

## A Brief Introduction to the Poetry of Mary Oliver

by  
Bonnie Thurston

When I mentioned the poetry of Mary Oliver at the March, 1998 meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at Oakham it did not occur to me that I might have the privilege of introducing her more formally. But, at the invitation of the editors of this journal, I am happy to say a word about her work to a Society which is so appropriately attuned to poetry and what it can teach and reveal. It is my intention in this brief essay to offer a sample of her work that will lead you to want to read more, and, second, to draw a few comparisons between the poetry of Mary Oliver and that of Thomas Merton (although, I confess at the outset to finding her the better poet).

Let me begin the introduction with Thomas Merton. One reason Merton was so attracted to Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey was precisely its setting among the knobs (rolling hills) of Kentucky. In his youth and young adulthood, Merton was primarily an urbanite, but he found first at St. Bonaventure University in rural, upstate New York, and then at Gethsemani Abbey that the Presence of God could sing out in a special way from the natural world, the created universe. Although her poetry seldom evinces the explicitly Christian theological language of Merton's "poetry of the forest" (George Kilcourse's term for Merton's nature poetry<sup>1</sup>) the glimpse of eternal verities in transitory creation is the great genius of Mary Oliver's poetic vision.

Mary Oliver is one of our best, if least known, contemporary American poets. She was born in Maple Heights, Ohio on September 10th, 1935. She attended Ohio State University (1955-56) and Vassar College (1956-57) and has subsequently been professor of creative writing or poet-in-residence at a number of American colleges and universities. A resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts, she is presently on the faculty of Bennington College in Vermont and is the author of ten volumes of verse and several prose works including *A Poetry Handbook*, *Blue Pastures*, and *Rules for the Dance*. She has won numerous literary prizes, the most prestigious of which may be the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1984 and the National Book Award in

1992, and has received both a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship, both much coveted in America. In my opinion the best entrées to her work are the volumes *American Primitive*<sup>2</sup> for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (and from which my examples in this essay are taken) and *New and Selected Poems*<sup>3</sup> recipient of the National Book Award. (This latter is a longer and more comprehensive collection of her poetry.)

The simplest and most obvious thing to say about Mary Oliver is that she is a nature poet, that her poems are brilliant portrayals both of landscape and the processes of the natural world. Titles of poems in *American Primitive* indicate this fact; she writes about "August," "Lightning," "Moles," "Clapp's Pond," "First Snow," "Rain in Ohio," "Spring," "The Sea." But Oliver is a nature poet more akin to Gerard Manley Hopkins or R.S. Thomas than to William Wordsworth and the more Romantic practitioners of the genre. In an article entitled "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry" Janet McNew calls Oliver "a visionary poet of nature" and has observed that "a mystical closeness to the natural world" is a major subject of Oliver's books.<sup>4</sup> For Oliver, the natural world provides insight into profound, spiritual truths. It reflects a greater reality of which it is, itself, a manifestation.

Like Merton, Oliver uses the natural world as a "jumping off place" for what, to me at least, is theological reflection. For example, in the poem "In Blackwater Woods" she begins by looking at the trees which "are turning/their own bodies/into pillars/ /of light" and the ponds of her woods. This observation of the natural landscape leads her to reflect on "internal landscape". "To live in this world" she writes

you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.<sup>5</sup>

But Oliver's relationship to the natural world goes beyond that of a subject looking at an object. Like many of Merton's Zen poems,<sup>6</sup> Oliver does not worry overmuch about such subject/object dualism. "Something disinclines Oliver to tremble over boundaries between herself and nature, or subject and object, as philosophers would have it."<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the speaker of the poem enters into the natural world and its processes, becomes one with them. She would, I think, agree with Merton "that we are first of all *part of nature*."<sup>8</sup> She speaks explicitly of this in the poem "Clapp's Pond" as she describes

How sometimes everything  
closes up, a painted fan, landscapes and moments  
flowing together until the sense of distance --  
say, between Clapp's Pond and me --  
vanishes, edges slide together  
like the feathers of a wing, everything  
touches everything. (21-22)

