THE BLIND MAN'S ELEPHANT

ESSAYS ON THE CRAFT OF POETRY

KURT BROWN

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PREFACE

The story of the blind man and the elephant is well known. It's a fable variously attributed to the Sufis, Jainists, Buddhists, and Hindus and is meant to teach the limits of one's own knowledge. Three blind men approach an elephant—one from the front, one from the rear, and one from the side. The one in front touches the elephant's trunk and thinks, *So this is what an elephant is—a long flexible hose-like creature.* The man in the rear touches the elephant's hind parts and thinks, *So this is what an elephant is—two high, wide, fleshy pillars with a wispy thing at the top.* The one who approaches from the side touches the elephant's belly and thinks, *An elephant is a gigantic beast—round as a barrel with a thick hide.* The lesson is simple: no one can see the entire elephant, and so must rely on partial knowledge when assessing it.

ANALYSIS

1

Poetry and the Language of Adam

> The Poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty.
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson

> What is it the poet reaches? Not mere knowledge. He
> obtains entrance
> Into the relationship of word and thing.
>
> — J. Riddel

One of the things poetry can do is rename the world. It doesn't matter how many times this has already been done, how many generations rise to inherit and reinvent the language, it must be done over again. And again. In an essential and important way, each individual ever born refashions language to his or her own purposes. Each of us has a unique sense of words and how they can be strung together to communicate thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Writers, but especially poets, are people who consciously accept this fact and make an effort in their work to further the process of renaming and extending the resources of language. When we rename a thing, when we describe it anew in such a way as to almost re-*create* it, we call it forth into a fresh dimension and show it to the rest of the world as if for the first time. An old thing, a used and worn thing, about which we thought we knew all there was to know, is suddenly revitalized, brought again to life under the power of the poet's scrutiny. Of all the things poetry can do, this renewal is one of its many virtues.

Poetry is said to have begun, at least according to one theory, with Adam naming the animals. There are competing theories[1], but this is

one of the most widespread and popular. It places the origins of poetry not with visions or rituals or courtly entertainments, but squarely on language—the application of word to thing—millennia before postmodernists would insist on the fallacy of this bond by instructing us that signifier and signified were forever divorced.

In the beginning, as it were, language and the world appeared together at the same primeval instant. The inner and the outer worlds, abstract and concrete, mind and body, rose out of nothingness together. By suggesting that poetry, first and foremost, is made out of language, that its primary function is description, the myth of Adam avoids at the outset the Romantic notion of poetry as a covert, magical act and places the emphasis on poetry as a practical, necessary impulse: setting the world in order through making distinctions between things by giving them their proper names. To be able to identify things, to tell one from the other, and to be able to communicate these distinctions to others is, in terms of this myth, essential. To do this, we need language. The Bible makes this assertion clear even before Adam enters the picture: "In the beginning was the Word." First there was language ("Let there be light") and out of it sprang the world.

The passage from Genesis that describes Adam naming the animals (chapter 2, verses 19 and 20) is short and seemingly straightforward. It follows immediately the episodes describing the creation of man and the planting of the Garden of Eden. Within the compass of a few short sentences, it describes the naming of the world's newly-created, though still anonymous, creatures:

> Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast
> of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought
> them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and
> whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was
> the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle,
> and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field…

Like Adam himself, God creates the animals out of dust and clay, which makes them the progeny of earth and underscores their special affinity with human beings. The names Adam utters on that first morning are the original names, perhaps the proto-language, which Adam, as the first man, would naturally have to invent. We can imagine a language of ur-words, what the linguists call *etymons*. An etymon is the original form of a word before time and history and the vagaries of human culture combine to corrupt it, changing its meaning and thrust in largely unpredictable ways. The Greek source of the word *etymon* itself is *eteos*, meaning "true." The names Adam gives the animals are their primal names, their "true" names, by which we may know them truly if only we could somehow reclaim these words for our own.

On the surface, this passage from the Bible offers no particular difficulty. It describes in the simplest terms what appears to be the simplest of acts. But naming a thing, especially for the first time, is a more complex matter.

To begin with, naming a thing *truly* demands a knowledge of that thing, a penetrating grasp of that thing, not ordinarily required in our everyday experience of it. We must know a thing in its essence to name it properly. We must know its quintessence, its soul, not just its general qualities. This suggests an acuteness of perception, an extraordinary effort of attention to see into the nature of what is to be named.

Further, to give something its exact and proper name is to somehow bestow an identity upon it. It is *this* thing, and no other. It is now named, known, which are perhaps two aspects of the same thing, or perhaps subsequent aspects: we know first—through the act of acute attention—*then* we may name. The thing is now individuated, defined.

Finally, this kind of naming amounts to nothing less than recognition, promoting something to its full and ultimate status. To name things properly is to celebrate them in their singularity. The scene with Adam among the animals in Eden resembles a mass baptism during which the animals are sanctioned, accepted, blessed.

For poets, the task is not to name things for the first time, nor to recover the lost language of etymons in all their pristine splendor, but to describe things in the unstable language of history and culture—the corrupt, inexact, approximate language of the fallen. I am speaking not in religious terms, but in terms of metaphor and available myth. Almost

every poet who has ever thought about it has testified to the faultiness, the inherent imperfections of language as a medium of expression. "What is perceived and what is said," Charles Simic wrote, "rarely match." For T. S. Eliot, every poem is "a raid on the inarticulate." Description for the poet, then, is not something florid or self-indulgent, not something to be skipped over to get to the good parts, to the action—rather, it is the very source of the action, the revelation. It is where poetry engages and grasps the world, where language, like Jacob, struggles with the mute and begrudging angel to get it to breathe out its blessing finally in a few surprising and original words.

This is the case with Walt Whitman, who has been referred to as the "new Adam" in the New World. Whitman himself honors the old literature, including the Bible, but assures the reader that "Song of Myself" will be a new source of knowledge and inspiration for human beings—at least in the United States. His brash self-confidence is not the point, but how he went about pioneering a new prosody, a new kind of language to describe a world that had never been described in poetry before. For this, paradoxically, he had to revert to ancient sources, Biblical rhythms, and Biblical forms—the long free line, the catalogs, the high rhetoric, the great resounding metaphors of nature—in order to employ words in fresh and illuminating ways. So, for instance, describing a carpenter planing a beam of wood in section 15 of "Song of Myself," Whitman explains:

> The carpenter dresses his plank… the tongue
> of his foreplane
> whistles its wild ascending lisp…

The action of the carpenter's plane as it "whistles its wild ascending lisp" has been captured—named—in such a way that we feel it has never been adequately described before, never been noticed or heard, though carpenters have been planing wood since before the time of Jesus, who was certainly familiar with the sound. The auditory imagery here is not simply functional or decorative, it is revelatory—a small rift in the fabric of time and space is opened and the world becomes sensually immediate,

as if we were standing beside the carpenter hearing the sound of the plane for ourselves, not just reading about it in a book. And the effect of the passage cannot be attributed to onomatopoeia alone—that beautiful pattern of S's that, along with the assonance of two short I's, echo the sound the plane makes as it runs up the wood. It exists as well in the metaphor: the "tongue" of the fore plane whistling, like the worker himself happy at his labor. It inheres too in the word "lisp," which captures a slightly broader shade of sound than mere sibilance—the flat, curling edges of fresh wood shavings. It resides in those two crucial adjectives "wild" and "ascending," suggesting vigor, the unchecked sexual energy Whitman loved to praise. It is in each of these and all of them—the precise, surprising choice of words, and how they are placed together until language and reality, for once, seem perfectly attuned.

Whitman referred to "Song of Myself" as, in part, a "language experiment." He wanted to see what he could do in the way of inventing a language that would more directly engage reality than the older poetries whose words and metaphors had grown conventional and stale. In this effort he would enlist any and every term at his disposal, including common speech, slang, argot, and cant. So he describes the sound of shoes striking pavement as "the sluff of bootsoles." It is probable that the word "sluff"—so accurate and exact—had never been used in a poem before, and very seldom in ordinary speech as well. It is not only sonically precise—we hear shoe leather scraping pavement—but somehow existentially correct as well—we feel the foot-dragging weariness of the masses as they make their way to office or home in a never-ending routine of labor and rest. Throughout "Song of Myself" and Whitman's other poems, words and phrases crop up that seem to name reality, call it out from behind its veil of inarticulateness, and show it to us naked, immediate, whole. Like a photographer who uses his lens to frame and focus our attention, to make us really *see*, Whitman uses words to pinpoint and focus reality in poem after poem. We know the words are *not* the reality, but the illusion created is a powerful one, one that can return us to the world with greater knowledge and awareness.

