insist on the presence of women through insistence on our bodies. This is the way to deal with phallocentric authority (and this is the way Cixous reads and teaches how to read Mallarmé, Freud, Derrida). Conley characterizes Cixous' "feminine" texts as "self-surpassing, open-ended, flowing. Each of these texts generates from a juxtaposition to other writing," as opposed to her "more properly novelistic works of half-closed narrative structures of plot development and intertextual binding."

Masculine forms are restrictive, masculine symbolisms are death inducing. (Germaine Greer makes this same important statement in *Sex and Destiny.*) Cixous writes towards life; in her works she is struggling constantly against all metaphorical encoding of death, and indeed against all reasoning by binary opposition which brings the necessary destruction of the other (a theme of Jeanne Hyvrard's work also). Yet she tries not to separate women from men, and this is possible because all unrepressed, writing folk are "missexuals," i.e. have "masculine" and "feminine" impulses. All difficulties are created by the phallocentric and phallogocentric individuals (male and female) against whom Cixous is in revolt.

In sum, Cixous sees all women as triple: daughter, mother and absent mother. Every text then becomes a search for the "mother tongue" which is the voice of the absent mother — desire being always desire for what is lacking. Each book marks therefore another stage in Cixous' quest "of how to live without being limited by the law, fear, unhappiness in a poetic, not an abstract, way." The preoccupation remains the same though the mode of exploration is transformed within and by each text.

**Conley and me:**

If I have understood Conley accurately and if her interpretation of Cixous is valid, then I have a number of issues to raise with Cixous. The main line of development as I have summarised it above is splendid; the problems lie in the way in which this development happens. (1) Cixous complains that the phallocentric think of women only as bodies — so does Cixous as far as I can tell. Her bodies are unrepressed, their bodies are repressed, but they are bodies all and women are restricted yet again to sexual activity. (2) We are told that "a woman writer must be legitimized by her father as stylus and the mother as *écriture*... Still others, like Cixous herself, have been legitimized by the absent (dead) father *and* by the mother." Conley maintains that in *Le Livre de Promethea* (1983), Promethea is free of the "authority of a father," but given the unending succession of male authority figures underlying all Cixous' writing, it seems to me that she is searching for an absent father and approval in her "paternal language" too. In the interview at the end of the book Cixous explains at some length the way she takes the best of the various male theoreticians' thought, avoids all pitfalls and subverts what we need for women's use. She presents her case well, but I still see Cixous (like Colette in another mode) as a woman whose point of reference — intellectual or sexual — is men. Despite the gynocentric trappings of her best outpourings, I still find Cixous to be very profoundly phallocentric — the rest is rhetoric.

On the other hand, I may not have understood Conley accurately. Her book offers an infuriating mixture of very useful insights (her analyses of how Cixous writes are extremely enlightening), of pseudo-poetic rhetoric, and of totally unreadable sentences that have been transposed undigested from fashionably pretentious French. The result is virtually unreadable in places and frequently briefly and vertiginously unintelligible. I offer you an example which at least has the merit of being amusing. Conley is discussing the journal *Poétique* and its treatment of *Finnegans Wake* and "missexualité":

> *The enumeration of academic copulatives is exemplary of a writing necktied by a tradition that the missexual gap — here a negatively matrical format Cixous offers at the beginning and ending of the number — will serve to bring out its platitude.*
>
> *She assigns herself a prosthetic task in the contribution entitled "La Missexualité." Following the asymptotic contours of the inner breast and the Cleopatrician phantasm elaborated in* La Jeune Née, *Cixous writes a marginal text uplifting the collegiate sag in the middle of the issue by compressing the midriff bulge so characteristic of most masculine writing in Joyce studies. The missexuality, drawn from a mid section, the middle of linear thinking, the median point between A and Z as the navel of the alphabet and the interior margin, will in her eyes espouse a freely militarized feminism, a locus in the middle-of-the-bed which has no real counterpart in American movements.*

Conley has committed the cardinal sins of criticism: (1) she wants to write like her author; (2) she wants to impress her author. The result is that she, also, is self-indulgent in her writing — dragging her metaphors far beyond the limits of any known Procrustean bed (if I may join the game too), playing with language when she needs to analyse, turning a nice fancy when we, poor readers, need her to explain.

The way in which this book was written poses serious problems to the reader (how it got past an editor is beyond me), and that is a pity. Hélène Cixous is an important figure whom the anglophone world needs to understand and maybe even appreciate. Verena Conley produces moments of fascinatingly lucid exposition — would the whole book were thus.

