

CALL TO WORSHIP: Mary Oliver's poem "The Sun" which begins "*Have you ever seen/ anything/ in your life/ more wonderful...*"

MARY OLIVER: POET OF WONDER PART I

Mary Oliver celebrated her 82nd birthday last Sunday, September 10th.

Born in 1935 in Maple Heights, Ohio, a semi-rural suburb of Cleveland (population 6,500 in 1935.) Her father was a social studies teacher and athletic coach in the Cleveland public schools. She tells us almost nothing about her mother.

She had a particularly a troublesome and abusive relationship with her father. Of her childhood she says: "*It was a very dark and broken house that I came from. And I escaped it, barely. With years of trouble.*"¹

She skipped school a lot, setting a truancy record. She would take her knapsack of books (especially poetry, such as Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass), and spend her a day in the woods, observing and writing.

She read voraciously to get away from her home life. She writes: "*I got saved by poetry. And the beauty of the world.*"

Which poets we are attracted to is a very personal matter - a matter of personal taste.

I know the reason I'm attracted to Mary Oliver's poetry. It has to do with my childhood. From the time I was 6 or 7 till I was 12, my folks lived in a tiny guest house on a huge estate in the outskirts of New Canaan, Conn (they were saving up their money to build their own dream house one day). I had only one other playmate, an older boy (and I saw him only on Saturdays because he attended a private boarding school during the week.)

So I spent many hours of my days exploring the estate's 75 acres of woods, streams and ponds (It's hard to imagine parents allowing their young children to do what I was allowed to do back then.) I would spend

¹ Many of these quotes come from Upstream (2016), a collection of short essays and prose pieces from some of her other books of poetry - the closest we have to an autobiography.

my time climbing trees, damming up streams, constructing forts, watching pond life — fish, turtles and snakes, and occasionally encountering foxes, otters, deer, skunks and rabbits. And I loved trying to track these animals in winter time.

I'm sure this is what immediately attracted me to her poetry. I resonate with Mary Oliver's solitary encounters in and with nature.

Because of her difficult and abusive home life, as soon as Mary Oliver was able to, she left her hometown. At age 17², she left home for good and made a pilgrimage to the poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay's, home in Austerlitz, New York— called Steepletop.

Edna St. Vincent Millay had died two years earlier³. Millay's sister, Norma, was running the homestead as a museum. Mary Oliver and Norma hit it off and Mary lived there for seven years, working on her own writing, and helping Norma organize Millay's papers.

It was on a return visit to Steepletop, several years later, in 1958, that Mary Oliver met and fell in love with Molly Malone Cook, a friend of Norma's (a photographer, a staff photographer for the Village Voice), Of their first meeting, Mary writes *"I took one look and fell, hook and tumble."*

Molly and Mary were partners for over 40 years. They lived most of their time together in Provincetown, Mass.. And some time after Molly's death in 2005, Mary moved to southern Florida to Hobe Sound⁴.

Mary Oliver attended Ohio State University and Vassar during the 1950's, but never earned degrees.

Mary has held a variety of odd jobs over her lifetime. She once said: *"I was very careful never to take a interesting job. Not an interesting one. I took lots of jobs. But if you have an interesting job you get interested in it. I also began in those years to keep early hours....If anybody has a job and starts*

² In 1952.

³ On October 19, 1950.

⁴ See interview with Trista Tippet. *"Sold my condo (in Provincetown) this summer & bought a little house down here."* Here is Hope Sound, FL. This was before October, in 2015 - I'm guessing 2013. She moved to Florida to be closer to friends.

at 9, there's no reason why they can't get up at 4:30 or 5 and write for a couple of hours, and give their employers their second best effort of the day — which is what I did."

She published her first book of poetry in 1963, when she was 28. She published 5 more books before her poetry achieved recognition. She published her 5th book of poetry in 1983, and the following year it won the Pulitzer Prize⁵ - and her life has not been the same since.

