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Act of Translation: Adrienne Rich's Common Language

"Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful" Rita Dove intones, but for poet Adrienne Rich and millions like her, this language is incomplete. It carries with it centuries of connotation; baggage of a society which has been, for millennia, fundamentally unequal. In her transformative volume, *The Dream of a Common Language*, Adrienne Rich sets out in search of a new way to communicate, one which will transcend the limits of the past. This visionary endeavor is a departure from the traditional forms and apolitical language of Rich's past (Fox), and strikes at the core of many timely issues, centering on the female experience, but also exploring its relationship to the war in Vietnam to the persecution of LGBTQ+ people in America. In the first part of the three-part volume, entitled "Power," Rich initiates her exploration of feminine power and the social dynamics which can drive women to madness and despair. The second section, "Twenty-One Love Poems," is a tender, in-depth exploration of the love between women and its revolutionary ordinariness. The final section, "Not Somewhere Else, But Here," is imbued with urgency, focusing on the relationship of language and poetry to concrete action and change-making; it finishes the dream with a wake-up call. This complex, rich volume is highly praised throughout the literary world, yet its impact stretched far beyond the page. In striving for a common language through the use of silence, radical love, and the powerful intersection of poetry and action, Adrienne Rich illuminates how women may claim their power and move towards a "society without domination."

Throughout the volume, Rich remarks on the pervasive erasure of the female experience which occurs throughout our world, and introduces the common language as a method to combat

this. Searching for and cultivating a new tongue is a pursuit grounded in, as Joanne Diehl writes in “Cartographies of Silence”, “The dream of finding a language with the capacity to free itself from its own history.” Rich seeks not only a language which is free, but one which is accessible, according to Virginia Woolf’s definition of ‘common’: universally understood. Not a secret code between women, nor an esoteric tongue specific to poets; rather, a new way to communicate grounded in an all-encompassing empathy. Rich asserts that this language and its healing of the rift begins with tenderness, most especially woman-to-woman tenderness. The power of this common language lies in the way it can reclaim experience, displayed in Rich’s questions, as she writes, “How do I exist? This was the silence I wanted to break in you” (18). The silence of experience and emotion so long stifled is emblematic of the frustration and powerlessness of women “dumb with loneliness” (15). This silence cannot be broken with words so imbued with the force which has rendered them powerless. Releasing its hold requires a new, a common-language.

Beyond simply breaking the silence, Rich asserts that the common language could become a mechanism to free and elevate. It would work to alleviate the fear articulated in “Hunger,” where she writes, “We’re scared of what it could be to take and use our love, hose it on a city, on a world” (13). The Common Language, as Rich explored in “Origins of Consciousness” returns power to women in a primal way, with an emphasis on healing the rifts of history. Rich’s critics take issue with the narrative here presented, of femininity being the ‘solution’, and the common language being woman-centric. However, Rich does not intend, as stated earlier, a closed-off narrative; she simply focuses on the elevation of female experience to raise it to the same level which male experience has occupied throughout history.

However, that history presents another issue with Rich’s aim, which she herself admits, as she writes, “power inheres itself in the word, it cannot rid itself of centuries of connotation” (56). There is no such thing as a truly new language; it is paradoxical to reach for it -- and

besides, the cargo of history, the connotation and denotation, will always be present. Therefore, the “linguistic utopia” Rich seeks may never come into being, but it is the seeking out of that utopia which matters, the striving for connection at all costs which forges a better, more inclusive world.

The common language seeks to break a silence borne of absence and inadequacy. Yet there is a different kind of silence, one which Rich claims as both a part of that common language and its counterpoint, which contributes to the balance of power and pursuit of the “society without domination.” A whole poem (“Cartographies of Silence”) is dedicated to this idea, as Rich writes “[Silence] is a presence/ It has a history a form/ Do not confuse it/ with any kind of absence” (17). By asserting the significance of Silence, Rich develops the idea that it is a learned behavior with a role in art, a tool for rebellion- and one which is pointedly female. It is used in the face of noise, expectation, violence, as the creation of space. In “Not Somewhere Else But Here,” this is driven home as she writes, “here, nothing is lost” (40). Thus, another role of silence is introduced-- as a resort when words aren’t enough, when existing, limited language cannot truthfully convey reality. Rich writes that “Language floats at the vanishing point” (15), when true atrocity exists. The poems which deal with this sort of silence invoke a timely and concrete atrocity: the Vietnam War and the cultural stigmas which accompany it. Thus, Rich places female silence opposite the din of ceaseless violence. In parallel, this same immense, powerful silence exists in the face of violence which is particularly intimate, such as abuse from a trusted person or staggering loss. Though silence is an essential resort in the face of tragedy, it is not merely a mechanism for when words fail. In “Toward the Solstice,” Rich explored the idea of silence as cleansing. She asserts that in silence, in the absence of words and male influence, the space for female growth is found. Where existing language is absent, the past fades, and in the free fall of silence, out of necessity, new language is found.

