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What We Have Learned

Mary Oliver's unconventionality

Max Stephan

The year was 1994—late January, strolling through the university bookstore, not too enthusiastic about guessing how much the semester's texts would end up costing *this time*. That day—so long ago, I cannot remember which courses I was taking, nor how many books I had stacked in my arms. What I do remember, quite vividly in fact, is how one specific book caught my attention: *American Primitive*, a collection of poems by Mary Oliver.

The cover was lurid, dark: a blurred, black and white image of a forest alongside what appears to be a frozen, backwoods pond surrounded by barren trunks and leafless limbs, some drooping, others broken. No doubt: The image was creepy. I cannot recall if it was the cover that initially drew me toward the book, since it wasn't among the required texts for any of the courses I was taking, but as I paged through, what I found were poems about dancing snakes, mushrooms and moles, a stillborn kitten, trees on a hospital lawn, bobcats, bears, and bats—not what I had expected from the cover's cryptic image. Even more surprising, the words were common, none too fancy or ornate, but each line carried weight: heavy, genuine, and tangible.

After a few minutes, I took another quick look at the cover to see if I recognized the poet's name but, at that time, nothing clicked. The cost: $7.95. Most of the other texts I held sported price tags of $50 or more. "What the hell—why not?" I mumbled to myself as I added it to the stack.

In retrospect, I can identify that split-second decision as one of the fundamental, if not fate-driven, turning points in my academic career.

Twenty-five years later, almost to the day, news began to spread of the passing of Oliver—the poet whom I had discovered by chance, the voice that had become the core of my academic research. Reflections and praise honoring her work and accomplishments were heard around the world on January 17, 2019.

A red-tailed hawk on a fence post. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB/DENISE HURT

Sitting at my desk, looking out the window, I began to muse: well over 1,000 poems in more than 20 books, the ways in which her work had changed over time, the topics she addressed and rejected. So, so much.

When I started to write this essay, I thought about concentrating on lines from poems that most have read: those printed on posters, sold in gift shops, selected for anthologies. I could have recited the basic words of praise voiced about "Wild Geese" or dug deeper into the true meaning of "Rice." But such are the poems the world already knows.

Yes—Oliver wrote about deer and dreams, fish and fall, rage, devoted love, and her dogs. She spoke of all forms of life: both flora and fauna, never too scientific, and not once identifying cells by genus and species. She let the reader make the connection—or not—with as much as they knew and understood about the snake or sparrow, vulture or violet, and she never attempted to boost her image with proof of knowledge. Oliver kept her messages simple and clear, a method and style that some critics took as a weakness. The undecorated phrases and clarity she embraced were part of what made Oliver's writing stand independently.

When I first began studying Oliver's poems for graduate work in the late 1990s, I stumbled into an obscure field of poetic research. For the past twenty years, I have been collecting and documenting Oliver's work. What originated as merely a detailed database listing each piece of work and where it had first appeared in print evolved into a category of poetic research known as genetic criticism. As my gathering of original journal publications swelled, I intensified my attention to detail and began to sift out discoveries—some minuscule, others dramatic.

Genetic criticism can be compared to investigative work: digging deep into early publications, drafts, or notes (if found), and inspecting the rounds of editing that led to later publications or prints. All too often, scholars look no further than the latest print edition. But, my friends, one finds secrecy and concealed splendor in poetry when discovering what waits to be found: everything from evidence of how a poem or theme had evolved before its latest print, to poems published in journals but deemed unfit for a book or anthology. This is where the truth of a poet awaits. What I had unearthed from dusty shelves tells much of Oliver's progress over time.

Vital windows to critical moments in a young poet's life can be unveiled when examining earlier, lesser-known work. In 1956 and 1957, three of Oliver's earliest poems ("Hawks at Task," "The Rabbit," and "The Punishment") appeared in three separate issues of *Vassar Review*, a student-run literary journal funded by Vassar College. Of the three poems, only one appeared in Oliver's first collection, *No Voyage and Other Poems*, published in 1963. Although Oliver has labeled most of her earlier writing as "derivative work," little conjecture is necessary to hypothesize its weight and representation.

