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A Debate on the Relationship between Poetry and Politics in W.H. Auden's *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* and A. Ostriker's *Elegy before the War*

Abstract

W.H. Auden's *In Memoriam W.B. Yeats* and A. Ostriker's *Elegy Before the War* are two pre-war elegies, in which personal and political dimensions are juxtaposed. W.H. Auden's poem portrays the death of a celebrity against the background of the perplexing 1930s when there was evident growing anxiety about Facism and its repercussions. In her long, 7-section work, A. Ostriker not only commemorates her dead mother, she also formulates a very powerfully articulated anti-war manifesto, in which she both denounces American imperialism during the 2nd Iraq war and questions the meaning of war and violence. W.H. Auden's elegy serves as a starting point for a debate A. Ostriker sparks over the role of poetry and its relationship with politics. When analysed together with the author's essays on poetry, their other famous poems and their post-war elegies (*The Shield of Achilles* and *The Eight and Thirteenth*), the two poems taken under examination display that the poets' stance concerning the role of poetry is neither explicit nor consistent. It is interesting also how the debate can be perceived in the context of a dilemma signaled in A. Ostriker's *Poem Sixty Years After Auschwitz* where the poet deliberates over what should be the appropriate shape and tone of poetry after the Holocaust.

Keywords: politics, poetry, relationship, Ostriker, Auden, elegy, debate.

And now I think we are writing the poems before the holocaust,
Is this not true? We are writing these poems with all our soul,
It's our writing, it's our wall.

A. Ostriker, *Poem Sixty Years After Auschwitz*

As the term "elegy" is in the first place defined either as "a poem or song composed especially as a lament for a deceased person" or as a poem "likely to be a personal and private expression of grief" (<http://www.answers.com/topic/elegy>), W.H. Auden's *In Memory of W.B.*

Yeats and A. Ostriker's *Elegy before the War*, the two pre-war elegies that are to be taken under examination in this essay, seem to transgress the boundaries of the above quoted definitions. Personal and intimate as they may be perceived, the poems are also imbued with politics, which cannot be accidental, because both poets insist on the necessity of "both political and psychological healing" (Hoggart 1984, p. 95). When it comes to W.H. Auden, most of his finest 1930s works, suffice it to mention *Spain 1937*, *In Memory of Sigmund Freud* and *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, reflect more personal experiences of human beings thrown into the chaos of pre-war Europe. A. Ostriker, who in her most recent book *Dancing at the Devil's Party* dwells specifically on the relation between art and politics, highlights, on the one hand, "the importance of a lively response to the political as to any other aspect of a poem" (Ostriker 2000, p. 5), but on the other, makes it clear that "any poetry that is merely political – and nothing else – is shallow poetry" (Ostriker 2000, p. 8). However, convergent as regards the importance of combining these two discussed dimensions, in the case of the significance of poetry and its impact upon society, the poets' views appear to diverge. While in his introduction to *The Poet's Tongue*, W.H. Auden, by arguing that "poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil" (O'Neill 2007, p. 105) opts for poetry which offers people possible choices, A. Ostriker, suggesting that "from time to time... poetry changes the world" (Ostriker 2000, p. 16) and strongly believing that "neither poet nor reader can occupy a neutral literary space" (Frost, Hogue 2006, p. 157), adopts a much more radical stance and she even goes so far as to disagree with W.H. Auden's assertion that "poetry makes nothing happen", the statement to which she refers in one of her essays. All the same, as apparent in *Elegy before the War*, even A. Ostriker finds herself faced with doubts about the real power of poetry. Her poem, which, owing to numerous deliberate similarities, is an explicit response to *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, forms together with W.H. Auden's work a dialogue on the "miscegenation" of poetry and politics.

What connects the two poems most strongly is that in both works the dignified tradition of the elegy is denied at first glance by the structure of the texts which, instead of being organized into conventional elegiac couplets, fall into sections containing stanzas of more or less regular versification. A. Ostriker's *Elegy before the War* is divided into seven sections, with the first and the last ones, a commemoration of the poet's dead mother, shaping the frame of the poem. Although a three-line pattern seems to dominate within the text, one may also notice quite a frequent emergence of lines which disrupt the regular structure of the work. Take, for instance, the second stanza in the second section which, by displaying a

gradual diminution, a consistent erasure of the words, aptly reflects the process of dying. Another example of the inconsistency of the delineation can be observed in the fourth section, where, by employing AA-BB rhymes, A. Ostriker alludes to the last section of W.H. Auden's elegy. What also stands out in the text structure are single, isolated lines which, just like in the third section, serve either as introductory ("Now that it is spring I open the window at night") or concluding ("Making music of that") statements. With regard to the formal organization of W.H. Auden's work, it becomes evident that the poet attempts, through the use of different types of poems in each section, to reflect different phases of W.B. Yeats' poetry. Tracing the rhythmic patterns, one may arrive at the conclusion that while the first section, having no rhymes and being blank verse, refers to W.B. Yeats' initial poetical endeavours, the subsequent sections – the second one with near rhyme and the third one with fully-fledged rhyme, portray, accordingly, the maturation and pinnacle of the poet's style.

