

FORMALISM OR “THE REGIME OF TRUTH”: A READING OF ADRIENNE RICH’S

A CHANGE OF WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Formalism in Adrienne Rich’s first book, *A Change of World*, has attracted different critics and scholars so far. In their interpretations, it seems that they have taken it for granted that Adrienne Rich was a formalist. But none of them has ever presented the cause for the emergence of formalism in Adrienne Rich’s early poetry. In this paper, I draw upon Michel Foucault’s theory of “repressive power” and demonstrate that formalism was actually “the regime of truth” which determined ‘true/false’ poetry for the young poet and excluded some poetic discourses and permitted only some particular ones to come into being in her first book.

KEYWORDS: Adrienne Rich, *A Change of World*, Formalism, Michel Foucault, Discourse Analysis, Repressive Power, Exclusion, Truth, The Regime of Truth

INTRODUCTION

Almost all critics of Adrienne Rich’s poetry agree that her early poems in *A Change of World* (1951) have been the poet’s practice of distancing devices of modernist formalism which was dominant among the poets in the United States in the 1950s. Trudi Dawne Witonsky, who has examined Adrienne Rich’s works in terms of Paulo Freire’s theory of praxis¹, admits that, in her early poetry, Rich wrote under the doctrine of New Critical formalism. She goes further and states that Rich’s transition from formalism in her early poetry to feminism in her later volumes happens because of the ‘inadequacy of formalist’ theory (Witonsky)². Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz asserts Adrienne Rich “begins by following the conventions of the leading figures in the post-war period, such as W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and others” (Diaz-Diocaretz 118). Yes, there is no doubt that formalism of the mentioned poets influenced and overwhelmed the young poet’s craft in her early poems.

As a young poet at that time, Rich followed the main doctrine of formalism, which privileged poetic ‘Form’ over emotional ‘Content’ and emphasized ‘universality’ and ‘impersonality’ rather than ‘individuality’ and ‘self-expression’ in art and literature. W. H. Auden, selecting *A Change of World* for the Yale Younger Poets Prize, in his foreword to it referred to the significance of the poetic craft of this kind and put: “In a young poet, as T.S. Eliot has observed, the most promising sign is craftsmanship for it is evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible” (Rich 10). Auden’s words, in fact, reveal the poetic disciplines of Adrienne Rich’s time; that is, one of the main prerequisites for poetic discourse to be accepted by the community of the poets was detachment from

¹ He is a Brazilian educator, working in literacy programs, who has written about social change as arising out of theory and action in relationship, each continually informing the other. Cf. Trudi Dawne Witonsky in BIBLIOGRAPHY.

² But I believe that Formalism should not be blamed for its inadequacy, since it was the ruling literary system of the time. If Rich turned her attention from Formalism to Feminism, it was because of the “distribution of power” from center to margins; this will be explained through the article

self-expression and Adrienne Rich, either consciously or unconsciously, followed this discipline in the majority of her poems in *A Change of World* and stayed detached from her 'self' and 'female identity' and, in this way, aroused Auden's compliment where he said: "...the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs..." (11).

There is no need to state the obvious in this paper; I do not intend to take the same path and to admit whether the young poet has been a true formalist or not, or even to blame her for putting gender-oriented issues in minority, but rather to question the grounds for Adrienne Rich's becoming a formalist in her first volume. Auden's words, though complimentary, lead the reader into these questions: Why are these poems dressed? Why do they speak quietly? Who are the elders and how are they respected? If they do not tell fibs, what truths do they tell? Evidently, Adalaide Morris, in her critique of *A Change of World*, has also been concerned with the same questions; she draws upon Adrienne Rich's later judgment of her first volume where she confessed the words, in this book, functioned "more as a kind of façade than as either self-revelation or as a probe into one's own consciousness." (Morris 137) Morris takes side with Rich and declares that "[t]he façade is an excellent image for these architecturally intricate and static poems, poems whose elegantly undisrupted exposition seems to conceal as much as it reveals." She believes these poems "speak quietly in order to hold down a yell" and "though they may not fib, do not quite tell the whole truth." (137) Rich herself confessed that in these early poems "the unconscious things never got to the surface." (137)

I do believe that Michael Foucault's theory of "repressing power" can supply me with reasonable and sufficient instruments here to attain more elaborate and systematic responses for the above questions. Focusing on Rich's first book, *A Change of World*, I demonstrate how as a result of the repression of formalism—functioning as the patriarchal structure of literary discourse of the time—only particular poetic discourses emerged and 'the other' discourses were not expressed or fully expressed. As a matter of fact, I claim that formalism was not just a literary school but "the regime of truth" which repressed the poet's early discourse. To cast light on the issue, first I need to elaborate "the regime of truth" itself.

