To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Janet Lee Warman entitled "'Voices the Heart Can Hear': From Silence to Voice in the Poetry of Mary Oliver." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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"VOICES THE HEART CAN HEAR":
FROM SILENCE TO VOICE IN THE POETRY OF MARY OLIVER

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Janet Lee Warman

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FOR JEANNE SAUNDERS

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Permission has been granted to use quotations from the following poems:

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ABSTRACT

Mary Oliver's poems are predominantly nature lyrics; therefore, they contain subject matter often devalued in our culture. She has been disregarded in most serious critical studies of contemporary poetry, even in studies of contemporary poetry by women. Her relationship to nature is complex, however, and it provides a means by which she can achieve a powerful voice.

In Oliver's earliest poems, women are often silent or speak ineffectually. These poems tend to be traditional in structure and have an artificial, distant quality. In Oliver's middle poems, however, she begins to listen to the sounds of nature and gradually moves into her own relationship with the flora and fauna. As she does so, her forms become freer. Both her union with nature and her increased use of less constrained forms can best be illuminated by feminist criticism, particularly that of feminist critics who see the feminine impulse as connective and fluid. In her final volume, entitled Dream Work, Oliver reevaluates the tasks required of and the problems inherent in finding a voice. This work provides a transition between all of her published poetry to date and what is yet to come.

My purpose in this study is twofold: to point out the development from silence to voice in Oliver's poetry

and to argue that there is enough of substance in her work to merit further serious critical study.

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INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that her American Primitive won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, Mary Oliver has received little serious critical attention. Numerous book reviews dismiss her as a "nature poet"; settle for superficial comparisons to Keats, Frost, and Roethke, among others; or find, as Anthony Thwaite does, that "one spends most of one's time registering if [she has] anything interesting to say" (6). Only Patricia Yaeger notes that something more than mere jubilation in the presence of nature is taking place in Oliver's poetry. Yaeger sees several of the poems in American Primitive as explorations of "the woman writer's capacity to lighten the burden of the tradition she has already begun to transform, to swallow what was meant to swallow her" (21-2).

Yaeger's work is a welcome beginning; however, it deals primarily with only one volume of Oliver's canon. A study of the totality of Oliver's work reveals that her achievement of a voice in her Pulitzer-prize-winning volume is hard-won. It is, then, important to look at the whole body of Oliver's work in order to see her progression from silence to voice. Early poems often include women who are silent or whose speech is ineffectual, in marked contrast to men whose words carry

power. These early poems as well as her middle poems reveal an intense desire to achieve speech, while still listening to a nature that speaks but does not oppress. Later poems display this achieved speech through acknowledgment of the poet's connections with nature.

Because of these motifs of silence and voice, Oliver's work can most readily be illuminated by feminist criticism. Most valuable in this context are analyses by early feminist critics of the patriarchy's power to silence women as well as the works of more recent French feminists who see feminine language as a pre-symbolic expression which makes use of the body to explore the full range of meaning.

In the fall of 1988, I had the privilege of attending a reading by Mary Oliver at The University of Tennessee. Though I had read and enjoyed her poetry prior to that evening, I first became aware of the power of her poetry while hearing her read. I do not use the word <u>power</u> indiscriminately in association with Oliver's work, for that evening I and seemingly everyone around me became aware of something working through her words to transform us. For weeks after that, I avidly read her poems, searching for the mysterious key to her power. I was convinced that if I could read her words carefully enough I could discover her secret. However, it was not until I began reading feminist criticism and looking

between the lines and between the words, into the silences in her poetry, that its power began to reveal itself.

My study does not mean to suggest that the progression from silence to voice is the only development present in Oliver's poetry. Nor does it mean to suggest that a feminist perspective is the only way in which to read Oliver "correctly" or that writing about nature is the only way for a woman to achieve an effective voice. However, Oliver's material is rich and complex. The sad fact that she has not been heard by those who study contemporary literature provides ample reason to look at her developing voice and her use of nature in order to determine what is taking place under the surface of her poems. In addition, when so much is being written about whether women writers can possibly find a way to use a male-dominated language system to express their own experiences, it is necessary to study those women writers who have been able to achieve a voice in order to see what possible avenues of expression are available to women. Oliver is one such writer who has found a way to speak, and her process of finding her way thus deserves attention.

