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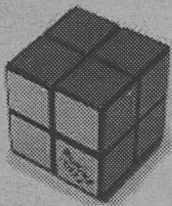
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queer classics: the poetry & prose of adrienne rich

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

We all have gaps in our reading. One of my bigger ones – as far as contemporary queer writings go – was Adrienne Rich, whose name I'd known for years but whose work I'd never explored. I was prompted to at least partially fill this gap after hearing Rich read from her poetry in October at Middlebury College.

In addition to being one of the most important poets of our time, Rich is also an influential feminist theorist. It's hard to think of another queer writer whose collected work more fully integrates the poetic with the political, or who has received more mainstream attention without shying away from topics the mainstream would rather leave silenced. Rich believes that “justice and creativity have something intrinsically in common.” Or, as one critic put it: “Rich insists that poetry be of use in the actual lives of actual human beings.”

Rich's appearance at Middlebury followed on the heels of Edward Albee's address to the college on the state of the arts (see *OITM's* November QC). Though their work shares few similarities, because they are held in similarly high esteem and are contemporaries (Albee was born in 1928; Rich in 1929), I couldn't help but draw comparisons. Albee was invited to give what was essentially a political speech; the actual words in his generally apolitical plays were, for the time he was at the podium, irrelevant. Rich, on the other hand – aside from brief commentary here and there – only read from her poetry. Yet, in a strange way, her message seemed at least as political as Albee's. I say in a strange way, because the poems were less overtly political than I expected, given Rich's reputation. Perhaps that's because, as Margaret Atwood said of Rich's breakthrough early work: “Her book is not a manifesto, though it subsumes manifestoes; nor is it a proclamation, though it makes proclamations.”

What most struck me at Rich's reading was a palpable feeling – among the hundreds of us squeezed into a small auditorium – that we were in the presence of someone who had something important to say about *now*. People leaned forward, anxious to connect her poetic imagery with these drifting-towards-war times. Rich – a tiny, delicate-appearing woman with a strong, sparkling gaze – seemed to appreciate the audience's reverence and her own power, yet without a trace of arrogance. In interviews she's

said that she feels hugely privileged to be able to do her work and that she's keenly aware of the responsibility that comes with such privilege.

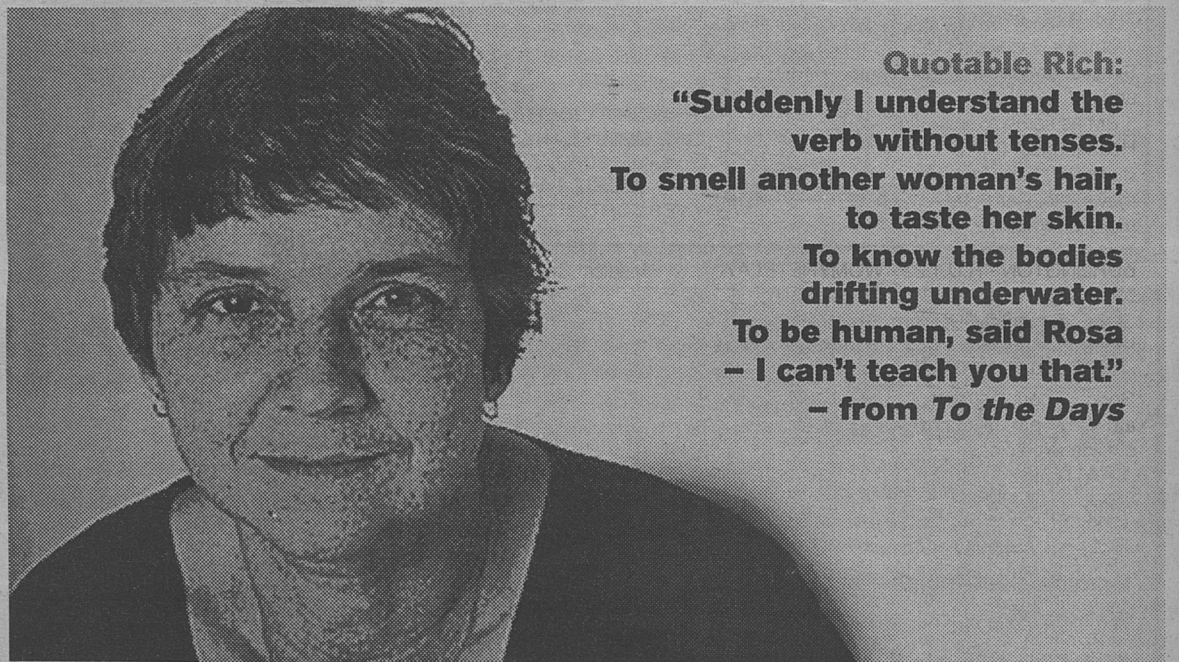
Whether poetry has the power to make a difference in a culture that seems more attention-deficit-disordered than ever (my term, not Rich's) is open to debate. Rich worries that in the US poetry – not unlike politics – is falsely perceived as having “nothing to do with the hard core of things,” incomprehensible to all but the elite. What people took away from her Middlebury reading undoubtedly varied from listener to listener. This listener felt enriched (no pun intended) but incomplete, the desire to engage with Rich's work – and with what it had to say about the times in which we live – more powerful