(Compare the view of this poem with Merton's "O Sweet Irrational Worship.") Or, again, in the poem, "Ghosts" Oliver describes a dream in which she watched a cow give birth

to a red calf, tongued him dry and nursed him  
in a warm corner  
of the clear night  
in the fragrant grass  
in the wild domains  
of the prairie spring, and I asked them,  
in my dream I knelt down and asked them  
to make room for me. (30)

Notice how limpid her poetry is. Her subject is always clear; the reader always knows what the poem is "about." Oliver does not rely on esoteric language or a private set of symbols. Her language is not arcane; her meanings are not hidden. The poems are as available to the reader as the external world which has inspired them. And this leads me to the second thing I would lift up about the poetry of Mary Oliver, its attentiveness to what is.

In Oliver's poems it is as if the prayer of the blind man, "Lord, let my eyes be opened," has been answered. Douglas Burton-Christie (an active member of the International Thomas Merton Society who has written frequently and well on Merton) observes about Oliver that there "is something here akin to Duns Scotus's insistence on *haecceitas*, the 'thisness' of reality, or Hopkins's 'inscape,' the sense that even in the humblest objects, an entire universe burgeons forth."<sup>9</sup> A few examples of Oliver's penetrating look at what is will have to suffice.

In the poem "Fall Song" the fallen leaves "underfoot, moldering/in that black subterranean castle/ /of unobservable mysteries" are seen as exactly what they are: compost. And yet, Oliver muses

I try to remember when time's measure  
painfully chafes, for instance when autumn

flares out at the last, boisterous and like us  
longing to stay --- how everything lives, shifting

from one bright vision to another, forever  
in these momentary pastures. (18)

The poem "Vultures" does not turn away from the grisly reality of eating carrion. Vultures look

for death,  
to eat it,  
to make it vanish,  
to make of it the miracle:  
resurrection. (37)

In "May" Oliver sees clearly "the miles of leafing," "windflowers and moccasin flowers," and the bees that dive into them. Again, blurring the distinction between the poet and what she observes, Oliver reports "I too gather/their spiritual honey." She observes what is, bees gathering nectar from spring flowers, and sees beyond or into it that

this sense of well-being, the flourishing  
of the physical body -- rides  
near the hub of the miracle that everything  
is a part of, is as good  
as a poem or a prayer, can also make  
luminous any dark place on earth. (53)

It is my sense that the attentiveness of the poet to what is *there* also allows her to teach us something of what *might* be there, just below our own level of comprehension.

I am uneasy making my third and final suggestion about the poetry of Mary Oliver, that it seems to me to reflect a profoundly feminine consciousness. I am not in a position to define "feminine," and so perhaps should not use the term. But I am not the only one to have had this response to the poetry. Writing on "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," Diane S. Bonds, correctly I think, observes "there is a sense in which Oliver's poems seem profoundly 'woman-identified'" although "there are few explicit indications of the gender of the speaker in her poems."<sup>10</sup> This "genderless voice" is because the speaker of the poem so often recedes into the background. Oliver's poems are not "feminist" in a shrill or political way, but hers is a womanly sensibility. There is a softness to her approach to her subjects, an attentiveness to birth and to the life of the senses that I find feminine.

This feminine sensibility is seen most clearly in the poetry's celebration of physical life, its delight in "ordinary" sensual experiences. I do not find in Merton's nature poetry this physicality, this innocent delight in sensuous bodily experience. "August" speaks of picking blackberries, of "cramming/the black honey of summer/into my mouth" of "this happy tongue." In "The Roses" the poet is, once again, watching bees gather nectar, and the experience leads her to exclaim

... there is no end,  
believe me! to the inventions of summer,  
to the happiness your body  
is willing to bear. (67)

In "The Honey Tree" the poet climbed the tree and "ate/chunks of pure light." "I climb like a snake," she says, "I clamber like a bear to/the nuzzling place" "the cords/of my body stretching/and singing in the/heaven of appetite." (81)<sup>11</sup>