Focusing first on a more personal dimension of the poems, it can be noticed that both poets, while portraying the dead, follow more or less the same scheme of description, first concentrating on the depiction of the process of passing away and then, through flashbacks, providing an image of the dead at the time when they were still alive.

Interestingly, only when the second section ensues does A. Ostriker, with a striking confession that her "mother is dead two weeks", reveal that her elegy is dedicated to her mother. Earlier, in the preceding sections, she claims she cannot defy the impression that the image of her dead mother does not accord with the true portrait she has. Instead of seeing a "mad [woman], ...spilling lava", she notices "her eyes... compelling as doe's eyes". Instead of listening to a woman "correcting/ People's grammar/ A week before", she hears only an unbearable silence which turns out to be her mother's response to the daughter's affection. It is also essential to point to the fact that in her description of the death, A. Ostriker pays much attention to her mother's bodily parts, a characteristic that is assigned especially and specifically to Jewish poetry¹. For example, "The face and hands outside the cotton quilt/ Soft, horrible, fine" or "the jaw tightened" explicitly signify defenselessness, vulnerability and helplessness, whereas the line "How light abandoned the hopeful eyes" could be rendered as the woman's inability to escape death. By contrast, in the last section, the mother, still alive, is described not only as strong and energetic, but also, and this comes in stark contrast to the idealized image presented in the first section, as unpredictable, full of rage and

¹ For example, many physical details in the work of I. Rosenberg.

constantly disgruntled at the world and reality that did not live up to her expectations about “The promised land” she had hoped to find in America.

In like manner W.H. Auden, claiming, probably to the bafflement of his contemporaries, that W.B. Yeats is in fact “silly like us”, presents the great poet in a different light, which results in a partial disenchantment both of a traditionally glorified figure and of a magical aura around him. Writing that W.B. Yeats, just like all other people at the time, was exposed to confining conventions established by “The parish of rich women” and maintaining that he also had to deal with “physical decay”, himself and “Mad Ireland”, W.H. Auden partly introduces his anti-heroic theme which, in a nutshell, constitutes an anti-romantic statement that great deeds are not performed by geniuses, but by otherwise ordinary individuals. Moreover, to a degree evoking the motif of an isolated suffering from his *Musee des Beaux Arts*, W.H. Auden described W.B. Yeats’ last hours of existence as “an afternoon of nurses and rumours”, as opposed to the wolves and the peasant river, symbolizing either nature or an embodiment of poetry, which are “far from [W.B. Yeats] illness”. As regards the description of the process of dying, W.H. Auden makes an interesting use of urban metaphors, comparing W.B. Yeats’ revolting body to “the provinces”, “the squares” and finally, “the suburbs” which “silence invaded”. However devoid of the pompous deification, the poem unequivocally indicates that his being “emptied of poetry” notwithstanding, W.B. Yeats is both to remain “the Irish vessel” and to “become his admirers”.

As W.H. Auden and A. Ostriker are equally engaged both with *the personal* and *the political*, the personal dimension in their elegies is either presented against the historical background (in W.H. Auden’s work) or is overshadowed by an image of war atrocities (in A. Ostriker’s work). Thereby, in the examined poems, the feeling of personal loss and grief mingles with an air of uncertainty and perplexity about war.

What emanates from W.H. Auden’s elegy is evidently a growing anxiety about Facism and its repercussions. The sombre tone of the whole poem manifests itself in the use of words and phrases, such as “the dead of winter”, “a dark cold day”, “frozen”, “deserted”, “dark” and “evaporated”, which all have explicitly negative connotations. Furthermore, the following sequence is repeated twice: “What instruments we have agree/ The day of his death was a dark cold day”, which illustrates the upsetting circumstances of W.B. Yeats’ death. Lastly, inserting the lines about “All the dogs of Europe [that] bark,/ And the living nations [that] wait”, W.H. Auden makes a stark remark about the 1930s Europe pervaded by an air of mutual hatred and suspicion.

