Rich: "The True Nature of Poetry"

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Adrienne Rich's poem "Origins and History of Consciousness" explores the limits of language and how poetry connects personal imagination to collective awareness to spark social change.

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In Adrienne Rich's 1978 poetry collection, *The Dream of a Common Language*, a central recurring issue that she contends with is the limitations of language. In her poem "Origins and History of Consciousness," she directly references Erich Neumann's 1949 book of the same title. Neumann, a psychologist and philosopher, was influenced by Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective consciousness. In his book, Neumann sought to "outline the archetypal stages in the development of consciousness," (Neumann xv) drawing upon a wide range of concepts, including archetypes, masculinity and femininity, and homosexuality. In analyzing "Origins and History of Consciousness," we may postulate that, considering Rich's knowledge of Neumann's extensive work concerning archetypes and the collective consciousness, these themes will illuminate her own work.

Rich's fascination with the true nature of poetry, coupled with her concerns about the obstructing quality of language, leads her to conclude that true poets must be able to navigate the subconscious mind without being enthralled by the purely personal imagination. For Rich, the role of a poet is not only to explore themselves as an individual, but also to resurface with the knowledge they have acquired, and to enlighten others with their discoveries in order to empower and mobilize them. The first section of "Origins and History of Consciousness" begins:

> Night-life. Letters, journals, bourbon
> sloshed in the glass. Poems crucified on the wall,
> dissected, their bird-wings severed
> like trophies. No one lives in this room
> without living through some kind of crisis. (446)

Immediately, Rich places her readers in a material space. She is in a room with her works strewn about, and she contemplates the blank page ("No one lives in this room/ without confronting the whiteness of the wall" [446]) at nighttime. The physical quality of the opening stanza, conveyed through the items she makes note of around her, includes the "Letters, journals, bourbon/ sloshed in the glass." The utilization of these physical objects, along with Rich's varying sources of inspiration—such as "behind the poems, planks of books, / photographs of dead heroines" (446)—introduces another layer of depth, suggesting that her poetry is not crafted in isolation. The root of her craft is informed by her predecessors. The legacies of literary, poetic, and feminist figures are prominently and proudly flaunted in her other poems–including this piece, which also acknowledges Neumann. The second stanza goes on to explore Rich's crisis.

> No one lives in this room
> without confronting the whiteness of the wall
> behind the poems, planks of books,
> photographs of dead heroines.

> Without contemplating last and late
> the true nature of poetry. The drive
> to connect. The dream of a common language. (446)

The crisis which she references is her inability to write poetry, as she does not know what the "true nature of poetry" is, and thus she suffers what I am calling a crisis of craft and creativity. Her issues with language complicate this topic further, as if she fears she is doomed to write in what she once called, in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," the "oppressor's language," (304) yet dreams to write in the "common language." What language does she use? How is Rich, the poet, meant to express herself when the weapon of the poet is her words? This crisis may also refer to her mental health, as during the writing of this poem (1972-1974), Rich was attending therapy sessions—which subsequently led to her relationship with her therapist, Lily Engler. In 1974, she published her collection *Twenty-One Love Poems*, which detailed her relationship with Engler.

The mention of the "dream of a common language" refers back to the title of Rich's book, which underscores the importance of this concept. The repeated issue of language can also be tracked in her other works, such as "The Burning of Paper instead of Children" (303) where she raises concerns of the "oppressor's language." In "Meditations for a Savage Child" (401), she discusses the case of a feral boy in France who was taught language. In this piece, she writes, "The sounds I make are prehuman, radical" (403). Her fixation on the inadequacies of language (for example, "our words misunderstand us" from "Like This Together" [176]) indicates her greater issue with the purpose of poetry. The politicization of words is no doubt the overwhelming throughline of Rich's attempts at drawing together the political sphere with the personal. The last lines of the second stanza of "The Origin and History of Consciousness" forewarn her readers of the encompassing themes of her poem: "The drive/ to connect. The dream of a common language." The poem continues:

