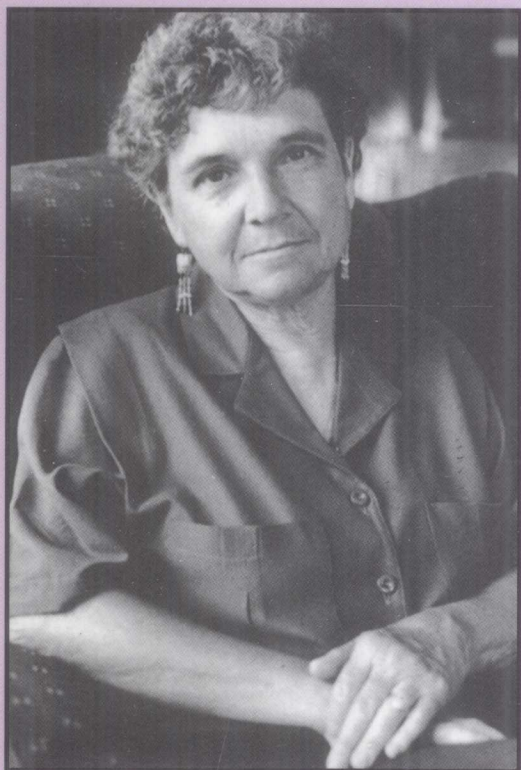


ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY AND PROSE



SELECTED AND EDITED
BY BARBARA CHARLESWORTH GELPI
AND ALBERT GELPI

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY
AND PROSE

POEMS
PROSE
REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

Selected and Edited by

BARBARA CHARLESWORTH GELPI

ALBERT GELPI

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

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Preface

The contents of *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* differ so widely from those of its predecessor, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* (1975), that words like *revised* and *enlarged* became inadequate, and we needed to change the title as well. These changes are signs not of any repudiation of that earlier work but of Adrienne Rich's extraordinary, in fact phenomenal, achievements during the eighteen years that separate the two editions. In 1975 Rich's was already a poetic voice that had earned universal attention, a voice that both affected and effected her readers' process of self-creation through articulation, through speech. The long process of her own self-birthing that Rich described in "Necessities of Life" (1962), and in many other poems as well, was herald, companion, and coach to others around the world, women and men, struggling toward a new consciousness.

As we knew even then, Rich's was not a consciousness that rested in its own achievement. Then, as now, its characteristic self-injunction was "To pull yourself up by your own roots; to eat the last meal in / your old neighborhood" ("Shooting Script" [11/69–7/70]). But even someone deeply aware of Rich's intelligence, courage, and passion and of the flexibility and power of her poetic gift could scarcely have foreseen future works such as *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1974–76), *Sources* (1981–82), and *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1990–91). This new edition, then, gives a long overdue compilation of Rich's work and a chart to her poetic journey. A selection like this one necessarily has to omit many important poems. We chose these to demonstrate the full range of Rich's achievement and to provide a balanced overview of her poetry.

Much more space was needed in this edition than in the last to represent, again only with works that seemed to us to mark certain high points, Rich's achievements in prose. In 1975 Rich had already written "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971)—an essay that continues to mark the point at which the second wave of feminism resoundingly reached shore. Our earlier edition contained that and "The Anti-Feminist Woman" (1972). The latter was, as it turned out, a glimpse toward what Rich was to accomplish in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). But in 1975 we had no adequate foreknowledge of the contributions Rich was shortly to make to feminist theory. As *Of Woman Born's* subtitle suggests, Rich was one of the first

to investigate in depth the meaning of the slogan at the heart of the feminist movement, “The personal is political.” She had very early and very clearly the radical insight that women’s most supposedly “personal” experiences—their motherhood, their very sexuality—are shaped in large part by the male-dominated institutions in which they occur.

That structuring process is now so familiar that the signifiers for it have become jargon; *constructed* and *inscribed* are taken as the appropriate adjectives for the very word *consciousness*. But in both the past and the present Rich’s thinking avoids and transcends the oversimplifications that create jargon. For her the fact that consciousness bears the marks and scars of oppressive institutions does not invalidate, much less destroy, the actuality of personal experience as a source and resource. Seeing the scars rather than denying them and using memory to grasp their causes and consequences together constitute the awesome “re-vision” undertaken in everything she writes. The most difficult but at the same time the most liberating aspect of this re-vision is that it involves the constant reassessment of the ways in which one has participated, whatever one’s race, gender, or class, in one’s own oppression. This focused and healing self-scrutiny so characteristic of Rich, so much the ground of her poetry’s fused insights and of her prose analysis, has also been her central, though by no means her single, contribution to the methodology at the core of all feminist theorizing.¹

“Three Conversations,” our dialogue with Rich in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry*, was made redundant by the wealth and significance of the prose Rich has published since 1975, and that body of materials eliminated the need for new “conversations” in this edition. The numerous essays on Rich’s work that have appeared in the intervening years and Rich’s own self-analytical prose also transformed the critical section of this book. In the place of the criticism with a strong biographical cast that for good reason characterized early studies of her work, we have looked to essays that emphasize the qualities of her writing and of her situation as a twentieth-century American woman poet. As a link between the three different sections of the book, our index not only includes references for the first lines and titles of the poems but indicates those places in both Rich’s own prose and the critical essays where particular poems are discussed.

Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose is, then, virtually a different book from *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry*, and that is appropriate, given the changes it registers in Rich’s thought, life, poetic production, and critical reception. But through these changes there remains continuity. To an interior interlocutor, the poet in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* says, “If you had known me / once, you’d still know me now though in a different /

1. We are grateful to Diane Middlebrook for pointing out this parallel between Rich’s stance toward experience and the central concerns of feminist theory.

light and life." Her words apply more generally as well to her ongoing dialogue with all her readers. Through dramatic changes in the inner and outer places from which Rich writes and through changes in profoundly lived commitments, whether as a wife and mother or as a lesbian lover, Rich's abiding dedication to "living memory" means that earlier selves are not lost, much less repudiated, but transformed. The voice of a woman focusing her intelligence and her passion and shaping her language to the articulation of a constantly evolving, freshly realized identity and situation is the voice we know through all these differences.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Stanford English Department for underwriting expenses we incurred while doing this revision of *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*. The reference librarians at Stanford's Green Library were an invaluable resource to us as we worked on the footnotes to the poems. Indeed, their zest transformed the potentially lonely task of source hunting into the communal pleasure of an intellectual scavenger hunt. Our thanks go to Karen Fiser and to Joellen Hiltbrand, whom we consulted as we were making editorial selections for this volume, and to Joellen for her help with other editorial labors such as photocopying and the pasting up of pages. George Hart assisted in the final stages with wonderful awareness, gusto, and sense of detail.

Above all, our thanks go to Adrienne Rich herself. While remaining rigorously separate from the process of selecting both her own work and the essays on it, she generously responded to questions, saving us hours in the library. While any errors or omissions are our own, her contribution was invaluable. We are grateful for this particular aid and rejoice in a friendship that has deepened over thirty years.

BARBARA CHARLESWORTH GELPI
ALBERT GELPI

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POEMS

A single dot at the bottom of the text on a page indicates a break between stanzas.

From *A Change of World* (1951)

Storm Warnings

The glass has been falling all the afternoon,
And knowing better than the instrument
What winds are walking overhead, what zone
Of gray unrest is moving across the land,
I leave the book upon a pillowed chair 5
And walk from window to closed window, watching
Boughs strain against the sky

And think again, as often when the air
Moves inward toward a silent core of waiting,
How with a single purpose time has traveled 10
By secret currents of the undiscerned
Into this polar realm. Weather abroad
And weather in the heart alike come on
Regardless of prediction.

Between foreseeing and averting change 15
Lies all the mastery of elements
Which clocks and weatherglasses cannot alter.
Time in the hand is not control of time,
Nor shattered fragments of an instrument
A proof against the wind; the wind will rise, 20
We can only close the shutters.

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
Of weather through the unsealed aperture. 25
This is our sole defense against the season;
These are the things that we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions.

Certain frailties of glass
Which, it cannot be denied,
Lead in times like these to fear
For crystal vase and chandelier.

10

Not that missiles will be cast;
None as yet dare lift an arm.
But the scene recalls a storm
When our grandsire stood aghast
To see his antique ruby bowl
Shivered in a thunder-roll.

15

Let us only bear in mind
How these treasures handed down
From a calmer age passed on
Are in the keeping of our kind.
We stand between the dead glass-blowers
And murmurings of missile-throwers.

20

An Unsaid Word

She who has power to call her man
From that estranged intensity
Where his mind forages alone,
Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
And when his thoughts to her return
Stands where he left her, still his own,
Knows this the hardest thing to learn.

5

From *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955)

Living in Sin

She had thought the studio would keep itself;
no dust upon the furniture of love.
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,
a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
had risen at his urging. 5

Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
so coldly would delineate the scraps
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—
envoy from some village in the moldings . . . 10

Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard, 15
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;
while she, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found
a towel to dust the table-top, 20
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.

By evening she was back in love again,
though not so wholly but throughout the night
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
like a relentless milkman up the stairs. 25

The Diamond Cutters

However legendary,
The stone is still a stone,