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Two Necessities of Poetry: Plenitude and Exuberance

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MARIANNE ROGOFF

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Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics, and the Erotic by Alicia Ostriker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 122 pages

Two Necessities of Poetry: Plenitude and Exuberance

Alicia Ostriker advocates a “poetics of ardor,” one which is not detached, objective, or merely intellectual, instead a poetry that embraces a big-hearted and practical definition of what erotic means. *Dancing at the Devil's Party* is mostly about women's poetry but Ostriker also reminds us of the wide-reaching sensuality of Whitman, Hopkins, Keats, and other sexy male forebears who permitted love to appear in their work. “The degree and quantity and variety of love in Whitman is simply astonishing,” she writes, describing herself as a 13-year-old sitting among grass and rocks in New York's Central Park reading *Leaves of Grass* for the first time. (26)

“Some portion of myself paused ecstatically when I (when it) encountered ‘Song of Myself’ and elected thenceforth to celebrate itself and sing itself.” (25)

The book's subtitle, *Essays on Poetry, Politics, and the Erotic*, lets us know the book encompasses more than Eros. The charged poets she discusses have also taken it upon themselves to revise (revisit, re-envision) politics that disallow the celebration of particular selves or aspects of self. Author of *Stealing the Language*, the important 1986 book on American women's poetry, Alicia Ostriker has long been working to establish scholastic redemption for subject matter and voices that didn't used to be found in the literary canon. In this new book's first essay she references John Milton and quotes William Blake as saying "Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell...(1) She believes, in fact, that the passages in *Paradise Lost* that deal with Satan are "more exciting, more energetic ... and worse, duller, less poetic in the sections dominated by God." (2) She says:

All art depends on opposition between God and the devil, reason and energy. The true poet (the good poet) is necessarily the partisan of energy, rebellion, and desire, and is opposed to passivity, obedience, and the authority of reasons, laws, and institutions.... The truer (better) the poetry, the more it will embody the truths of Desire. (2)

William Blake said "exuberance is beauty." Ostriker says, "whatever the writer's ostensible political positions, plenitude and exuberance signal the democratizing/subversive impulse, the dance of the devil's party." (5) The poets she is drawn to, admires, and chooses to write about here, therefore, are poets who, like Whitman, "contain multitudes." "For the work of

Eros... is to join whatever is disconnected.” (28) Which, presumably, is the job also of politics, governments, systems, and institutions; here again our forebear Whitman was inclusive in his vision. Via poetry, he invented “a rhetoric of power without authority, without hierarchy, and without violence. The omnivorous empathy of his imagination wants to incorporate ALL.” (32)

In her essay on why the “austere poetry of Elizabeth Bishop is universally praised and the physically and sexually charged poetry of Sharon Olds is commonly attacked” (39), Ostriker begins by defining erotic discourse in poetry as a version of Adrienne Rich’s “drive to connect, the dream of a common language.” (38) “The impulse to connect, to perceive unities across the conventional boundaries of separation [is] always implicitly erotic, always a form of making love.” (38) While,

“what most contemporary critics seem to want is less body and less feeling in poetry. Less sensuousness. Less desire. -- These topics are so sticky, so embarrassing, so impolite, so troublesome -- can’t we please have a poetry that’s clean, with the messy and horrifying fluids and emotions scrubbed off it?” (39)

Certainly Alicia Ostriker was the first poet I ever read who wrote glowingly of pregnancy, in her early (1974) collection *Once More Out of Darkness*, written during the Vietnam War when she was about to give birth to her son Gabriel, potential future soldier. In that book she combines the delicate vulnerability and fondest wishes we all have for our offspring

with the sharp knowledge of war and the possibilities of violence that await the newborn. Erotics and politics, sex and violence, are never far apart in the body's reality, yet the divisive mind would have us compartmentalize and keep the two things cleanly separate.

