

On Adrienne Rich · Mary Hussmann

ADRIENNE RICH IS ONE TOUGH POET. In a voice which is powerful, resolute, critical, and honest, she has tried to integrate the personal and the political in order to create a woman-identified aesthetic. She has consistently challenged the premises of patriarchal beliefs and attempted to shape “the dream of a common language” capable of articulating a true image of women in our society. Her poetry reflects our culture and tries to shape it. In her own feminist way, she has shown the ability to transform herself, to re-create her poetic voice in response to herself, as well as to the larger world around her. In doing so, Rich carries on the modernist tradition of Yeats and Auden.

If Adrienne Rich stepped away from patriarchal society in her earlier books in order to establish her own voice as a woman, then with “An Atlas of the Difficult World” she steps fully back into contemporary society “bent on fathoming what it means to love my country.” And that country includes men as well as women. Rich has discovered who she is; now she tries to show us where we are.

In a 1991 interview with David Montenegro in *American Poetry Review* Rich says:

It feels to me that I need to know more than I ever did to be a poet, that I need to be conscious of what is happening on this planet in ways that I never used to think about.

True to that statement, Adrienne Rich’s thirteenth book of poetry, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, presents a map of the physical and spiritual landscape of American culture in a work that is vast, visionary, and superbly ambitious. In the thirteen sections that make up the expansive title poem, Rich guides the reader across this complex terrain in a series of poems at once sprawling, political, and Whitmanesque, yet intensely personal, meditative, and ultimately tender. The poems in the second section of the book examine themes she’s examined before: death, survival, and the role of memory. In this book Rich turns her scrutiny away from herself—out-

An Atlas of the Difficult World. W. W. Norton and Company. New York and London. 1991.

ward—and the result is an inclusiveness and maturity that lend a further dimension to the body of her work.

Rich is a poet of discovery and we know we're entering new terrain when she announces in the first section:

This is no place you ever knew me
These are not the roads
you knew me by. But for the woman driving, walking, watching
for life and death, is the same.

“An Atlas of the Difficult World” is a road poem about bearing witness. Along the way Rich shows us places of beauty and squalor and people in all the complexities of human dignity and human degradation.

Much of Rich's work has explored the idea of contradictory dualities and this poem is no exception. Many of the sections build on the contradictions and oppositions that form the spiritual and physical landscape of contemporary culture. In the poem's first section, Rich shows us migrant workers picking strawberries in chemical-dusted fields and the housewives crippled with angst and ennui who buy the berries; a young man in a writing workshop anguishing over his poems and a teacher watching grey-faced children who have gone without breakfast. Rich also relates an episode of domestic abuse, then says:

I don't want to know
wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials
and so are the slow lift of the moon's belly
over wreckage, dreck and waste, wild treefrogs calling in
another season, light and music still pouring over
our fissured, cracked terrain.

In section V, the myth of freedom represented here by the Statue of Liberty is set against scenes of our worst atrocities: Appomatox, Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, and Selma.

Rich not only chronicles our sins against peoples but against our land. In section IV, the purity of natural beauty, described as the roadside flowers that “bind the map of this country together,” is juxtaposed against images of waste; both natural, which “darkens/ the states to their strict borders,”

and human, “The watcher’s eye put out/ . . . those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish/ now at risk in this segregate republic. . . .” And section VIII explores the historical precedent of man’s adversarial relation to nature, to our land. “He thought there would be a limit and that it would stop him,” Rich says, “He depended on that . . . and so he/ flung/ and burned and hacked and bled himself toward that.” What he found on this westward march of domination was, of course, the Pacific Ocean, “no teacher, only its violent/ self, the Pacific, dialectical waters rearing/ their wild calm constructs, momentary, ancient.”

Rich commands a surprising range of voice and diction throughout these poems. Section II presents “a map of our country” in brash, compelling, exhortatory rhetoric reminiscent of Whitman or Ginsberg: “here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt/ This is the haunted river . . . / This is the desert where missiles are planted like corms/ . . . This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy/ here are the forests primeval/ This is the capital of money and dolor.” Yet, with her typical passion for absolute accuracy, Rich admits that this is no objective “map,” but is in fact a “mural,” and by implication then, subjective.