It is not too much to say that for poets the world doesn't exist in some real sense until they describe it, until it has been captured and measured in words. Only then is perception confirmed. Only then is

reality verified in concrete, evocative terms. This is the case with James Dickey, who has spoken about the "personal" in poetry—meaning not the intimate or confessional, but the unique, inimitable core of an individual sensibility, a diction and syntax so exact as to be almost equivalent to one's fingerprints or DNA. Dickey has hardly written a poem without this signature quality without somewhere finding the words necessary to equal and therefore body forth the world. This is true of his earliest work, poems about his experience in World War II, with its "besieging mud," the "clumsy hover" of its air transports, and the "licked, light, chalky dazzle" of the South Pacific. For Dickey, the whole project of poetry is not so much to develop and articulate psycho-socio-political themes as to match language to reality, or reality to language, until description itself is the point, the revelation which the whole poem seeks. Certainly, there are intellectual, paraphrasable themes in Dickey's work. But his poems imply something else, something more, as if each declaimed, "This is what it's like to be alive, to inhabit a body, to be conscious and aware." In a fundamental sense, this same ambition pervades the poetry of Walt Whitman, and is one of its most important achievements. "Song of Myself" is as much a hymn to consciousness as it is to anything else, proclaiming in no uncertain terms, and proudly: "I was the man, I suffered, I was there."

The poet is still the singular, passionate observer we need to translate the world into penetrating, accurate language that somehow makes reality available to our minds in a way in which experience alone cannot thoroughly provide. Before Adam, there was perceiving without knowing. A pre-verbal silence in which things were indistinguishable from one another, or generalized until they were finally specified. Then, like Athena from Zeus's head, things sprang into being fully themselves, startlingly present and clear. This sense of discovery, of locating and naming the distinct quality of things is immediately recognizable in Dickey's work, and easily illustrated. When, in "The Movement of Fish," for instance, we read:

> No water is still, on top.
> Without wind, even, it is full
> Of a chill, superficial agitation… [5]

we feel that those three words—*chill*, *superficial*, *agitation*—are rigorously exact. They conform to our own perceptions of the behavior of watery surfaces. We have noticed this phenomenon before, have seen it clearly many times. Now it is acknowledged, defined. This is more than description. It is a bestowal of being, a *making-it-clear-to-the-mind*, manifesting something without robbing it of its inherent mystery and essence.

Again and again we feel Dickey making an effort to translate what he perceives into precise revelatory language. In "Diabetes,"[3] he writes of "The rotten, nervous sweetness of my blood," and we feel the disease has been characterized, diagnosed in words as seldom before. When he speaks of animals pouncing "upon the bright backs of their prey / … In a sovereign floating of joy," or the monotonously identical figures on blankets "… made by machine / From a sanctioned, unholy pattern / rigid with industry," we are convinced he has defined the essence of these actions and things, nailed them down with meticulous, unremitting care. They may be familiar, but now they are also designated clearly, accounted for to the language-requiring mind. Whatever we think of Dickey personally, his politics or behavior, his sometimes-inflated rhetoric and exaggerated stance, we cannot deny the obvious power of his best verse.

Another poet capable of translating the world into exact terms, phrases of distinct radiance and acuity, is Mary Oliver, especially in four books: *Twelve Moons*, *American Primitive*, *Dream Work*, and *House of Light*. With a profound grasp of her subjects, Oliver employs the telling adjective, the expressive term that—more than merely describing—*characterizes* creatures and things, revealing their particular nature, their sure and unmistakable "it-ness," to borrow a philosophical term. She speaks of the butterfly's "loping" flight, the "morose" movement of turtles, the ocean's "black, anonymous roar." In poem after poem, she displays what fellow-poet Hayden Carruth notes as "the depth and diversity" of her "perceptual awareness." So, we read of the "blue lung" of the Caribbean, the "muscled sleeve" of the fox, the "iron rinds" over winter ponds, and more. The list might be extended at length. Regardless of her proclivity to sentimentalize nature in her more unguarded moments, the power of her observation seldom fails. At her best, she looks at the world with a predator's eye and articulates the way things are—how creatures, plants, minerals, and weathers look, move, change, and manifest themselves to the discerning mind.

This specificity is not the *bon mot*, the "good word," which is cleverness and wit, a stroke of brilliance for the benefit of one's dinner companions. The employment of a *bon mot* involves an adept play of language in the service of entertainment, not accuracy or revelation. We are delighted by the use of a particular term in a particular context because we had never thought of it before, and because in some ways it ridicules and "fits" its object in a jocular way. In visual terms, it may be likened to caricature, which captures and exaggerates the subject's more prominent features while dispensing with other details—details that might be rendered in more exact, realistic proportions if a true representation were desired. The *bon mot* and other such linguistic pleasantries are by nature partial, superficial, and quick—deft thrusts at likeness, at portraiture.

Nor am I speaking strictly of the element of diction, the *mot juste*, or "exact word," though diction and vocabulary are certainly involved in any discussion of language and its expressive possibilities. Diction carries its own importance in writing of all kinds—especially poetry. Concerning writers, Ezra Pound notes that "when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e., becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive and bloated, the whole machinery of social and individual thought and order goes to pot." This is the idea of diction as a moral responsibility, the imperative for writers to get things straight, to call a spade a spade and not some other thing. Poets, he asserts, must not give in to generalities or euphemisms, must not blur the all-important distinctions to which they are obligated as artists, as thinkers and observers. Word choice is crucial to clarity of presentation and thought. But precision and accuracy aren't all that is involved in naming, or renaming, the world.

For that, we need the kind of poetic language that lifts things into consciousness, the delicate seam of words—visionary, resonant, defining—that exists between reality and the mind, that seems to join the two in a moment of insight, until subject and object for once seem to merge, to become one. So, in the example of Oliver's poetry, she speaks of the "ocean's black, anonymous roar"—she might have written of "the ocean's loud, continuous roar" which would have been accurate enough in its way, satisfying our ordinary demands for precision and truth: the ocean *is* both continuous and loud. But the word "black" in this context suggests

that the ocean is obscure, impenetrable, difficult to grasp or understand. It also refers to the beach at night, and the largely lightless depths, even at noon, which we have yet to explore. There is a hint of the crack of waves in the adjective as well—by sonic association—and the word "anonymous" suggests even more. The ocean is non-human, the not-self or *Nicht-Ich*, empty of consciousness, morality, or thought. Measured against it, our proud self-regard—our very being—is annihilated. Such is nature, most of it—a place so alien we can only stand appalled at its impersonal power. Between perceiving and describing falls the shadow.

I am not arguing that the world be abstracted into language, but that language be concretized into the world, as far as is possible. A language so visceral, so tangible, that it seems to equal and reflect in itself the concreteness of the world. Some of physicality is found in the work of Galway Kinnell. When his daughter, Maud, is born in the first section of *The Book of Nightmares*, he describes her birth with phrases like "she skids out on her face… this peck of stunned flesh / clotted with celestial cheesiness…"[4]

These phrases afford many pleasures, not the least of which is a delicate pattern of sound and a jaunty, affectionate tone balanced against a profoundly critical moment both fascinating and repellant. The word "skids" is not accurate and true, in Pound's notion of "the application of word to thing," so much as it is evocative, illuminating. It suggests ideas about birth and life somewhat different from the sentimental, pious beliefs ordinarily associated with these things. The fact that Kinnell's daughter "skids" out (and on her face to boot!) implies resistance, or at the very least an involuntary—that is to say, unintentional—action. Further, "skids" contains within it the seeds of humor, someone stepping on a banana peel, while at the same time hinting of danger, of accident—a car careening on an icy road. We do not *intend* to be born, we are ejected into the world, ready or not, leaving us "stunned" in harsh, hospital light.

The same mixture of humor and unease is picked up in the wonderful line "clotted with celestial cheesiness…." The states implied by the words "celestial" and "cheesiness" are existentially poles apart, the spirit and the flesh, and their odd connection here describes an intermediary phase in which spirit is only just beginning to cohere, or "clot," into matter, to move from the divine towards the mundane.