THE REGIME OF TRUTH

"The regime of truth" came into being in Foucault's "The Order of Discourse" in which he elaborated his theory of "repressing power." On Foucault's account, what we can express and what we think we might want to express is constrained by systems and rules which are in some senses beyond human control. These rules are frameworks within which discourse is produced and within which one constructs their utterances and thoughts. In "The Order of Discourse," where he introduces his thesis of "critical analysis of discourse" for the first time, Foucault refers to the delimiting function of discursive structures upon discourse in this way: "In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality" (Foucault 52). These procedures, accordingly, function in three ways: 1. exterior to discourse, working as exclusion, 2. interior to discourse, 3. not necessarily exterior or interior to discourse, working as rarefaction of speaking subjects' access to discourse. All of these mechanisms for constraining and structuring discourse have a similar effect: they exclude some kinds of discourses; on the other hand, they cause the production of other discourses, but only certain types of discourses. In a sense, they show that what can be said and what can be perceived as true knowledge occur within specific bounds³. The procedures of exclusion operate from the exterior; "they have to do with the part of discourse which puts power and desire at stake," (56) as

³ Of course, this is not to say that all of the individuals existing within an era agree upon a particular discourse, but simply that all of the stated discourses and texts are produced within similar discursive structures in an era or culture

Foucault points out. These are the rules which determine what is considered normal or rational; they silence what they exclude. Although what is possible to say seems natural, this naturalness is the result of what has been excluded and silenced. Raman Selden puts it in this way, “individuals working within particular discursive practices cannot think or speak without obeying the unspoken ‘archive’ of rules and constraints; otherwise they risk being condemned to madness or silence” (159). The procedures of exclusion work, as Foucault has isolated them, as forms of 1. prohibition, 2. opposition between reason and madness, and 3. opposition between truth and falsehood. Among these elements, the third principle of ‘exclusion’ shapes the basis of my reasoning and analysis in this paper.

The third principle of exclusion which plans what can be regarded as true discourse is, in fact, the division between truth and falsehood, or in other words, between knowledge which is perceived as true and that which is considered to be false. ‘Truth’ from Foucault’s perspective has a particular meaning, as ‘discourse’ does⁴. In an interview, Foucault elaborates on what he means by ‘truth’ and says that “by truth I do not mean ‘the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted’, but rather ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’” (Foucault 131). This means there are institutional systems for the production of knowledge, to which Foucault refers as “the regimes of truth.” Thus, the question is not ‘what true knowledge is’ or ‘what the path to true knowledge is;’ rather, ‘what the regimes of truth are.’ These regimes are defined as follows:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (131).

Here, Foucault is concerned with the rules and practices which, on one hand, govern the formation of only some (true) statements and, on the other hand, exclude or constrain some others. What Foucault is claiming is that knowledge and its objects are affected through an ensemble of discursive rules, and not through a knowing subject. To illustrate this point, he gives the following example in “The Order of Discourse:” “People have often wondered how the botanists or biologists of the nineteenth century managed not to see that what Mendel was saying was true. But it was because Mendel was speaking of objects, applying methods, and placing himself on a theoretical horizon which were alien to the biology of his time....Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not ‘within the true’ of the biological discourse of his time” (Foucault 60-61). Foucault refers to the decisive role of institutional rules as well when he states: “It is always possible that

⁴ In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault has written: “...instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word ‘discourse’, I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (Foucault 90). If we analyze this quotation, we will be able to isolate a range of meanings that the term discourse has for Foucault. The first definition that he gives is the broadest: ‘the general domain of all statements;’ that is, “all utterances or texts which have meaning and which have some effects in the real world count as discourse” (Mills 7). In the second definition that he gives—‘an individualizable group of statements’—he is concerned with “groups of utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common” (7) such as discourses of feminism. Foucault’s third definition of discourse seems to be the most significant and disputable one upon which most of the critics have focused: ‘a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements.’ Here, one can say, “he [was] interested less in the actual utterances/texts that are produced than in the rules and structures which produce particular utterances and texts” (7). Stuart Hall interprets this last definition of discourse in this way: “What interested [Foucault] were the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods (Hall 72). Therefore, one of the most productive ways of defining discourse is to regard it not as a group of signs or a corpus of texts but as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 54). In this sense, a discourse is something which produces something else, for instance, an utterance, a concept or an effect, and also something in which meaning and meaningful practices are constructed

one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority, but one is 'in the true' only by obeying the rules of a discursive 'policing' which one has to reactivate in each of one's discourses" (61). In this regard, upon the relationship between discourse and truth, Mark Poster states that "From Foucault's Nietzschean viewpoint, all discourses are merely perspectives, and if one has more value than another, that is not because of its intrinsic properties as 'truth', or because we call it 'science', but because of an extra-epistemological ground, the role the discourse plays in constituting practices" (Poster 85). That is, the content of a statement does not guarantee its truth; rather, the circumstances under which it is said are determining. As Foucault believes truth is something which societies have to work to produce, rather than something which appears in a transcendental way.

