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Adrienne Rich's Feminism: The Individual, Society, & Gender Relationships in Her Poetry

Much has been discussed about Adrienne Rich being a radical feminist. Many critics, such as Wendy Martin, have consider Rich's work an open attack to the old order that male domination established and an intent to center in the figure of the woman the redeemer of "an egalitarian and humane society" (169). Adrienne Rich herself, in essays such as "When We Dead Awaken" (1971) and "Women and Honor" (1975), might seem to accept that radical role; not only for criticizing openly the actual state of society and literature—which, according to her, are determined and influenced by a patriarchal force and culture—, but also for acknowledging both men and women—in spite of their alleged status as feminist writers—as the perpetuators of a false image of womanhood or the same feminism. In fact, in "When We Dead Awaken", she goes as far as to assert that "no male writer has written primarily or even largely for women, or with the sense of women's criticism as a consideration when he chooses his materials, his theme, his language," and that to "a lesser or greater extent, every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was supposed to be addressing women" (169).

Thus, contrary to the expected connotation of the term "radical feminism", Rich's apparent conclusiveness or radicalness might seem to reside in the fact that she repudiates

a male dominion based in patriarchal traditions and criticizes even canonical feminists' irresoluteness, rather than in attacking the male gender or considering it an enemy *per se* causelessly. Then, the aim of this essay is to explore some of the main features and themes—as her interest in gender relationships, the individual, and society—of Rich's poetry in order to reach a conclusion regarding in what her feminist stance consists.

Adrienne Rich, in poems such as “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers”, “The Knight”, and “The Stranger”, criticizes and explores inequality—that is, traditional organization into social hierarchies based on genders—, stereotypes, and the relationship of these with the same art through the use of poetic and rhetoric devices such as versification, contrast, metonymy, analogy, and simile, among others. In this way, many times the themes that Rich approaches in her poetry are reinforced by formal means.

First, in order to explore what I mentioned above, I would like to begin by discussing one of Rich's most well-known poems; that is, “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers”:

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
 Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
 They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
 They pace in sleek chivalric certainty. (Rich 4)

As we can see in the first stanza, the poetic voice describes the screen which Aunt Jennifer is embroidering. The speaker emphasizes how the still image of the tigers is given movement and vivified through the use of rhyme and metonymy—this last is achieved by portraying and equaling the tigers' bright colour with that of the topaz. This is important since, as we will see later in this paper, the serene, lively, and chivalric attitude of the tigers contrasts with Aunt Jennifer's petrified state, and the screen stands as a mirror of her

desires. Likewise, even at this early point of the poem, the masculine—represented in the word “men” through the use of synecdoche—is acknowledged as an antagonistic force. This antagonism between the feminine and the masculine is more evident in the second stanza:

Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool
 Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
 The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
 Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand. (Rich 4)

At this point of the poem the quality of Aunt Jennifer’s relationship with her husband is made more explicit. It would seem that it is based in fear rather than in love, that it is based in subjugation—of the feminine to the masculine; thus, depicting a patriarchal organization. Once again, through the use of synecdoche—which is even reinforced by the capitalization of the appellatives “Aunt Jennifer” and “Uncle”—Rich makes Aunt Jennifer and his husband stand for the feminine and the masculine respectively. Similarly, this relationship might represent the feminine subjugation—artistic and/or domestic—to a sort of male authority or tradition—here symbolized in the wedding band that oppresses Aunt Jennifer—. As Wendy Martin observes, “‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’ present[s] carefully distanced portraits of women alienated from their husbands, the community, and even themselves: for example, Aunt Jennifer spends her days embroidering tigers that ‘do not fear the men beneath the tree’ while her own life is hopelessly constricted by custom” (180). However, despite the fact that the individual or the woman is subjected to conventions or patriarchy, an optimistic feeling still permeates the poem. Creativity is not prevented completely. The individual or woman finds in art her opportunity to overturn conventions, to attain freedom, and to transcend. This is evident in the final stanza:

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
 Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
 The tigers in the panel that she made
 Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (Rich 4)

Here the contrast that was started at the first stanza reaches its climax. Adrienne Rich herself, in "When We Dead Awaken", describes this stanza, thematically, as follows: "this woman [Aunt Jennifer] suffers from the opposition of her imagination, worked out in tapestry, and her life-style, 'ringed with ordeals she was mastered by'" (171). Nevertheless, here again, this opposition is assumed positively. The poetic voice realizes that although Aunt Jennifer will remain unable to get rid of the yoke of tradition and manhood, her spiritual struggle will continue through her panel, through her creation. Thus, the male domination and tradition are not only minimized, but also acknowledged as possible to be overcome.

