



The role of identity in demonstrating a need for re-vision and reclamation in the political poetry of Adrienne Rich and Tony Harrison

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Identity is central to all political poetry; in Rich's own words, there exists a 'cross-over between personal and political [which pushes against] the limits of experience reflected in literature, certainly in poetry'.¹ The use of past tense is key here; political poetry often invokes representations of improved future circumstances for those belonging to this 'cross-over' of the personal and the political. Moreover, such identity accounts for the personal politics of the poet, their poems often manifesting conceptualised ideas of political movements they are aligned with, as well as those of readers who look to political poetry to contemplate representations and misrepresentations of their identity. Rich's poetry is occupied by her theory of re-vision, which she explains as: 'For writers, and [...] for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and the promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored'.² This 'psychic geography', Rich's feminist and therefore political re-vision, is that women should hold the power to establish their identity without influence or constraint from society's outdated patriarchal structures. Similarly, Harrison's poetry attempts to reclaim traditional poetic forms through accent and dialect features, thus implicitly indicating political comment on divisions of class and language. This reclamation is not the same as Rich's re-visioning, which is inherently a feminist approach. However, it operates as an analogous process relating to politics of class, rather than to those of gender. Despite that the concepts of re-vision and reclamation are not the same, this essay argues that Rich and Harrison use them similarly through manipulations of form and technique to rewrite both the past and the future in ways that benefit the politically shaped identities they are respectively concerned with.

Both poets use representations of personal identity to better relate to readerships that share their politics and ideologies. Rich uses the first person singular pronoun 'I' as the lyric 'I': a technique commonly used to express the outpouring of personal feeling, dually embodying her own writerly voice alongside the collective voices of those she wishes to represent. On lyric poetry generally, but relevant to the lyric 'I', Lennard writes: "Lyric" is the adjective form of 'lyre', a stringed musical instrument [...] but the term now [is known for] expressing [...] personal emotion, and is defined mostly by a process of exclusion [from other poetic forms].³ Moreover, the lyric 'I' works as Rich's 'instrument', demonstrating how the personal, identity, is shaped by the political, and although 'exclusion' here refers to form, Rich aligns this form with the societal and patriarchal exclusion of women; a re-vision for both is possible through her writing.

¹ Adrienne Rich (AR), 'Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet', *The Massachusetts Review*, 24:3 (1983), p. 535.

² AR, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34:1 (1972), p. 19.

³ John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: a guide to reading poetry for pleasure and practical criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 66.

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This notion towards solidarity is apparent in Rich's 'In Those Years': 'In those years, people will say, we lost track/ of the meaning of we, of you/ we found ourselves/ reduced to I'.⁴ These line breaks exhibit semantic mirroring: the line breaks at 'we lost track', and this extract ends similarly, with 'reduced to I' at the bottom of these broken lines. The fronted time adverbial 'In those years' reiterates that both poetry and politics exist in moments of time; this acts as a nod to poetry and politics of the past. Despite the use of the preterite tense verb 'found', the line 'we found ourselves' is rather a nod to the future; the collective that the lyric 'I' refers to will rediscover their suppressed identities as part of Rich's re-vision, which both structurally and meaningfully depends upon Rich enacting re-vision through poetry ('reduced to I'). Furthermore, Dennis writes that Rich's 'we' represents 'the communitarian we of the women's movement. The rhetoric here adopts [...] the inclusion of the reader in the poetical process and the political project'.⁵ Therefore, Rich's lyric 'I' adds a pluralistic and collective dimension to the first person singular pronoun, affording her writing universality and encouraging political solidarity with her intended readers.

