## STEALING THE LANGUAGE: THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S POETRY IN AMERICA

Alicia Ostriker. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

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Alicia Ostriker's timely and important book, *Stealing the Language*, claims for women poets wirting in America in the 1960s the revolutionary status accorded to English romantic poets writing at the beginning of the last century. Her title echoes Dennis Donoghue's *Thieves of Fire*, an appreciation of romantic poetry; it points to the same Promethean myth and for many of the same reasons. Wordsworth and Coleridge, in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), promised to return poetry to the common language of men, to return poetry to its folk sources in the ballad, in legend, and in myth. So we find the women poets, whose work Ostriker summarizes and to some extent evaluates, writing poetry about and for women, defying elitism, consciously adopting a rebel stance.

Ostriker's thesis is that women's poetry (as distinct from poetry by individual women) "exists, has a history, a terrain, a language." Her work bears out her thesis as she considers thematically and stylistically the poetry of Anne Bradstreet who arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, as she notes male misreadings of Emily Dickinson's poetry, as she praises May Sarton's "The Muse as Medusa." Ostriker's method is inductive and often delightfully metaphoric: "I attempt to read by the light that poems themselves emit, rather than by the fixed beam of one or another theory which might shine where a poem is not and leave in the darkness the place where it is." The strength of her thesis lies in her finding that individual poems from a diverse body of women writers do, in fact, cohere: "philosophically, a distaste for dualisms, hierarchy, and vertical metaphors, and a preference for a 'compact body whole entire' organized through balances rather than superior-inferior structures, will be a core female position. So will living attachment to nature and the body and a willingness to identify the self with animals."

But, in spite of the impressive range of her knowledge of women's poetry and the apparent logic of her argument, there are nagging problems with this book. *Stealing the Language* reads as though it were haunted. The ghost is male and is frequently about a century old. For example, in a chapter about women poets and revisionist poetry, Ostriker remarks that Kate Ellis's poem 'Matrilinear Descent' recalls the Demeter-Kore myth of mother-daughter dependence. Ostriker, herself, looks to Demeter-Kore mythology as an alternative (a corrective) to Harold Bloom's Freudian analysis of male poetry as based on Oedipus-Laius myth. Yet it is Prometheus, male and rebel, who through the title, itself, dominates Ostriker's book. The romantics, in general, are well represented.

Ostriker's first chapter, 'I'm Nobody: Women's Poetry, 1650-1960,' articulates clearly and convincingly the effort of women writers to discover a center of self, a source of strength from which to write, but the need of a creative artist to write from a sure center crosses sexual boundaries. The ghost who speaks to this chapter is Coleridge:

> *Without this latent presence of the 'I Am,' all modes of existence in the external world would flit before us as colored shadows, with no greater depth, root, or fixture, than the image of a rock hath in a gliding stream.*
> (Biographia Literaria and Two Lay Sermons, *1894, Appendix C, 347.)*

While Ostriker is impressive in cataloguing and categorizing poetry written by contemporary women, these echoes in thought and word of an earlier poetry resonate through her work. In her introduction, Ostriker, defining a contemporary writing which "tends to be passionate rather than distant," and which defies conventional divisions between 'the line of feeling' and the activity of the intellect sounds a good deal like Pound describing imagism as an intellectual and emotional complex rendered in an instant of time.

Ostrikers generalizes later in the same chapter, on the permissible subject of love, which "seems often in women's poems to be a disguised means of treating the theme of power." This could be an adequate description of theme and incident in several of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. When Ostriker quotes from May Swenson, who extends the self into nature and "yearns for the stone's endurance, the ghost is Wallace Stevens, who yearned to be a thinking stone, foisted upward by a sea of thought. When Ostriker describes Swenson as one who can "believably and without sentiment imagine what it is like being a cat, a lion, a bee,..." one remembers D.H. Lawrence's effort in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* to know the snake, the tortoise, the peach, from the inside out.

One can't help but feel that it is the poetry itself which calls up these echoes. Language is a shared experience. Surely Adrienne Rich knows that John Donne stands in the wings when she writes "Any woman's death diminishes me," or that Wallace Steven's high-toned old Christian woman voices the other side of the argument to Rich's claim that it is "pure happiness to know/all our high-toned questions/breed in a lively animal."

Rich is, of course, the poet Ostriker chooses to quote, but Ostriker, herself, both poet and critic, is capable of the ghost-ridden phrase. Claiming in her chapter on women poets and revisionist mythology, that familiar figures from a male tradition emerge altered, Ostriker writes that "the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience." In the cadence and the ring of those lines, we still hear Yeats mourning the Irish people in 1916.

It may well be that these speaking ghosts only serve to summon up yet another — that of Wittgenstein who assured us that language holds us all captive, since it repeats its truths to us inexorably. But I want to urge something other than futility.

If we are to see beyond the limitations of our individual cultures, it will only be because the artists, the makers, have suffered, have shared, have pioneered, and this must be particularly true of work by women in this century. But... the role of the critic is a separate one, and it entails evaluation. If there is a serious flaw in Ostriker's work, it lies in her willingness to quote from poetry which sounds inadequate to its theme. Ostriker's reference to Judy Grahn's love lament never recognizes that this is, after all, not very good poetry, and one suspects that May Sarton's "My Sisters, O My Sisters," is recognized for its content rather than for its quality.

Although I am grateful to Ostriker for her introduction of poets new to me, and although I am impressed both by the order and the range of her thinking, her argument invites one final ghost, this time one from this century and female. Elizabeth Bishop writes to Joan Keerfe, June 8, 1977:

> *Undoubtedly gender does play an important part in the making of any art, but art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc., into two sexes is to emphasize values in them that are not art.*