ADRIENNE RICH AND FORMALISM

Coming back to the issue of formalism and Adrienne Rich, I believe formalism of the time functioned as "the regime of truth;" the majority of the poems in *A Change of World* reflect the poet's *conscious obedience* to formalist norms, but there are a few poems in this volume which lay bare the poet's *unconscious tendency* or *preference* toward female identity which, at that time, could not be considered formalist since it was gendered and therefore not impersonal. It is helpful to have a comparison and contrast between these two groups of majority and minority in Adrienne Rich's early poetry, since these two groups actually are the products of two discourses: one formalism, being the dominating discourse, and the other feminism, being the dominated one.

To elaborate the discourse of formalism and its role as "the regime of truth" in Rich's early poetry, it will be helpful if I mention Cheri Colby Langdell's assertion upon the nature of formalist art that "...art, in order to remain art, cannot be overly sensational or emotional. Art must contain an element of hardness, purity, sternness" (Langdell 24). To avoid "a too compassionate art," to "respect [the] elders," and "to win a place in the male poetic tradition" (Swiontkowski 86), Rich found the solution in T.S. Eliot's theory where he says: "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot 21). Consequently, she tried to be 'impersonal' in her early poetry and to be impersonal, as a matter of fact, meant to create 'universal themes,' not personal experiences of a woman, and to give shape to a 'universal event' and to a general persona or subject. Adalaide Morris has, in this regard, the same idea where she holds that in Rich's early poetry "...immediate personal states are transmuted into general or universal situations" (Morris 142). The 'universal events' in *A Change of World* originated mostly from the modernist attitude toward life and also the cultural and socio-political situations of the 1950s in which Rich and her contemporaries lived. Rich's insistence on following her male models actually prevented her from 'self-expression.' In other words, "the poet's voice in these early poems is still in bondage of Fathers" (Flowers 21) and Rich, to be an efficient follower of these 'fathers,' repressed the female voice of the poet or of the female subject in the poems. In doing so, as Wendy Martin asserts, she actually "subscribes to the traditional male aesthetic," (Martin 17) which shapes her choice of images and pronouns relevant to subjectivity in her first two books.

Betty S. Flowers has charted three main strategies of handling subjectivity in Adrienne Rich's first volume, *A Change of World*, which help the poet not to participate in struggle for a speaking female subject: 1. Using the pronoun "she" from the point of view of an omniscient speaker as that in "An Unsaid Word," 2. Using the persona of a man as that in "The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room," and 3. Positing the problem of repressed female identity without participating in it, like the voice of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (20-21). But Flowers's categorization of subjectivity in Rich's early poems can be revised to gain a better understanding of the poet's perspective toward subjectivity in *A Change of World*.

As mentioned above, Adrienne Rich tried to remain impersonal in her early poems which meant to her using a general subject or persona and demonstrating a universal event. From this point of view, Rich’s early poems, thematically, can be divided into two groups: the major group includes poems in which she is concerned with universality, and the minor group is concerned with the gender problem. Linguistically, the two groups are also distinguished in that her handling of pronouns and personae is different in each group. In the poems which represent the philosophy of the New Critics and are overshadowed with ‘universality,’ Rich performs three strategies of handling pronouns and personae:

1. The persona in some poems is a man, as Flowers has observed, and is depicted through a first person point of view, that is, an ‘I’ which sometimes shifts to ‘we’, as in “The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room” and “Love in the Museum.” In “The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room” the persona is the ‘I’ who in relation with the title is revealed to be ‘the Uncle’ himself. The poem is about “a sullen mob of missile-throwers” who have threatened the Uncle’s “crystal vase and chandelier:”

I have seen the mob of late
 Standing sullen in the square,
 Gazing with a sullen stare
 At window, balcony, and gate.
 Some have talked in bitter tones,
 Some have held and fingered stones. (*A Change of World*, 44)