Not until A. Ostriker juxtaposes the fact that they (A. Ostriker and her family) “burned her (mother) and flew to Arizona” with the equally crucial fact that “the tanks roamed Ramallah and Nabulus” is a theme of the title war introduced, or – to be more precise – the war between Israel and Palestine². Even though only imagining it, she draws a plausible scenario of “The tanks”, “the missiles” and “Greedy teeth smile at the microphone”, set in the desert scenery, the landscape which may be evocative of the one depicted in K. Douglas’s famous *Cairo Jag* or *Desert Landscape*. Compassionate as A. Ostriker is, she realizes that it is mainly innocent civilians, now at the mercy of a ruthless foreign army, that are in peril: “The bus explodes,/ The shelled house collapses over the grandmother/ And the gasping family”.

As A. Ostriker’s work provides a multidimensional political viewpoint, one may read *Elegy before the War* as a formulation of a very powerfully articulated anti-war manifesto. Not only does the poet denounce the war in Palestine, she also, finding no justification for employing violence as the means of pressure, casts aspersions on American imperialism. Pondering the possible reasons for Israel’s onslaught on Palestine, A. Ostriker, half-serious, half-sarcastic, concludes that (though perpetrators would certainly refute it) the war results from several factors, among them greed (“They know where the oil is. They have plans, big plans”), “testosterone explosions” and the need for retaliation (“we do this/ To you because/ You did it to us first”). She then goes on to belittle the value of theories, according to which “the impulse to destroy” must be either ingrained in the genes (“It is simply a human characteristic/ It has climbed the corporate ladder of DNA”) or is, as those who still interpret everything on the basis of Freudian theory, sexually conditioned.

As regards American imperialism, it is interesting how America, which comes in for A. Ostriker’s scathing criticism throughout the fifth section, is contrasted to the European countries. To some, such a juxtaposition might arouse associations with H. James’s international theme, according to which it could be construed that in the poem America, deliberately called *she* instead of the more neutral *it*, appears, with “her morale... still too high” and “no conscience” at all, to be a more expansive version of D. Miller, whereas the French and the Italians, with their “ineffective soldiers”, and a Czech who “will fight to the last/ Drop of ink” bear a resemblance to the stable, reasonable and cynical F. Winterbourne. A. Ostriker’s backlash against her countrymen’s cruelty and reluctance is also expressed in the second section below the asterisks, where, elucidating on the seductive power of war, she explicates why people exult in violence depicted in mass media: “They taste good, I like

² Even though the poet directly refers to the Israelete war, the war in question is the second Iraq war, begun in March 2003.

them. You like them. They are their own/ Best advertisement. We like to shudder at them. We like to blame". That she may connect the power of war with the activity of Satan is implied by the following line in the fifth section: "violence that stunts,/ stints, stains, struts, standardizes, brutally strangles/ The intelligence". Undoubtedly, the accumulation of "st" sounds is aimed at evoking an image of a tempting, hissing snake. Criticising war and favouring pacifism, A. Ostriker opts both for "the kind of politics [that] is totally continuous with ethics"³ and for the importance of cultivating "the loving-kindness", the term derived from Buddhist philosophy, denoting a trans-social compassion.

On the contrary, despite being written in the socially and politically unstable 1930s, W.H. Auden's *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, unlike A. Ostriker's work, is not much concerned with politics. Only when analysed together with *Spain 1937* and *In Memory of Sigmund Freud* does it provide some idea about W.H. Auden's general outlook on war. Through an analysis of the three above mentioned poems, one may arrive at the conclusion that the poet's attitude to violence is not consistent. While in the elegies, W.H. Auden, by expressing his concern about "intellectual disgrace [that] stares from every human face" and by protesting against "the Generalised Life" (*In Memory of Sigmund Freud*) which might have resulted in the loss of individual identity, finds himself in the role of a moral authority, in *Spain 1937*, undoubtedly written under the influence of a short-lasting infatuation with Marxism, he calls for an active participation in the war, even though it could entail "the suicide pact, the romantic Death" (*Spain 1937*). All the same, it is essential to mention that W.H. Auden, after losing his faith in the ideology that pushed him to fight, disowned his fine propaganda piece.

Having briefly discussed the poets' approach to politics, it is now crucial to examine how W.H. Auden and A. Ostriker see the role of poetry and a poet in shaping political awareness of a society. As W.H. Auden argues in one of his essays, "All that the poet can do is warn" (Hoggart 1984, p. 97). In contrast, A. Ostriker, who has reiterated several times the fundamental position of poetry, strongly believes in "A voice that is at once the poet's voice and the voice of a time, a nation, a gender" (Ostriker 2000, p. 6). Yet, it seems that in the light of the examined poems, the poets' concepts, and in particular A. Ostriker's idea of the poet as a guide, needs to be reformulated.