The passage artfully captures a father's paradoxical feelings about his daughter's birth: a brisk humor reflecting his joy at her arrival set against his anxiety about suffering and mortality, which must inevitably follow birth, and which the phrase "astral violet / of the underlife" insinuates so effectively. In fact, *underlife* is another term that simultaneously contains these polarities of thought and feeling: the seriousness of some unknown metaphysical power, and the humorous suggestion that the life of the fetus lies "under," in the womb at the lower extremities of the body, like someone living in a basement apartment under a tall building.

As with Whitman's description of the carpenter's fore plane as it "whistles its wild ascending lisp," Kinnell's description of birth goes beyond mere diction, mere clarity and responsible reporting. Such moments of heightened perception are prevalent throughout his work. In another poem, "The Fly," from *Body Rags*[5], he depicts a common housefly as it crawls over the eyelids and cheeks of a corpse, remarking, "One day I may learn to suffer / his mizzling sporadic stroll…"—language, once again, revelatory in both sound and sense in the way it reaches beyond itself to grapple with the palpable but no less mysterious facts of existence. Along with Whitman and Dickey—and clearly in kinship with Emerson and Thoreau—Kinnell's poems express a desire to realize the moment in the only way writers know how: through the agency of inspired and exacting language. "I have always intended to live forever," writes Kinnell in his poem, "The Seekonk Woods," "but even more, to live now."

To be alive, and to know it—a seemingly simple realization—is the not-so-secret program of many of our best poets. To be awake and cognizant of even a fraction of an ordinary day, which is also a fraction of eternity, cannot be so easily assumed. Poets have frittered away their lives in pursuit of far less. Thoreau asserts that he spent his time in solitude at Walden Pond because he didn't want to reach the end of his life and find he had never been alive at all. He found a language equal to the task of apprehending and articulating the world. The words of this language rely on the poet's knowledge of their inner resonances, their feel and heft and complex reverberations when placed in context with other words, the intimate associations they have forged in imagination and memory, their psychological and emotional implications, their symbolic and metaphorical potential, their particular temperature and texture and taste. This is

more than the definition of connotation ordinarily allows. It is to treat words as intricate, adaptable organisms that take sustenance from what surrounds them in order to add again—to answer back with their own contributory lives—to the infinite life of their surroundings. They are their surroundings, and their surroundings are them, in the normal give-and-take of vibrant, responsive substances.

So, there is a language that is both of-and-about the world, both object and reflection in the mirror of words. In order to employ such language, delicate transactions are required between word and thing. In his essay "Romanticism and Classicism," the English Modernist poet, theorist, and critic T. E. Hulme writes:

> The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description. The first thing is to recognise how extraordinarily difficult this is. It is no mere matter of carefulness: you have to use language, and language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise—that which is common to you, me and everybody.[6]

Already, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hulme anticipates the language theories to come. He knows that language is capable of obtruding itself, forcing its own purposes on the writer who is not careful, whose mind is already a complex network of entrenched forms, past reading experiences and second-hand concepts. As Robert Bly cautions in his little book *Leaping Poetry*, this leads to atrophy in literature. Though Bly is speaking particularly about imaginative association—how ideas and images become invariably related—the same might be said of language in general, how words are chosen automatically, almost compulsively by the mind:

> By the eighteenth century… Freedom of association had become drastically curtailed. The word "sylvan" by some psychic railway leads directly to "nymph," to

> "lawns," to "dancing," so to "reason," to music, spheres, heavenly order, etc. They're all stops on some railroad.[7]

Thus, in describing the sound a brook makes as it pours over stones, we can be sure the words "purl," "bubble," "sing," and "babble" will come up as predictably as Pavlov's dog will salivate at a sound it associates with food. Here is the very crux of the matter: When stale, fossilized, pre-fabricated language overrides the poet's own consciousness and unique personal expression, the world is not revealed but obscured, dressed in borrowed rags, so that we see only the dulled reality of a socialized mind, not the rare, spontaneous glimpses—the sudden lightning strokes—of perception we expect to access in poetry. Only the best writers are capable of the "terrific struggle" it takes to precisely describe—that is, re-name—the world. As Hulme says somewhat later in the essay cited above:

> There are then two things to distinguish, first the particular faculty of mind to see things as they really are, and apart from the conventional ways in which you have been trained to see them. This is itself rare enough in all consciousness. Second, the concentrated state of mind, the grip over oneself which is necessary in the actual expression of what one sees.

To see things as they really are! To "wash the gum from your eyes," as Whitman urges. Or to "cleanse the doors of perception," as Blake would have it. There are many poets, now and throughout history, who have been equal to the struggle. And the struggle has only deepened over the centuries. Gertrude Stein has said that we are in a late period of language. She means that the edges have been worn off words from constant use, that grammar has solidified in molds, like steel, that diction and syntax—the very structure of the sentence itself—has succumbed to methods of mass-production and pre-packaging that destroy any pretension towards originality of expression. She means that our language—not only the

language we speak every day, but the language of poetry itself—is a fallen one and must be redeemed by poets willing to engage daily in a confrontation with words to renew, or rediscover, their lost potential.

Acknowledging this problem, poets have attempted various methods to deploy language in ways that will remind readers that poetry is made out of words—a medium about which we have many assumptions, and which can be scuffed, worn, and battered through overuse. Or, to put it another way, words can disappear through long familiarity—we no longer even see them—as we leap past them toward standard meanings and manipulated, predictable responses. Gertrude Stein herself is a good example. Her non-syntactical phrases and repetitions are meant to prevent us from easily falling into interpretation, into the referential phase of reading, by stopping us abruptly at the surface of the page itself, trying to make sense out of unfamiliar clusters of words. This practice has an effect, but is limited and empty in the end. Language *completely* devoid of referentiality is crippled language, foreshortened language, language fighting with one hand tied behind its back. "Be all you can be," the Army urges in its stirring, epic propaganda. Stein's poems, or writings, seem to exhort language to be less than it can be. The answer to renewal of language cannot reside in disposing of one of its most potent and crucial functions—the representation of meaning and thought, feeling and perception, insight and apprehension. Without these, we are left with a pile of words, inert, unrelated, mere verbiage that is interesting but ultimately mute.

Other poets like Galway Kinnell attempt to recall words back from their long exile of disuse, their historical obsolescence, in hopes that now—having been almost completely forgotten—they will appear new again, glittering with some of their former energy and significance. So, in the *Book of Nightmares*, Kinnell can imagine a moment of transcendent experience, reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's nightmarish descent into the earth below a battlefield, when he writes:

> A way opens
> at my feet. I go down
> the night-lighted mule-steps into the earth,
> the footprints behind me

filling already with pre-sacrificial trills
of canaries, go down
in the unbreathable goaf
of everything I ever craved and lost.[8]

Even in the general curiousness, the linguistic eeriness of this passage, *goaf* stands out and shimmers with unusual allure. Before we are sent to the dictionary to define it, we are struck by something that feels right, even inevitable about the word itself: the single, heavy syllable, the interesting sound, the coupling of it to a known but disturbing adjective—all in an earthy yet surreal, almost otherworldly setting. Once we find out what the word means (a mining term, referring to the hole made in the earth, the rubble taken from it, and the reservoir of gas that builds up there), we feel sure that it is right in this context and that an odd, superannuated noun has been rescued for us, given new life in a contemporary poem. This is another technique for renaming the world. However, we wouldn't want Kinnell or any poet to make a habit of filling his lines with antiquated terms or it would become mere pedantry, a lexical showing-off, as though poetry required nothing more than a good dictionary or book of synonyms. This kind of technique should be used only sparingly, and with great tact.

Other poets, like Robert Pinsky, attempt to resuscitate language by unabashedly flaunting lists of words in front of us in order to catch our attention, like a street vendor laying his wares out before us for inspection and appraisal. Some words in the list may be common, others unusual, but all are normally overlooked as we rush toward extracting only the meaning, leaving empty hulls of those words behind. The idea is to force us to stop and heft each term, as it were: to weigh it, consider it, regard it the way we might regard a vase or a picture, any object that deserves our undivided attention before advancing to the next word, then the next. For words are objects as well as abstract signs or repositories of meaning. Each has a physical presence, a linguistic body, makes a distinct sound, requires a certain effort to pronounce, and has a palpable effect on other words when put into contact with them. So, in what is arguably one of his best poems, "Shirt,"[9] Pinsky begins by listing various parts of that apparel in order to

call our attention not just to the shirt, but to the language we ordinarily use to denote it. The opening line of the poem begins this process:

> The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams…

Later, he lists terms referring to the different jobs undertaken in the production of shirts, and even parts of the machines used in that production, as well as terms indicating the organization of labor:

> The Presser, the cutter,
> The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,
> The treadle, the bobbin. The Code…

Still later, as though it were fun, even pleasurable, to dwell on words this way, to savor them and meditate upon them the way we savor expensive and exotic foodstuffs, filling our mouths with their sumptuous textures and tastes, Pinsky give us another list, an inventory of various kinds of shirts with interesting and appealing names:

> Prints, plaids, checks,
> Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras.