The second tenet of Rich's volume can only be described as radical love: an exploration of the ways in which relationships between women reclaim power and develop this common language, a new way to address the world. This begins at the outset of the volume, when Rich tells the tale of an ill-fated all-woman climbing team in "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev." Despite the tragic end to their venture, Rich uses their story to explore the power inherent in a collective endeavor, how choosing love changes everything. Writing that on the mountain, they felt "changes elemental and minute/ as those we underwent/to bring each other here/ choosing ourselves each other and this life" (5). This reflects Rich's belief that the strength of women, when bound together, only increases, transforms into something greater than the sum of its parts. Rich communicates a primal refusal to be contained as in the past, resulting in an endless upward spiral, proclaiming "we will not live to settle for less" (6). This is the power, the radical love, which the common language enables to transform the world-- the pursuit of higher things alongside one another.

Rich's exploration of woman-to-woman relationships takes many forms-- sisterhood, mother-daughter, even friend-to-friend-- yet it would be a disservice to disregard the significance of the central narrative of "Twenty-One-Love Poems": that of two women in love. This volume was Rich's first venture into this sort of autobiographical narrative, groundbreaking for her and the society she lived in. "Twenty-One Love Poems" reflects the uncharted territory this love resides in. Love between women, in Rich's voice, is groundbreaking and norm-defying simply in that it exists. As she writes, "What we do together is pure invention/the maps they gave us were out of date by years" (31). Yet it is not strange or sensational, rather "heroic in its ordinariness" (35), in the ways in which it is a daily truth, simple and familiar. The newness of this concept, the normalcy of love between women, is a tenet of Rich's common language. The

connection, the experiences of these women make it so that “any chronicle of the world we share/could be written with a new meaning” (13). Unprecedented; ordinary. Rich paints the love between women, the love which she herself has found and cherished, as an act of rebellion. It is a rebellion against the norm, against the ordinary world which has denied that love’s existence and validity for so long. It is a breaking of the silence.

This is a prime example of how she makes the personal political, a tendency which critics claim de-elevates her art to the level of experience and identity politic skirmishes (Tejada). But for Rich, one cannot exist without the other. As New York Times reporter Margalit Fox asserts, “The personal, the political and the poetical [are] indissolubly linked; her body of work can be read as a series of urgent dispatches from the front.” Rich’s experiences as a lesbian, Jewish woman and a feminist permeate her poetry. How could they not? In a work that so emphasizes rebellion through tenderness, Rich’s intimate portrayal of the love between women strays out beyond the known into the territory of a new, common language. Without the weight and significance of identity, specificity, and advocacy, the visionary quality of her poetry would be absent, and its meaning would be sorely diminished.

Though this romantic love, revered and normalized, is an essential tenet of the “Dream of a Common Language,” the relationships between women outside of romantic love are also an enormous contributor to the volume’s pursuit of feminine power. Rich asserts that the depth and healing power of these connections stems from emotion, vulnerability, asserting, “Without tenderness, we are in hell” (30). This departure from the traditional, masculine scorn for emotionality (Tejada) exemplifies the newness of Rich’s endeavor for a common language, and its pacifism. Returning to tenderness, to female power, to the long-denied self in the form of other women is Rich’s professed first step towards a common language. This return after so long

being “Homesick for myself, for her” (76), is healing and essential. This tenderness is the reason that Rich believes, as she asserts in “X,” that she could trust the hands of women to heal centuries of rifts, that these hands “might carry out an unavoidable violence with such restraint/ [...] that violence ever after would be obsolete” (28). Womens’ familiarity with violence, so often enacted on them, would make them wary and hesitant enough in the act of rebellion that the cycle would end. This is the larger significance of the common language, the fundamental difference between it and its predecessor: a vulnerable connection without resort to force.

Rich is adamant, though, throughout poems such as “Mother-Right” and “Natural Resources” that femininity is not the absence of force or strength: that the tenderness which characterizes it is not weakness or passivity. She writes, “gentleness is active/ gentleness [...] invents more merciful instruments/ to touch the wound beyond the wound” (63). The subtlety of the common language, its power, lies in its capacity to heal the wounds inflicted upon women and the world they live in, on a deeper, more fundamental level. Healing, growth, fertility: all historically associated with the divine feminine, which Rich, rather than rejecting, embraces. She uses it to identify the aim and impact of her art, from which, as she writes, “time after time / truth breaks moist and green” (14). Rich plays on the idea of writing as birth, reclaiming it as the laudable domain of the woman. The idea that everything comes from a woman, that feminine power is “the stone foundation/ forming under everything that grows” (77) is one which permeates the volume and underlies the essential nature of female reclamation of power, so that this foundation can grow solid and the common language which grows from it flourish without the constraints of the past.