> Thinking of lovers, their blind faith, their
> experienced crucifixions,
> my envy is not simple. I have dreamed of going to bed
> as walking into clear water ringed by a snowy wood
> white as cold sheets, thinking, *I'll freeze in there*. (447)

The word "simple" will appear nine times in total throughout the piece, signaling it as a key term for Rich. Here, she states that "my envy is not simple," which one might initially infer is an envy derived from viewing the lovers with their "blind faith." Yet upon consideration, we can see it as a complicated envy towards those who create, as she finishes the line, "I have dreamed of going to bed/ as walking into clear water ringed by a snowy wood/ white as cold sheets, thinking, *I'll freeze in there.*" Rich envies those who do not find themselves in the same crisis as her. With this added context, one may take it to mean that Rich is envious of those who can access sleep – or rather, the subconscious – as the imaginative process is often linked to the subconscious mind. The act of creation is not something that a poet or artist may consciously think about, but something which is undergone without the poet's awareness.

Alternatively, Rich's envy is not the simple ability to enter the subconscious, but to become unconscious. Later in her work, she presents imagery which encompasses greater societal issues, such as systemic wealth inequality. Her envy, when applied to this context, becomes tongue-in-cheek, as becoming unconscious would mean actively ignoring the suffering around her. As an activist, this willing detachment from reality is something which Rich cannot afford to partake in. She forces herself, and her readers, to be ceaselessly conscious of the suffering of others under systemic oppression -whether through capitalism, white supremacy, or patriarchy.

Later in the third stanza of "Origins," Rich continues:

> My bare feet are numbed already by the snow
> but the water

is mild, I sink and float
like a warm amphibious animal
that has broken the net, has run
through fields of snow leaving no print;
this water washes off the scent—
You are clear now
of the hunter, the trapper
the wardens of the mind— (447)

The use of amphibians is striking, as they are known to undergo a metamorphosis from their larval stage to adulthood, changing from an aquatic to a terrestrial organism and living between both worlds. The ability to access these two realms is a physical manifestation of a poet accessing both the corporeal world as well as the incorporeal. Amphibious animals thus represent a transitory state Rich dreams of undergoing, one that moves from the "snowy wood" and "into the clear water," from terrestrial to the aquatic.

The use of italics introduces a new voice to the piece. One may infer that it is Rich's internal thought, which is supported with the image of transitioning from the corporeal world to the subconscious. "*You are clear now/ of the hunter, the trapper/ the wardens of the mind*—" In contrast to the cold and the snow, "the water is mild" implies an invitation or even comfort. However, considering the implications of becoming unconscious, this mildness is deceptive and therefore should be approached with caution. Rich continues:

yet the warm animal dreams on
of another animal
swimming under the snow-flecked surface of the pool,
and wakes, and sleeps again.
No one sleeps in this room without
the dream of a common language. (447)

Once again, here Rich mentions a "dream of a common language." From her first stanza to the second, Rich moves her reader from the physical world of her work or office room to a descent into her unconscious – not dissimilar to the imagery in her poem "Diving into the Wreck" (370), in which Rich, as a scuba diver, descends into the wreckage of a ship in search of truth. In becoming unconscious, she paradoxically seeks the subconscious in order to invigorate her creativity and craft.

In the second section of "The Origins and History of Consciousness," Rich writes about her former lover and therapist Lily Engler.

It was simple to meet you, simple to take your eyes
into mine, saying: these are eyes I have known
from the first…. It was simple to touch you
against the hacked background, the grain of what we
had been, the choices, years…. It was even simple
to take each other's lives in our hands, as bodies. (447)

Rich talks about the body, which once more places her in the physical world. She describes meeting her lover and the simplicity in being with her. Yet, what is simple? She explains these things as simple – "It was simple to meet you, simple to take your eyes/ It was simple to touch you." However, in the previous section, we are told that "My envy is not simple."

