

Two Poets' State of the Union: Adrienne Rich and Erin Belieu

G. H. Mosson Reviews *Later Poems: Selected and New* and *Slant Six*

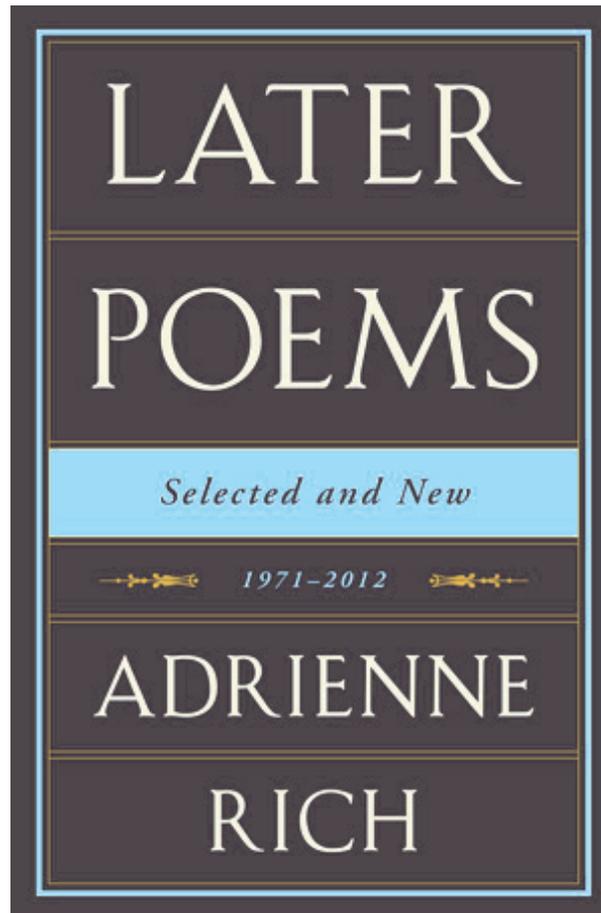
American poets still chart a course between two founding nineteenth century poles. There is the gregarious and epic "Poet of Democracy" Walt Whitman. More individually insular, Emily Dickenson sings how "[t]he Soul selects her own Society" in hymnal-inspired lyrics. Walt Whitman placed American democracy at poetry's center of many of his major poems. Today, Whitman's democratic-poetry continues in recent books from Adrienne Rich and Erin Belieu.

Unlike his epic precursors, Whitman did not look backwards. Whitman's poetry does not look back to some established democracy nor did he treat America as static subject matter. For his poetry, America also is not an "object" of a poet's gaze and commentary. Rather, Whitman adventures, celebrates, bathes, harbors a runaway slave, travels, and puzzles through America in an exciting, unfolding narrative that was first launched in 1855 in his book-length poem *Leaves of Grass*. This present-tense singing ranges throughout one of his most famous poems, "Song of Myself," which is equally about everyone else and everything else, as we all

know. As in "Beginners," Whitman expects the best from the future, his readers, us. Democratic American poetry continues on through Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams, Gwendolyn Brooks, Allen Ginsberg, among others, and through Adrienne Rich.

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore on May 16, 1929, into an educated family with the means to provide. Rich attended the all-girls Roland Park Country School in Baltimore and Radcliff College, and while there in 1951, her debut book of metrical poetry won the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Chosen by W. H. Auden, the Yale prize gave her an instant audience. In 2013, she passed after six significant decades of publishing poetry and essays that ranged from her technically sharp early books, to her activist and feminist work for which she is better known now, to her fragmented work in her last two decades.

Rich, certainly in the 1960s, became an activist poet, essayist, and academic and non-academic part of the civil rights and civil justice movements then and since then. To discuss this is beyond our scope. Rich's poetry, as sampled in (continued on next page)



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Later Poems, [Norton (NY: 2013): 530 pages, Hardcover: \$39.95, ISBN (13): 978-0-393-08956-1] displays a number of phases, including narrative imagism, more diary-like *in medias res* verse, to experimental forms and series-style poems, to feminist and lesbian poetry, and of course, personal lyrics.

In the last two decades, Rich has incorporated philosophical readings and intellectual mediations into the more fragmented and broken surface of her poems. This break began with her 1991 “Atlas of a Difficult World,” which she expresses and reflects upon the selfish limits of lyric poetry, and the luxury of revolutionary and romantic ideologies if not employed to actual change.