Similarly, Harrison uses the first person pronoun 'I' to create highly characterised, idiosyncratic voices throughout his poetry, invoking representations of working-class identity that his readers can relate to. In Harrison's 'V', the poem's voice engages in dialogue with a character termed 'skinhead'. The skinhead says to the more educated speaker: 'Ah've told yer, no more Greek ... That's yer last warning!/ Ah'll boot yer fucking balls to Kingdom Come'.⁶ Here Harrison uses cacographic orthography, replacing 'I' with 'Ah' to replicate the Leeds accent; this choice of spelling and accent representation being synonymous with northern, working-class identity. Furthermore, the use of the dialect term 'yer', the fricative expletive 'fucking' and plosive phrase 'boot yer fucking balls' enhances the aggression and inarticulation of the skinhead, which Harrison implies stems from lack of education due to socioeconomic deprivation. Such contrast in educational standard is represented by the skinhead refusing the speaker's 'Greek', juxtaposing the educated speaker's register as this secondary voice is that of a working-class youth with no knowledge of or need to comprehend classical study, especially as his articulation of English is incomplete (note the contractions between pronouns and auxiliary verbs: 'Ah've', 'Ah'll'). Harrison permits the skinhead speaking in first person so that his character, that being his working-class underprivileged identity, resonates with the reader through voice and thus verisimilitude. This corresponds with Lennard's findings that 'moral and political coherence in Harrison's work depends on general 'truthfulness', verisimilar representation of 'how it was'.⁷ In depicting this dichotomy of educated and uneducated, articulate and inarticulate, Harrison acknowledges his academic achievements, while being able to reclaim his past experiences and heritage as a working-class northerner, expressing this aspect of his identity to perhaps, from a writerly perspective, reclaim the former self of his youth and the prospect of 'aspirations' for all, particularly working-classes aspiring towards education ('His [the skinhead's] name was mine'). Therefore, Harrison uses identity to depict a lack of privilege as a result of class divisions, further evidencing a 'cross-over' of the personal and the political which calls to both past and future.

⁴ AR, 'In Those Years', provided in the ENGL3066 Rich and Plath collection, p. 14.

⁵ Helen Dennis, 'Adrienne Rich: Introducing the Selected', *Selected Poems: From Modernism to Now*, ed. Hélène Aji, Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 71.

⁶ Tony Harrison (TH), 'V', *Collected Poems* (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 271.

⁷ JL, *TPH*, p. 323.

However, this dichotomy in Harrison's 'V' equally demonstrates the tension and controversy of an educated poet speaking on behalf of those who are uneducated, suggesting difficulty in reclaiming the right to speak about working-class deprivation after escaping it. The verisimilitude that Lennard refers to reduces some of Harrison's distance from the working-class identities he represents, but this technique, which draws contrasts between the well-educated speaker of 'V' and the 'skinhead', indicates Harrison's guilt and political self-awareness that he must create such a distance to not appear fraudulent. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write: 'One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalises all 'variants' as impurities'.⁸ Although Harrison conveys variation in educational standard to protest against linguistic imperialism, there exists friction in writing with such 'impurities' (accent and dialect features) when Harrison knows how to write and speak without them, especially when representing those who do not share the same degree of articulation, education or privilege. The speaker, attempting to understand the skinhead's behaviour, asks: 'Or just a cri-de-coeur because man dies?'.⁹ Here the educated speaker blends his own sophisticated, 'standard' language ('cri-de-coeur'), ironically borrowed from French, with the slang and dialect typical of the skinhead's non-standard language (the pluralised overextension of 'man'), demonstrating that the speaker, who seems autobiographical of Harrison, is capable of both registers.