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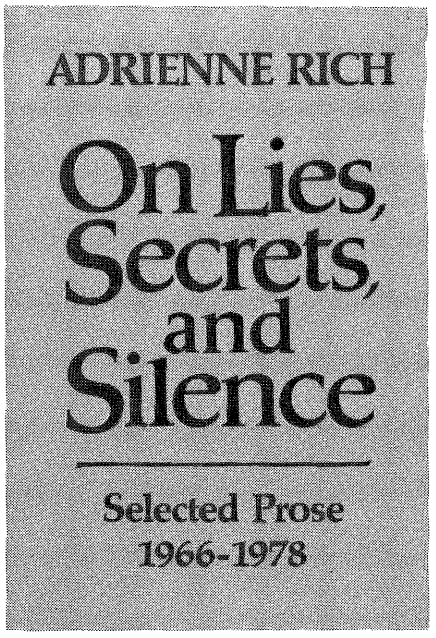
**THE AESTHETICS OF POWER: THE POETRY OF ADRIENNE RICH**

Claire Keyes. Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1986.

***Ian Sowton***

One of the most useful moves in this book is to put Rich's prose writing, as in "The Kingdom of the Fathers" (*Partisan Review*, 1975) and some of the essays collected in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, into ongoing intertextual conversation with her poetry. Those prose pieces were being written during the same period as the poems published in *Leaflets: Poems, 1965-1968* (1969), *The Will to Change: Poems, 1968-1970* (1971), *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems, 1971-1972* (1973), and *Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-1977* (1978). The inclusion of dates in Rich's series of titles is significant. The sense becomes very strong of the obligation to write oneself out of silence, or away from the accents of The Masters' Voice, and into one's own herstory. So does the sense of an alert, ongoing conversation with one's own times. So does the sense of pilgrimage. Rich's collection of

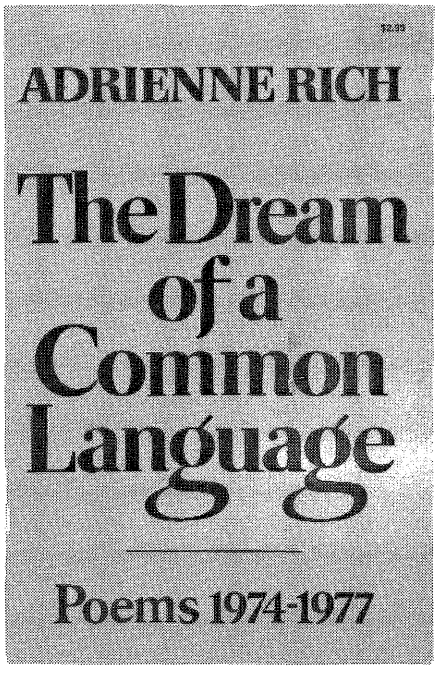


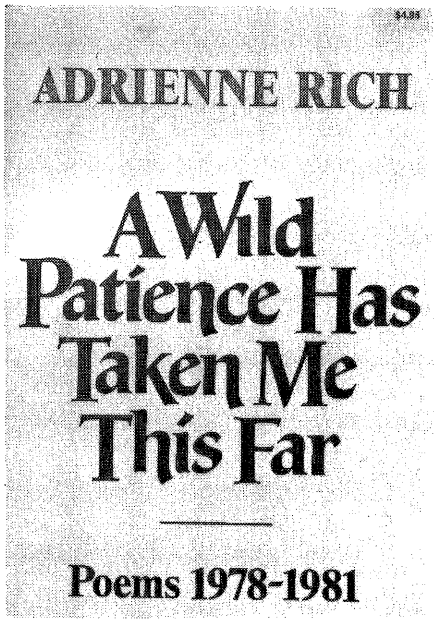

essays also has a title that locates them carefully in time.

Together these are the texts (poetry and prose) in which the speaker is increasingly and more and more resolutely taking up a position as woman-identified agent, as subject of her own life's sentence; in which discovery of her own, woman's voice is partly a recovery of other women's voices, earlier and contemporary. They are texts in which the psychopolitics of defining oneself as a woman becomes inscribed with increasing confidence and complexity. Temptations simply to "otherize" men are raised — even entertained — but (as far as I can tell) eventually refused (though there might be some gender refraction at work here). And not only sisterhood but also the differences among women, among various feminisms are registered and celebrated. Then, too, these texts form a series in which there emerges, more and more clearly and *politically* inscribed, the women-identified *lesbian* subject.