Just as Alicia Ostriker has William Blake and Walt Whitman to thank for permission to write about all of her self's passions and pains and insights, I have her to thank for giving me, when I was a student in her 20th Century Poetry class at Rutgers in the late 1970s, permission, in the classroom and by example, to write about the personal, domestic, non-academic subjects that compelled me then. Last year, I was steeled again when she visited the classes I now teach at CCAC and told the next generation, my students, to "write what you're afraid to write."

Permission and a dare, a fearsome mandate that Elizabeth Bishop and Sharon Olds, in differing ways, take on.

Whereas Bishop writes as a voice of loneliness, fearing and desiring connection, the self in Olds is never represented in isolation but always in relation, penetrated and penetrating, glued by memory and gaze to others. (49)

Still, Bishop is aware, Ostriker says, that

the emergence of a self-conscious individual identity can never be separable from an experience of identification with others. (45)

In Bishop's late poem "In the Waiting Room" (from her last published volume *Geography III*), the voice is a seven-year-old reading *National Geographic* in a dentist's waiting

room who (like many of us?) was initially shocked by an image of some primitive women whose “breasts were horrifying.” The child in the poem asks “what similarities... held us all together or made us all just one?” (45), experiencing an epiphany of frightening yet universal connection. Other critics saw Bishop’s “fall” into identity in that poem as repellent, while Ostriker insists (as does Carl Jung, among others) that “Self is self-in-relation: no other kind exists.” (46)

What all the poets discussed in this book -- Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Bishop, Sharon Olds, Maxine Kumin, Lucille Clifton, and Allen Ginsberg -- share in common (in various ways) is that they “assume connections where the dualisms of our culture assume separation -- between self and other, humans and nature, male and female, public and private life, pleasure and pain -- and what emanates ... is something like joy.” (85) And, though they may dance at the devil’s party, a poet like Maxine Kumin is most remarkable for her sanity. “It is the way of someone rooted in a chosen set of routines and responsibilities. Kumin differs from other feminists in her capacity to locate strength in normality.” (59) Kumin writes of family, maternal attachment in both animals and humans, being grounded in place, the making of preserves “a recurring metaphor for what the poet wants to do with the world at large.” (61) Lucille Clifton is a master of “sacred levity” (79) and demonstrates “how spiritually complicated an apparently ‘easy’ poet can be -- and how a gentle voice can be both revolutionary and revelatory.” (78)

Ostriker quotes Toni Morrison:

It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. (78)

I quote Alicia Ostriker:

... 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 put 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. (ix)

One of the ways it does this is by refusing to be afraid, of deep, entrenched, personal, or difficult subject matter, or of what (other) critics might say, and insisting on writing about those topics which "belong to the devil's party of those who pursue desire rather than bow to reason....

In a postmodern era, there is something embarrassing about this.... so much the more am I obliged to champion it." (x) For all of our cool detachment, righteous politics, and critical aesthetic judgments, to make connections is nature's way, to live erotically humankind's only hope for survival: poetry is a form of connection.

In the Afterword Alicia Ostriker informs us that her closing essay on Allen Ginsberg came from her own "midlife explorations of Judaism." (118) She uses the word *kindness* as the most compelling quality in Ginsberg, in his work and in person. This "virtue at the core of

Ginsberg's character and his writing is known in Hebrew as *Chesed*: lovingkindness,"(103) and is acted out in the voice of the poet in *Howl* where "the speaking and shrieking and wailing 'I' oscillates between individual and collective identity."(107)

"From America Allen takes Whitman. The manly love of comrades, the open road, the democratic vistas stretching to eternity, and also the eyes of America taking a fall...

America will always be, for him, infinite hope and infinite disappointment. That's very Jewish." (118)

Ostriker quotes Alan Mintz regarding the "failure of divine response" (106) to a history that is full of suffering: "Jewish society ... has had many massive individual catastrophes visited upon it and still survived; ... in significant measure through the exertions of the Hebrew literary imagination ... [which is] the story of transcendence of the catastrophe." (106) Ginsberg's Moloch is a cruel god but we must still "declare him holy." (119) This is what we do when we dance at the devil's party.