Sections marked by political oratory and observation are contrasted with sections that are personal and reflective. Section III is a remarkable narrative meditation on memory and the wisdom gathered through age. In these quiet yet intense lines, Rich shows an assuredness, a maturity, and a haunting tenderness that makes the forceful, driving voice of her political passages more powerful precisely because of this contrast. In this section, the unseasonably warm autumn becomes a metaphor and vehicle for taking stock, for personal reflection. To Rich the warm wind “feels like a time of self-deception, a memory of pushing/ limits in youth, that intricate losing game of innocence long/ overdue.” She catalogs possessions acquired and kept which hold the memories of people since lost — most notably a bookplate of her father’s and old wine glasses from her husband. In her prior work, Rich often had trouble assessing the role of these men in her life. She had ambivalent, sometimes angry feelings for both, but here we sense a healing, a reconciliation in her affectionate acceptance of these men *as* memories.

If “An Atlas of the Difficult World” is a map of our failures, it is also very much a poem about the possibility of redemption. In section X, Rich quotes from the letters of George Jackson about life in Soledad prison and

we see that in the midst of degradation and despair, “no one responds to kindness, no one is more sensitive to it/ than the desperate man.” And in the long, oratorical section XI, Rich picks up and makes public the theme first expressed privately in section III, the “burnt-out dream of innocence.” This passage is an exhaustive examination of citizenship, and Rich includes us all, men and women, when she proclaims that she is “one woman/ like and unlike so many, fooled as to her destiny, the scope of/ her task.” In her muscular, resolute, forthright voice, Rich tells us:

A patriot is a citizen trying to
wake
from the burnt-out dream of innocence
remember
that blessing and cursing are born as twins and separated at birth
to meet again in mourning
that the internal emigrant is the most homesick of all women and
of all men
that every flag that flies today is a cry of pain.
Where are we moored?
What are the bindings?
What behooves us?

After Rich has guided us through the ruin and beauty of our cultural terrain, she grants us a measure of hope, expressed in the final section, “Dedications”:

I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

Stripped of our old prejudices and assumptions, we see the possibility of a new innocence, a new beginning.

In “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” Rich proves that an essential voice of social conscience need not be mired in rigid stance or rhetoric. This

poem, so broadly imagined and imaginatively crafted, works because of the complex interplay between the personal and the political voice, intellect and emotion. Adrienne Rich remains a voice it would behoove all of us to attend to.

The interwoven threads of death, survival, and the duplicity and complicity of memory connect the remaining poems in this volume. Through memory's "smoky mirror," the long poem, "Eastern War Time," reflects contemporary war in the Middle East against the backdrop of the Holocaust. "Through Corralitos Under Rolls of Cloud" looks at the issue of survival. Again, the mirror becomes a metaphor for Rich's characteristic honesty: "What does it mean to say *I have survived*/ until you take the mirrors and turn them outward/ and read your own face in their outraged light." But if the metaphor of light often represents a self-critical honesty, Rich moves towards twilight and the attractions of night in the lyric "Darklight." Imagining the fade of day, Rich says:

this is the ancient hour
between light and dark, work and rest
earthly tracks and star-trails
the last willed act of the day
and the night's first dream

If you could have this hour
for the last hour of your life.

Lest we are lulled into thinking that Rich will settle quietly into her own later years, she ends the collection with the assertive and quirky poem, "Final Notations." Using deceptively simple repetition and rhythm, Rich sings about a mysterious "it" which "will not be simple, it will not be long/ it will take little time, it will take all your thought,/ it will take all your breath,/ it will become your will." Death? That's certainly one reading. But perhaps the poem is really about her poetic legacy. She also says, "you are taking parts of us into places never planned/ You are going away with pieces of our lives." For Adrienne Rich, each poem, each book reflects a moment in the process of "becoming," and each successive poem clarifies her past and anticipates her future. As she said to David Montenegro in *APR*, "Experience is always larger than language. And there's always the next poem." I expect there will be.