In the second stanza, the Uncle, who is the representative of high-class culture, connects himself to ‘we’ and in this way generalizes his idea of ‘value and purpose of art,’ a main issue among the New Critics:

These are follies that subside.
 Let us consider, none the less,
 Certain frailties of glass
 Which, it cannot be denied,
 Lead in times like these to fear
 For crystal vase and chandelier. (44)

2. In a number of other poems, the subject is again masculine, but this time appears in the third person as a ‘he,’ and is depicted by an omniscient persona. “By No Means Native” portrays a traveler, an alien man, who desires to be accepted by the natives. He tries to learn the language and even the local accent of that place to be like a native:

His tongue, in hopes to find itself at home,
 Caught up the twist of every idiom.
 He learned the accent and the turn of phrase,
 Studied like Latin texts the local ways. (31)

But despite his skill in the language, he is “treated as someone *who could not understand*” (Langdell 22). No one receives him as a native. Langdell believes this poem “convey[s] [Rich’s] *split* sense of being an outsider, which she may have unconsciously felt as an intellectual woman contending for top honors in poetry and in her studies in academe” (22). It is true that Rich with such a poem manifests her own alienation as a woman poet among the male poets, but more important than that is the fact that she reveals her own feelings through a male character not female.

3. The third way of creating a ‘universalized subject’ for Rich in this group of poems is using an ungendered persona who does not reveal his/her gender and moves repeatedly between “I” and “we.” This form of a general speaking

subject is the most recurrent persona that appears in *A Change of World*. This universal persona, as Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz describes it, "...represents the speaker's sense of being fused with a world seen detachedly, where the experience of the individual becomes dissolved in the external flow of life" (Díaz-Diocaretz 93). The opening poem of *A Change of World*, "Storm Warnings," manifests the speaker's helplessness before the "Weather abroad and weather in the heart" (17). S/he, "Who lives in troubled regions," is alienated from his/her surroundings and has no human contact. Although there are scientific instruments to predict the weather, the persona knows better than instruments that "the wind will rise, / We can only close the shutters" (18). In such an unsafe world the "sole defense" is "defense by enclosure" (Morris 144); the windows and the shutters are closed, the curtains are drawn and the candles are sheathed in glass.

Aside from these poems which are the majority and reflect the formalist central ideas, there are also a few poems,—"occasional surprises, occasions of happy discovery that an unexpected turn could be taken" (Rich 89)—which illustrate not 'universal events' but heterosexual conflicts in which a female subject is entangled. The problems raised in these poems are not those which have to be faced by any human being in general; these problems are gender-oriented and are exclusively related to women. I do believe that these poems bear traces of the poet's unconscious intention to write freely and without the considerations of formalism, but even these minor poems become the poetic discourses which are repressed by the disciplines of ruling discursive literary system of formalism. The characteristic theme of these poems concerns "the identity of woman on man's established terms" (Gelpi XI). Langdell refers to these poems as the "muted story of female characters" (15), in which the poet hesitates to speak out and to make a bridge between her own consciousness and that of the female subject in the poem. But even in these poems the poet tries to remain impersonal. While in the poems discussed previously 'impersonality' meant to use a masculine or an ungendered subject, in these poems it means to be preferably detached from the female character. Impersonality is still a requisite for poetic craft, to which Rich refers in her statement in 1964:

In the period in which my first two books were written I had a much more absolute approach to the universe than I now have. I also felt—as many people still feel—that a poem was an arrangement of ideas and feelings, pre-determined, and it said what I had already decided it should say. There were occasional surprises, occasions of happy discovery that an unexpected turn could be taken, but control, technical mastery and intellectual clarity were the real goals, and for many reasons it was satisfying to be able to create this kind of formal order in poems (Rich 89).

It is interesting to see that Rich herself had also noticed this minority of poems in the course of time, but it should be taken into consideration that Rich speaks of these "occasional surprises" when she is out of the episteme of formalism and the ruling discursive literary system has changed to an archive of discourses at the time when she speaks the above words. In the 1950s these poems could be just the unconscious stream of her mind.