Close examination of these poems reveals early traces of identity and self-discovery interwoven with developmental verse—poems remarkably symbolic of the challenges she faced throughout her life: the ways in which

Oliver's actions and words confronted and challenged the barriers of gender and sexual identity in the late 1950s. Imagine the young woman crafting these lines: "The taste of blood upon the tongue / Might make rare music, were it sung, — / But murder in the feathered heart / So sets the criminal apart" ("Hawks at Task"). There is nothing soft in the images portrayed. Although the poem follows numerous traditional regulations, including the iambic beat, first-word capitalization, and a couplet rhyme scheme, the subject matter was unconventional for women at that time. Published more than half a century ago, and a quarter of a century before Oliver's emergence in 1984 as the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, each of these poems clench premature, fragmented traces of Oliver's hallmark voice.

The word *fragmented* is key. Oliver tested various forms and subject matter for nearly two decades. During 1977 and 1978, however, significant changes began to appear in her work, a sudden metamorphosis not only of style and genre but also of theme. Although she had experimented with numerous fauna images, at that time the creature on which Oliver seemed fixated was the bear. Discursive investigation reveals that, by using the image of the bear in verse, Oliver unveils a revolutionary emergence in gender identity parallel to the budding of her voice and work.

Oliver's bear poems evolved from the mid-1970s on through the late 1980s. The inception of the bear can be traced back to the poem "Bears on the Massachusetts Turnpike," published in *Yankee* magazine in 1974. Through this rather simplistic and informative narrative, the reader can question commercial development and its intrusion in nature while simultaneously appreciating modern construction's attempts at accommodating wildlife. "The bear" is vaguely defined, if not overtly generic. The creature is "fattened by berries," "near-sighted, peaceful, [and] sleepy." The poem focuses more on coexistence, describing men as those who love "no thing / So much as sitting down / In tavern." Both the subject and object are plural ("men" and "bears"), with bears addressed androgynously, with no emphasis on traditional or untraditional gender characteristics.

During the following two years, Oliver wrote several additional poems based on the bear, including "The Bear" and "The Truro Bear"; however, "Winter Sleep" represents a crucial shift in the image and representation of the bear, revealing details told through the bear's personified features, actions, and reflections. By 1977, new perspectives of the bear emerged. "Winter Sleep," first published in *Poetry Northwest*, offers an image of the bear both

tantalizing and telling. Contrary to earlier work, the bear's sex was unquestionably female. Using the title the "she-bear," Oliver's strengthening voice ventured bold steps in untouched territory. The poem begins:

> If I could I would
> Go down to winter with the drowsy she-bear,
> Crawl with her under the hillside
> And lie with her, cradled. Like two souls
> In a patchwork bed —

And with lines 20–25, the poem concludes:

> We would sleep and dream.
> We would wake and tell
> How we longed for spring.
> Smiles on our faces, limbs around each other,
> We would turn and turn
> Until we heard our lips in unison sighing.

If read independently, lines 23 to 25 offer an erotic ambiance. And if substituting the bear with one's partner, such sincerity is quite telling. When hypothesizing the dramatic changes that had taken place during this critical period in Oliver's career, evidence is in the text: Oliver had faced conflicting views on sexual representation, hence the sex and gender represented in her work.

Surprisingly, minimal literary criticism of Oliver's work exists; in the 1980s, other than a handful of reviews, there was close to none. To date, Oliver remains a critically undervalued poet.

In 1994, Vicki Graham took an unprecedented step forward in the literary criticism of Oliver. In her essay, "Into the Body of Another: Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other," Graham theorizes Oliver's act of becoming one with nature as an ability to "not just . . . cross the boundaries between ourselves and others, but to be divided within ourselves." Graham's theory bases nature—and nature alone—as the Other. Though I agree with Graham's belief that one's "identity is multiple and the boundaries of the self are unstable," a critical fissure exists in Graham's interpretation of Oliver's gender identity and the methods through which her identity is revealed.

