu/quarterly/199803/page36.html>>

^{viii} Kate Waldman, 'Adrienne Rich'.

^{ix} See especially, Adrienne Rich, 'And Now', in *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems, 1991-1995* (New York and London: Norton, 1995), p. 31.

^x Michael Klein, 'A Rich Life: Adrienne Rich on Poetry, Politics, and Personal Revelation', *Boston Phoenix*, June, 1999. <www.bostonphoenix.com/archive/1in10/99/06/RICH.html>

^{xi} Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible*, (New York and London: Norton & Co., 2001), p. 2.

^{xii} Adrienne Rich, 'On "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve"', *The Paris Review*, March 2, 2011. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/03/02/adrienne-rich-on-tonight-no-poetry-will-serve>>

^{xiii} Adrienne Rich, *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998* (New York and London: Norton, 1999), pp. 64-5.

^{xiv} Adrienne Rich, *Time's Power: Poems, 1985-1988* (New York and London: Norton, 1989), p. 46.

^{xv} Hannah Arendt, 'The Pursuit of Happiness,' in *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), ch.3.

^{xvi} Michael Klein, 'A Rich Life'.

^{xvii} Adrienne Rich, 'Standing at the InterReal', *Real Change News*, April, 19, 2001, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/onlineints.htm>

^{xviii} Adrienne Rich, quoted in *Sylvia Henneberg, The Creative Crone: Aging and the Poetry of May Sarton and Adrienne Rich* (Columbia, MO: Missouri University Press, 2010), p. 139.

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