For all its mastery and beauty, the true power of Rich’s volume lies in its visionary nature. It is not enough to merely speculate passively, hoping, hands tied, for a better world.

Adrienne Rich recognizes and heralds the need for specific action, even if it receives establishment pushback. In this way, this volume is a significant departure from her previous works, as she herself recognizes, as she writes, “These are words I cannot choose again / humanism androgyny/ [...] their glint is too shallow, like a dye/ that does not permeate/ the fibers of actual life/ as we live it now” (60). Her previous volumes, particularly *Diving Into the Wreck*, were confined to these humanistic, androgynous, widely palatable tales (Young). However, as her personal politics and poet’s vision evolved, a volume resulted whose unapologetic focus was on women: the female experience, not out of petty exclusionary philosophy, but out of necessity. Implicitly, Rich holds that in the same way that ‘Save ALL Trees’ is not an effective tool for rainforest preservation, ‘Women AND Men should be Equal’ is insufficient for the task at hand. Both have good intentions, but do not address the specific needs and situations at the crisis’ root. This specific misunderstanding is addressed in a conversation recounted in “Natural Resources”, where a male interviewer jokingly asks if Rich wants a world with only women, or a world without women, and she replies, “I live in both” (61). This harmful erasure, felt on both sides, is the reason for the search for the common language

Beyond the harm done by the erasure of female experience, Rich’s call-to-action heralds the potential for female power to enact change. In the time she was writing, as now, the turbulent world turned fast, and all too often, Rich’s words rang true: “The patriot’s fist is at her throat/ her voice is in mortal danger” (63). Again, she presents an emotionally stunning account of women and the violence which they resist in every way they can, dissenting against war, trying to communicate its horror, to teach their children “unteachable lessons” (40). Yet the narrative of victimhood, too, is insufficient for Rich’s visionary narrative to triumph. In a poem which is otherwise an homage to the women of our collective past, a shift in tone generates momentum

until Rich reaches her penultimate declaration: “The woman who cherished her suffering is dead” (29), that the common language is a fundamental resistance of “the temptation to make a career of pain” (30). Rather than focusing on this pain, there is a conscious shift to the pursuit of a way to end it. This idea is highlighted in “Hunger,” as Rich writes “The decision to feed the world/ is the real decision. No revolution/ has chosen it. For that choice requires/ that women shall be free” (13). This is an insistence that to empower women is to enable the mechanism which will remedy hurts, which will carry a world towards a better way of living. It is far from passive.

This active work towards creation, towards choice and power is an essential and transformative tenet of this volume, whose aim can be summed up in the simple lines in one of the first poems: “I refuse these givens/[...] i am choosing/not to suffer uselessly [...]/i choose to love this time for once/with all my intelligence” (11). In order to claim power, in order to transcend present limitations, Rich asserts that one must first reject inherent assumptions, cut the strings. This choice, this leap into the unfettered unknown made by the women in “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” and “Transcendental Etude” exemplifies the leap which must be made by the world. Despite the danger and unsurety which accompanies this breakaway, only in this new, unstable world can you begin to live and to love in a common language.

After millennia of women being the ‘other’ of male consciousness, Rich’s proposed shift is a revolutionary one. The common language she seeks creates through silence, when existing words cannot help, a space for growth. It lends power through the radical ordinariness of love between women, whether as lovers, sisters, mothers or daughters. Above all, it allows the personal to become political and transformative, insisting that language can and should go beyond the page to transform the world and the way women live in it. As literary critic Alicia Ostriker writes in “Her Cargo,” *The Dream of a Common Language* is grounded in “a faith that attempts to communicate can succeed.” The idealism of this endeavor to overcome the cargo of the centuries is powerful because it is paradoxical and impossible, yet all the same a worthy goal.



The pursuit of this language, inclusive, transformative, tender- even if it is never achieved, is valuable, and will itself affect change. This slender book of poems is above all visionary grounded in reality; Rich both acknowledges the limits of language and believes in the capacity to transcend them, as she writes, “a whole new poetry beginning here” (76). Her common language has been infiltrating our world; remarkable progress has been made since the 1970’s. Today, the feminism advocated by Rich and her contemporaries is far more widespread; things continue to improve for the modern woman and her right to live and love. Yet still century-old shadows lurk, misunderstanding persists, and the fundamental inequalities and wounds are stubbornly present. Ours is a world still in translation, with a long way yet to go until we come close to speaking that common language- but, as Adrienne Rich has written, the power lies in the dream and the pursuit of it; silence, tenderness and action working in synergy to claim the word back for women.

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