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## Book Review: Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston, 1986)

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"Whenever a book is abused, it is taken for granted that it is I who have been abusing it." And presumably showing cause for doing so—unlike Christopher North, for one, whose judgments, Poe claimed, were "mere *dicta* . . . there has been no period at which he has ever *demonstrated* anything." But, surprisingly, Poe's *BJ* contributions were themselves thick with "mere dicta" and were seldom abusive. He was consistently good at demonstrating syntax and spelling errors in the works he reviewed. More substantial matters, however, were usually dealt with by assertion only. As for abusive, one wishes that his reviews and brief notices could have been much more so. Thus his usually dispassionate editor permits himself this comment about the indulgent treatment given the poems of Elizabeth Oakes Smith: "There should be some explanation, aside from extraordinarily misguided taste . . . for [Poe's] lavish praise of [her] inept, sentimental rubbish."

Although such judgmental harshness is rare, a personal note is occasionally heard—as in, "Poe's ready acceptance of the evils of tobacco assumes more rationality than America has since demonstrated concerning the addiction"; and in Pollin's applause for Poe's enthusiasm about anastatic printing: "How social-minded it was!"—these come as welcome asides, brief eddies in the massive flow of informative detail which Pollin's notes, here as in the Poe volumes earlier edited, provide.

Still, one could wish he had done a bit more. For one instance, why is it consistent with Poe's "whole critical outlook" that he thought novels should be laced with auctorial comment? Another item worth examining is what Poe might have specifically meant by "the infallible principles of a Natural Art," by "the natural law (of the heart and intellect)." And what if any context might make understandable Poe's curious comment: "If the question be put today, what is the value of the Platonian philosophy, the proper answer is—'exactly nothing at all.'"

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STEALING THE LANGUAGE: *The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*.

By Alicia Suskin Ostriker. Boston: Beacon. 1986. xvii, 315 pp. \$19.95.

Beginning with Claudine Hermann's imperative that women writers must be "voleuses de langue"—thieves of language—Alicia Ostriker studies the American women poets who have claimed a poetic voice in spite of a tradition that too often ignores women's writing.

*Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, then, is an extended discussion of the tradition of women's artistic self-assertion that defies masculine cultural hegemony; in addition, this study provides an analysis of the challenge posed by the feminist aesthetic to the centrality of post-modernist style. Asserting that the feminist movement has served as a catalyst for innovative poetry that addresses itself to the particular concerns of women, Ostriker argues that this new poetry by women presents a radical alternative to traditional poetics: "We need to recognize that our customary literary language is systematically gendered in ways that influence what we approve and disapprove of, making it extremely difficult for us to acknowledge certain kinds of originality—of difference—in women poets" (pp. 2–3). Insisting that our aesthetic priorities are based on the valorization of the masculine, Ostriker attempts to map out a new territory of the experience and concerns shared by women. Here Ostriker is working in the tradition established by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, Cheryl Walker, myself and others who have observed that women writers often assume diminutive poses disguising their rebelliousness with a masque of pious obedience in order to escape the criticism of men. Thus, the truths of women's experience are often submerged; at the same time, these self-protective strategies are nevertheless subversive to masculine ideology.

Taking 1960 as an approximate point of departure, Ostriker makes it clear that she is not studying individual accomplishment but the collective achievement of a new generation of women poets. This generation can be characterized by a profound commitment to feminist-activist values (Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn); or, at the very least, by feminist consciousness (Louise Glück, June Jordan, Diane Wakowski). In presenting an overview of contemporary women poets, Ostriker is vulnerable to the charge of inadequate aesthetic discrimination (for example, she implies that Adrienne Rich and Judy Grahn are of equal accomplishment). Nevertheless, the study does give us a useful overview of recent women poets in their ethnic, social, and sexual diversity. As Ostriker observes, the "vitality" of this new community of poets "derives from an explosive attempt to overcome [the] mental and moral confinement" of previous generations of women writers (p. 10). In contrast to their predecessors, many contemporary women writers celebrate aesthetic and cultural freedom, especially the freedom from the traditional constraint of having to please men in art and in life.