It goes without saying that it is his famous statement that "poetry makes nothing happen" on which W.H. Auden's *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* hinges. Due to its unique and ambiguous grammatical construction, the phrase can be read in two ways, either as an

³ A number of her poems realise such a fusion, among them *Daffodils* and *The window at the moment of flame*.

assertion that poetry has an ability to empower, comfort and force to think or as an assumption that poetry only exists on its own and influences nothing in the political/material world. Paradoxically, as poetry has the capacity both to survive, just like D. Shostakovich's music in A. Ostriker's *The Eighth and Thirteenth*, "A way of happening" and, in an appropriate moment, to "be scattered among a hundred cities/ And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections", the two interpretations do not necessarily have to exclude each other. Assuming that "the death of the poet was kept from his poems", the statement which is reminiscent of Horace's *non omnis moriar* phrase, W.H. Auden may also equivocally imply that now W.B. Yeats' poetry, freed from the confinements of the body, has become, with its "unconstraining voice", more effectual. Even though he clearly appoints the poet to "follow... follow right", it must be, however, specifically poetry, namely W.B. Yeats' creation that is to heal ("With the farming of a verse/ Make a vineyard of the curse") and restore ("In the deserts of the heart/ Let the healing fountain start") hope in people.

As far as A. Ostriker is concerned, it comes as a surprise that in her *Elegy before the War* she seems to be losing to some extent her implicit faith in poetry, becoming skeptical about its real power. Yearning for a relief from the unbearable reality and finding out that the poetry of the old masters has ceased to lift her spirits, she begins, under the pretence that they are not in a position to change anything, to discredit her gurus who inspired her in the past. In the second section of the poem, she first poses a number of rhetorical questions, asking fervently "Where is Shelley when we need him?", "where is William Blake, burning/ Bright as the tiger", "where is Walt Whitman" and "where is Ginsberg, genius of kindness?". In addition, in the fourth section, she directly refers to the last section of W.H. Auden's *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* and sarcastically, as if being certain about her superior knowledge, asks the poet whether he is still "attempting to rejoice" and whether he is "happy that all he had was a voice". Finally, A. Ostriker crowns her outbreak of sarcasm with the statement that W. Whitman and W. Blake, as "celebrants of war equally with peace", "Descendants of Homer" and men, no longer can play the role of moralists. Nor can the other poets who, in spite of soaking their poetries with universal and timeless ideas, have no significant effect upon contemporary societies. Nonetheless, A. Ostriker still sees the light of hope at the end of the tunnel when she implores "awesome ones", meaning the formerly criticized poets, to "lift [themselves] off the page" and "to blow through us like a hot desert wind", that is – to restore hope. It is, however, not clear why A. Ostriker advocates people's transformation from saxophones and trumpets, that is to say, rather neutral musical instruments, into drums, namely an attribute of war. Recapitulating her deliberations over the significance of poetry, in

the sixth section, she flatters “the watercolorists/ Who do normal mediocre meadows and lakes”, making an allusion that art, as an ineffective tool, should be relegated, just like in the work of the Lake Poets, to an affirmation of nature.

The main conclusion that may be made after the examination of both poems is that while W.H. Auden, in his *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, highlights (knowing that it can even elude death) the importance of poetry in the political discourse, A. Ostriker, being increasingly impatient with its ineffective nature, rejects poetry, suggesting, for example, by begging “her mother [to] come back sometime” or by confessing (in the third section of her elegy) that she could “make music” of an everyday scene she witnesses, that a source of moral and mental relief is to be found in other people. To put it crudely, when juxtaposed, the two works demonstrate an opposition of a choice between abstraction (poetry) and physicality (“poetry” personified; people). In this context, it is interesting to observe how entirely different approaches, as compared with the discussed pre-war elegies, are presented in the poets’ post-war elegies, namely W.H. Auden’s *The Shield of Achilles* and A. Ostriker’s *The Eighth and Thirteenth*. Even though from both poems an anti-war air radiates, it is now A. Ostriker who, referring to D. Shostakovich’s symphonies, strongly asserts that “art destroys silence, that is serves as a reminder to humanity”, whereas W.H. Auden, now more skeptical, by making his shield, symbolizing both art and war, the central motif in the poem, may imply that war and violence are inherently human and that art cannot do anything to prevent it.

In the context of the discussion of the relation between art and politics, the question A. Ostriker asks in the last stanza (quoted at the beginning of the essay) of her *Poem Sixty Years after Auschwitz* appears to be especially pertinent. Undoubtedly, it points to the timeless dilemma whether poetry should be private, public or a mixture of both. Is the role of poetry to prevent humanity from “the holocaust” or is its aim to build a “wall”, a safe place one could always retreat to?

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