After receiving the Pulitzer Mary was invited to be "Poet in Residence" at many colleges and Universities. During the 1980's she taught at Case Western Reserve University, Bucknell University (1986), Sweet Briar College (1991), Bennington College (? - 2001). In 1992 she won the National Book Award for her New and Selected Poems.

A new section of her poetry, called Devotions, will be published on October 10th. of this year.

Mary does not think of herself as a traveller — except in her own neighborhood of Provincetown. In her book, Winter Hours (1999), she writes *"Never been to Rome. Never been to Paris or Greece or Sweden. Did go with Molly once to the Far East."* And she did come to San Miguel once! And wrote a poem about her visit - "First Days in San Miguel de Allende."⁶ (Guessing her visit to San Miguel, on her first ever trip to Mexico, was in the winter of 2008.)

She loves her solitude. Very seldom grants interviews. Doesn't like being in the news. While her partner, Molly was still alive, and people would call their house, asking for Mary, Molly would answer the phone, pretend to get Mary, fake footsteps walking away from the phone, and come back to the phone, and pretend to be Mary. (Probably how Molly became Mary's literary agent.)

Mary says: *"I've always wanted to write poems and nothing else. There were times over the years when life was not easy, but if you're working a*

⁵American Primitive.

⁶ Published in Evidence (2009). So visit must have been in winter of 2008. See Oona Patrick interview.

few hours a day and you've got a good book to read, and you can go outside to the beach and dig for clams, you're okay."

(*morsel of info*). When, in the a poem, she mentions clams, mussels, berries or edible plants, it's very likely she was foraging that day for her afternoon or evening meal. During her lean years, she would forage for food (like Ewell Gibbons) while making notes for her poems.

Mary Oliver and Billy Collins are the best-selling living U.S. poets. Of her poems she says: *"One thing I do know is that poetry, to be understood, must be clear. It must't be fancy. ... I always feel that whatever isn't necessary shouldn't be in a poem."*

That's my bias too. I love poetry that is accessible. I find much of contemporary U.S. poetry too baroque. It may be great but too baroque for me. I do love "politically engaged" poetry, like Adrienne Rich, Marge Piercy, Carolyn Forché - and neither Mary nor Billy Collins are "politically engaged" poets. But Mary Oliver's poems are not just sweetness and light. She writes poems about her childhood abuse, and her struggle with cancer four years ago, and published a book of poems on grief after her partner, Molly, died in 2005. She is rooted in the Romantic tradition of poetry - however, she can show us ecstasy one minute, and show us a world of predators and prey in the next.

One of her Provincetown anecdotes that I remember: The poetic muse speaks to Mary on her walks and hikes. So she always carries with her a hand sewn notebook so she can stop and make entries. One time she discovered she had no pencil to write with, so from then on, squirrel like, she hide pencils in the trees along the trails she liked to hike so she always has a spare.

One of her famous poems, "The Summer Day" (which Luisa and Elisa will read later in English and Spanish) ends with the line, *"Tell me what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"* An interviewer once asked her what she'd done with her own wild and precious life, Mary answered, *"Used a lot of pencils."*

She writes: *"Every day I walk out into the world/ to be dazzled, then to be reflective."*

Listen to her poem, Messenger⁷

*My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird -
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.*

*Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,*

*which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,*

*Which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.*

(End of Part I)

FIRST SET OF READINGS (Four poems by Mary Oliver, read by Judy Rosenthal):

The Swan (Begins “This clumsy living...”)
The Swan (Begins “Did you see it...”)
Almost a Conversation
Some Questions You Might Ask

⁷ From Thirst

SECOND SET OF READINGS: (Three poems by Mary Oliver read in English and Spanish by Luisa Fields and Elisa Gonzales)

Wild Geese / Gansos salvajes
The Journey / El viaje
The Summer Day / El dia verrano

MARY OLIVER: POET OF WONDER PART II

The three Mary Oliver poems that Luisa and Elisa read “Summer Day,” “Wild Geese” and “The Journey.” — are three of her poems that will be remembered and recited for a long time. Part of her poetic legacy.