If Adrienne Rich is a poet who reads, lives, and breaths ideals of justice—and she is—then Rich also clearly rejects the pursuit of happiness defined by a consumer, capitalist society. Rich’s 1997 rejection of the National Medal of Art is a good starting point for discussion of her late work. In 1997, Adrienne Rich declined a National Medal of Art from President Bill Clinton because of her horror of the never-ending *Me Decade* that began in the 1980s and continues today. In “Midnight Salvage” published the same year, Rich writes:

But neither was expecting in my time
to witness this : : wasn’t deep
lucid or mindful you might say enough
to look through history’s bloodshot eyes
into this commerce this dreadnaught wreck cut loose
from all vows, oaths, patents, compacts, promises : :
To see
not O my Captain
fallen cold & dead by the assassin’s hand
but cold alive & cringing : : drinking with the assassins
in suit of noir Hong Kong silk
pushing his daughter in her famine-
waisted flamingo gown
out on the dance floor with the traffickers
in nerve gas saying to them *Go for it*
and to the girl *Get with it*

As the opening alludes, Rich has been an activist-thinker for decades, yet admits she was not “expecting” how history would develop by the mid-1990s. The poem, and all of her later work, has the courage and tenacity to be more than right, truthful. What Rich faces, in her view, is a society of “commerce” that is “cut loose” from values. As American political critique, this is marketplace society without constitutional values. Unlike Whitman who can at least dream of the assassinated Lincoln as a hero (“O Captain! My Captain!”), Rich here imagines a world without patriotic and romantic nostalgia. Rich is trying to see clear-eyed without the blinder of ‘heaven’ beforehand (or afterward). Here, Rich’s ‘captain’ is on the take. In capitalism (“commerce”)—linked to war for Rich through the nerve gas representative—the owners and salesmen of our society prostitute their daughters for profit, push them onto the dance floor of objectification and sexual commerce. Go along to get along. This is a bleak view. Is it easily dismissible?

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Rich's primary point is that society is being run by "elite gangsterism," as coined by Cornel West in *Democracy Matters*. As Rich portrays herself in "USonian Journals 2000," many of us scramble to survive it. As also shown the first section of Rich's "USonian Journals," the ethical person must make ethical choices, and cannot escape them even when considering whether to teach at a university, or a colleague's interest in the working poor which does not extend outside of a Dickens novel. Rich, as with Dickens, writes for and out of that flesh and blood concern as well as aesthetically. As a result, in the journal-poem, Rich flees academia and, during a possible crime incident, for it's unclear, "runs away from, not toward, the police." The poem goes forward after this across several sections, beyond the scope of this review. Importantly, Rich made choices and her poetry makes readers face theirs.

Though not my favorite poem at the time of publication, Rich's "School Among the Ruins" protests against the fighting raging across "*Beirut.Baghdad.Sarajevo.Bethlehem.Kabul*," by imagining a bombed out school where the teacher and students come together around caring for a stray cat. While the poem is one of her more narratively straight-forward, even didactic poems of her late style period, the fact is she has something valuable to tell us. Upon rereading, I have grown to never forget this poem. In other words, caring for the cat reconnects the children to their humanity and during the war preserves it. This is what I call "knowledge," and is what makes Rich's poetry not just artful and provocative but important and lasting.

Rich's ideological poetry is not without art. Her artistry in "Midnight Salvage" excepted above deserves a brief comment. Some reviewers in the last two decades have praised her intensity and commitment, while bemoaning loss of nuance. What makes Rich dynamic, and what these reviewers miss, is that Rich's message is not an answer but a commitment. This commitment is not dogmatism, but most often—searching and discovery and loss and more questions. Artistically in "Midnight Salvage," Rich uses vivid metaphor ("history's bloodshot eyes"), mixes in legal and moral terms ("vows, oaths, patents, compacts, promises"), alludes to Whitman, paints a scene and tells a story on the dance floor. This vivid scene also functions as allegory, embodying "commerce" mentioned first. More technically, lines one through three use chiaroscuro repetition to create rhythm, a marker of poetry over written prose ("deep" / "lucid" / "mindful") and ("witness" then "look"). Rich is comfortable with contemporary lingo ("Go for it" / "Get with it") and a range of dictions. Further, Rich experiments with creative grammar. This includes lack of punctuation and the use of this symbol ":". I read that symbol as both extended pause and mathematical equation. Further, Rich's experimentalism is not nonsensical; it spines her intellectually and emotionally charged verse.

The *Later Poems* remains the most relevant selected poems of Rich available today. It is geared to a 21st century reader, because it tackles our globalized commercial world and also idealistic American values colliding with real-world problems. I agree with some reviewers that one day a 200-page "Selected" will be made available and pack more punch. At the same time, *Later Poems* offers 500 pages of good and great verse. I have wrestled with how to review it in summary. Of the great poems in here, I include her still stunning "Diving into the Wreck," and also "Atlas of a Difficult World," "Midnight Salvage," "USonian Journals 2000," and even a powerful emotional lyric like "Seven Skins."