Each of these techniques represents ways in which poets strive to focus attention on words themselves, and in so doing reinvigorate language for the purpose of writing fresh and interesting lines of poetry. But as they are techniques, not revelations, each is really only a half-measure, a partial solution to the problem of actually renaming the world. They are intellectual solutions, ways of manipulating language, adding fresh ingredients to enliven an old stew. Solutions, that is, applied from the *outside*, derived from language itself; not arising from *inside*, from the

wellhead of conscious experience and personal illumination which then emerge through language, finding their way out in descriptions of profound and original beauty. Technique is not enough. It lacks, in Hulme's words, "The particular faculty of mind to see things as they really are." It lacks the kind of devout attentiveness Malebranche tells us is "the natural prayer of the soul." This is the first indispensable step, the source of any true, inherent renewal of language.

I am writing at pains to avoid sounding vague and mystical. I am not speaking of theological revelation or the metaphysical visions of saints, but the direct, unmediated, visceral knowledge of the world—the world we live in every day, but rarely apprehend. The language of Adam is not the language of transcendence. It is the language of the body, the senses, the language of the Eden we have and not the ideal, abstract one we seek. It is meaning, substance, truth, something attainable and real the poets must strive for in their daily work. It cannot be replaced by mere style or technique, and it cannot be faked. It is not a product of intelligence, culture, sophistication, or literary panache. It does not care to impress us. It overwhelms us. Moreover, examples of it may be culled from the best literature of any time and place. When we encounter it, we are sure. "The hair on the backs of our hands," as Emily Dickinson has told us, "stands up. Our experience of it electrifies us, forces us to take notice, as though our own semi-conscious, half-apprehended inklings were objectified finally in words of uncanny accuracy and power." The only worthwhile question, the only real question, is how to come by it. That requires extraordinary tenacity, sacrifice, and devotion.

Writing transformative verse is not simply a gift, a matter of talent alone. The language of such poetry is inspired, primal. It arises from heightened awareness and extraordinarily acute perception, never from mere literary cunning. It is arrived at by means of Hulme's "terrific struggle with language" which may take years, even decades of apprenticeship to words and methods of focusing the mind in order to see clearly what is in front of us. All of this sounds forbidding, impossibly difficult to achieve. Yet our literature abounds in moments of revelation, penetrating descriptions of the world that make it feel freshly witnessed, glowing with the excitement of initial discovery. "It is the choice of the commodious adjective," Wallace Stevens tells us, "it comes to that in the end:

the description that makes it divinity." And the kind of description he is talking about is not confined to the genre of poetry. Exemplary passages may be found in the works of all great novelists at moments when, by virtue of an intensification of language matched to powerful insight, they lift themselves into uncommon awareness to reveal the mysterious, something half-hidden and unguessed at in the most ordinary phenomena. So, in *Moby Dick*, Melville describes a particularly languid day:

> But one transparent blue morning, when a stillness almost preternatural spread over the sea, however unattended with any stagnant calm; when the long burnished sunglade on the waters seemed a golden finger laid across them, enjoining secrecy; when the slippered waves whispered together as they softly ran on… 10

It is a morning before time, a paradise of tranquility devoid temporarily of suffering the burden of human knowing. Among the many other felicities in this passage, the adjective "slippered" is particularly inspired, comprehending as it does both the motion of the waves sliding off one another with liquid ease and the idea that they are hushed—as though they wore slippers—a homely but effective image. This is heightened by the seething "s" sounds and the short "i" sounds echoed in the words "slippered" and "whispered." Such sounds are woven together throughout the entire passage until it becomes a delicate tissue of meaning, expressive at every juncture and at every moment of its presentation. Moreover, Melville is describing these particular waves in this particular spot on this particular day. No other. And perhaps never to be perceived exactly this way again but caught for an instant—yet forever—in prose of uncanny accuracy and effect.

Melville fashions a proto-language, a language of ur-words and eponyms, the "true" words and phrases he needs in order to tell his daunting, colossal tale. Like Adam, he knows something intuitively, exactly as it is in its individual essence and nature. He knows the sea and is therefore able to bestow an identity upon it, to describe it for us in precise

terms. In *Moby Dick*, the ocean acquires an unmistakable character, a soul. Melville stretches his hands out over "the great shroud of the sea" and blesses it, sanctifying it in language piercingly beautiful and exact.

ASSESSMENT

11

Nature and the Poet:

On the Work of Mary Oliver

For decades, Mary Oliver has been producing books that have garnered awards and created a large and admiring audience for her work. Earlier collections like *American Primitive*[1], *House of Light*[2], *Dream Work*[3], and *Twelve Moons*[4] are filled with poems of technical precision, emotional intensity, and penetrating vision into the mysteries of the natural world. Perhaps one of the last American Transcendentalists whose work can be taken seriously, Oliver promises in poem after poem to lift us beyond ourselves, beyond the confines of humdrum existence to a place of revelation. It is a difficult task, one which requires the highest poetic skills and the deepest passionate understanding of the non-human world. Oliver seems to possess a natural empathy that approaches religious devotion.

"Leaving the house," she says in the first line of the first poem in a recent book, "I went out to see / the frog, for example, / in her shining green skin" and we become aware a certain expectation has been set up, the expectation that her famous vision, her heightened sensibility will be acute and powerful enough to lead us back into Paradise once again, that place of pristine first vision when the doors of perception were wide open, letting the light of heaven stream in. It is a world apprehended with a consciousness not unlike that of a child, witnessed with an adult's respectful—and grateful—sense of awe. In language both simple and precise, Oliver creates images that enrapture our senses, that make us see and feel again what it is like to perceive the world as if for the first time. In the light of that perception, we are made to observe the frog's eggs "like a slippery veil; / and her eyes / with their golden rims." In that world, the pond lies unruffled "with its risen lilies," for it is a world where resurrection and eternal life are not merely promises, but facts, a

world where "the white heron / like a dropped cloud" wanders languidly "through the still waters" echoing the comforting words of the 23rd Psalm.

Oliver's vision is Blakean, the Blake who could see angels lounging in trees, glimpse the soul of a flea, and address the seasons with an unselfconscious directness, as he does, for instance, in "To Spring" which opens, "O thou, with dewy locks, who lookest down / through the clear windows of the morning…" That sense of "looking down through the clear windows of the morning" unsullied by the modern world's disbelief and bitter cynicism, its sophisticated rejection of the marvelous, is everywhere apparent in Oliver's work. She takes Whitman, another forebear, at his word:

> Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,
> Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
> You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and
> of every moment of your life.

The last two lines of Whitman's injunction, especially, might serve as an epigraph to the whole body of Oliver's work. She is one who has challenged us to experience the world once more in its prelapsarian purity, before Adam fell and with him, according to Puritan doctrine, the whole multitudinous, pristine enterprise of nature, right down to the least bird, fish, and flower. Her work is punctuated by reminders that life is a precious gift, as in "The Summer Day" from *House of Light* which ends: "Tell me what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" or in a poem entitled "Black Snake" from *What Do We Know*[5], which asks, "… if you would praise the world, what is it that you would leave out?" For the inevitable result of such seeing, the poems all but literally assert, can be nothing but spontaneous celebration and praise.

