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Alicia Suskin Ostriker and the Politics of Poetry

“Only then exactly to understand
What I see in this tangle is all process.”
— Alicia Suskin Ostriker, “Still Life”

Poet and critic, Alicia Suskin Ostriker is one of the most important voices in contemporary American literature and culture. Besides being the author of twelve collections of poems, most recently *The Book of Seventy* (2009), winner of the Jewish Book Award for Poetry, she has authored three major and very influential books of feminist criticism (*Writing like a Woman*, 1983; *Stealing the Language: the Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, 1986; *Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics and the Erotic*, 2000) and produced major re-readings of the Bible from a Jewish feminist point of view (*Feminist Revision and the Bible*, 1993; *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*, 1994; *For the Love of God: The Bible as an Open Book*, 2007). “The true poet (the good poet),” she claims, “is necessarily the partisan of energy, rebellion, and desire, and is opposed to passivity, obedience and the authority of reason, laws, institutions. . . . In whatever age, and whatever the writer's ostensibly political positions, plenitude and exuberance signal the democratizing/subversive impulse, the dance of the devil's party.” (“Dancing at the Devil's Party” 2-5)

Alicia Ostriker has been “always fascinated by the convergence of the political, the erotic, and the spiritual in other poets” (Preface IX). As the three poems she is contributing to this issue of *RSA* amply testify, a similar convergence characterizes her own poetry as well. Her “Ghazal: America,” entertains an intertextual dialogue with Ginsberg's “America,” evoked in the title and referenced to in the poem itself, which places it from the outset in the tradition of critical and political U.S. poetry. Her hidden dialogue with Adrienne Rich's “From an Old House in America” and with a poetry which narratively moves from the personal to the mythic while solidly locating the

poem also in the tradition of feminist poetry, corroborates her claim that “vital myths are ... both public and private, ... they encode both consent to and dissent from existing power structures, and ... have at all times a potential for being interpreted both officially and subversively” (Ostriker, “Out of my Sight” 28). Coherently, “Ghazal: America,” moves from the personal remembrance of a time past to a family history which, on the American shore of the Atlantic, is made to begin with a Jewish grandfather who migrated to the United States in the first years of the twentieth century, driven there by anti-Semitic East-European persecution and “the American Dream.” In the poem, the child’s precious early memories of the grandfather, finding their way to the brain and heart through waves of bodily sensations – the fragrance of his tobacco, the color of his sweater, his calming voice – unravel his life-story, testifying to the failure of the Great Mother ‘America’ to rescue and nourish the immigrant European fleeing his Fatherland. If to the grandfather the reality America offers, beyond the dream, is two wars and no democratic defense of persecuted minorities, for the granddaughter it is, as in Ginsberg, “corporate America” and capital as its sole god and value that continues to falsify the American Dream at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Building a parallel between Ginsberg’s McCarthyist America of the 1950s and contemporary U.S., Ostriker shows us a land ravaged by the latest form of exploitation, flooded by rivers which expose domestic poverty and exclusion, while cluster bombs condense the ‘evil’ of the nation’s wars and aspirations to hegemonic world power. And if the Statue of Liberty in the poem becomes both a lure and a trap, in the two couplets that conclude it, “fear” runs through the land, transforming “America” from dream to nightmare. Not only its figurative and discursive content, but the form chosen by Ostriker greatly contributes to our perception of the poem both as narration and a series of snapshots condensing U.S.’s last hundred years of history. The ghazal, typical of classic Persian poetry, indeed builds the whole through a series of couplets that offer separate images. In this case, the couplets and images of the poem are woven into mythic cohesion by the red thread which is “America,” its contradictions and its curse. And the reader’s intensely emotional impression of a vampire America feeding on a bleeding America remains uninterrupted by a final stop in the second poem, “Banquet,” as if the U.S. were most of all at war with itself. And yet, as if her

poetic outpour were continuing without interruption in the concluding lines of “What the Butterfly is Thinking,” to mark the co-presence of negative and positive visions, Ostriker mitigates the loss of a sense of order and direction, the feeling of a doomed land, by recovering the mythic dream of America as a Paradise to be regained through a return to nature and to the nourishing roles harmonizing nature and humanity.

I would like to conclude this brief introduction with a quotation that, more so than a lengthy analysis, condenses Alicia Ostriker’s poetry and poetic stance:

‘Poetry makes nothing happen,’ said W. H. Auden, but there are those of us who disagree. Poetry can tear at the heart with its claws, make the neural nets shiver, flood us with hope, despair, longing, ecstasy, love, anger, terror. It can help us think more lucidly. It can force us to laugh. Poetry can, as Conrad puts it, make us *see*. It can also, like Rilke’s torso of Apollo, tell us that we must change our lives. From time to time, some of us believe, poetry changes the world. I am of this ... persuasion and I have always enjoyed the work of visionary artists dissatisfied with the rule of ‘things as they are.’ (Preface ix)

Works cited

- Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. “Preface,” “Dancing at the Devil’s Party: Some Notes on Politics and Poetry.” *Dancing at the Devil’s Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics and the Erotic*. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2000. ix-x, 1-20.
- . “Out of my Sight: The Buried Woman in Biblical Narrative.” *Feminist Revision and the Bible*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993. 27-54.
- . “Still Life: A Glassful of Zinnias on My Daughter’s Kitchen Table.” *The Little Space: Poems Selected and New, 1968-1998*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1998. 199-201.