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Erin Belieu was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1965, and soon enough moved to the East Coast and Boston University to pursue her poetic craft, first as graduate student, then as managing editor of the journal *Agni*. In her fourth book *Slant Six*, [Copper Canyon (WA: 2014): 68 pages, Paperback: \$16.00, ISBN (13): 978-1-55659-471-7] Belieu sees the same American whirligig of commerce, that “dreadnaught wreck cut loose,” from the perspective of a consumer, a mid-life divorced Mom, a Floridian living in the hot panhandle, a professor in casual clothes, who like many of us juggles multiple roles and emotions, all the while pulling out of the Wall-Mart, looking back, people-watching, with knife-sharp free verse intact, ready to slice and dice and in every poem, and every strophe, laugh.

The opening section of the book is an *ars poetica*, on target and funny. Here, Belieu celebrates being knee-deep in Americana and performing the poet’s role as recorder (not herald) of democracy. As she proudly declares in “At a Certain Party in New York City,” she is NOT a Brooklyn hipster. Whitman would approve, she says in another poem, because he approved of true diversity. American poets should be neck-deep in the muck, uncertain of their importance, letting like so many others their freak flag within the “normalcy” fly, she argues. For instance, Belieu writes:

Americanness is everywhere,
wedged into everything, is best when driving
around a frowsy Gulf Coast city with its terrific
mini-marts like Bill’s, the very best of the marts.

(“Someone Asks, What Makes This Poem American?”)

Please. Don’t tell us
history. Nobody hearts a cemetery
like we do. . . .

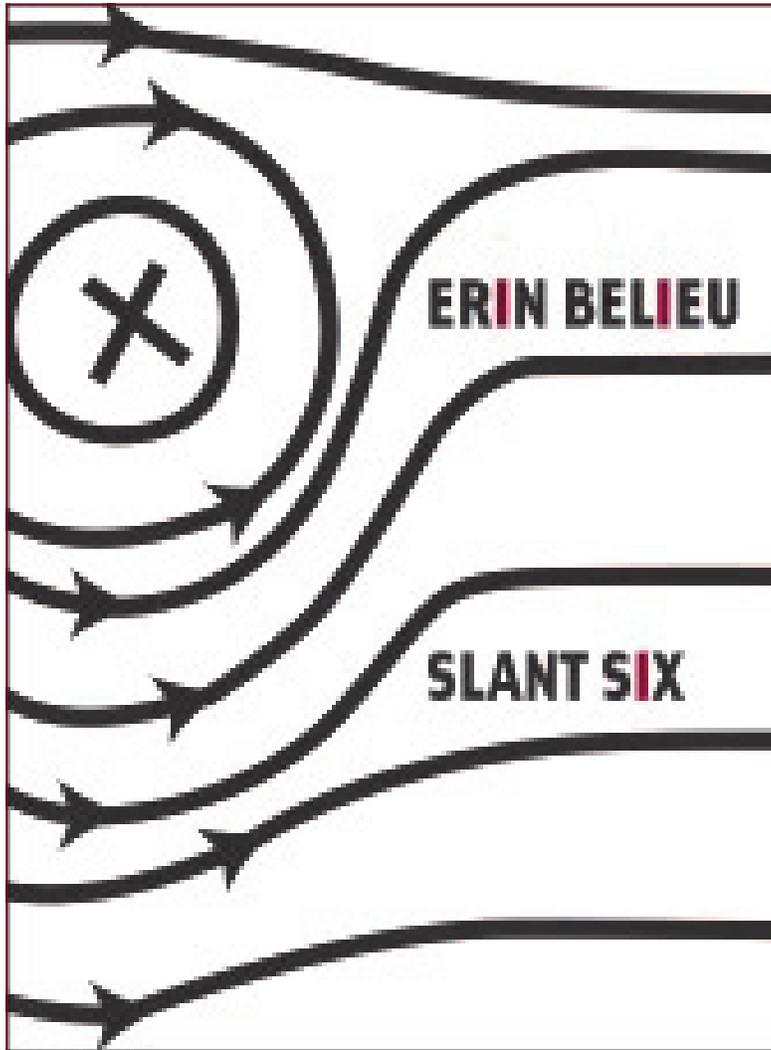
Though we do hear
the news. Oh sure. It gets to us.
Story is, up north, people shit
crushed pineapple and rest-stop
whores make change with paper
money.