And that is part of the problem with Oliver's work. Though many readers and critics have pointed out the pains Oliver takes to avoid sentimentalizing nature, it can hardly be doubted that she comes perilously close in many of her poems. In the poem mentioned above, for instance, "The Summer Day" from *House of Light*, Oliver observes a grasshopper,

"the one who has flung herself out of the grass, / the one who is eating sugar out of my hand." A grasshopper eating sugar? Out of a human hand? Surely this is a fond fancy, a poetically contrived moment when emotion and the fervency of belief overcome reality. The grasshopper in the poem has been transformed into something cute, like a pony, which—for human beings, at least—is much easier to love than the many-limbed, chitinous, bug-eyed reality of an insect. And Oliver's further attempts to disguise the grasshopper's more alien features—she says it has "enormous and complicated eyes" and "pale forearms"—fail to convince. Now the grasshopper has become a beautiful, dark-eyed girl. But anyone who has studied a grasshopper closely knows that it is nothing like a pony or a girl. The triangular mask of its face, its twitching mandibles, dragon-like body, serrated appendages and jutting threadlike antennae bear no resemblance to anything cuddly or adorable. And its eyes—opaque, fixated, bulging—are complicated, yes, but not with the intricacies of beauty. Rather, the complexities of function and necessity. A particularly repellant feature of grasshoppers is that they have dirty brown blood and a soft segmented body not much more appealing than a maggot's. It is possible to admire grasshoppers for the way in which their bodies are adapted to their environment and their ability to persist over geologic time. But to love them? Perhaps in flight, when they "snap their wings open and float away." Even this, however, is not quite accurate. Less flight than awkward leap, they flop into the air to land with an inaudible thud wherever the trajectory of their oversized femurs happens to propel them. Yet these powerful hindlegs exhibit, oddly enough, the only real aesthetic feature of their gangly frame, marked as they are by garnet rows of chevrons from hip to knee.

Likewise, in the prose poem "Black Snake" from *What Do We Know*, Oliver seeks to redeem the much-maligned reputation of the snake as being on one hand slimy and shifty, and on the other a symbol of ultimate evil. Observing a snake sunning on a rock, she muses: "He has cousins who have teeth that spring up and down and are full of the sap of death, but what of that, so have we all." Fair enough. But when she depicts the snake devouring its prey and says, "he can catch a mouse and swallow it like a soft stone," we may balk at the obvious way in which she avoids the real horror here. The mouse is not a "soft stone," but has consciousness and feeling, and must be rigid with terror at being ingested whole,

completely aware and alive. Until overpowered by constriction and the peristaltic action of the snake's body, the mouse kicks for all it's worth to back away from that ghastly, rippling maw. We can accept and "forgive" the snake, of course, knowing it has no choice and is simply following the dictates of its genes. Like the grasshopper, we can even admire it and certainly respect it for its lethal power. But we must not prettify the brutal facts of the situation, or the mouse's fear. In fact, we may do them more honor by accepting them for what they are than falsifying or domesticating them in order to make them more sympathetic to humans.

A poem is not a zoological treatise. A poem is an imaginative act and need not conform to physical reality. At the same time, poems must not falsify psychological and emotional truth. We cannot be brought to feel what we do not feel, no matter how much we may wish to feel it, and no matter how commendable that wish may be. Nor can we be forced to deny what we assuredly know. If Oliver's poetic ambition is to bring herself—and her readers—to love all nature regardless of its more repulsive and downright horrifying aspects, she must do so honestly. Perhaps it is possible to love the grasshopper and the snake in a doctrinal sense, a Platonic spiritual sense, as legitimate representatives of God's abundant creation, but not—as Oliver would have us believe—in a personal, erotic, physical sense. It will be a long time before some of us are prepared to lie down easily with the scorpion or the black-tailed rattler.

The image of an idealized nature, of the lion reclining with the lamb, comes to us from a long tradition of Biblical belief. Once humanity—and with it all of co-corrupted nature—has been redeemed, the conventional animosities and competitions between animals will cease. We are not told what the animals will eat or how they will live, but we are assured that harmony and mutual love will reign among beasts. The wish for physical contact—safe, affectionate, reciprocal—is often expressed in Oliver's work in ways which we can more readily accept than the wish to consort with bugs or deadly serpents. In "The Roses," for instance, Oliver walks all day on the dunes of Cape Cod "from one thick raft of the wrinkled salt roses to another." Overcome by their allure, she addresses them: "O sweetness pure and simple, may I join you?" And in typical Oliverian fashion, feels the desire to be in contact. "I lie down next to them, on the sand." We may think this odd or not, but there is

nothing inherently repugnant in the act because roses are both beautiful and harmless. Moreover, most of us have dreamed of lying down in a field of flowers. It's the following lines that perplex: "But to tell / what happens next, truly I need help. / Will somebody or something please start to sing?" What does happen next? Something inconceivable? A floral orgy? We do not know, because the poem stops here. Oliver implies that she has fallen into a kind of erotic-spiritual swoon and cannot speak, like Theresa of Avila. There's little for the reader to do but discreetly avert his eyes and move on.

This kind of omni-eroticism is not new in American poetry. Whitman was the first to express it in "Song of Myself" and many of his ensuing poems. The desire is announced in his opening lines:

> The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of
> the distillation, it is odorless,
> It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
> I will go down to the bank by the wood, and become
> undisguised and naked,
> I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

Later, Whitman implores: "Press close, bare-bosomed night!" and, addressing the earth, says "Smile, for your lover comes!" From beginning to end, "Song of Myself" ripples with sexual energy that sometimes bursts out to manifest itself in passages of unusual frankness—unusual for the nineteenth century. This is the new world, and Whitman is the new Adam returning to Eden. The idea has a long and venerable tradition for both Transcendentalists and Puritans.

Oliver's assignation with the roses is not her only fling with nature either. In "The Return" she finds an abandoned seal pup along the beach and lies down on the sand "with my back toward it, and / pretty soon it rolled over, and rolled over / until the length of its body lay along / the length of my body." And in the poem, "Ghosts," from *American Primitive*, she dreams of the vanished buffalo sprawled across the Great Plains. In the final section of the poem, a cow gives birth to a calf:

> … in a warm corner
> of the clear night
> in the fragrant grass
> in the wild domains
> of the prairie spring… I asked them,
> in my dream I knelt down and asked them
> to make room for me.

It is a surprising and evocative moment, a moment when, through the poet's catalytic imagination, an ancient wish to commune with the animals is fulfilled, poetically at least.

But roses, baby seals, and bison are easy to love. We may be more easily persuaded to love them than other species more distant from us on the evolutionary chain. The closer the link, the better. By investing animals or plants with human attributes, we are drawn closer to them. And once we begin to identify with them, our sympathies are readily engaged. This is accomplished regularly with Oliver's mockingbirds, loons, ravens, egrets, larks, and the like, and other mammals such as the bobcat, skunk, whale, fawn, and wild goose. With some imagination, and Oliver has plenty, we can be brought to empathize with mussels, clams, dogfish, bats, and turtles, though some of the cold-blooded creatures and scavengers are harder to adore. Insects, reptiles, and vermin are perhaps the hardest sell of all. Sometimes, as with the grasshopper, the stretch to identify personally with something and therefore to love it is too great. No matter how much language, how much gorgeous and arresting imagery Oliver lavishes on such creatures, we demur. We step back. We hesitate in the face of such closeness to what is so alien and strange. Though Oliver does her best with the black snake,

> …he can climb a tree and dangle
> like a red-eyed rope out of its branches; he can
> swim…

we cannot quite be brought to believe that a snake is just one of the rascally boys in our neighborhood.

One of her easier persuasions, you might think, would be the dolphin. After all, they almost speak by themselves, frolic in the waves, ostensibly smile, and generally win our hearts with their watery shenanigans. And we all know how intelligent they are. Yet the poem "One Hundred White-sided Dolphins on a Summer Day" is arguably the weakest in her book, *What Do We Know*, perhaps because dolphins already resemble us in so many ways. Thus, the magic of Oliver's transformation is robbed of its initial peculiarity and surprise. There they are, leaping in the sea, "threading through the … foam," and we are sure a moment of transcendental illumination is on the way. How could it be otherwise? Oliver has set herself a daunting task: every time she passes over her threshold we expect nothing less than revelation. Inevitably, predictably, the dolphins rise to meet her challenge: collectively, they become God, who looks "with the moon of his eye / into my heart." And what does God find there?

pure, sudden, steep, sharp, painful
gratitude
that falls—

I don't know—either
unbearable tons
or the pale, bearable hand
of salvation
on my neck
lifting me
from the boat's plain plank seat
into the world's

unspeakable kindness …

For one thing, Oliver's estimable vocabulary and powers of description seem to fail her here. For another—perhaps because of that failure—we

are told what she feels, more than we are shown, which would allow us to experience her feelings for ourselves. The "bearable hand of salvation" is simply too vague an image to effect much of a transcendence. And because our hearts and our imaginations are not transported, we are unable to swallow the assertion towards which the experience is leading. The world is not unspeakably kind, though it is sometimes beautiful even in its savagery. The language of the poem continues to fail before the agenda it has set for itself. After asserting that she almost vanishes into the body of the dolphin—the typical conceit for spiritual union—she sinks to the bottom of the sea "with everything / that ever was, or ever will be." The language here is hackneyed, flat, even blustery in its attempt to convey vastness, hugeness, a sense of awe. What happens next? The animals continue to frolic:

> Then, in our little boat, the dolphins suddenly gone
> we sailed on through the brisk, cheerful day.