Chapter I focuses on Oliver's first two books, No Voyage and Other Poems and The River Styx, Ohio and

Other Poems, and examines the way in which men speak and women are silent in these poems. The phenomenon of silent women in the poems is analyzed as a result of cultural expectations concerning the roles available to women.

Chapter II examines the motif of listening in Oliver's early and middle poems. As she listens to nature, she begins to break free from the restrictions of silence and to find an environment within which she can later achieve her own poetic voice. "Voice" here is used as "more than an academic shorthand for a person's point of view," in that it connotes as well the interconnection of language, "mind, and self," as discussed by Belenky et al (18). "Nature" refers to the non-human world of flora, fauna, and other natural phenomena, all of which "speak" to Oliver through their own sounds and through their relatedness to each other and to the poet.

Chapter III studies the content of the chapbooks and Twelve Moons and American Primitive, particularly in terms of how Oliver increasingly enters into a relationship with nature. After acknowledging the ways in which human beings are separate from nature, she finds her place as a female in the natural scheme of the universe, accepts her body as a part of the world's body, and meditates on her fusion with the origins of life.

The French feminists who view the feminine as a fusionary rather than a separative impulse illuminate Oliver's task in these books.

Chapter IV continues the discussion of Oliver's achievement of a voice by studying the technical changes that occur in her poetry. Oliver finds an original, feminine voice by breaking free from traditional forms of rhyme and meter, by entering into a relationship with the reader, and by empowering her use of imagery.

Chapter V turns to Oliver's most recent book, Dream Work, and argues that many of the poems in this volume are Oliver's reevaluations of the process which she has gone through in order to achieve her voice. The problems inherent in speaking out as well as the necessary task of facing both the delightful and the disturbing sides of life in order to speak fully are material for these poems.

Chapter VI explores the critical neglect of Oliver's work and posits that her gender and her use of nature as subject may have placed her in a marginal position, one easily dismissed by critics. I argue that this disregard or misreading is particularly unfortunate in that there is much of substance in her work and much power in her voice.

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to

argue that achievement of a voice does take place in Oliver's poetry; and second, to argue that her poetry merits serious consideration by critics of contemporary literature.

CHAPTER I

"WITH MUTED HEARTS": SILENT WOMEN IN THE EARLY POEMS

That Western culture is a patriarchy is not often disputed. Patriarchy, as Adrienne Rich defines it, is "a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men . . . determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (Of Woman 57). Although they are making strides in achieving self-identity and self-determination, women still must do so within a system wherein male values determine what is accepted or rejected within society. Little has changed since 1949 when Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "Woman herself recognizes that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are men" (598). The repercussions of this recognition, according to de Beauvoir, are many:

> It is quite conceivable that if other women fail to make a deep impression upon the world, it is because they are tied down in their situation. They can hardly take a hand in affairs in other than a negative and oblique manner. Judith, Charlotte Corday, Vera Zauslich were assassins, the Frondeuses were conspirators; during the Revolution, during the Comme, women battled beside the men against the established order. Against a liberty without rights, without powers, woman has been permitted to rise in refusal and revolt while being forbidden to participate in positively constructive effort; at the most she may succeed in joining men's enterprises through an

> indirect road. Aspasia, Mme. de Maintenon, the Princess des Ursins were counselors who were listened to seriously--yet somebody had to be willing to listen to them. Men are glad to exaggerate the extent of these influences when they wish to convince woman that she has chosen the better part; but as a matter of fact, feminine voices are silent when it comes to concrete action. (130-1)

Mary Oliver's early poems depict such a world of male domination. In her first two books, No Voyage and Other Poems (1965) and The River Styx, Ohio and Other Poems (1972), threads of male control and female passivity are subtly woven throughout her lines. Especially in her second volume, The River Styx, Ohio and Other Poems (RS), the poet communicates the widespread influence of men in the world of action. For example, in "O Pioneers,"[1] Oliver describes the founders of our nation as concerned only for their sons:

> Headed through wilderness to found a nation,
> They dreamed of farms and easy sleep,
> And kept their powder dry, and talked with God.
> And shed the cloth of England for the buckskin,
> And carved new habits for their sons to keep.
>
> Yea, for the Lord's sake, and for their unborn sons,
> They strode across the continent, and took
> The rivers and the forest and the prairie

---

[1] All documentation for Oliver's poems will be cited parenthetically. For the first mention of a poem, format will be the abbreviation of the book title, followed by the page number on which the quotation appears and then the line numbers being cited. For each succeeding reference to the same poem, only line numbers will be given.