The fact that the agendas for Rich's poetry and prose are much the same for the period 1965-1977 is one reason for the usefulness of Keyes' move. Another important reason is that, in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, we have Adrienne Rich in 1978 commenting on each of the collected pieces, some of which were first written or delivered over ten years earlier. We have a multiple ongoing version of AR present in the text and we have the 1978 version looking back over the way she's come and estimating how far she now is from, or still how close to, those various textual milestones. So that when Keyes invokes Rich's prose in aid of engaging her poetry, readers find themselves at work in such a potentially rich intertextual play as: from 1965 to 1977 AR inscribes herself in papers, reviews, addresses, and essays that read both her own and other women's poems; AR re-reads those earlier inscriptions of herself as an increasingly politicized woman, writer, teacher, lesbian, citizen, activist; Keyes reads AR re-reading AR; we read Keyes reading AR re-reading AR.

Another useful move that Claire Keyes' text often makes is to provide readers with a helpful entry into succeeding volumes of Rich's poetry. Important questions of tact and strategy attend that unavoidable moment of first engaging a text. At that moment the scene includes potential reader, the critic, and the text(s) the critic proposes to help us read, wants to introduce us to. One way of negotiating this introductory moment is to beckon in a fourth party. Keyes performs a series of such fourth party instructions that are particularly helpful in the first half of her book, as when she introduces Rich's first book of poems, *A Change of World* (1951), with Elaine Showalter and her notion of how some women's texts might carry a "double voiced discourse containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story." Or when she introduces Rich's second book of poems, *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), with Mary Jacobus and her idea that although a woman writer cannot avoid mimicry of man's language, she can deviate from it — ms/use it so to speak — by acting out or role playing within her own text.




Or when she puts us in touch with *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) with a perfunctory introduction to Albert Gelpi's Jungian reading and a rather more elaborate introduction to Sandra M. Gilbert's account of "transvestism as metaphor in modern literature."

During the second half of Keyes' study these mediating, fourth party introductions become less helpful and convincing. For example, Charles Olson's phrase "the will to change" may indeed provide the title for Rich's sixth volume of poems (1971) but the influence upon these poems of his discussion of "projective verse" is merely asserted, not demonstrated. Or again, in the case of *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981), Keyes' application of Jonathan Holden's distinction between a poetry that gives testimony and a later post-modernist mode of poetry that makes hypotheses, seems to me to privilege some of the poems in this collection while skewing or simply suppressing a good number of others. That is, the poems in *A Wild Patience* have been situated, in advance, within a previously authorised schema; the conditions of their "success" — or even of their qualifying for mention — have already been fairly narrowly determined. And so, what can be a helpful introduction (as it generally is throughout the first half of *The Aesthetics of Power*) can also become a limiting and preemptive or coercive move.

I think this slippage, whereby a gesture of helpful opening up becomes more and more one of closing off, is

symptomatic of a number of interrelated matters. I have the space to elaborate only two: first, for all Keyes' sisterly solidarity and sense of the importance of Rich's poetry, and for all her talk of power, the "aesthetics of power," the more insistently the post-1968 poems become feminist-activist and political and angry, the uneasier Keyes' writing becomes. This uneasiness shows, for example, in propositions about *Diving Into the Wreck* that are simply wrong: Rich has *not* "given up understanding men" — on the contrary, this volume is full of poems that register only too well the angry break-out moments in a process of coming to understand men; or it shows in the increasing proportion of assertion to demonstration: "While there is much truth in [Rich's] ideology... she is an extremist and her total view leads to the absurdity of the poem 'The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven Understood At Last As a Sexual Message.'". The first part of that assertion produces no explanation whatever by way of justifying her dismissal of this poem as absurd.

Her growing unease with Rich's later poems also shows up on the topic of language. Keyes well understands Rich's emphasis on language, on acquiring a language and breaking silence as the crucial first step of empowerment. But she seems to have increasing difficulty with Rich's application of the linguistic powers of poetry as agents of political belief and praxis. It's as if Keyes' methods and assumptions are adequate to the first, but not the second part of Rich's statement, "I go on believing in the power of literature, and also in the politics of literature" (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*). *A Wild Patience* is chided because "Rich's beliefs often take precedence over her commitment to the power of poetry". But what if the poetry is in the beliefs? Rich knows as well as Caliban that if you stop at the first stage of language-empowerment all you can do is name your oppressor. Keyes, though, is uneasy with women's writing-as-politics and seems to feel that women's poetry, at least, should take care to keep its ideological body-language under the chaste wraps of an accomplished style: it's OK to be angry, hold beliefs, draw up political agendas as long as that kind of thing is sublimated or reified in Well Wrought Urns. The roots of the unease I've been trying to describe are located in the increasing intractability of Rich's later poetry to Keyes' methods and critical/theoretical assumptions:

> *The successful poems in* A Wild Patience, *those in which Rich convinces us by her "mastery of technique", make us less tolerant of those poems in which her beliefs obtrude, where she is "protecting" a personal relationship, or where she does not employ the post-modernist mode [i.e. the above mentioned poetry of hypothesis] .*

In that passage the ideology at work in Keyes' text is revealing itself as a residual, partially and uneasily feminized version of 'New Criticism,' whose ideology was so singularly dominant in literary studies on this continent from the 1940s well into the 1960s. With (as always) notable exceptions like some of Kenneth Burke's writing, that ideology worked with unprecedented effectiveness to de-historicize poetry, to neuter it, sealing it off from political praxis and personal referents to boot. It worked, as it were, to de-activate poetry and, not least, to naturalize and render invisible its own operations. My complaint isn't that Keyes' ideology is showing; all writing, including this review, is ideological. My point is, first, that I think Keyes' text becomes more and more uncomfortably entangled in contradictions between its own assumptions and procedures and those animating the poetry she wishes to engage; and second, that these contradictions produce readings that become more and more limiting or coercive while accounting for less and less. For my money Keyes is most confident, persuasive, and useful in discussing Rich's earlier volumes of poetry — precisely those which were written and published during the hegemonic heydey of New Criticism. I don't think, though, that very much of Rich's poetry since *The Will to Change* (1971) can be recuperated to the assumptions and values of that kind of criticism.

The second matter that's symptomatic of the slippage I mentioned above is lesbianism. In Rich's life and writing her lesbianism becomes an inseparable aspect of her feminist politics; and so, necessarily, the more uneasy Keyes' text becomes over Rich's beliefs and politics as textualized in her poetry, the uneasier it becomes over her lesbianism. Keyes is not homophobic. What happens is that we begin to pick up a fuller inflection of deepening incompatibilities between her text and Rich's — incompatibilities that issue finally, in Keyes' last two chapters, as readings that limit, misread, or otherwise paper over difficulties:

> *When Rich's poems lose that delicate balance between poetry and belief, they fail. As Louis Zukofsky writes, "If read properly, good poetry does not argue its attitudes or beliefs; it exists independently of the reader's preferences for one kind of 'subject' or another. Its conviction is in its mastery of technique." Whether or not we prefer the lesbian sensibility or Rich's program for poetry, when she convinces us through her "mastery of technique," we find good poems .*

Those really are question-begging assertions of a quintessentially New Criticism sort (What's a proper reading? Who decides? In Rich "lesbian sensibility" and "program for poetry" aren't an either/or, they're part of the same literary-political project). After question-begging comes mystification. Having admitted that there are some effective poems in the mode of "personal testimony" in Rich's *Dream of a Common Language* (1978) Keyes writes:

> *In* A Wild Patience, *however, Rich "recoils" from the confessional "demands" of such testimony, as many of her poems deal with an ongoing relationship with another woman. When protecting that relationship becomes more important than the poem itself, the poetry suffers. Her protectiveness also seems an offshoot of her belief system, that is, her lesbian separatism .*

In that piece of very poor writing those embarrassed quotation marks are like fissures in the text signalling problems. "Protecting that relationship" is a piece of sheer euphemistic mystification — a strong signal that Rich's lesbian poems are strenuously unwilling to parley on Keyes' terms, which include ignoring Rich's fine and justly famous essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality." Writing, politics, lesbianism: no reading of Rich is going to work that reduces, suppresses, or mystifies any of these three terms. "I go on believing," wrote Rich in 1976 — and she still believes —

> *in the power of literature, and also in the politics of literature. The experience of the black woman* as *woman, of the white and black woman cast as antagonists in the patriarchal drama, and of black and white women as lesbians, has been kept invisible for good reason* (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence,

Keyes certainly doesn't try to keep Rich-as-lesbian invisible but she is so uneasy about a lot of the work collected in *Diving Into the Wreck, Dream of a*

*Common Language*, and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* that she's incapable of producing an undeformed reading of it.

In all this I am of course not arguing that Adrienne Rich can't put a syllable wrong. I've been trying to give some account of why I find Keyes unconvincing at some of the crucial moments when she finds Rich unconvincing. *The Aesthetics of Power* shows that Claire Keyes likes and profoundly admires a lot of Rich's poetry, and that she can enter into interesting, useful dialogue with a lot of it. I wish she'd been able to like even more of it and to engage Rich's later work in a more complete, less uneasy conversation.

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## FILMS FOR WOMEN

Edited by Charlotte Brunsdon. London: BFI Books, British Film Institute, 1986. Distributed in North America by University of Illinois Press.