A poem is a kind of dwelling place that invites us to dwell in other habitations more thoughtfully. Mary Oliver’s poems summon us to relationship with the natural world.

Thomas Berry, I believe, touches on the essence of her poetry project when he makes the claim: “The Universe consists of a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

Her giving voice to nonhuman subjects is a way of honoring their otherness. It also reminds us of the capacity other beings to be our teachers, holders of knowledge, guides for us.

Mary Oliver’s poems are not religious in a classic sense, but they do have designs on us - their readers. They are a summons to wonder and delight.

She writes: *“I learned from Walt Whitman that the poem is a temple — or a green field — a place to enter and in which to feel....I learned that a poem was made not just to exist, but to speak — to be company.”*

She writes: *“I think of myself as a ‘praise poet’ - I acknowledge my feeling and gratitude for life by praising the world.”*

Not surprising — one of her favorite poets is Rumi.

The central project of Mary Oliver is to return us to a sense of wonder. The speaker in her poems is meant to be a representative person going into the wilderness in search of otherness. She wants to make the “I” of her poem stand for us, the reader. She makes the “I” of her poem stand for Everywoman/Everyman.

The poet’s role is to listen to what has no tongue, to become its tongue, to translate the lesson a hawk, a humpback whale, or a lily might have for us.

Wonder, she believes, awakens the moral sense. That’s why so many of her poems end with that twist of perspective, from “other” to “self” — from description to asking herself:

“How should I be living?”

“What should I be doing with my one wild and precious life?”

“Am I too much focused on power, money or things?”

“What does it mean that the earth is so beautiful?”

“What is the gift I should bring to the world?”

“What is the life I should live?”

“What is my life next to this?”

She wants a poem to ask something and she wants the question to remain unanswered. She wants it to be clear that answering the question is our/the reader’s part.

She writes: “I would say that there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and our chances are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family; and there is no decency or sense of honoring one thing, or a few things, and then closing the list... We are each other’s destiny.”

She writes: “I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. But not me. For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple.”

One advantage of poetry over other forms of literature is that people are more apt to remember poems (or even memorize poems). In this way poetry is closer to song than prose. Poetry is also close to prayer. Prayers, like poems, are forms of literature that people sometimes choose to memorize.

I conclude with her poem: *I Happen to be Standing*

*I don't know where prayers go,
or what they do.
Do cats pray, while they sleep
half-asleep in the sun?
Does the opossum pray as it
crosses the street?
The sunflower? The old black oak
growing older every year?
I know I can walk through the world,
along the shore or under the trees,
With my mind filled with things
of little importance, in full
self-attendance. A condition I can't really
call being alive.
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition,
or does it matter?
The sunflowers blaze, maybe that's their way.
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe not.*

*While I was thinking this I happened to be standing
Just outside my door, with my notebook open,
Which is the way I begin every morning.
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,
I don't know why. And yet, why not.
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe
Or whatever you don't. That's your business.
But I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be
if it isn't a prayer?
So I just listened, my pen in the air.*

CLOSING WORDS: From Part 3 of “The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac.”

*...I know, you never intended to be in this world.
But you're in it all the same.
So why not get started immediately.
I mean, belonging to it.
There is so much to admire, to weep over.
And to write music or poems about.
Bless the feet that take you to and fro.
Bless the eyes and the listening ears.
Bless the tongue, the marvel of taste.
Bless touching.
You could live a hundred years, it's happened.
Or not.
I am speaking from the fortunate platform
of many years,
none of which, I think, I ever wasted.*

*Do you need a prod?
Do you need a little darkness to get you going?
Let me be as urgent as a knife, then,
and remind you of Keats,
so single of purpose and thinking, for a while,
he had a lifetime.*