Contrary to Graham's theory that Oliver "loses" herself by becoming what is nonhuman—whether that's a bear, whale, tree, or violet—I firmly believe that the transcendence of becoming another represents, if not unveils, Oliver's true self. Through the bear, Oliver's sexual identity is not lost but found and praised. Oliver becomes the bear and presents her sexuality to the reader. She symbolically announces and establishes her beliefs, pleasures, and desires.

The image of the she-bear continued to appear in poems through the 1980s. Through the she-bear, Oliver celebrated specific events and actions, ranging from images of conception and giving birth to nurturing and feeding a cub (child). Likewise, she left the male bear unidentified or secondary. Ultimately, she praised features, traits, and characteristics she found feminine and idyllic.

In contrast to her earlier work and before the publication of *Twelve Moons* (1979), Oliver decided to abandon the narrative as well as personal references. She opted to vacate the "self-examination" of her earlier poems, in which she questioned sexuality and sexual identity. She substituted sexual identity with symbolism and mystic imagery of nature and the wild, as if coming out with the assistance and guidance of various flora and fauna, such as the bear, the sensual taste of honey in the beehive, sleeping in the den, and so forth. At this point, Oliver adopted nature not solely as the core of her work but as a method of representing sensitive matters. Oliver's fresh voice began to emerge well-defined and self-directed.

Writers often break from their norms. In 1999, I read Oliver's short essay, "Building the House," a brief muse on her attempt to build a small cabin in backwoods Massachusetts. She had tried to show the importance of learning traditional construction methods when building from scratch. Her reflection on the "hows" and "whys" of piecing together a building emphasized how much she learned from a hands-on experience. The "house" ended up being more of a small cabin, but she accomplished her goals, both mentally and physically.

Oliver's choice to build a new structure required planning, and it carried surprises. Blueprint set, hammer in hand, connect the Legos as directed. Oliver talked about the obstacles she confronted, most of which she had not unexpected. She learned how not to violate state or town laws and to keep neighbors' rights in mind.

The essay drew me back to a poem Oliver had written in the early 1970s, "New England Houses." The poem speaks of aging tradesmen and carpenters, their traditional methods, hands-on work, and fear of change. Oliver writes that the carpenters were "happiest at [their] tasks of wood, / Shaped and hammered like disciples of time" who "drove the nails in straight and deep, / Pounding for love and a kind of salvation." But she reveals fear, if not anxiety, soon after: "'Now,' said the carpenters, 'the world / has changed.'"

The narrative was a staple in Oliver's earlier work—not necessarily poetry of witness revealing human pain, but vision publicizing personal experiences as a child and young woman. Third-party subjects were common, but images of family were stronger. Oliver's first three books of poetry—*No Voyage and Other Poems* (J.M. Dent, 1963 and Houghton Mifflin, 1965); *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972); and *Twelve Moons* (Little, Brown, 1979)—as well as her first chapbook, *The Night Traveler* (Bits Press, 1978), all include poems about Oliver's childhood, family, and the rural Appalachian community in which she grew up.

Oliver's lyric poems, at times intimate, speak of memories and reflections, both with and without family. "After My Grandfather's Death: A Poem of the China Clock" and "The Grandmothers" provide images of the lifestyle Oliver knew as child. "The Grandmothers" opens with: "They moved like rivers in their mended stockings, / Their skirts, their buns, their bodies grown / Round as trees." Later, a mix of memory and emotion expose the differences between generations, remembering "their hands, swollen and hard as wood."