Now, regarding prosodic construction or versification, some critics, as Wendy Martin, suggest that the tight form and rhyme scheme of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" serve the speaker "to control the turbulent emotions that seethe beneath the surface" (180). Thus, the vividness that rhyme achieves as well as the dominant iambic rhythm would also serve as a cloak to make bearable both the traumatic scene and speech that the poetic voice renders and perhaps witnesses. In other words, these poetic devices achieve to evoke a joyful sensation that goes against the overall feeling of the poem.

Second, in contrast with "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", the poem that I will be discussing now is centered on the male figure rather than on womanhood. The poem is called "The Knight":

A knight rides into the noon,
 and his helmet points to the sun,
 and a thousand splintered suns
 are the gaiety of his mail.
 The soles of his feet glitter
 and his palms flash in reply,
 and under his crackling banner
 he rides like a ship in sail. (Rich 8)

In these lines, the poetic voice describes the outward appearance of the knight. He is equaled indirectly to the grandeur of the sun by describing how the ray lights are reflected in his armor. Likewise, once again relying on the analogy of the sun and its beams, this image of the knight is depicted as being powerful, vivid, and merry. He seems to be comfortable with his errand and at his medium. This sense of ease is achieved by means of simile, by comparing the knight's ride with the sailing of a ship. Similarly, Rich plays with the connotations of chivalry, with the gallantry, honor, bravery, and strength expected from both a male soldier and a male tradition, either historical or literary. Thus, in this first stanza, Rich might seem to present, metaphorically, a faultless male image that has been held through ages. Nonetheless, as we will see in the following quotation, as the poetic voice goes deeper in its description, other meanings or senses arouse regarding the aforementioned image:

A knight rides into the noon,
 and only his eye is living,
 a lump of bitter jelly

set in a metal mask,
 betraying rags and tatters
 that cling to the flesh beneath
 and wear his nerves to ribbons
 under the radiant casque. (Rich 8)

The poetic voice makes evident the contrast of the image of the knight depicted in the first stanza by repeating the same first line. This time, the description is focalized in the knight's inner state. In contrast with the portrayal of the first stanza, imagery and tone, rather than being grandiose, are almost grotesque. The speaker makes allusion to the rottenness of the knight's spirit by delineating very explicitly his decay. This is evident in the use of the appositive "a lump of bitter jelly / set in a metal mask" (11, 12) so as to describe his eye: the only body part that it is alive. Thus, by this metaphorical introspection, Rich is enabled not only to criticize actual stereotypes, but to question the core of their existence. In addition, she might seem to imply that all these male stereotypes, roles, or traditions can barely hold and are about to die. As we will see in the closing stanza, the poetic voice approaches directly the nature of the knight's fall as well as of everything that this image encompasses:

Who will unhorse the rider
 and free him from between
 the walls of iron, the emblems
 crushing his chest with their weight?
 Will they defeat him gently,
 or leave him hurled on the green,

his rags and wounds till hidden

under the great breastplate? (Rich 8)

First of all, despite of the knight's state of decay, his fall is not acknowledged as being definite or certain. The speaker wonders who and when the knight is going to be freed; when his image is going to be erased or put to an end. Regarding this, the final question is ambivalent. On the one hand, the poetic voice might be wandering if the knight will fall due to the same emblems that he carries or if he will remain the same—implying that man's own dominant and image will terminate him or is even oppressive to him—. On the other hand, it could stand for a call for help, expecting somebody to dispose him off the weight he has been carrying, of the weight that tradition and society imposed on him. However, this unhorsing or defeat is not a violent one. It is described as being done "gently", which implies that man himself per se is not acknowledged as a sort of enemy, but rather, to a certain extent, a victim. He is portrayed as being metaphorically entrapped in walls of iron, in his mail, in given values. Be that as it may, in either of the two interpretations, stereotypes or roles are conceived as a prison and as what really needs to be expunged.