In the following stanza, the skinhead responds: 'So, what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt? Can't you speak/ The language that yer mam spoke. Think of 'er!'. Structurally, the juxtaposing identities are further distanced by their dialogue, and their varying 'standard' of language, being split apart into different stanzas. The phrase 'So, what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt? Can't you speak/' is monosyllabic, showing the simplicity of the skinhead's language, meaning this can be read aloud in a fast pace to highlight the aggression of the skinhead's tone, heightened by the alliterated 'c' sound and the expletive 'cunt'. Lennard writes that "'cunt' remains more difficult [to enter into ordinary social and poetic usage], distinctly rude and 'politically incorrect' (despite attempts at reclamation)".¹⁰ However, this line is written in iambic pentameter, a traditional poetic metre commonly assigned to characters of upper-classes, or heroes characterised by nobility and wisdom. Harrison's blending of the skinhead's untraditional language with this traditional form attempts such 'reclamation', advocating the skinhead's virtue of character and implying that it is solely his language, due to his working-class upbringing, that is below 'standard'. The tension between Harrison's identity as a writer and as the working-class boy from Leeds is further paralleled by the speaker's identity: the skinhead, a symbol of Harrison's working-class childhood, uses the imperative 'Think', forcing the speaker, and perhaps Harrison himself, to remember how they once spoke in 'impurities', too. Therefore, Harrison represents variations between the standard and non-standard language usages associated with different social classes to convey the struggle between his identity as an educated writer and that of his working-class childhood; this depicts an attempt to reclaim his right to speak from a working-class perspective, as well as reclamation of traditional metre by non-standard language users.

Rich also writes of the distance she feels from her readers as a political poet, but instead reveals the fear of her authorial authority being removed from her and her words

⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The empire writes back* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 7.

⁹ TH, 'V', *CP*, p. 269.

¹⁰ JL, *TPH*, p. 238.

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being manipulated towards a different, unintended political message. This fear is expressed in Rich's poem 'North American Time', as she writes: '[I] knew what I would not report/ for fear of enemies' usage'.¹¹ This refers to the submission and suppression of women and their inability to report wrongdoings, whether they be sexual, domestic or emotional; contemporary to the women's liberation movement, women had long been inferior to men within society's patriarchal structures, with little option but to suffer in silence. However, this line is both metafictional and confessional: a revelation coming directly from Rich as the poet, 'report' dually meaning what she will write and release to the world. This is structurally undercut by a line break and the explicit mention of Rich's 'fear' and 'enemies', suggesting the imminent possibility of Rich's words being appropriated by others who do not share her political intentions. In the line 'for fear of enemies' usage', Rich uses both fricatives and assonated sibilance; the /f/ and /s/ sounds are both unvoiced, suggesting that such 'enemies' are unknown to Rich, but could take any form and manipulate her poetry for any political matter. Rich states that 'Nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name'.¹² This resembles the 'fear' Rich refers to and highlights the possibility that her re-vision could be re-visited further.

Rich repeatedly represents this fear of powerlessness against the political repurposing of her work throughout 'North American Time', particularly within the seventh stanza. She writes: 'I am writing this in a time/ when anything we write/ can be used against those we love/ where the context is never given'. The enjambment and lack of punctuation depicts the ongoing and threatening nature of Rich's fear, and of poetry being repurposed continually throughout time. Further imposing her own authorial identity upon this poem, Rich's use of the first person pronoun 'I' again introduces a metafictional aspect to this poem and entangles the personal with the political, that being the purpose of her poetry. Rich uses the indefinite article 'a' in the phrase 'in a time' to again portray the relationship between political poetry and the past and future. The lack of specific detail on time here imbues this poem with a sense of timelessness, suggesting the repeatability of poetry being repurposed for future political movements, but also demonstrating that the identities of 'those we love' are and have been subject to oppression in both the future and the past, requiring the poetic representation that Rich provides them. However, there exists irony in such timelessness: Rich herself acknowledges that 'nothing is too sacred' to be re-visited and, by not explicitly referring to a specific time or political matter, Rich allows her work to remain widely relevant for future political uses, meaning that her work could be re-visited in the way that she fears. Thus, while re-imagining is a technique that affords Rich poetic power over the politics of the past, the threat of her work being re-visited in the future undermines her poetic authority and identity.

Both poets demonstrate awareness for the power of language in that political re-visions and reclamations can be achieved if readers identify with the language used to represent the groups to which they belong. In her poem 'Tonight No Poetry Will Serve', Rich writes:

verb force-feeds noun
submerges the subject
noun is choking

¹¹ AR, 'North American Time', provided in the ENGL3066 Rich and Plath collection, pp. 7-9.

