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**Talking about Trees: Stances
towards Political Poetry in
Adrienne Rich's "What Kind of
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PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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This paper aims to present the potential for political activism within poetry by analysing the poem "What Kind of Times are These" by Adrienne Rich. The literary analysis demonstrates an affinity with the second-wave-feminist stance of the personal as being inherently political, implying a necessity for political poetry that addresses injustices beyond the political macro level of the public realm. The author thus makes the case for poetry as a means for socio-political interaction, allowing those who are overheard in the public sphere to expose systemic injustices that seep into the private realm.

KEYWORDS

Adrienne Rich, Bertolt Brecht, political poetry, feminism

ADRIENNE RICH: WHAT KIND OF TIMES ARE THESE

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows
uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but
don't be fooled,
this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light—
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary
to talk about trees.

1. INTRODUCTION

While political poems have been written throughout history, the many-voiced criticism of the genre has been just as consistent. It remains a dominating view that lyrical qualities are compromised by an alleged hard-headedness of politics. The author and activist Adrienne Rich contested the inherent destructivity of political content to poetry, claiming that art is never fully detached from the political climate in which it was created (*Arts of the Possible* 54). Her poem "What Kind of Times are These" (Rich, *Dark Fields*) follows the New Historicist notion that literature is inseparably bound to the context in which it was created (Veese, *The New Historicism* 3).

The poem encapsulates her stance towards the apparent dichotomy by embedding political proceedings in an unspecified woodland. Conflating nature poetry and political poetry, the author imposes a distinct attitude on the subject: the poetic and the political forge a unit with two complementary sides that are not only compatible, but interdependent. The recurrent mention of trees within the poem is one of its most prominent features, which is even more emphasised by an overt request within the poem to be conscious of them.

With this in mind, the paper will centre on the tree motif in the poem. The parties involved in the conversation about trees will be revealed by the poem's textual content, while an analysis of its stylistic devices integrates the tree motif within the poem's two potentially conflicting directions. In order to interpret the trees' metaphorical meaning, the poem will then be examined in the context of a work by Bertolt Brecht. Finally, detecting the implied location of the trees helps to specify which political appeal the poem might contain. A variety of Rich's speeches and essays will be used as a basis to relate the poem to the context of her literary work and political activism.

2. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: WHO TALKS ABOUT TREES?

"What Kind of Times are These" tells the story and aftermath of a failed revolution, narrated by an unnamed speaker. The speaker, who at that point is still covert, introduces the scenery in the first stanza by giving an expositional description of the forest environment at the fringe of civilisation. She¹ depicts an old, shadowy "revolutionary road" at a nearby abandoned house, which was formerly possessed by a persecuted group, possibly the revolutionaries. The persecuted are said to have disappeared into the shadows, but it is unspecified whether the shadows have served as a hide-out for the subversive group or for their secret elimination by outside forces.

In the second stanza, the speaker first refers to herself, revealing that she has visited the place before to collect mushrooms "at the edge of dread". Her past locational proximity to the revolutionaries' headquarters implies that the speaker was a witness of their actions and downfall, possibly even an active ally. The walk at the "edge of dread" may symbolise her own struggle with fear as well as the looming threat towards the revolutionaries and their conventicle. The speaker directly turns to her addressee in the second stanza ("don't be fooled"). She explicitly discloses herself as a poet by referring to "this poem", suggesting that she may not only talk to a fictive addressee but to the actual readers. The speaker then stresses that these dreadful things have already been happening in "our country".

The third stanza contains the speaker's refusal to specify the exact location of the place despite her providing further details to its visual description. The speaker also refrains from revealing her own identity or that of the addressee; even the number of possible addressees is left open, as the speaker's use of "you" may be singular or plural. The only clear connection between the speaker and the addressee is their shared origin ("here", "our country").