### *Kay Armatage*

Since the 1979 Feminism and Cinema Event at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, a group of films, both documentary and fiction, has emerged as a canon which has formed the basis of a body of theoretical and critical writings. This excellent and useful book collects together articles which have emerged as illustrative of the central tenets of the developing debate, and which also apply the theoretical precepts to the analysis of specific and fairly accessible film texts.

The films and the critical discussions are informed by a number of related issues, firstly the debate about realism, which was generated predominantly by the group of British feminist film scholars and activists who were the principal organizers of the first women's film festival at Edinburgh in 1972. Although the first article in the book, by Julia Lesage, a prominent American feminist writer, argues for the strength and political importance of consciousness-raising films which unquestioningly accept the conventions of documentary realism, the bulk of the other pieces operate at some level upon an hostility to realism. The way in which cinema works to reproduce dominant ideas is seen primarily at the level of form. Rather than simply the images presented, the 'reality effect' itself is ideologically questioned as working against radical social and political change precisely insofar as films are understood to offer up their representations as 'real.'

Secondly, the discussions are informed by the way in which feminist critics approached and understood mainstream (Hollywood) film production, an approach which hinges both upon notions of misrepresentation of women and the production of pleasure for the masculine spectator. In these arguments, the film form cannot just be used to present positive or alternative representations because the forms themselves are complicit in producing women as subordinate. Such an analysis demanded that feminists make films which, at minimum, interrogated and refused the established conventions of mainstream cinema. A feminist approach to cinema raised the corollary issues of articulation (how, from where, and to whom to speak) and language. If it is through language that we order our perceptions of the world, and that language is founded upon the repression of the feminine or the construction of the feminine as other, the feminine becomes, in such a theorization, outside or in the margins of language. The traces of the feminine are then found in disruption, the irrational, the avant-garde — the modernist canon represented by and best known through the films of Chantal Akerman, Yvonne Rainer, Sally Potter.

Although this anthology traces the above arguments through well-selected exemplary texts by well-known writers like Jane Feuer, B. Ruby Rich, Sylvia Harvey, Pam Cook, Claire Jonson, Annette Kuhn, and Elizabeth Cowie, its stance is more balanced and in some sense 'corrective' to their academic and theoretical concerns, which are in any case well served by Annette Kuhn's 1983 state of the art summary and explication, *Women's Pictures. Films For Women*, while emphasizing the importance of such notions and usefully placing them in a specific historical context, also broadens the focus to include discussions of European art cinema (such as that of Margarethe von Trotta and Marleen Gorris) and traditional women's genres such as melodrama and soap opera in their current Hollywood expression as 'new women's films' (for example, *Julia*, *Mahogany*, *Personal Best*, *Lianna*). In addition, many of the articles, though nominally identified as the text of one writer, were written after collective work on a topic or film, and the results are discussions which combine depth and intricacy with clarity and conciseness.

The final section of the book (after Documentary, Fictions, and Hollywood) addresses the important questions of exhibition and distribution. This last section documents feminist interventions into the distribution and exhibition of films, ranging from feminists picketing against films like *Dressed To Kill* to the formation of distribution companies which specialize in women's films across the range of filmic political expression from art to agit-prop. It is here that we encounter also the practical and material ramifications of theoretical issues such as the relation of women to language and specifically to cinematic language; the history of cinema and women's place in that history; the shifting significance of the 'politics of representation'; and the effect of gender positioning on viewing, identification, and pleasure. How do women watch and enjoy films? How do we account for the specific and varied responses of different groups of women? And how do we watch and produce films which recognize the diversity, heterogeneity and different determinations of cultural experience?

The majority of the articles included in the anthology were first published elsewhere, from 1978-1984. The book thus not only covers a significant period of developing feminist theory, but gathers together significant and illustrative texts from sources which are difficult to find except in specialized library collections. In this alone the book is eminently welcome; I for one have spent countless hours at a xerox machine, delicately pasting up and reducing my tattered old clippings from *The Village Voice* (Ruby Rich's deservedly praised article on *Not A Love Story*) or splitting the spines of my now-out-of-print volumes of *mlf* (Elizabeth Cowie on *Coma*), all the while risking jail or bankruptcy for copyright infringement. The publication of this book means that those days are over, at least for publications up to 1984.

Brunsdon as editor has also commissioned contributions on topics which had not been adequately dealt with in the existing theoretical canon, notably pieces on the popular feminist film *A Question of Silence* and the more problematic *Lianna*. Brunsdon's contributions of concise and telling introductions to each section are both helpful to readers who are new to film