It is simple to undergo action when one is not thinking of how it may be politicized. It is simple to live life only aware of and understanding the personal, individual self, not considering how an individual may be intrinsically woven into the matrix of society. But life is inherently political, and to Rich, her personal relationships are a political action—("This touch is political," Rich writes in "The Blue Ghazals." [312]). This is further explored in the seventh stanza of "Origins," as Rich unveils what is not simple.

What is not simple: to wake from drowning
from where the ocean beat inside us like an afterbirth
into this common, acute particularity
these two selves who walked half a lifetime untouching—
to wake to something deceptively simple: a glass
sweated with dew, a ring of the telephone, a scream
of someone beaten up far down in the street
causing each of us to listen to her own inward scream (448)

With the line "What is not simple: to wake from drowning," Rich recontextualizes the imagery of entering the "clear water." While she holds a simple envy for those who are able to easily recede into dreams, she warns against staying under the water for too long; she advises her readers to wake up. Water holds great power for Rich: the power to immobilize, as well as the power of knowledge. This repeated image haunts her later work, "Letters to a Young Poet," in which she writes in section IV, second stanza: "to and fro, fabric of caves, the onset of your fear/ kicking away their lush and slippery fauna nurseried/ in liquid glass/ trying to stand fast in rootsuck, in distraction,/ trying to wade this/ undertow of utter repetition" (820). After resurfacing from entering the water, the reader finds themselves stuck and fearful in the undertow.

The inability to move parallels the lines above, "from where the ocean beat inside us like an afterbirth/ into this common, acute particularity," as in both instances, the ocean's powerful current ensnares Rich's reader in the aftermath of coming into sudden inheritance of knowledge. In "Letters to a Young Poet," Rich writes: "Look: with all my fear I'm here with you, trying what it/ means, to stand fast; what it means to move" (820). She reaffirms to her reader that escaping this immobility is frightening, that she herself does not completely know what it means to move. But one might imagine that her need to move is the need to move her readers to activism, and to use their voices as poets to bring to the forefront systemic injustices that would otherwise numb or paralyze them from this daunting task.

This now answers the question of what "true poetry" is. It is when the poet is able to possess the power of entering their subconscious. To overcome the crisis of craft and creativity and be able to engage with their imaginative process without hindrance. Yet, it is also about having the ability to overcome the pull of dreams, the allure of the imagination, and to reemerge into reality, and to express your subconscious to the conscious world. She writes in "Origins" of:

knowing the mind of the mugger and the mugged
as any woman must who stands to survive this city,
this century, this life…
each of us having loved the flesh in its clenched or loosened beauty
better than trees or music (yet loving those too
as if they were flesh—and they are—but the flesh
of beings unfathomed as yet in our roughly literal life). (448)

The image of the "mugger and the mugged" establishes Rich's attempt to weave her intimate and personal relationship with Engler to the outside, political injustices. She cannot separate herself from politics, as she cannot make herself unconscious to them. As she contemplates these matters, perhaps in the room in which she writes, she must give voice to those who many remain unconscious of.

The subsequent lines, "as any woman must who stands to survive this city,/ this century, this life…," clarify the issue of gendered violence and how it remains untouched and ignored. Then, intriguingly, Rich moves to the image of flesh, "each of us having loved the flesh in its clenched or loosened beauty/ better than trees or music (yet loving those too/ as if they were flesh—and they are—but the flesh/ of beings unfathomed as yet in our roughly literal life)."

