

THE SIGH PRESS

AMPERSAND INTERVIEW 8



We are very excited to have had a chance to interview internationally acclaimed poet Alicia Ostriker for our eighth Ampersand. Winner of the William Carlos Williams Award, the Paterson Award, the Jewish National Book Award, the San Francisco State Poetry Center Award, and twice a finalist for the National Book Award, Ostriker visited Florence in June 2017 where she shared her work in a reading with fellow poet Elisa Biagini (TSP Issues 1, 13 & Ampersand Interview 5).

In the upcoming Spring issue of the journal, you can look forward to reading unpublished poems by Ostriker.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris, Editors



Author of numerous poetry collections as well as a critical writer, Alicia Suskin Ostriker received the William Carlos Williams Award for *The Imaginary Lover* (1986), the Paterson Award and the San Francisco State Poetry Center Award for *The Crack in Everything* (1996), the Jewish National Book Award for *The Book of Seventy* (2009), and she was twice a finalist for the National Book Award. Her most recent collection is *Waiting for the Light* (2017). She has received fellowships and awards from, among others, the NEA, the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations, and the Poetry Society of America. Ostriker is professor emerita of English at Rutgers University.

“When I give poetry readings, my hope is to make people in my audience laugh and cry...As an American poet I see myself in the line of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg, those great enablers of the inclusive democratic impulse, the corollary of which is formal openness.” (Poetry Foundation)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alicia-ostriker>

<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~ostriker/home.htm>



TSP: What book (not written by you) comes closest to capturing something about you? What is this aspect?

AO: Two books, one old, one new: Whitman's "Song of Myself," read in adolescence, seemed to me to speak my own thoughts, my own concealed energy, my own Spirit enclosed in a Body of flesh I cherished—just as Whitman intended. Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, read when I was a young mother, captured my interior rage, self-hate, suicidal fantasies. Do I contradict myself? Very well, then...

TSP: What is the biggest personal obstacle you must overcome in order to write?

AO: Right now, the biggest personal obstacle is the absence of something significant to say. See the poems in the next issue of *The Sigh Press*.

TSP: With the world the way it is and the innumerable distractions in daily life, how do you find the time and dedication to pursue something as ephemeral as an idea?

AO: When I *do* have an idea, I am obsessed with it, and then it is easy to push other things aside, and attempt to put that idea into the right words, in the right order.

TSP: "The everyday" is clearly a protagonist (or catalyst) in your work. Is this a way into writing for you? Can you tell us a little bit about the process that takes you from the mundane towards the transcendent?

AO: Transcendence doesn't interest me. It is immanence that I seek—the deep spirit within ourselves, and within the material world. Though the spirit perhaps "cometh from afar," as Wordsworth says, I find it within. "Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me," as Lawrence says. Or to descend into the self as into a well.

TSP: What is something few people know about you?

AO: How insecure I am, beneath a fairly confident-appearing exterior. But perhaps this is true of all artists?

TSP: It has been said that artists pursue one question in different ways throughout their work. Would you say this is true of your writing? If so, what is your question?

AO: I guess I wouldn't say that. Unless the question is simply: how can I make this particular thing I am writing, whether it is prose or poetry, more true, more perfect, more strong, more alive?

TSP "...I feel/ rather acutely alive but I need a thing of beauty..."

(Waiting for the Light)

What does beauty (in art, in writing) mean to you?

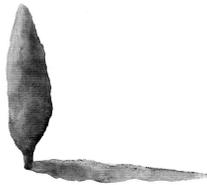
AO: Oh what a good question. I wish I could answer it. I can only say that beauty makes me keenly happy when I encounter it.

TSP: Tell us something that recently struck your funny bone.

AO: A New Yorker cartoon in which the President and Paul Ryan are gazing into a baby carriage and Ryan is saying "Passing the tax bill was as easy as taking health care away from a baby."

TSP: If you could shout something from a mountain top, what would it be?

AO: "Peace on earth" is one possibility.



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