Review of *Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles* by Panthea Reid

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The large book by Panthea Reid (449 pages, 16 chapters, a prologue, epilogue, and three appendices) tracks Tillie Olsen’s long life (1912–2007) step by step, beginning from the Jewish-Russian origins of both her maternal and paternal families, up to her death on January 1, 2007.

The book could have been a useful addition to Olsen scholarship, if not for the biographer’s insistent efforts to destroy the image of a writer and a woman who was committed so extensively to unhinging the political, social, and cultural stereotypes built up to contain the action of women in America and elsewhere.

In the name of the truth, which a biographer should always pursue (though in this book many interpretations and comments are not supported by evidence), the detailed quoting of sources and testimony produced to solve the presumed riddle of Tillie Olsen aims to prove Reid’s thesis: all that we know about Olsen (including what she explained, sustained, confessed in many interviews) is derogated or put forward as untrue. Unfortunately, this seems the only reason behind the publication of Reid’s book, for, on one hand it shows the author’s limited understanding of the history Olsen was writing about, and on the other it displays a peculiar insensitivity to the circumstances in which she was attempting to write.

The negative comments on the American Communist Party seem more influenced by Reid’s political opinions than by the pursuit of historical truth. They do not take into consideration either the serious difficulties created by the Stalinist directives, in America as well as in Europe, within the political groups in the Soviet orbit, or the good faith of the many American (and European) affiliates. Olsen never justified Stalin’s purges, atrocities, and expansionism; on the contrary, she left the Party in strong disagreement with a leadership that enforced those repressive measures.

Overall, it seems that Reid intends to debunk the icon that the feminist movement made of Olsen in the sixties and seventies. She does not even try to consider the possibility (among others) that Olsen could have been aware of this, while accepting it as a price to pay in the name of a good cause: a stronger light on women’s issues, and more visibility for the work of women. Paradoxically, Panthea Reid herself has received benefits from this woman’s “myth”; as the book’s acknowledgments establish, Olsen “willingly endured [Reid’s] visits, letters, and phone calls and responded eagerly to [her] queries,” allowing Reid to construct her research project on the many riddles of “Tillie-the-Sphinx.”

Olsen’s egocentric personality, a trait that often characterizes writers and artists; her determination and lack of indulgence even toward herself; and her sense of frustration over not having produced as much as she could have cannot tarnish her unquestioned and unquestionable talent as a writer, or diminish the relevant contribution she made to the short story genre. Also, it is worth highlighting the vital impulse that women’s writing received through Olsen’s untiring commitment in urging readers and scholars to read, study, and teach texts written by well-known women writers as well as those who were at the beginning of their careers, while recommending the reprinting of
women writers who had disappeared from publishers' catalogues (such as Rebecca Harding Davis and Agnes Smedley).

I met Tillie Olsen when she was ninety, just shortly before Alzheimer's assailed her and progressively brought to an end her earthly journey in 2007. I never experienced the hardness, obstinacy, inclination to manipulate truth, disloyalty, arrogance, or lack of a sense of family that throughout the book Reid attributes to Olsen in every phase of her life. Moreover, I believe the truth can be laid out without indulging in moral judgment, especially regarding perplexing personal choices.

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