

Nocturnal Remarks Regarding Selected Poems of Rochelle Owens: Eros Speaks from Northwest of Basra



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Although poets and poetry editors of your time bandy “erotic poetry” about as if poetry readers recognize it as a charming consumable like personal lubricant, I speak this evening with an awareness that in the 21st century as few comprehend and appreciate erotic poetry as understand the identity of Eros.

I come to praise one of your most neglected contemporary poets of deep eroticism. And trace her lineage – we’re only considering poetry in flavors of English since I can’t trust your working knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin - in a way she herself might question – but Eros should be trusted more than the poet in this case because genius tho she is, she still comes utterly under my spell.

Surely Rochelle Owens, like the best of the experimental writers of her generation coming of age in the 1960s, must have read Gertrude Stein carefully, particularly Stein’s major Eros-primers: “Lifting Belly” and “Pink Melon Joy.” Owens gets inside the quivering flesh-and-spirit rhythms Stein musically celebrates: sensual slippery sibilants, wagging tongue fluttery vowels, whole buttery pelvic melt enacted in synapse-zapping lines.

And in Owens poems like “I am Very Excited. It’s July the

3rd and I Am on a Destroyer” and “Lesson in Songmaking, Song of Kim,” playful/strutting erotic urgency becomes shadowed by thieving Death, moving into an archetypal Eros/Thanatos tango swirl. Where Gertrude Stein feared to step (and bend), Owens advances, donning the masks of “wild-man” and “wild-woman” borrowed from Ethnopoetics, with wry Yeatsian sagacity.

And while I’m reluctant to talk of Owens’ mastery in purely literary terms, surely along with Stein’s influence there is Louis Zukofsky’s, his Catullus transformations. Not a huge stretch of undergarment elastic to suggest that Zukofskian pidgin-comic-homophonically-bumptous ur-English transforms comic hesitations during lovemaking into stand-up comedic poetry. In Owens that Zuked-boxed sound comes out like this in “Say Old English Wishe Me”:

th th
twease my paws. My voice her tits
were loafš of bread just dadabeeyah

I, Eros, stammer, fucking or not, I do. Owens gets the sublime humor of Eros stammering, her contemporaries taking me entirely too seriously in the worst way-cooly ironic. Stammer also a consequence of pleasure-pain transits and transformations so quick as would make Ovid’s shade blush.

And finally among her influences, let me single out Jack Spicer who instructs forcefully, exhorting Rochelle Owens to fulfill her career as poet by heeding his call in the opening of his “Poem for Ramparts”: “Get those words out of your mouth and into your heart.”

In your time when poetry is so reduced to games of intellectual recreation underwritten by English departments in dispirited virtual factories of “higher education,” Spicer’s marching orders remain as necessary, and as difficult to follow as ever. Owens decades ago refused any intellectually flyweight academic con-game because she was, and is, too smitten in her life and work by passional realities (Robert Duncan’s Eros-electrifying phrase) tugging at her soul demanding poetic and dramatic expression.

These passional realities in a significant portion of Owens’ poetry happen in an unlikely location: in a mirthfully imaginary

Mediterranean/Middle East, ornately seductive as Scheherazade, and deliciously campy and kitschy – Eros in drag, Sample these lines from Owens’ “J.S. Bach’s Blisters”:

why can't i have the shiksa
 wailed the queen of sheba why
 must it be the descendent of
 haile selassie & the original queen

And from “The Smell of Apples”:

the smell of apples
 by the negev
 the color of a gasp
 is the color of apple
 the rusted nail
 behind black apples
 breast-rib & nose rings
 drool of Samuel
 evil archangel

There’s an ideal soundtrack for reading the Owens poems dancing across this terrain: “The Sheik of Araby” by Fats Waller, and two jazzy works by Raymond Scott (whose music gained fame through becoming the musical accompaniment for the golden age of Warner Brothers cartoons): “Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals” and “Ali Baba Goes to Town.”

As Eros, how can I not adore cartoony music, cartoons where libidinous anatomy in ferocious jazz swing stretches to gigantic proportions or is wonderlandedly miniaturized? And Owens is so close to the impulses of jazz and cartoon, all integral to my identity, queen of such coyly convulsive violence in such animated short takes of buggy/Bugsy animal selves diving into freeze-frame abyss.

And more: Owens is that rare poet who knows how to write poems critically examining other arts in depth. Never have the erotic tensions birthing Picasso’s cubist period been as joyfully called-forth as in her “Museum Curator in a Cube,” or the shimmering transparent erotic play of glass art been illuminated as in “Never Having Seen a Wave.”

Daylight is arriving. Get back to your writing. See if your

words tumbling out of your too-bright heads can incubate in your hearts ripe for my theft. See if you can locate your poems in some Ur that while being northwest of Basra on a map is also where these Rochelle Owens poems live.

And listen for Fats Waller there too. His knowing “urs” between verses in those Rhythm King recordings between the grooves of which I spin nightly.

Rochelle Owens, *Out of Ur: New & Selected Poems 1961-2012* (Shearsman Books, 2013)