In the last stanza, the speaker explains that the reason why she talks about trees at all is "because you still listen". While this does not contradict the notion of an addressee located within the world of the poem, it picks up the previously suggested break in the fourth wall: someone who "still listens" is the person who hears or reads the poem in the real world. Thus, Rich calls attention to the interactive component of poetry. Her readers are not to merely indulge in the world she has built, but to actively listen and understand what she has to say. At the same time, she poses her readers as the main matter of her writing. Her appeal, then, goes two ways: not only should readers try to connect to the writer, but the writer, rather than remaining in a creative solitude, should seek a connection to the readers.

3. STYLISTIC DEVICES: BETWEEN TREES AND TRUTH

The poem exhibits only few structuring elements: the rhythm flows freely and irregularly without clearly apparent rhyme schemes, continual verse feet or regularly stressed syllable intervals. There are also numerous alternations between caesurae and enjambments. The poem's fluidity of form and language is characteristic for Rich's work (Rich, *Arts of the Possible* 17-18) and creates a sense of unstrained intimacy. This, amplified by the lack in typically lyrical patterns and regularities, conveys the impression of spontaneous conversation rather than carefully structured verses. Only the poem's distinct division into four stanzas (the

first two further divided into five and the last two into four verses) marks a deliberate arrangement.

This division delimits two linguistic styles which alternate within the poem. The first and third stanza are characterised by a comparatively lyrical, ornate diction and contain numerous tonal devices such as assonances ("old"/ "road"/ "host"/ "crossroads"/ "leafmold"/ "know") and alliterations ("grass/ grows"; "revolutionary/ road", "won't/ where"; "mesh/ meeting"). These euphonies underline the setting's tranquillity, which is only compromised by the eeriness induced from the elements of decay.

The diction of the second and the last stanza, however, appears prosaic and straightforward: the speaker's objective is no longer to use pleasing sounds to create a vivid depiction of nature, but to clarify all doubts. The words are not deployed on the basis of their tonal qualities, but on the information they need to convey. The speaker's tone is clear and concise, as exemplified in her overt warning "don't be fooled", which is even further emphasized by its isolation in a single line.

In the third stanza, the speaker returns to her associative approach. By choosing metaphorical expressions from other-worldly domains (e.g. "ghost-ridden", "paradise"), she mystifies and alienates the described place, as if to obscure rather than identify it. Her tone changes once again in the last stanza when she reveals another clear message: the reason of speaking to the addressee at all is because "it's necessary / to talk about trees". The poetic wording of the previous stanza has entirely made way for poignant repetitions such as "tell you/ tell you", "because/ because", "listen/ listen". Nonetheless, the last lines of this stanza contain the only full rhyme "these/trees", the peak of formal harmony in the poem. Even the textual content itself justifies the existence of the more lyrical lines - the conversation about trees - which are deemed necessary in the last stanza in order to talk about "truth and dread".

Playfully toggling distinct moods and styles, the poet seems to be located above the poem's topic, which she can access on the route of her choosing. The reconciliation of the "flowery" and the more sober style of the poem clarifies that the two writing modes are not at odds - much rather, they are interwoven. This also becomes apparent through the recurring motif (trees) and themes (secrecy, disappearance) interlinking all stanzas. The juxtaposition of the lyrical and the plain writing style is parallel to the thematic juxtaposing of "talking about trees" with "truth and dread". The linguistic resolution within the poem composes a comment on the compatibility of nature poetry and political poetry - one does not exclude the other, and both of them are warranted in their value.

4. REFERENCES TO "AN DIE NACHGEBORENEN": WHAT ARE THE TREES?

It should be noted that the poem includes overt references to Bertolt Brecht's poem "An die Nachgeborenen", which was published almost sixty years prior to the poem by Adrienne Rich. The first of these references occurs already in the poem's title, which is a direct translation of a verse within "An die Nachgeborenen". The speaker in Brecht's poem laments that, in times like these, "talking about trees", just as "the innocent word," "a smooth forehead"² - in short, any conversation revolving around harmless banalities - amounts to the deliberate silence about the misdeeds and sufferings in the world.³ As this turmoil is directed towards *die Nachgeborenen* - that is, those who are born after - the speaker in Rich's contemporary poem is invited to directly join in the conversation and provide her answer, stating that "to have you listen at all, it is necessary / to talk about trees".