From the early 1960s on through the late 1970s, kin were common in Oliver's poems. In "Strawberry Moon," Oliver speaks of her great-aunt; in "Dreams," she references her two great-uncles who got lost in Colorado. She talks about her Aunt Elsie and Uncle William in "Aunt Elsie's Night Music." She writes of her mother as a widow in "The Black Walnut Tree." Oliver's poems about her father dig deepest into memories kept quiet for decades. In the chapbook *The Night Traveler*, "Ice" remembers Oliver's father in his last winter, when he had made "ice-grips for shoes / Out of strips of inner tube and scrap metal" and how he "wrapped and mailed / A dozen pairs to me in the easy snows / Of Massachusetts, and a dozen / To my sister, in California." Later in the poem, after Oliver's father passes away, the meaning behind the previous winter's gifts is revealed: "the giving was an asking / a petition."

Following the publication of "Ice," Oliver published only one additional poem about her father, "Poem for My Father's Ghost," unofficially letting go of narrative family images.

Change is constant, never ending. Change cannot be avoided—altered, modified, but not stopped. Oliver's poems went through numerous changes over time. The bold, revealing words of the late 1970s and early 1980s gave way to the prose poem, poems of redemption, poems of lost love, and poems of genuine kindness. While researching and collecting Oliver's work, I was able to identify such changes firsthand. Much of her writing first appeared in more than 100 newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals over the span of 60 years. She published in the *Paris Review, Orion, Ploughshares,* and *Prairie Schooner*. Most journals had the privilege of publishing her work multiple times. Poems in ten different issues of *The American Scholar* stretched from 1963 through 2003. Her work appeared in 15 issues of *Poetry* and 25 issues of the *Amicus Journal/on Earth*. But the one journal that has published the highest number of Oliver's poems is *Appalachia*. In more than 30 issues spanning 27 years, Oliver's poetry has been a staple in the Appalachian Mountain Club's journal—an accomplishment that no other literary journal will ever surpass.

Oliver's first poems to appear in *Appalachia* were "The Gesture" and "The Instant," both published in 1992 (June 15 and December 15) when Sandy Stott was editor-in-chief. From 1992 on, Oliver's writing appeared in nearly every issue. These poems ranged from those about her dogs ("The Dog Has Run Off Again") to more personal reflections ("From this River, When I Was a Child, I Used to Drink").

As the last sentence of Mary Oliver's life ended on January 17, 2019, people around the world suffered multiple levels of sorrow. Suddenly realizing that no new poems or essays would be surprising any readers when paging through the latest issue of *Appalachia* or *Michigan Quarterly Review*, I felt disappointment mixed with grief. But it did not take long to grasp how far Oliver's accomplishments outweigh the work of most of America's contemporary poets. The number and scope of poems published, the obstacles she had overcome, awards received, and praise voiced regularly are all aspirations for other poets and writers.

In closing, a short excerpt from Oliver's prose poem "I Have Decided" (in *A Thousand Mornings*, Penguin Press, 2012) says it best:

> I have decided to find myself a home in the mountains, somewhere high up where one learns to live peacefully in the cold and the silence. It's said that in such a place certain revelations may be discovered. That what the spirit reaches for may be eventually felt, if not exactly understood. Slowly, no doubt. I'm not talking about a vacation.

Mary, what you have created through the years will never halt its inspiration, wonder, and reflection. Your volumes of verse will continue to enlighten those with a love for the wild, just as much as those wild about love: love for one another, love for wonder, love for faith. We know that every second of every day, your soul is at peace in the very same mountains you once envisioned, forever watching the sun rise, hiking in the pinewoods, counting the maple leaves, tasting the joy of honey, and loving everyone and everything around you. In your absence, the world has changed again.

For the past 20 years, Max Stephan has been conducting the most comprehensive textual criticism of Mary Oliver to date: a systematic archaeological gathering of Oliver's work, followed by an archival process of documenting and analyzing publications as far back as the 1950s. Stephan's ever-growing compilation of more than 500 artifacts is one of the largest private collections of its kind nationwide. In addition to *Appalachia*, Stephan's writing has appeared in a wide range of publications, stretching from *The Christian Science Monitor* to *Cimarron Review*. He teaches at Niagara University, specializing in contemporary American poetry. Learn more about his work at maxstephan.net.