Rich expresses that while all of us have loved flesh, appreciating it above the beauty of trees or music, she identifies these entities as flesh that we cannot see. The lines in parentheses are puzzling in tone and voice. However, when contextualizing it with Neumann's work, it may be an application of the collective

consciousness. In section III of "Origins," Rich concludes the poem with the reintroduction of the corporeal world:

> It's simple to wake from sleep with a stranger,
> dress, go out, drink coffee,
> enter a life again. It isn't simple
> to wake from sleep into the neighborhood
> of one neither strange nor familiar
> whom we have chosen to trust. Trusting, untrusting,
> we lowered ourselves into this, let ourselves
> downward hand over hand as on a rope that quivered
> over the unsearched…. We did this. Conceived
> of each other, conceived each other in a darkness
> which I remember as drenched in light.
> I want to call this, life. (448)

After receding into herself, she "enters a life again"—"dress, go out, drink coffee"— which mirrors her first line, "Nightlife. Letters, journals, bourbon/ sloshed in the glass." This signals her return to the waking world and communicates the poem's narrative conclusion. The lines "whom we have chosen to trust. Trusting, untrusting,/ we lowered ourselves into this, let ourselves/ downward hand over hand as on a rope that quivered/ over the unsearched…. We did this. Conceived/ of each other, conceived each other in a darkness/ which I remember as drenched in light" imply that we– meaning all of us– have created a society in which it is acceptable to remain unconscious to the injustice of others.

Later within section III, Rich will more explicitly reference Plato's *Allegory of the cave*. With the allusion to the cave in mind, one can easily presume that Rich means to say that we are the reason for our own enslavement, our own ignorance to reality. The leaders we have "chosen to trust" have given us the rope which we took to descend into the cave. The tension of waking from sleep with a stranger, versus waking from sleep "into the neighborhood/ of one neither strange nor familiar" refers to the ease in remaining oblivious to the lives of others (the stranger). It is much more difficult to awaken to the truths of society (the neighborhood). Rich concludes:

> But I can't call it life until we start to move
> beyond this secret circle of fire
> where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall
> where the night becomes our inner darkness, and sleeps
> like a dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner. (449)

Rich's attention to immobility once again resurfaces in "Letters to a Young Poet," Section II: "history running back and forth/ panic in the labyrinth/ —I will not touch you further:/ your choice to freeze or not/ to say, you and I are caught in/ a laboratory without a science" (819). Her message in "Letters to a Young Poet" conflicts with the lines in Section II of "Origins," : "It was simple to touch you/ against the hacked background, the grain of what we/ had been, the choices, years…. It was even simple/ to take each other's lives in our hands, as bodies." There is a shift between "Origins" and "Young Poet": she now rejects touch. The significance of this rejection is that in her later work, Rich has realized that she cannot move those who do not wish to be moved by her.

The line "But I can't call it life until we start to move/ beyond this secret circle of fire" also calls back to her earlier poem, "Living in the Cave" (390) which references Plato's *Allegory of the cave*. The story, told by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, details a group of people who have lived chained inside a cave since birth. Their only perception of reality is the shadows of objects cast on the wall. They live believing that the shadows are reality. Then when one prisoner escapes and is able to ascend to the outside world, he becomes enlightened and sees the true form of objects in the light. When the escaped prisoner returns with his newfound knowledge, those left inside cannot accept the truth of his experience, as living inside the cave is all they

know. Rich urges her readers to move beyond, and the mention of the "dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner" at the end of "Origins," looks to "The Lioness", the conclusive poem to *The Dream of a Common Language*. In her closing poem, Rich describes looking inside an enclosure that is "three square yards" (460) and meeting the eyes of a lioness. The lioness pauses in front of her, "and looks at me. Her eyes/ are truthful" (460), allowing readers to reevaluate the knowledge and capacity of the beast.

By the poem's conclusion, Rich wishes to impart to her readers that one cannot go searching for knowledge, entering the "clear water," without eventually resurfacing to "wake from drowning." Nor can one move beyond the "secret circle of fire" without enlightening those still chained, living inside the cave. "Origins and History of Consciousness" is Adrienne Rich's call to action to the true poets, who are similarly in search of "the true nature of poetry."

References

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