Analyzing the personae in the minor group, one notices that the subjects are women and more significantly always 'she' rather than 'I.' The poet obviously keeps distance from the female character. There are several examples of this case among which "An Unsaid Word" and "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" can be taken for analysis. In "An Unsaid Word," representing the powerlessness of the female subject, Rich shows what is expected of a woman by the dominant male group and how difficult it is to fulfill these expectations. This poem is about keeping quiet which is the hardest thing to learn. The woman in the poem can call her husband to come back to her but never on her own terms. She has to wait until "his thoughts to her return" (51). Carmen Birkle believes the "unsaid word" is the woman's "I want" (Birkle 124); this "I want" is the woman's 'power' for self-expression which is replaced by powerlessness. Claire Keyes relates the poem to the

sexual politics of the fifties. She claims: “[the poem] tells the story of a woman’s willing subservience to sexual roles that allow a man to wander free while a woman stands still “where he left her.” In effect, the woman appears as the fulfillment of a male fantasy, for she mutes her power and remains silent, her words of desire or complaint “unsaid.” Because this woman is modest and unassuming, she keeps her man” (Keyes 19). But whether the problem is sexual or something wider covering the whole heterosexual relationship, the “static silence”⁵ (Ratcliffe 123) of the female subject in this poem is, actually, the result of ‘lack of self-reflectivity or self-knowledge’ which is the result of the repressing formalism. Like “An Unsaid Word,” in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” the speaker ungendered and distanced from the female subject—Aunt Jennifer—and only comments upon the action:

Aunt Jennifer’s fingers 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.(19)

CONCLUSIONS

These poems were just some examples of Adrienne Rich’s first poetry book to demonstrate the poet’s choice of terms under the influence of formalism which in a way predetermines both the construction of particular discourses of identity and the exclusion of some other ones. Let’s say these discourses of identity are “produced” under the impact of a patriarchal literary discourse. In this regard, Judith Butler, in her definition of identity, follows in a way Foucault’ model and regards identity as “...an *effect*, that is, ...*produced* or *generated*” (Butler 147). After keeping a close eye on Adrienne Rich and Michel Foucault, we can conclude that formalism functions as “the regime of truth” in the academic and literary society in the 1950s; its insistence on being not ‘emotional and personal’ gives shape to the binary opposition of true/false poetry for its followers. To write true poetry, for a young poet as Adrienne Rich, meant to follow the rules of the dominant literary system. But there was nothing wrong with following formalism and choosing formalists as models in composing her poems; the problem is that ‘universality’ for Rich meant to write in a “non-female” way (Rich 44), or better to say, only a male voice or an ungendered speaker could speak and ponder on universal human issues. In these poems, the ‘I’ is “a masculine consciousness which has become synonymous with the human consciousness” (Annas 10), to use Pamela Annas’s words. It seems that in the poet’s female consciousness, the female figure was not allowed or could not “forage” in “that estranged intensity” (Rich 51), where the male subjects had already entered. That is to say, the women lacked those features of the male to be able or to be permitted to enter the world of ‘universality.’ In elaborating how language is used in these poems, Sally McConnell Ginet has been cited in Alan Shima’s book where she believes: “Universalization and homogenization are both aspects of a male-centered perspective on language” (Shima 26). In agreement to this view, Alan Shima herself writes: “By representing the universal with masculine pronouns, women by logical inference have been grammatically constructed as “the second sex” (23). Rich’s first two volumes appeared at a time when the leading poets were male and the dominant literary discourse was that of the formalism. To be accepted among her contemporary male poets and in the academic literary society, Rich had to write through the medium of the dominant discourse. Monique Wittig refers to this dominant male discourse as “the discourse of heterosexuality” and points out its excluding function in this way: “These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak

⁵ Ratcliffe points out three forms of silence illustrated through different personae in Adrienne Rich’s poems. The first form of silence is “stasis.” Cf. Pp.122-25.

in their terms" (Shima 23). Rich later becomes aware of this dilemma and in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" asserts that there is no alternative except "the oppressor's language" for a woman poet: "this is the oppressor's language/ yet I need it to talk to you" (Rich 15). Formalism, operating as a patriarchal institution, in fact, causes the exclusion of women, "not necessarily through conscious intention or conscious decision" (Evans 8). Apparently, revealing the female consciousness of the poet or the speaker in the poems could have meant "personality" instead of "impersonality," which was one of the prerequisites of formalism. For the young poet, as it seems, "I carried an authority which at that time she felt she could not claim" (Eagleton 301). In Foucault's term, Rich is the author "who sets out to write a text on the horizon of which a possible oeuvre is prowling, ...what [she] writes and what [she] does not write...and what [she] lets fall by way of commonplace remarks—this whole play of differences is prescribed by the author-function, as [she] receives it from [her] epoch, or as [she] modifies it in [her] turn" (Foucault 59). In other words, under the influences of the "episteme" in which Rich writes, she controls and rarifies her access to discourse. Adrienne Rich could have expressed her 'self' or the female characters' self in her first volumes as well; if she had done, she would have told the truth. But she did not, since, otherwise, she would not have been admitted by and included in "the regime of truth."

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