It is as if she had written: "…and then we all lived happily ever after." The ending is weak because what preceded it is weak, and the whole project of the poem—to bring us to a visionary understanding of God and salvation—collapses. Even the title of the poem is unconvincing: Were there actually one hundred dolphins? Or is this merely a symbolic number, like one of those exaggerated statistics from the Middle Ages, meaning *lots*. The whole poem has the feeling of a symbolic gesture, the depiction of an abstract grandiose idea rather than an actual, heartfelt experience.

This failure of language is evinced here and there throughout *What Do We Know*. In the poem "The Roses," for instance, there are several lapses in diction, all the more noticeable for a poet who is normally scrupulous about her word choices. Describing the roses, she says their petals are "red as blood or white as snow," comparisons so dull, so frayed and trite we are puzzled and shocked by them. And in a line already quoted above, she addresses the flowers: "Oh sweetness pure and simple, may I join you?" Purely and simply, this is shopworn language. Perhaps these are really lapses in imagination, which are always bound up at the root with language—a

lapse in one practically dictating a lapse in the other. Speaking of her beloved egrets once more, she says, "They stand in the marsh like white flowers." Surely this is the conventional image, the expected image, the first and easiest one the mind settles upon when striving after metaphor. And such failures lead, inevitably, to lapses in thought as well. Language-image-thought, they are intricately connected, affecting one another in radical ways. Describing a flurry in "Early Snow," Oliver remarks: "…the gardens began / to vanish as each white, six-pointed / snowflake lay down without a sound…" and later thinks "how not one looks quite like another / though each is exquisite, fanciful." This leads to an image of the snow as "a confident, white blanket / carrying out its / cheerful work…," the kind of facile personification that makes Oliver sound like one of those forgettable nineteenth century lady-versifiers who drove Ezra Pound to distraction.

Perhaps Oliver's silliest metaphors are reserved for "Mockingbird," a poem about writers' sometimes painful inability to marshal language in response to the world's obvious attractions. Wandering through the spring landscape, lonely as a cloud, she complains that she is unable to write a single word, nor even think anything at all "at the window of my heart." This flirts with sentiment and unquestionably works better in popular song than in poetry. Two stanzas later, Oliver commits to paper what may be her most egregious conceit. Referring to the landscape around her, she observes:

> And nothing there anyway knew, don't we know, what a word is,
> or could parse down from the general liquidity of feeling
> to the spasm and bull's eye of the moment, or the logic,
> or the instance,
> trimming the fingernails of happiness, entering the house
> of rhetoric.

The language and thought leading up to "trimming the fingernails of happiness" is a bit turgid, and the phrase, when it occurs, strikes us as unfortunate, if not somewhat ludicrous. Keats, listening intently to his bird, never allows himself to stray so far into the antic and bizarre.

Such failings are curious. In the past, Oliver has employed a precise and resourceful vocabulary—a powerful mode of expression—for the visionary experience. This is achieved not with polysyllabic Latinate terms from the vocabulary of philosophy, but, as is always with true visionaries, the simplest language, the words and images of everyday experience newly conceived. Pick up any of Oliver's earlier books and browse. You will find surprises on almost every page, language so original it seems to fit—to accommodate itself—to reality. So, in *American Primitive*, Oliver writes of the mole who digs "among the pale girders / of apple root" or the thrush, with its "gorgeous amoral voice," or the heron that spreads its wings and "rows forward into flight." Those words, "girder," "amoral," and "row," are precise, almost revelatory in their exactness. From *Dream Work*, possibly her best book, we read of the "one-lunged life" of clams, or starfish who slide "like too many thumbs" up onto the sand, or—a stunning auditory image—the ocean's "black, anonymous roar." In *Twelve Moons*, we read of "the hot blade" of the fish's body, of "silky" ponds and a turtle "hunting, morosely, for something to eat." Could there be a more perfect word than "morosely" to describe the turtle's sluggish, cold-blooded delving? And in *House of Light*, we are presented with fields in "wrappings of mist" and another more believable snake, a snake right out of the mystery of the universe and the poet's image-fusing imagination, a snake who moves "like a stream of glowing syrup." Here, the image is the illumination, not a description of it.

Part of the problem for a poet of exaltation is the exhaustion of language available for descriptive purposes. The stock nouns might include such terms as "sweetness," "joy," "gratitude," "beauty," "purity," "tenderness," "wonder," "kindness," "glory," "mystery," and so forth. Adjectives like "unspeakable," "luminous," "holy," or "unbearable" abound, as well as the words "lovely" and "utterly." All of these words—and/or variations of them—appear in her current work, and to a far lesser extent in the earlier books. When the poet is at her best, it is not in the guise of an explainer, but a presenter, one who invests images of the natural world with a startling newness, as though we had never really looked at landscapes or animals accurately before. The key is in the image, conceived with visionary perspective, and not in the mere testimony of general descriptive words like those above. And further, the image thus drawn must

be believed: not the fanciful "pale forearms" of the grasshopper, but the real bodies of sharks,

> sinuous explorers of the blue chambers
> of coastal waters moving
> easy as oil, without a wasted stroke,
> in and out of the warm coves.

It is the difference between thinking and seeing. Always it is the latter that galvanizes and transforms.

At her best, that is, Oliver does not attempt to beautify nature, to decorate the bare facts of reality with attractive anthropomorphic details. Instead, she looks closely with the obsessive focus of a predator's eye, and the words to incarnate reality seem to come to her naturally, though we know how much work it takes to hone the poet's sensibility to just such a keen edge of vision, and how much work it takes to shape that vision into song. Nor does Oliver insist on drawing a comforting moral out of what she sees. In "Sharks," excerpted above from the volume *Twelve Moons*, the swimmers along a beach are called out of the water after "the steep / dark dorsal fin" of a shark is spotted in the distance. A few hours later:

> … since nothing has happened
> a few figures dare the water to their waists,
> forgetting, as men have always forgotten,
>
> that life's winners are not the rapacious but the patient;
> what triumphs and takes new territory
>
> has learned to lie for centuries in the shadows
> like the shadows of the rocks.

Despite the elevated tone of "life's winners"—a line ringing with the rhetoric of a sports announcer—we are a long way from Oliver's frisking dolphins and their abstract, comforting message. A long way from the mockingbird with its "fingernails of happiness" and the black snake who "looks shyly at nothing and streams away into the grass." The shark, and the images that reveal it, are specific, unvarnished, and dead-on.

Among the more recent poems that convince are ones that retain some of the old fierceness of thought, if not imagery. Standing on the shore of one of the ponds that dot the landscape of Cape Cod, Oliver observes two herons—one blue, one green—neither of which is at that moment fishing. Therefore, "the little fish in their rainbow shirts are gliding peacefully by." Abruptly, the description of the scene is cut short by a narrative:

> There is an old story, often told, of a warrior frightened
> before battle, not so much for his own peril but for the strife
> to come, and the awful taking of life by his own sword.
> Suddenly a figure appears beside him—it is one of the gods
> in the dress of battle and on his face an expression of willingness
> and ferocity. His speech is brief, and all-encouraging.

The poem returns abruptly to the scene at the pond. The green heron, having been asleep, shakes itself awake and begins hunting. And the blue heron walks rapidly "one might say devotedly along the shore. And the water opens willingly for the terrible feet. And the narrow face, the powerful beak, plunge down." The gods, it is implied, not only encourage, but sponsor the carnage of nature. Hunger and death are not immoral in the non-human world. They are part of a divine order.

