BOOK REVIEW: Margot Adler's *Heretic's Heart*

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Most *Pomegranate* readers know Margot Adler as the author of the definitive journalistic study of the American Pagan movement, *Drawing Down the Moon,* published in 1979 with a revised edition released later. Some hear her voice now and then as a National Public Radio network reporter. But the story Adler tells in *Heretic's Heart* (a title she acknowledges came from Catherine Madsen's song of the same name) is of her life before she found the Craft, when she was a girl growing up in an "atheist, semi-Marxist, non-Jewish, Jewish home" — a "red-diaper baby," to use the old Cold War term. A psychoanalyst like her famous grandfather, Alfred Adler (whom she never met), might make something of Margot Adler's feeling of growing up 'separate'. But her long pilgrimage to the Craft was not a simple case of taking a minority religious path because she felt she was 'different'. Her place in the Craft came only after years of attempting to reconcile her desire to fight social exploitation with a long, less-expressed desire for ecstasy and mystery.

Margot Adler's story is set in the middle of that over-summarized decade, the 1960s. One advantage to reading it is to get past the image of antiwar protests, burning inner-city neighborhoods, and LSD and to hear two people's stories: hers and that of the American soldier who became her pen pal, confidant, and briefly lover.

"Today," she writes, "we tend to lump many aspects of the sixties together — rock music, politics, clothing styles, sex and drugs — but a continuing battle between the 'hippies', on the one side, and the 'politicos' on the other, defined much of the era." For Margot Adler, the "sixties" took off when she entered the University of California at Berkeley in 1964, a pivotal year in that institution's history. "Living in New York City, I looked upon Berkeley as so many Americans have looked throughout history upon the West — as an escape from everything that defined my past. For me, Berkeley was not only an excellent school, and a place with a rich history of student activism; going to Berkeley meant fleeing New York, my parents, the memories of four depressing high school years during which I had few real friends. Most of all, I was fleeing from myself and from the large one-hundred-and-eighty pound body that encased me. … I was determined to

enter this mythical realm [California] and to claim it as my own ..."

A shy first-year student but a definite 'politico', Adler enlisted as a foot soldier in one of America's first big student protest movements, the Free Speech Movement of 1964. The FSM began as defiance of a university ban on on-campus political activity by civil-rights organizers and others and grew into a nationally televised confrontation between University of California 'knowledge factory' administrators and students in what felt like "a battle to wrest the control of our lives away from the clerks, the files, and the forms that seemed to be increasingly dominating our lives as students — in other words, from the seemingly invulnerable giants of technology and bureaucracy." After her FSM experience, Adler felt drawn to the civil-rights work being done in the South, registering black citizens to vote and so forth. Not only did it seem to be what the 'real activists' did, but she herself had been born in Little Rock, and one of her New York neighbors was Andy Goodman, one of three civil-rights workers murdered in Mississippi during the previous summer.

She continued to be tempted by the tiny American Communist Party but knew herself ultimately to be too much of an anarchist and a heretic to fit in. Yet her left-wing training left her with an intellectual legacy. Adler observes that "the core legacy shared by those of us who went through a serious encounter with Marxism has little to do with economic theory or even communism. It is this: when we look at the world, even today, we take nothing at face value. We are always looking for the unseen relationships."

Describing her former self as "a left-wing nun in the Summer of Love," Adler revisits her correspondence with an American GI serving in Vietnam, Marc Anderson, who had written a bitter letter to her university newspaper about the luxury of those who could smoke marijuana and talk about Maoism while soldiers like him are "dying for lighting a cigarette at night, or 'cause the NCO in charge was drunk." No flag-waver, Specialist 4 Anderson responded to her reply and shared his own disillusionment with the Vietnam War: "I know exactly how you feel, as I fight 'their' war and one with myself." Their correspondence, about war, American society, and the trivia of daily life, forms the book's center. While both naturally present themselves on their best behavior, theirs is the conversation of two 'foot soldiers', one an actual infantryman and one a soldier in 'the revolution' that was always just around the corner in the late 1960s. Reading both sides of the correspondence cuts through the cliches that we still hear about doped-up 'baby killers' on side and 'long-haired free love antiwar demonstrators' on the other.

But the 'Psychedelic Sixties' are also underway and they make Adler

nervous at first; she goes to graduate school in journalism and spends another 'revolutionary' summer harvesting sugar cane in Cuba as part of the Venceremos ("We will win") Brigade, a group of American pacifists and leftists. But as she ages, the old Marxist ideas lose their appeal: "my belief that I should be some kind of socialist revolutionary had not changed. But what I was actually doing was reading about nature and feeling a fear for the plight of the earth." On a second trip to Cuba, this time as a journalist, she begins to realize her need to be a spiritual revolutionary.

When Neopagan Witches get together, stories about 'how I found the Craft' are a conversational staple. Adler saves her core 'conversion story' for chapter 12, but without the previous eleven chapters, it would lack its context. She struggles: "The old Marxist inside me warns that all this religion stuff is an opiate, an oppressor. … these occult philosophies do let the anxious middle class feel secure with their privilege." Ultimately, as the readers of *Drawing Down the Moon* know, Adler rejects the old Marxist Left as "too afraid of the irrational and its pull," too condescending towards the eternal human need for ecstasy and mystery. "It did not realize that one can enter the flow of the mysterious, the non-ordinary reality known to all artists, poets, and indigenous people without losing one's intellectual integrity … that one can work to end poverty and exploitation but still embrace song and dance and dream."

Heretic's Heart: A Journey through Spirit and Revolution
Margot Adler
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