(“How We Count in the South”)

Belieu is a funny poet, in the sharp sense. She is quick to praise what turns out to be low praise: We know that the best “mart” remains a mini-mart. Junk food has its solace though, doesn’t it? Belieu is great with rightly-placed adjectives (“frowsy”). She also engineers humor through line breaks. For instance, the line break is funny when she says “Americanness is everywhere / wedged into everything.” The tone in the second line has an irony, as if celebratory in line one (iambic) becomes in line two pushy and a tad annoying (“wedged”, trochaic). Her formal training is apparent in the couplet because the couplet first line is iambic, creating a sing-song rhythm, but the next line starts with a thick trochee (“WEDGED in / to EV / erTHING”), which sonically mimics the act of being “wedged into everything.”

In the second excerpt above, the line breaks move and change the meaning so quickly, it sparks tension and possibly a smile. A rest-stop is assumed the usual noun—for a micro-second. Then it becomes “rest-stop / whores.” Even “paper / money” (continued on next page)

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confounds a reader's expectation and works this way because people don't usually say this phrase. This line-break technique appears again and again in *Slant Six*. It's always done with surprising harmonic juxtapositions.

Belieu always has possessed razor-sharp free verse fingers. Her debut, *Infanta*, was a prestigious National Poetry Series winner and featured a chiseled mix of formal poems and free-verse. She came more into her own as a chiseled poet of tight free verse in her second book, *One Above and One Below*. Her third book, *Black Box*, dealt with her divorce, and featured freer emotion and more experimental form. *Slant Six* is closer to the voice driven confessional style, yet with a deft control of diction, juxtaposition, and line break. Two of the poems in *Slant Six* appeared in the *Best American Poetry* series. The book contains these and even better poems.

Let's compare Rich and Belieu. Looking at Adrienne Rich, Rich writes in the Whitman tradition because, like Whitman, Rich writes in the lyric "I" voice about epic concerns: historical, social, cultural, art, and for Rich, capitalism

versus humanism, and 21st century survival. Rich has Whitman's future-orientated mindset. However she is less optimistic than either Walt Whitman or Langston Hughes. Rich's fragmentary, intellectually infused verse from 1991 through 2013 can be difficult. It recreates, also as in Whitman's work, the sense of being present as it is 'spoken' on the page. However in this later work, the present experience an evolving experience, a disrupted experience, where the poet-speaker thinks, speaks, experiences, reacts, questions, discovers, and witnesses.

Belieu's lyric voice is more individualistic and isolated than Rich or Whitman. In other ways, however, Belieu's lyric voice is closer to Whitman's. Each poem in *Slant Six* moves through the events that occur in present-tense action. Belieu's present-tense scenery is not panoramic and heroic as it can be in Whitman. It is factual, often funny, and impactful. Belieu depicts America comically seen while driving, while running an errand, while waking up to one's frumpy lover on a Sunday. Like Whitman, Belieu encounters. But she does not become these people through empathy. Belieu notes, describes, chuckles, sometimes sympathizes, and moves on.

What is Belieu's conclusion? Belieu is a realist. She is more personal than Rich's poetry of social concerns. At the same time as in Rich's work of 1991-2013, Belieu finds herself adrift in the hodgepodge chaos of America. Unlike Rich, Belieu is more concerned with surviving it on a day to day emotional basis. She also is more comfortable with (continued on next page)

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turning the whirligig not into political protest, or visions of something better, but just a good biting laugh. Belieu often achieves this humor through deft juxtaposition, as I've said, whether it's breaking an unlikely adjective from its noun across a line ("rest-stop / whores") or diction (Don't tell us / history").

Despite this penchant for humor, *Slant Six* ends with a humorous political poem. In it, a mother tries to handle how her son demonizes "Republicans" partially (and maybe mostly) because the Dad has divorced his "Mama" in Florida and married a Cuban-American card-carrying Republican. Within this framework of emotional truth and also political difference, the Mom still tries to impart to her son "Jude" a sense of appreciating differences. This female poetic-speaker and "Mama" wants Jude to understand, rather than demonize, lasting disagreement (from politics to divorce). This empathy is valued if and when disagreement and difference persist (and maybe are never reconciled). For here, the mother self-consciously tries to impart a Whitmanesque value of humanizing empathy (as in "I was the man, I suffered, I was there"), without creating a parent-child conflict though telling Jude what to do.

The poem ends with this thought, which is idealistic as anything in Adrienne Rich, though not as intellectual. To compare again, Belieu is more resigned to lasting differences than Rich would concede in her work, because Rich is concerned about social justice for all. For Rich, nothing is impossible to bridge, there is no bridge impossible to cross, we just have not found it, nor conceived it yet, or have lost it, or permitted others to render it crooked and useless. For Rich better to be bitter about a bridge not yet crossed, then say *the bridge is broken*. Belieu extends her compassion across both whole and broken bridges:

But with kids, you never know,
as our present is busy becoming
their future, every minute, every day,

while they're working as hard as they can
to perfect the obstinate and beautiful mystery
that every soul ends up being to every other.

— G. H. Mosson

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