

## Book Review

Osherow, Jacqueline. *Dead Men's Praise*. New York: Grove Press, 1999.

The title of Jacqueline Osherow's fourth collection of poetry, *Dead Men's Praise*, is derived from the famous verse in Psalm 115 ("Dead Men Don't Praise God"), one of the Psalms of David recited in the Hallel Prayers on Jewish holidays. Osherow, who is the director of creative writing at the University of Utah, is a Jewish-American poet for whom "Jewish" is more than just an ethnic label. She is well versed in both the Hebrew language and liturgy, as well as Jewish history, and draws upon her extensive knowledge in this new volume of her poetry. Osherow, who may be best known for her poems about the Holocaust "Conversations with Survivors" and "My Cousin Abe, Paul Antschel and Paul Celan," turns her attention to a wide array of subjects in this new collection.

The volume is divided into four sections and ranges in subject matter from a sequence of "Scattered Psalms" in which the poet talks back to King David about the meanings of the Psalms, to long poems written in elaborate *terza rima*, which register the poet's impressions of Italian Renaissance paintings, to shorter lyrics written on a variety of occasions, including one entitled "Yom Kippur Sonnet, with a Line from Lamentations" and another entitled "Site of the Jewish Cemetery, Raciaz, Poland." The reader will be impressed both with the range of Osherow's interests and her mastery of a variety of poetic forms. Osherow is also a leading member of a younger generation of Jewish women writers who are concerned with issues of Jewish female identity in their work.

The volume begins with the poem "*Sc'vil Schreiben* a Poem auf Yiddish," or "I want to write a poem in Yiddish." This may seem like an odd longing for a post-Holocaust poet, born in Philadelphia in 1955 long after Yiddish reached its apex as a literary and spoken language. Osherow, however, is an avid reader of Yiddish poetry and includes references to many Yiddish poets in her volume, most prominently Perets Markish and Yakov Glatstein. In the poem, which opens the volume, she indulges in hyperbole, imagining writing a Yiddish poem that is so Yiddish "it would not be possible to translate." She declares:

Even Yiddish doesn't have a word  
for the greatness of my Yiddish poem,  
a poem so exquisite that if Dante could rise from the dead  
he would have to rend his clothes in mourning.

Osherow's posturing about the greatness of her Yiddish poem, written in a language she confesses she does not know how to speak, is her way of registering, ironically, her love and affection for a language and a poetry that has been all but lost.

In a later poem in section II of the volume, "A Footnote for Perets Markish," Osherow pays tribute to a Russian Yiddish poet who received the prestigious Lenin Prize in 1939 but who was shot in Lubyanka Prison in 1952 by the Stalinist regime. Osherow stumbled upon Markish in

reading a diary entry by Anna Akhmatova, where she describes Markish as someone who visited Osip Mandelstam's wife after the great Russian poet was seized by local authorities. In this long poem Osherow reflects on both the neglect of Markish's work and her envy of his fluency in Yiddish. She asks in her inimitable conversational style:

Would you believe me, Perets, if I said I'm jealous.  
It's my mother tongue, or should be, too  
And the only one that might offer any solace

For how this vicious century has treated you,  
As if there were any solace to be had . . .

Much of this poem accounts for the circumstances of this relatively unknown Yiddish poet's life and attempts to rescue him and his lines of poetry from oblivion. In a sense, the poem is Osherow's "footnote" to Perets Markish, because the reference in the diary omitted any explanation of who he was, simply listing other figures that visited Mandelstam's house. In her poem Osherow rescues Markish from an ignominious fate, "lying in that ditch" along with other Stalinist victims.

In "New Tanager / New Song," another striking poem in the second section of the volume, Osherow finds a measure of personal solace in the natural world. This poem, like so many in this collection, takes as an epigraph a line from one of the Psalms: "Sing God a new song, because He's done wondrous things." The poem is a meditation on the significance of the poet sighting a Western Tanager and is the cause for her to muse on her childhood affection for birds, an interest the poet wants to share with her three daughters.

Actually, it's my middle one who most likes birds.  
Penguins are her area of expertise  
But given the great distance to the Antarctic  
She's willing to help me scan local backyards.

Here we see Osherow in one of her characteristic poses, sharing her enthusiasm for the mysteries of creation with her children. Later, in the "Scattered Psalms" sequence, she will try to explain to one of her daughters how the same God both makes "darkness his Concealment" and illuminates the darkness. In this poem it is the Western Tanager which illuminates the poet's world, and she uses the sighting of it to reflect on what it means to sing a new song. In the process, she both celebrates the physical beauty of the bird and its evolutionary genius.