Chapter I is a brief survey of the colonial and Victorian American women poets that demonstrates the crippling effects of genteel

femininity. The need for women to dissemble frailty in order to be protected, the model of powerlessness, and the confined physical and psychological space assigned to women were almost insurmountable obstacles to artistic achievement. Not until the flapper poets of the 1920s—Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Muriel Rukeyser—was there a concerted effort to break out of the cage of domesticity. These modern women poets often rejected false modesty and wrote candidly about female sexuality as well as about their emotional and social priorities. This boldness of the women writers of the 20s made it possible for their disciples in the 60s and 70s to write openly of socio-economic injustice and racial intolerance as well as gender bias.

In Chapter II Ostriker explores the efforts of poets like Robin Morgan, Marge Piercy, and June Jordan to shatter the silence, and to destroy the bonds of invisibility and muteness that result in women's passivity, marginality, and self-hatred. Part of this process of consciousness raising and speaking out is the effort to give birth to a new self that is not characterized by ontological dualisms. Ostriker argues that in this attempt to transcend oppressive bifurcations, women's poetry strives for an aesthetics of process, or "jouissance," a phrase she borrows from Hélène Cixous.

Chapter III is an analysis of what Ostriker, along with many feminist critics, sees as a feminine aesthetic that is grounded in the body and in natural processes. This organic mode described by writers like Susan Griffin and Estella Lauter suggests a non-hierarchical relationship between mind and body or nature and culture. It is perhaps best exemplified in the work of Adrienne Rich, Maxine Kumin, and Audre Lorde. Chapter IV explores what happens when female anger is transmuted into liberating energy. Contrasting Rich with Plath and Sexton, Ostriker observes that through a feminist analysis of anger, Rich has managed to avoid the entropic effects of internalized rage which paralyzed and ultimately destroyed both Plath and Sexton.

Finally, in chapter V Ostriker defines and explains a "female erotics" which includes the new primacy of the experience of motherhood, the centrality of female biology, and the anarchistic implications of female sexuality. In this chapter, Ostriker also provides a summary of women poets who have not received attention from mainstream critics and readers but who nevertheless have achieved a grass-roots reputation for their candid explorations of female experience. Poets like Mona Van Duyn, Alta, Lucille Clifton, and Judy Grahn all have a large following, and Ostriker includes them in her discussion because so many readers respond to their work.

*Stealing the Language* is written in a lively, readable style, sometimes more personal than scholarly. The strength of this book lies in Ostriker's discussion of numerous poets who might not otherwise receive substantial recognition but whose work nevertheless forms the foundation for a female poetics. Ostriker's study would be considerably strengthened by more extensive historical analysis and by more elaborate discussion of stylistic characteristics of the poetry she cites. If this study runs the risk of being discursive and descriptive, it nevertheless breaks important new ground which others will cultivate for some time to come.

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THE COMPLETE PROSE OF MARIANNE MOORE. Ed. Patricia C. Willis. New York: Viking. 1986. x, 723 pp. \$24.95.

MARIANNE MOORE: *Subversive Modernist*. By Taffy Martin. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press. 1986. xv, 151 pp. \$16.95.

There are many important but unfamiliar things in Patricia C. Willis' finely edited volume of Marianne Moore's *Complete Prose*. One of them is a review of T. S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*, published in the *Dial* in 1921 and never since reprinted, in which Moore begins by examining the connection between "criticism and creation." That connection is intimate and complex: while "criticism naturally deals with creation . . . it is equally true that criticism inspires creation." We can take this statement as referring, first, to Moore's already-longstanding habit of relying on critical works and other "secondary" sources while composing her poems; second, to the increasingly complex critical stance of her own poems; and, finally, to the burgeoning influence of Eliot's criticism on Moore's poetry, which I have discussed at length elsewhere.

Moore found the "definition of criticism" put forward in *The Sacred Wood* "especially rich" not because it was new to her, but because it confirmed and deepened her understanding of "criticism and creation" as simultaneous, complementary activities. That sense of complementarity, which she had gathered from Eliot's earlier essays, helped Moore to resolve the problem of how to respond to other writers which had bedeviled her poetry from the beginning.

The figure of the critic which appears in so many of Moore's early poems embodies this problem dramatically. Before 1920, critics are always getting in the way, blocking innovation and impeding progress like the "immovable critic" in "Poetry" (1919) or the recalcitrant swan