In addition, regarding versification, in contrast with "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", the rhyme as well as the dominant iambic trimeter, rather than vivifying the theme or speech, are representative of the feeling of entrapment that pervades throughout the poem. On the one hand, the near rhyme could symbolize the equally near disposing off of the yokes of literary tradition. On the other hand, the nearly regular rhythm as well as the fixed meter that last until the end of the poem might represent the still latent presence of conventionalisms.

Finally, in order to conclude, I would like to discuss briefly the poem “The Stranger”, since I believe that it sheds light on the ideology of Adrienne Rich—regarding the individual, society, and the relationship between the genders—that I approached throughout this paper:

Looking as I’ve looked before, straight down the heart
of the street to the river
walking the rivers of the avenues
feeling the shudder of the caves beneath the asphalt
watching the lights turn on in the towers
walking as I’ve walked before
like a man, like a woman, in the city
my visionary anger cleansing my sight
and the detailed perceptions of mercy
flowering from that anger

if I come into a room out of the sharp misty light
and hear them talking a dead language
if they ask me my identity
what can I say but
I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the lids
of the new born child (52)

As we can see in the first stanza, the poetic voice makes an analogy between the rural and the urban as an intent to reconcile what we would generally acknowledge as counterparts. The streets and avenues are intermingled or equaled to rivers so tightly that the boundaries between them turn almost indefinable. Likewise, the presence of the rural, represented by the mentioning of the caves, is palpable in the urban, in the asphalt of the city. Moreover, in this same stanza, the reconciliation continues with genders. The speaker describes how the old notions or separations of the sexes are becoming obsolete, how it is able to embody the two of them. It is through anger, imagination, and action that these “perceptions of mercy” or enlightenment can be attained. This is symbolized mainly in the seeing of the lights in the tower. Furthermore, this sense of liberation, which contrasts with the poems discussed above, is also evident in versification. This time, Rich does not use a conventional rhythm or rhyme scheme, but free verse. The sole election of that verse form, as well as its name, already gives us a hint of the liberating character of the whole poem.

In the second stanza, the poetic voice describes how a sort of rebirth within it takes place. After coming out of the misty light or tumult, the speaker reemerges as a single entity that encompasses both sexes: the male and the female. It calls himself the “androgynous”. In this way, although it is either difficult or impossible to the others to acknowledge or join this transformation, the poetic voice is able to transcend divisions, stereotypes, and social conventions through language and leave its mark in new generations (this is symbolized in the birth of the innocent new born child).

Definitely, although male qualities are often considered as antagonistic features, as I hinted in the introduction of this paper, Adrienne Rich’s radical feminism never consists in

a direct attack either to the male or female gender per se, but in adopting a critical stand—which certainly is more inclined to a feminine perspective—that allows her to do both denounce forms of male dominion based in schemes of subjugation and the possible weaknesses of her own sex, as in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”. In fact, what Rich criticizes harshly in her poetry is the existent division among them. Arguably, what her poetry ultimately seeks is to reconcile both genders and to raise other people, through creation and language—as in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” and “The Stranger”, respectively—to a state that enables them to transcend or look beyond the social conventions or stereotypes that determine and oppresses them—as it is evident in “The Knight” —.

Thus, it would seem that Rich’s feminist radicalism resides in both reiteration and in a call for taking action against any repressive system. Adrienne Rich herself explains it like this:

I am a feminist because I feel endangered, psychically and physically, by this society, and because I believe that the women’s movement is saying we have come to an edge of history when men—insofar as they are embodiments of the patriarchal idea— have become dangerous to children and other living things, themselves included; and that we cannot longer afford to keep the female principle enclosed. (Rich in Martin 172)

Appendix

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

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