¹² AR, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', p. 23.

verb disgraced goes on doing¹³

Here the lexis of language ('verb', 'noun', 'subject') metaphorically mirrors the politics of oppression and suppression. Rich characterises these words, 'noun' and 'subject' suggesting removed identity; this linguistic lexicon obscuring any previous identity. Again, there is a universality and a repeatability to this, as Rich demonstrates that this oppression is non-specific, due to the lack of identity represented, and thus could refer to any oppressed group. The incessant nature of this is shown once more by unpunctuated, enjambed lines, but also by use of active voice, making the fricative phrase 'force-feeds' seem more directly threatening to the 'noun'; the 'verb' pre-modifying this phrase is structurally the more powerful.

These lines deal not only with the loss of identity for the oppressed, but also for the oppressors; they are merely characterised by their actions, their 'doing', which undermines their power and suggests that the political has potential to eradicate the personal. Lowney discusses political poetry and its 'desire to reinvent poetry, [...] to reinvent a grammar that connects past with present, present with future'.¹⁴ This corresponds with Rich's use of tense to demonstrate the problems of past politics and her re-vision for the future. Rich writes mainly in present tense within these lines, but the choice of the present tense continuous phrase 'goes on doing' rather than a future tense equivalent suggests hope for suppressed identities in the future: the 'doing' cannot progress to the future of Rich's re-vision and will be left in the past. This also emphasises the relentlessness of oppression and how it can consume identity, whether that be of the oppressor or the oppressed. Therefore, Rich is judicious in both her language choices and her choice to represent the power that language can hold over and for political groups and identities.

Harrison manipulates language to connect the identities he represents with politics of present, past and future, as Lowney details. In 'National Trust', Harrison uses simple, accessible language, ensuring that the working-class everyman represented in this poem is able to understand it: 'the dumb go down in history and disappear'.¹⁵ This line is initially monosyllabic and the iambs act as heartbeats, empowering the working-classes to read on despite the meaning of this line. This line stops being monosyllabic at 'history and disappear', causing the line to reach eleven iambs, one more than is needed for iambic pentameter, conveying tension between this authoritative upper-class perception of 'the dumb' and the working-class reader. This is enhanced by the poem's final line: 'the tongueless man gets his land took'. Here Harrison uses a grammatically incorrect past participle ('took', not 'taken') to conventionally rhyme in a couplet with the end of the previous line ('book'). This further demonstrates Harrison advocating the non-standard grammar of the 'tongueless' regional working-classes through traditional poetic convention; 'tongueless' being the only word that is not monosyllabic in this line, suggesting it is an imposition and form of oppression from the upper-classes upon those lower in society, the latter being silenced and their language use being rejected by the former. However, the iambic heartbeat persists to the poem's end, implying that non-standard language users can resist linguistic oppression and do not have to remain 'tongueless' in the future. Thus, Harrison adopts a regional grammar to represent the working-classes, using this grammar

¹³ AR, 'Tonight No Poetry Will Serve', provided in the ENGL3066 Rich and Plath collection, p. 12.

¹⁴ John Lowney, *History, Memory and the Literary Left* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p. 27.

¹⁵ TH, 'National Trust', *CP*, p. 131.

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within traditional poetic structures to further show that non-standard language users can reclaim power over perceptions of language.

Overall, Rich and Harrison use identities of past, present and future as motivation, inspiration and tools for their poetic initiatives towards political re-vision and reclamation. Each poet represents the 'cross-over' of the personal and the political, demonstrating how politics imposed upon an individual or group can shape identity, but equally how politics can be re-visioned and reclaimed through personal strength and with an end goal of unsuppressed identity. Rich's poetry includes the reader by representing their identity as part of the collectives to which she refers, thus involving and investing her readership in her re-vision. Similarly, although relevant to class rather than gender, Harrison uses accent and dialect to create verisimilar working-class representations, implying injustice in class divisions and using traditional techniques to reclaim acceptance of non-standard language. Thus, identity is an invaluable theme in poetry that works towards future political change.

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