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Oracular Fever

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Oracular Fever

American Primitive. Mary Oliver.
Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and
Company. 1983. \$12.00 cloth. \$6.95
paper.

It is easy to dismiss Mary Oliver as a nature poet, or a spiritual poet who follows back the bloodlines to Frost and Thoreau, with a Native American religiosity ruminating not so quietly below. It is easy to applaud her for this as well, finding poems that prove the comfort and terror of wilderness in and out of ourselves, her peculiar, dual awareness that consoles by its intelligence. But to leave Mary Oliver in her content only is a mistake, for it is new how zealously, and for how long — through four collections now — she has taken up something very old: writing poems not overheard, but directly spoken. Not in many places in contemporary poetry is the listener so taken into account. She *tells* poems, and this confidence is a major strength in *American Primitive*, bringing to the brim the discursive element largely tabooed in this country in recent years. One feels that her poems hearten and illustrate ideas; some approach statement — a strategy which might be pedantic if it were not, in Oliver's hands, so successful. Such clarity, more often than not, works: we are charmed, set adrift. Worlds open in this book. But they are not invented; one feels the weight and relief of their reality.

It is a complex reality, belied by simple language and unambitious narrative shape. Everywhere the poet is slowly busy gathering the strange, the private, the miraculous — evidence held up with the earnestness and puzzlement of a child. But unlike the child, Oliver insists on conclusion, pushing steadily to a finality beyond the poem's border. There is the kitten, one-eyed creature, stillborn; and having buried it at once, without fanfare, the poet takes apart, carefully, her possibilities: the museum, the local newspapers.

But instead I took it out into the field
and opened the earth

and put it back
saying, it was real,
saying, life is infinitely inventive,
saying, what other amazements
lie in the dark seed of the earth . . .

Many poets writing now, I suspect, would stop here, knowing somehow that generalizing, no matter how lovely, is dangerous taken too far, preferring the oriental notion of leaf, twig, branch to imply the whole tree. We are used to this. We like it. It is Mary Oliver who keeps raking ground to isolate a personal nerve, working through the child's urgency: did I do right? ". . . yes," she concludes, "I think I did right to go out alone / and give it back peacefully, and cover the place / with the reckless blossoms of weeds" ("The Kitten").

It is simply not enough in Oliver's world to notice things; one must know, weigh, *account for* one's experience. Things fit. There is pattern, invisible and grand. Because of this habit, she has been called a visionary poet, and because of it, in spite of the darkness she turns up in work such as "The Kitten," she keeps an optimistic grace. Yet such grace is neither empty-hearted nor -headed. It comes at us squarely, with affectionate shrewdness. In memory, for instance, her girlhood exploration of an abandoned whorehouse strikes past the exciting accumulation of tabooed treasures—the mattress, the crystal chandelier, the "expected glamour" now doused in rainwater and debris—to wider realizations. "But we were fourteen . . ." she writes. "We whispered, we imagined. / It would be years before / we'd learn how effortlessly / sin blooms, then softens, / like any bed of flowers" ("The Old Whorehouse").

Mary Oliver specializes in this long view. Here is the story, she seems to say, and here is the meaning. Here the body, here the soul. Weight in these poems lies as reverie in the connecting distance between idea and its thing, Williams' dictum going slowly into motion, seams revealed by her critical double take. Much of the work in *American Primitive* is enriched by this design which becomes characteristic of Oliver, a fact that pleases, but there is danger in the predictability, danger of routine: tedium, dullness, the look-alike poem. Her amazement—and thus, ours, such is her power to pass things on instantly—can be hammered flat, for all her specific wonder at the natural world, by her need to make parable. It is, at times, as if

Frost's notion of the poem moving upward from delight to wisdom were thrown off balance, top-heavy. This is a weakness, more or less, in previous collections, and it continues here to a quieter degree in such pieces as "John Chapman," "The Fish," "Skunk Cabbage."

Which is not to say that her desire to lift things into significance never works: it does, again and again to make a great number of memorable poems. "First Snow" is one treasure, beginning simply, rising on Oliver's infectious, intelligent joy, levelling into a depth uncalculated, and for that, certain to last. She begins, not surprisingly, with questions the new snow triggers, "calling us back to *why, how, / whence* such beauty and *what* / the meaning; such / an oracular fever! flowing / past windows . . ." The world is filled, once the flurries stop, with quiet, and nothing's familiar. For Oliver, this strangeness is the way into the heart, the opening of the landscape which gives us reason. "Trees," she writes almost breathlessly,

glitter like castles
of ribbons, the broad fields
smolder with light, a passing
creekbed lies
heaped with shining hills
and though the questions
that have assailed us all day
remain—not a single
answer has been found—
walking out now
into the silence and the light
under the trees,
and through the fields,
feels like one.

Only a handful of poems in *American Primitive* venture out of the poet's home terrain—woods, shore, garden—into the wrought world of machine and concrete. And here, like some sea animal moving cautiously into air, onto solid ground, Oliver is not so sure, releasing some of her dominance by necessity. Meaning in these places is accidental; mystery emerges violently, an inexplicable gift. In "Flying," one of the best efforts, Oliver

transforms the numbing, repetitious interior of a commercial jet into sacred space by a sudden recognition of beauty—a stranger who sits nearby, unaware of his own perfection. You must, she tells us, rub him “oh, lightly, / like a coin / you find in the earth somewhere / shining and unexpected and, / without thinking, / reach for. You stand there / shaken / by the strangeness . . .” The price of such knowledge is high, its isolation, stunning. Oliver—this is perhaps the New Englander in her—is aware of the cost, striking the final image with inevitable sorrow.

When he's gone
you stare like an animal into
the blinding clouds
with the snapped chain of your life,
the life you know:
the deeply affectionate earth,
the familiar landscapes
slowly turning
thousands of feet below.

From this distance, Oliver's world takes on the look of the lost garden, invention the only possible return.

To re-enter the more typical lands of *American Primitive*, after such a vision, is to see Oliver's invention not in any flashy surrealist sense, but in her stubborn near personification of natural life. By it, she attempts to mend the chain, to reroot the garden. The sun, for instance, is “tenderness on my neck / and shoulders” (“Little Sister Pond”); moles take “Long / lonely walks” (“Moles”); egrets have “such faith in the world”—as evinced by their “tilting through the water, / unruffled, sure . . .” (“Egrets”). So the reading of the wild code continues, inviting us to more than common friendship with the physical universe, offering, in fact, apprenticeship there. And if we grow uneasy under Oliver's passionate interpretation, we are moved by its sheer conviction, its lack of condescension, its modesty. We are soothed, too, by an acknowledged darkness. The snake lies in wait after all. Of vultures that “sweep over / the glades looking / for death . . .” the poet tells us, ominously, that we

honor them and we
loathe them,
however wise the doctrine,
however magnificent the cycles,
however ultimately sweet
the huddle of death to fuel
those powerful wings.

(“The Vultures”)

At base, however, *American Primitive* is a love song. Even the creatures of the past return—the buffalo, the “yellow-eyed” wolves—to be celebrated, redreamt. A strong undertow in all this is Oliver’s immense appetite for the immediacy in things, her drive toward union. In “Ghosts,” the primal circumstance is replayed as the speaker secretly watches a cow giving birth, then nursing the calf

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.

Much of the pleasure of Oliver’s poems comes from the fact that we owe them nothing but attention. They fire up alone, and work through their mystery with little help from us. We need not strain to hear them properly, though they stay in the mind clearly, for an unaccountable time, the way clouds do, fanning out slowly on windless days. I suppose this could make us idle, prone in an ordinary field, doing nothing but looking up. So be it.