One of the strongest poems in *What Do We Know* begins with a familiar scene near the edge of woods (at twilight, of course) "when something begins / to sing, like a waterfall / pouring down / through the leaves." We are in familiar poetic territory here, and many other such scenes—from Frost, for example, or Keats—raise themselves up in memory. Ah, "the sweetness of it—those chords, / those pursed twirls… "We relax, prepared

for the usual encomium to nature's beauty and the romance of the night. Suddenly, the poem swerves in a different direction when the poet hears "out of the same twilight / the wildest red outcry." The sound is ghoulish, loud, desperate. It silences the thrush that had been singing. Is it the predator or its prey? Now, "the dark grows darker" as the appalling cry seems to eclipse everything, except the moon which has just begun to rise:

> And whatever that wild cry was
>
> it will always remain a mystery
> you have to go home now and live with,
> sometimes with the ease of music, and sometimes in silence,
> for the rest of your life.

This poem achieves the right balance between wonder and fear with regard to the natural world. The most important line in the poem, "out of the same twilight," is crucial. Out of the same inscrutable source—initially appealing—nature sends forth the beautiful and terrible, life and death, music and anguish, as though the merging of the two were not contradictory but somehow proper, logical, natural. It is just this mixture of rapture and dread that confounds us with regard to nature. Many lesser poets choose to ignore horror or gloss it over with decorative metaphors or the comforting technique of personification. But Oliver wisely rejects those possibilities here. The enigma remains—nature is not logical, but paradoxical. A paradox we must live with, whether we like it or not.

That is why, when in "Black Snake" Oliver asks, "if you would praise the world, what is it you would leave out?" answers leap to mind: the horrifying, the evil, the repulsive. How to praise them? Yet, in any serious account of nature they must be included. When emissaries from the savage, non-human side of nature show up, as with the shark or the "black prince" from "Raven with Crows," we must pay them due respect while regarding them with an unblinking fidelity. The raven, we are told, "is not a big bird… but an / impossibly big bird":

its
chunky, almost blooming black beak

and its large unquenchable eyes
shine
like a small, unheard explosion; it is
no crow, no perky, stiff-winged head-bobbing
corn-meddler…

All great nature poets understand it is not in sameness where the power of their poetry lies. If the animals are just like us, and we like them, what can they teach us? So, it is not in likeness, but in otherness where revelation resides. Once our humanness is thrown into relief against these alien creatures, we begin to discover who and what we really are. And who and what they are, as well. This is why writers from Thoreau to Gary Snyder have argued for the preservation of wilderness and wild species. When we lose them, they contend, we lose a part of ourselves that we may never recover. It is also worth noting that just here, with a less loveable creature, Oliver's imagery returns to something like its former vigor.

For throughout *What Do We Know* the imagery is not only domesticated, but rather generalized, ordinary, even tepid. Here, for example, the ocean's "black, anonymous roar" from *Dream Work* becomes simply "the big voice of the sea," an altogether friendly and companionable presence by comparison. In *American Primitive*, the sea is described as "luminous roughage," an "insucking genesis" and "that roaring flamboyance," images that strive to describe the ocean in terms of its unique otherness, its quintessential nature, not its generic qualities. It has often been asserted, as I have in the first chapter of this book, that the poet's job is Adam's job: to name the things of this world again as though for the first time. They wait, still, always, no matter what the age for their precise names, for the language of poetry to discover them and call them forth. In *Twelve Moons*, the sea becomes "A cold slate / full of swirls" from which waves are "tossed shoreward on dark tines, / lapping with boiling tongues / up the smooth sand," and later in the same poem, "the smashing of the water's gray fists / among the pilings" is heard, and "the blue cauldron / of the

sea's immense appetite" is discerned—shadowy, bottomless. In *House of Light,"* the sea / … was slashing along as usual / shouting and hissing/ toward the future." These images have movement, force, a kinetic energy that seeks to capture the spirit of nature in words. When Oliver returns to the sea in *What Do We Know*, it is only for a glance:

> When I went back to the sea
> it wasn't waiting.
> Neither had it gone away.
> All its musics were safe and sound; the circling gulls
> were still commonplace the fluted shells
> rolled on the shore
> more beautiful than money—
> oh yes, more beautiful than money!

Then she notices a number of seals, bobbing in the waves:

> oh bed of silk,
> lie back now on your prairies of blackness your fields of sunlight
> that I may look at you.
>
> I am happy to be home.

This is fine as far as it goes, but the passion for description, the fiery intensity of seeing and imagining, of grasping the world with words, has gone out of it. Once again, the language fails, falling into cliché: the sea is "safe and sound." All the poet can do now is point out a few "commonplace" things—the circling gulls, the fluted shells, the seals. Even the adjectives here are the usual ones. The specific, self-identifying sounds of the sea are now generalized into "all its musics." The phrase "prairies of blackness" is promising, but not followed up. The poet here has not gone out into the world where everything is unaccustomed and new, but has

come home to where things are old, familiar, and comfortable. We feel it in every line of the poem.

If there is a diminishment of poetic imagination and expression in her most recent work, how can we account for it? Age may play a part. There are many examples—especially among nature poets—of those whose literary powers have flagged with time. Wordsworth is foremost, but one might just as easily mention Lawrence or even Whitman, whom Lawrence called "the white aborigine." These and others have found that as the body ages, one begins to defer to the mind. That is, once the life of the senses begins to recede, so the life of the mind concomitantly takes precedence. As Wordsworth tells us in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood":

> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind…
>
> In the years that bring the philosophic mind.

The aging poet moves towards abstraction, toward ideas, away from the physicality of the body and the senses. But the senses are the only direct access the poet has to nature. Move away from them and you move away from the primal world of oceans and snakes and stars. The mind is weak, almost useless, for grasping the immediate facts of creation, for creation is manifestly a place of substance, a place of no-mind, or perhaps not-mind. Insofar as it is alive, it is generally a place of flesh, instincts, reflexes, and genetic mandate. In our egocentricity, human beings like to believe that most other animals have some sort of feeling and thought, an inner life like ours, but the number of animals who actually do amount to a pretty narrow fringe just below us on the evolutionary scale. The vast world of living things has nothing even approximating human consciousness or personality. And then there's the non-living world, the world of inanimate matter, and beyond that emptiness—a nearly atom-less vacuum—which

is what 99.99% of the universe is made of, according to cosmologists. The mind there is truly lost.

If the language of the mind is statement, the language of the senses is image. The sense-image when it is powerfully conceived, is both thought and thing. It is thought incarnated as thing. In her best moments, Mary Oliver still understands this. In the poem, "Wind," she writes:

> I am tired of explanations. Unless they are spoken
> by the best mouths. Black bear coming up from
> sleep, growling her happiness. Nighthawks snap-
> ping their way through the dusk. Or the voice of
> the wind itself flailing out of any and every quarter
> of the sky…

Yet, this poem, like so many others in *What Do We Know* seems barren of compelling images. It is mostly statement—mostly explanation. Unless one considers the final image, "the wind breaks open its silver countries of rain." But this seems more of a mental image than a sense-image, more contrived than felt, as the shark's oily, unimpeded movements through the blue chambers of the sea are obviously felt in *Twelve Moons*. There, the language is as concrete as the object being described. There, the imagination is engaged directly through the senses and the resultant image is palpable, undiluted by abstraction. And when thought does enter the poem, it feels as concrete and physical as the world out of which it has emerged. Recalling the excerpt from "Sharks" when a few people finally decide it's safe enough to wade back into the water, the language is crisp, clear, the thought it conveys as tangible as an object: "…what triumphs and takes new territory / has learned to lie for centuries in the shadows / like the shadows of rocks." We are reminded of Eliot's idea of dissociation of sensibility, his assertion that the Metaphysical poets enjoyed a special sensibility that has largely been lost. For Donne, Marvell, or Henry Vaughn, "a thought was an experience…" an experience characterized by "a fusion of thought and feeling." They "felt their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."

If there has been a dissociation of sensibility in the work of Mary Oliver, perhaps it is signaled by a movement in her career towards the prose poem. There are eight prose poems in *What Do We Know*, out of forty overall. Not a high ratio, granted. But none of the earlier books contain a single prose poem. They only begin to appear in 1994 with the publication of *White Pine* and continue through *West Wind* and *Winter Hours* to *What Do We Know*. In fact, *Winter Hours* is overwhelmingly a volume of prose and prose poems. Yet, Oliver is still able to assert: "I can think for a little while; then, it's the world again." In these volumes, poems in traditional lines and stanzas continue to predominate. But if prose is fundamentally the genre of speculation and thought—as in the essay, for instance—or the long narrative that develops a theme—as in the novel—then perhaps the move towards prose, once it has been taken, begins to bleed into the poet's more formal work as well. Perhaps the habit of abstraction begins to shadow the words and images of the tightly controlled lines of verse that once stood out so solidly from the page, and in the mind, as things rather than vehicles for themes or ideas.