Several of the other poems in section two of the volume reflect Osherow's interest in form and her willingness to experiment with traditional forms. In such poems as "Lean Sonnet," "Ghazal: Comet," and "Villanelle from a Sentence in a Poet's Brief Biography," she demonstrates her versatility in a variety of poetic forms. One such poem is "Yom Kippur Sonnet, with a Line from Lamentations." In this fine confessional poem, the poet reflects on her own shortcomings. Although she uses the sonnet form as a way to "deflect her repentance," nevertheless, it proves to be a fitting form for the poet's stirring self-examination and the shortcomings we all have.

Can a person atone for pure bewilderment  
For hyperbole for being wrong  
In a thousand categorical opinions  
For never opening her mouth, except too soon  
For ignoring all week long, the waning moon  
Retreating from its haunt above the local canyons,  
Signaling her season to repent,  
Then deflecting her repentance with a song  
Because the rest is just too difficult to face  
What we are I mean in all its meagerness  
The way we stint on any modicum of kindness  
What we allow ourselves what we don't learn  
How each lapsed, unchanging year resigns us  
Return us, Lord, to you, and we'll return.

The ending of this poem with a line from Lamentations is typical of the way Osherow incorporates Scripture in her own poetry and signals her as a contemporary midrashist. For classical Jewish Midrash is often composed out of Biblical verses, even as they serve as commentary on those verses. Here Osherow inserts a very famous line from Lamentations to conclude and comment upon her own lament and repentance.

The midrashic impulse is even stronger in the third section of her collection, entitled "Scattered Psalms." Gerald Bruns in his notable essay "Midrash and Allegory" explains that "the term midrash derives from *drash*, meaning 'to study,' 'to search,' 'to investigate,' 'to inquire': it means to go in pursuit of." This is, in fact, what Osherow does in her "Scattered Psalms" sequence. She begins usually each one with two epigraphs, verses taken from the Psalms of David and then will shake loose whatever meaning she can from such verses in her own new "psalm." Her sequence works as a contemporary Midrash, both an interpretation and a textual re-creation of the Biblical Psalms.

One of the most moving in Osherow's sequence is number eleven, "Dead Men's Praise." It begins with a reference to Yakov Glatstein, who already used a reference to the verse in Psalm 115 (The dead don't praise God, / or the ones who go down to silence) in a collection of Yiddish poems entitled *Radiant Jews*, published in 1946. Osherow reflects that in 1946, "I don't blame him if he thought / all praise had ended." She wonders if it is "heartless" only fifty years later "to think again the praise has just begun." Her poem meditates on the beauty of the Hebrew word hallelujah, "a word composed of holy signs/ that could actually spell God's name," as well as the legend which, explains that angels stole the original Hebrew version of the Akadmut, a liturgical poem read on Shavuot. The author, Rabbi Meir ben Yitzhak, had to resort to Aramaic. The ending of Osherow's Scattered Psalm XI (Dead Men's Praise) is a stirring reminder that the unborn generations of the Holocaust, "permutations of permutations/ of permutations of permutations / of pairs of double helixes," will never get to hear, let alone sing, hallelujah.

The concluding section of her volume is composed of one long poem entitled "One Last Terza Rima/Italian Train." The ostensible occasion for this poem is a train ride the poet takes between

Fumicino and Rome. The reader learns it was in Italy where Osherow first began to write, and that might explain her being enamored of *terza rima*, the tercet stanza of Dante's Divine Comedy. Although *terza rima* is quite rare in English poetry, Osherow uses it to good end to reflect on a wide array of subjects in this concluding poem. Her major concern here is aesthetics, and the poet comments on the work of a number of painters whose work she has seen in Washington D.C. and in Italy. She makes telling observations of paintings by Derain, Vermeer, Van Eyck, and Giotto, as well as revealing remarks about her own vocation as a poet ("I like this life / Of waking in the morning to check the poem // I worked on the day before for signs of life"). She also comments on her selection of *terza rima* to record both the Italian landscape and her aesthetic preoccupations:

It's a kind of self-delusion, terza rima,  
As if all I need is one more rhyming word,  
And I'll possess this changeless panorama . . .

Self-delusion or not, Osherow offers the reader a rich world of work that encompasses a wide range of interests. She is first and foremost, however, a poet of Jewish experience and Jewish history. With this fourth collection, she has further established her voice and reputation as a leading poet in the current Jewish Literary Revival.

#### Notes

Bruns, Gerald. "Midrash and Allegory." In *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, 625-646. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

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