This answer allows for various readings of differing plausibility. In the context of Brecht's reproach, the speaker may imply that the shallow conversational hooks may serve to catch a listener's attention or, to put it more narrowly, that a poem about nature makes its readers receptive for the discussion of more profound topics. While it can hardly be contested that pressing political matters may be made accessible to the public by pandering to their personal interests, there is no reason to assume that either the author or the speaker of "An die Nachgeborenen" were unaware of this tactic. Therefore, the intention supposed in this reading may be considered unlikely. Considering the dire circumstances in which the speaker and the addressee are located, the answer by Rich's speaker may also be read as a defence; "talking about trees" is deemed an escapist method to mentally flee one's own surroundings.

Engaging with superficial matters is, in this sense, deemed a useful act to get some needed distance from the misdeeds that Brecht describes. What seems inconsistent in this reading is how closely the speaker connects the trees to the misdeeds and sufferings: the trees frame the head-quarters of the persecuted and cast the shadows in which they disappeared. The "dark mesh of the woods" is clearly contrasted with the less threatening "unmarked strip of light". Rather than distracting one from the problems, the trees are entangled with them; the speaker does not need to move away from the trees to discuss other topics because they are part of the situation.

This reading seems to be most consistent with the author's own political affiliations and stances. Adrienne Rich has repeatedly criticised the exclusion of everyday life in political discussions, which are "reduced

to government, to contests between the empowered, or to petty in-group squabbles" (*What is Found There* 24). This criticism is in line with the call of academic feminists to consider the layers of women's daily lives for political discussions (Gallop, *History is Like Mother* 317). What Brecht's speaker saw as avoidant withdrawal is actually a devotion to matters that have been overlooked. In the view of Rich, the political seeps into the personal and is in turn reflected by everyday occurrences. In a poem with such close ties between the poet and the speaker, it is likely that her stance has fed into the poem's message: the trees are the "innocent word", the ostensibly natural banalities which need to be located and scrutinised in order to follow in the footsteps of the revolutionaries.

While Rich's speaker evidently disagrees with Brecht's speaker, "What Kind of Times are These" must not be understood as a conclusive rebuttal to "An die Nachgeborenen". In reference to the works of her literary idols, which included Bertolt Brecht, Rich states that those works were "a part of a long conversation with the elders and with the future [...]. Such artists draw on a tradition in which political struggle and spiritual continuity are meshed. Nothing need be lost, no beauty sacrificed" (61). Instead, Rich harnesses the opportunity to create an intergenerational dialogue through poetry; not rebuking, but adding to the body of knowledge and sentiment which has been left behind for those who are born after. Engaging with the past will help to understand and improve the future – as Judith Gardiner puts it, "We think back through our mothers [...] We have yet to think forward through them" ("The Heroine as Her Author's Daughter" 252).

5. POLITICAL STANCES WITHIN THE POEM: WHERE ARE THE TREES?

If the trees symbolise life's mundane commonplaces as opposed to issues officially deemed relevant and significant, this means that one does not have to look far to find "truth and dread": not to Russia or other countries experiencing political turmoil, maybe not even to people's own "country" as a whole. After all, what is described is only the microcosm of the "place between two stands of trees". The speaker actively obscures this place, but not with the intention of holding others off from it – at the time of her conversation, it is already lost to the speaker and the persecuted; it has been taken over by outside forces and cannot be protected anymore. The concealment rather serves to encourage the addressee to actively search for this place within her own reach. In order to learn about her country's own problems and "own ways of making people disappear", the addressee must locate the trees and talk about them.

Being the first to delve into the conversation about trees, the speaker functions as a role model to the addressee. As the speaker repeatedly indicates her identity as being that of the poet, the role-model function applies to poets in general as well. With merely "talking about trees" as the stated main goal, this holds implications about the objective of political poets. Their goal should not be to produce artistic propaganda, "to persuade others 'out there' of some atrocity or injustice" (Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 367) but to describe their own world and attempt to identify its sources for her own fear, grief or anger. According to Sean Wilentz, all forms of writing, whether public or private, are relevant for political interpretation: "Personal diary jottings about recalcitrant slaves, disobedient children, and mired cattle can tell us things about political relations in colonial Virginia not to be found in the most impassioned pamphlet of natural law" (*Rites of Power* 5). The most private of concerns tend to be overlooked by the public eye, but as they reflect the systems in which all people find themselves, they deserve to be discussed and deconstructed.