Some of the finer moments in *What Do We Know* are not of inspired diction or imagery, but moments of direct statement offered up to the reader for his or her own reflection, like koans. Some have already been mentioned, as the statement in "Black Snake," "if you would praise the world, what is it you would leave out?" and the opening of "Wind," "I am tired of explanations." The book is peppered with others. In "Crows," she remarks: "Somewhere, among all my thoughts, there is a narrow path. / It's attractive, but who could follow it?" and in "The Lark," she asserts: "We are reconciled, I think, / to too much." In "Moonlight," she warns: "Take care you don't know anything in this world / too quickly or easily" which echoes the statements from "Snowy Night" quoted above. One of her best comments appears as the first line of "Blue Iris": "Now that I'm free to be myself, who am I?" At such moments, when she asks such questions and makes such statements, we are disarmed and ready to be convinced. These, and not images and tactile experiences, constitute the true visionary moments in *What Do We Know*. But moments of inspired statement, unfounded—or ungrounded—in the physical are the stock in trade of the essayist, more than of the nature poet. The nature poet's gift is to describe, to show, to re-create the world through images that fairly make us shudder

as though we responded to something actual and not an illusion, of art. That's what made Dickinson's pulse race and the hair stand up on the back of her arm—not abstract argument, no matter how intelligent. We respond physically to the physical. Statement only makes us pensive.

Oliver herself seems to guess at the problem afflicting her new work. Finding a huge jellyfish washed up on the shore, she says of her own struggle to describe it: "For all the liveliness of my mind, / I have to work to imagine / its life of gleaming and wandering, / its bulbous, slow, salt comfort…" A curious admission for a poet who seemed, for a while at least, to have found a perfect language to bring forth whatever object or creature she might come upon in the world.

Beneath the note of wonder and joy at the diversity of the natural world with which we are familiar in all her work, we detect an elegiac note, the beginning, perhaps, of a long valedictory. Time and again, the language blurs into hackneyed speech, cliché, easy sentiment, verbosity, a tendency towards the approximate rather than the exact. Is it mere chance that "Mink" is reserved for the final poem in the volume? Out walking again in the snow, Oliver is treated to a rare sight:

> A mink,
> jointless as heat, was
> tip-toeing along
> the edge of the creek,
> which was still in its coat of snow,
> yet singing—I could hear it!—
> the old song
> of brightness.

She can hear it, the "old song of brightness," but can she still reproduce it in powerful, accurate language? The proto-language of Adam articulating the world? It seems not. The banks of the creek wear only an ordinary "coat of snow," and the intricate, glassy, tinkling flow of an icebound brook is reduced to an "old song" whose one quality is an abstraction. She is reminded of Ruskin, but no—he never painted a scene like this.

She notices the trees leaning "this way and that" (a phrase only half a step away from "to and fro"). We can almost feel her straining to grasp some elemental noun, some fresh, animating verb that will bring it all to life. There is the "seed-beaded buckthorn," and the water that slips through the landscape "like a long, / unknotted thread." This is suggestive, but leads back to the mink who has "a hunger in him / bigger than his shadow" which was "gathered / like a sheet of darkness under his / neat feet." She watches as the mink sniffs the air, his way of acutely perceiving the world, but after attempting to imagine what the mink smells in rather bland images, she gives up: "who knows / what his keen nose was / finding out." Now it is possible for her to relax and say what she has to say outright: "for me, it was the gift of winter / to see him." Just seeing him is the gift, not capturing his essence, his spirit in that "old song of brightness." Moreover, it is the gift "of winter," that time of barrenness and endings.

Finally, she turns away altogether, but not without a retrospective glance or two, as if she knows such chances will come less and less now, and the attempt to capture them become increasingly difficult:

I stood awhile and then walked on

over the white snow: the terrible, gleaming
loneliness. It took me, I suppose,
something like six more weeks to reach
finally a patch of green, I paused so often
to be glad, and grateful, and even then carefully across
the vast, deep woods kept looking back.

ADDENDUM:

It is possible that poets whose careers last forty years or more will begin to repeat themselves and become programmatic in their approach. Certain subjects, themes, strategies, and perspectives show up with expected regularity—which is perhaps a comfort, not a liability, to their many readers. In Mary Oliver's latest, as of this writing, collection of poems, *Why I Wake Early*[6], the tokens of her style adorn almost every

poem with such predictability it is possible to posit a standard form, hardly more variable than the twelve-bar blues. It goes something like this: I woke up this morning and walked out into the shining world, where I found something amazing, which I observed, and in which I ultimately found sacred truth: the universe is beautiful and good beyond words. This God's-in-his-heaven-and-all's-right-with-the-world approach is evident from the very first poem in the volume:

> Hello, sun in my face.
> Hello, you who make the morning
> and spread it over the fields
> and into the faces of the tulips
> and the nodding morning glories,
> and into the windows of, even, the
> miserable and the crotchety—
>
> best preacher that ever was,
> dear star, that just happens
> to be where you are in the universe
> to keep us from ever-darkness,
> to ease us with warm touching,
> to hold us in the great hands of light—
> good morning, good morning, good morning.
>
> Watch, now, how I start the day
> in happiness, in kindness.

This chirpiness, this irrepressible good humor, is enough to dispense with suffering and death in a single brief line, for what can they matter in the face of such overwhelming and benign existence? "Every Day," the poet assures us in another poem later in the book, "I see or hear / something / that more or less / kills me / with delight… " One can only assume the poet never listens to the radio or reads a newspaper or even speaks to another informed human being. And the facts of natural science are glossed

over with indifference, as well. In Oliver's version of reality, a hundred species a day aren't slipping into extinction and the world isn't balanced on the edge of ecological disaster. Instead, she asserts, with characteristic bravura: "Oh Lord, how shining and festive is your gift to us, if we / only look, and see."

Even when the poet tries to accommodate the more terrifying aspects of existence in her poems, she fails notably—a failure that makes itself apparent in both image and diction:

> Don't call this world adorable, or useful, that's not it.
> It's frisky, and a theater for more than fair winds.
> The eyelash of lightning is neither good nor evil.
> The struck tree burns like a pillar of gold.

Not only humanity with its wars and torture chambers, its relentless injustice and wide-spread oppression, but all of nature "red in tooth and claw" is subsumed in that one insipid adjective: frisky. Understatement is hardly adequate to describe the euphemistic quality of "frisky" in this context. And though a bolt of lightning is neither good nor evil, it is a bit more than an eyelash to anyone but an inveterate idealist or an all-powerful god. By this time in her career and given her commitment to praising only the beauty of the world while ignoring the rest, Oliver is bound to beautify images of nature whenever they may appear threatening or ugly. So, a tree after being struck by lightning—splintered and still smoldering—becomes a pillar of gold, something lovely and positively symbolic. But even Yahweh's famous pillar was composed of wild, uncontainable fire, searing the sky, nothing so handsome and aesthetically pleasing as gold.

Why I Wake Early then continues, and even amplifies, the general substance and approach of earlier volumes, an approach that by this time has become almost reflexive. The poet is there to praise (consider the epigraph to this book, from George Herbert: "Lord! who hath praise enough?"), and any attempt to vary from this purpose will meet with immediate resistance from the poet herself: "I would like to write a poem about the world that has in it / nothing fancy," Oliver confesses in the

very first line of a poem, "But it seems impossible." The impulse to praise is admirable, even necessary, one of the oldest functions of poetry. But praise must come at the end of struggle, a true and comprehensive assessment of reality, praise that the reader feels has been wrested and won out of the general chaos and violence of existence. It cannot proceed blithely out of a self-satisfied and willful solitude. There is no struggle here, only conviction, something quite different.

In one of the best poems in *Why I Wake Early*, Oliver suddenly confronts her own complacency in lines of unusual frankness and, for once, takes herself task:

THE ARROWHEAD

The Arrowhead,
which I found beside the river,
was glittering and pointed.
I picked it up, and said,
"Now, it's mine."
I thought of showing it to friends.
I thought of putting it—such an imposing trinket—
in a little box, on my desk.
Halfway home, past the cut fields,
the old ghost
stood under the hickories.
"I would rather drink the wind," he said,
"I would rather eat mud and die
than steal as you steal,
than lie as you lie."