Oliver's is not a poetry devoid of sexuality. But hers is a sexuality integrated into the larger patterns of sensual life. She writes clearly and simply of the beauty and pleasure of incarnate life. I shared a few of Oliver's poems with a student who says she does not read poetry. She remarked perceptively, "they are very kinesthetic." Precisely. For Oliver, life in the body seems not so much problematic as profoundly good. "Joy" she writes in "The Plum Trees,"

is a taste before  
it's anything else, and the body

can lounge for hours devouring  
the important moments. Listen,

the only way  
to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it

into the body first, like small  
wild plums. (84)

Burton-Christie has written that Oliver's is a poetry of correspondence. "Correspondence refers to the search for symbolic meaning, the process of making imaginative connections between the ever-shifting and fathomless worlds of self and nature."<sup>12</sup> In a fragmented and fragmenting world we need such a sensibility, a vision that draws together rather than separates. For me it is exemplified perfectly in "The Fish" which I quote in its entirety.

The first fish  
I ever caught  
would not lie down  
quiet in the pail  
but flailed and sucked  
at the burning  
amazement of the air  
and died  
in the slow pouring off  
of rainbows. Later  
I opened his body and separated  
the flesh from the bones  
and ate him. Now the sea  
is in me: I am the fish, the fish  
glitters in me; we are  
risen, tangled together, certain to fall  
back to the sea. Out of pain,  
and pain, and more pain  
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished  
by the mystery. (56)

For me, this poem is profoundly Eucharistic (in the way that the film "Babette's Feast" is Eucharistic). It also clearly encapsulates the aspects of Mary Oliver as a poet which I so much admire: her

profound connectedness to the natural world; her ability to see what is and having so seen, to penetrate within and beyond; her deeply feminine sensibility as it is manifested in a celebration of bodily life.

In the wonderful book *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* Esther De Waal introduces the nature poetry of the Celtic hermits. She explains that they saw with "rinsed eyes" She continues

This is not descriptive verse which sometimes tends to become shallow, superficial, sentimental. Neither is it primitive or romantic. But it is imaginative, vitally felt and expressed with emotional insight so that it can still today produce a shock of delight in the reader.<sup>13</sup>

The description perfectly fits Mary Oliver's verse. She sees with "rinsed eyes," indeed, I would dare to suggest with *baptized eyes*. Her vision of the world, while sometimes stark and never shying away from brutal realities<sup>14</sup>, produces "a shock of delight in the reader." By looking at the external world and really seeing it, she invites us into internal realities and gives us arresting spiritual insights. And the poet invites us into the process.

Who will behold the inner chamber who has not observed  
with admiration, even with rapture, the outer stone?

Well, there is time left--  
fields everywhere invite you into them.

And who will care, who will chide you if you wander away  
from wherever you are, to look for your soul?

Quickly, then, get up, put on your coat, leave your desk!<sup>15</sup>

## Notes and References

1. George Kilcourse, "A Shy Wild Deer: The True Self in Thomas Merton's Poetry," *The Merton Annual* 4 (1991) p.103.
2. Available from Little, Brown and Company, Boston, MA. (1983).
3. Available from Beacon Press, Boston, MA. (1992).
4. Janet McNew, "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* 30 (1989) pp.59,61.

5. Mary Oliver, *American Primitive* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983) pp.82-83. Hereafter, unless specifically noted to the contrary, page numbers given in the text are references to this volume.
6. I have written about the lack of subject-object dualism in Merton's later articles in "Zen in the Eye of Thomas Merton's Poetry," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4 (1984) pp.103-117.
7. McNew op.cit. p.66.
8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1968) p.294.
9. Douglas Burton-Christie, "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," *Cross Currents* 46 (1996) pp.77-87.
10. Diane S. Bonds, "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," *Women's Studies* 21 (1992) 5.
11. "No less than sixteen poems in *American Primitive* use eating as a central, eucharistic symbol for mystical communion with nature." McNew, op.cit., p.69.
12. Burton-Christie, op.cit., p.79.
13. Esther De Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996) p.88.
14. Burton-Christie says "much of her poetry is given over to an unflinching examination of the power of death in the natural world." op.cit., p.82.
15. From "Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches" in *West Wind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997) p.61.