In one of her speeches, Rich has stated that, to her, politics were "not something 'out there' but something 'in here' and of the essence of my condition" (*Arts of the Possible* 22). Even though this speech was published more than twenty years prior to the poem, the excerpt bears striking resemblance to the line "This isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here". The speaker reminds her addressee that brutalities happen in their own surroundings, even though the "ways of making people disappear" are different from what she might have heard about Russia. The appeal is the same as in Rich's speech, which further blurs the lines between the speaker and the poet, the addressee and the reader. The readers are urged to engage with the things that happen in their most immediate surroundings – their own countries, buildings, rooms – and to analyse how they affect their condition and constitute their identities. In poetry, writers and readers can find a space to reflect on those seemingly little ills of civilisation without them being shrugged off in favour of topics which their oppressors deem to be worthy of discussion.

6. CONCLUSION

One comment by Adrienne Rich naturally unfolds in "What Kind of Times are These": "Poetry never stood a chance of standing outside history" (*Poetry and Prose* 357). Even a poem devoted to the importance of seemingly unmemorable nullities contains a political appeal to change the times.

The trees in this poem are inextricably linked to the notions of truth and dread: amidst all their serenity, a ruthless persecution happened, leading to the revolutionaries' expulsion from their own Paradise.

Therefore, the speaker talks about trees, but she could never talk about trees *only*. This illustrates how closely poetry is tied to politics – every possible concern of a poet, regardless of how private it may seem, is in some way imbued with her surroundings and, therefore, the politics that determine these surroundings. Other writers have pointed out that every artwork is embedded in a sociocultural context and can never be interpreted in isolation (Marcus, *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf* 90). The interconnectedness of all writings requires a communicative network which allows creators and consumers of texts to enter a dialogue (90). To Rich, poetry offers a place where seemingly insignificant problems within the private realm can find their audience: through their writings, poets may identify and map out "the myths and obsessions of gender, [...] of race" and "the violent exercise of power" (*Arts of the Possible* 50).

The linguistic preservation of the poetic from the influences of political content lies in the responsibility of the poet. On this, Rich has stated that poetry has to "account for itself politically [...] without sacrificing intensity of language" (*Arts of the Possible* 47). Her speaker shows a lyrical omnipotence: skipping back and forth between alternating styles at will, but still revolving around the same theme, she demonstrates that the poetic does not have to be compromised by any topical choice.

No matter how irrelevant talking about trees may seem in a world which has seen an abundance of nature poetry, it does more than only keep the poets busy or distract their audience. Intellectually engaging with the little things in daily life serves to expose shortcomings and make them tangible. This corresponds to the objective of political poetry in Rich's eyes, which is not to "tell you who or when to kill, what and when to burn, or even how to theorize. It reminds you ... where and when and how you are living and might live" (*What is Found There* 241). The appeal of the speaker is political, but she does not call to take revenge or reclaim the space that has been taken – she only asks people to make themselves heard and talk to each other.

END NOTES

(All quotations from this poem refer to Rich, Adrienne: "What Kind of Times Are These." In *Later Poems: Selected and New, 1971-2012*. *Adrienne Rich*. Reprinted by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, 2013, p. 247.)

1 Gender-specific pronouns in this paper should be read as including all genders unless otherwise specified. They were used for the purpose of facilitating the reading flow and without the intention to exclude or offend.

2 "Wirklich, ich lebe in finsternen Zeiten!; Das arglose Wort ist töricht. Eine glatte Stirn; Deutet auf Unempfindlichkeit hin." (Brecht 70).

3 "Was sind das für Zeiten, wo; Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist; Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!" (ibid.)

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