continued this balancing act through the '50s and early '60s, maintaining a conventional family life while earning additional praise for her second collection of poetry, which too followed a male-sanctioned path.

It wasn't until 1963 – with the publication of her third book, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* – that Rich broke free of tradition, artistically at least, and began to establish a voice uniquely her own. Her lauded formalism became fragmented, honestly reflecting the process of a woman writing amid the demands of raising a family. *Snapshots* is now recognized as the watershed transitional moment in Rich's career, but at the time many critics – primarily male, of course – dismissed it. Even a relatively recent review of Rich's work comments:

Kosovo and at Columbine, chose Rich's “Shattered Head” from her collection *Midnight Salvage*. “One of the things that distinguishes her art,” he writes, “is a restless need to confront difficulty, a refusal to be easily appeased.”

Rich, in a 1999 interview with Michael Klein, said the poetry that most interests her has “a field of energy. It's intellectual and moral and political and sexual and sensual – all of that fermenting together.” In the same interview she was asked how a young lesbian poet today, already out, might find her place in the arts. Tellingly, Rich answered with a question that bent into this open-ended statement: “There has to be a kind of resistance to the already offered clichés, and I think that that's something every



Quotable Rich:
“Suddenly I understand the verb without tenses. To smell another woman's hair, to taste her skin. To know the bodies drifting underwater. To be human, said Rosa – I can't teach you that!”
– from *To the Days*

than the capability to do so. Which made me want to puzzle over it on the page.

Though Adrienne Rich garnered critical attention shortly after graduating from Radcliffe in 1951 – when W.H. Auden selected her first book, *A Change of World*, for the Yale Younger Poets Prize – her place at the forefront of queer letters was carved only gradually. Her early poems were hailed for their “chiseled formalism” and “restrained emotional content.” In other words, for their adherence to tradition – specifically, male tradition.

In 1953, Rich married a Harvard economist and in quick succession had three sons. In her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, she analyzes the tension between creative impulse and family responsibility: “to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination ... in those years I always felt the conflict as a failure of love in myself.” Rich

“Many readers never forgave her transformation from lyric poet to feminist prophet.” One imagines these readers would've been happier if the “feminist prophet” had stuck to writing poems entirely unrelated to her real life: “universal” lies passing as profundity.

In the 1970s Rich's commitment to writing “directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience” became stronger in her poetry and essays alike. This shift in her artistry coincided with the burgeoning women's movement and the development of a lesbian feminist consciousness, as well as a shift in Rich's personal life. “The suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her limbs,” she wrote. Since 1976 she has lived with the writer and editor Michelle Cliff.

Rich's career since the 1970s is too complex to be neatly summarized, her thinking too multifaceted to be reduced to a sound bite. The poet Richard Hass, looking for a poem to help him sort through violence in

good poet has to make up for herself or himself – how to do that.” One thing Rich doesn't support – though she feels partially responsible for the tendency – is succumbing to the “demon of the personal,” which celebrates only personal feelings and experience, leading to a “commodified version of humanity.”

Perhaps what I ultimately gained from Rich's reading is a sense of the importance of being true to one's personal experience without becoming mired in the self. It's a point that was driven home to me later, when I read her poem “In Those Years,” which begins: “In those years, people will say, we lost track / of the meaning of *we*, of *you* / we found ourselves / reduced to *I* / and the whole thing became / silly, ironic, terrible.” Written in 1991, about an earlier era, it stands as a timeless warning. ▼

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