> And spun them into farms, and bore strong children
> Between the musket and the old prayer book.
> (RS 41: 1-10)

Daughters are mentioned only within the context of the branch of the family that stays behind and remains inert. In "Anton and Yaro," a poem from No Voyage and Other Poems (NV), the grandfather, who has stayed while his two brothers have left to explore the wilderness, is left "Here in his kingdom of trees and daughters" (NV 58: 21) and "Grows drowsy in a small and closing circle" (23). The daughters are part of the life, then, that does not move beyond its confines. And the granddaughter, who is certain that Anton and Yaro will return even though everyone else in the family is doubtful, does not voice her certainty, saying, "but I keep silent" (42). Even after death, the male line reigns supreme: "Maybe in earth, shaped into roots, they lie. / Or maybe, met in Heaven with their sons . . ." (RS 41: 11-12). There is no indication here that female children, either in life or after death, have any significance or merit any attention. Just as the frontier is theirs, graveyards also seem to be the final resting places only for men. In "Learning about the Indians," Oliver remembers White Eagle, who "strutted for money now, in schoolrooms built / On Ohio's plains, surrounded by the graves / Of all of our fathers . . ." (RS 12: 5-7). Similarly, in

"Magellan," when Oliver muses upon the goal of striving onward, she turns to male adventurers for her role models: "Let us be heroes, or, if that's not in us, / Let us find men to follow, honor-bright" (RS 51; 7-8). Once again, there is no indication that women can be the ones who pursue active lives worth emulating.

Even among her own ancestors, Oliver seems to see only the male lineage as the active line of the family tree. In "Stark Boughs on the Family Tree," she searches in vain for some trace of heroism among her ancestors, only to find:

> no sign
> Of hero in this distant life,
> But only men as calm as snow
> Who took some faithful girl as wife.
> (RS 3; 9-12)

Heroes may not exist for her in her family tree, but at least the men have achieved adulthood and are capable of action. The women, on the other hand, are labeled girls and are the gender being "taken." The sentiment in this poem runs close to that voiced by the "old carpenters" in "New England Houses": "There was never much / We could count on. Weather, whiskey, girls / Warmed us for a while, then left us swamped or dry" (RS 18; 1-2). In the world of these poems, then, women exist purely for the sake of men. Whether they perform their "duty" well or not seems less the issue than that their duty is to men, not to themselves.

Through these works, Oliver stresses that women have no identity, a fact made particularly pointed when women's effacement is compared with the richness of men's lives. Compare Oliver's poems "Isabel Sparrow" and "Alex," both about people who have disappeared without any indication of what their fate has been. The poet asks similar questions of both of them: "Isabel Sparrow, who is she?" (RS 38; 1) and "Where is Alex, keeper of horses? / Nobody knows" (RS 9; 1-2). The difference, however, lies in that in the case of Alex specific details of his past identity are given: "He lived all year in the broken barn" (RS 9; 3). He had a "tangled beard" (6), was a "soiled old man" (7), and "had hungry eyes / For money and the bottle" (10-11). Much more is known of him than of Isabel Sparrow, who is described merely as "a thin sweet woman" (RS 38; 3). The poet ponders her mystery: "Was it a hundred years or two she walked / In her tidy leather shoes? / Did she find love, bear children?" (5-7). These questions hound the poet, moreso because "no one can tell, no one remembers or wonders / Or even is certain why / Her name came up, like a drifting leaf, to be spoken / And casually passed by" (9-12).

These constructs of male power and male autonomy are not just theoretical ones for Oliver. Their

personal impact on her life is far-reaching. For example, in "The Juggler" she poignantly describes the effects on a daughter of watching a father who is in control and of always feeling incompetent herself:

> When my father threw saucers into the air
> And caught them spinning, one by one,
> So rapidly the wheel seemed never broken,
> We thought it was only for fun.
>
> But the glazed faces of the saucers, and my
> father's hands
> Moving like clockwork, and the lines of strain
> Showing under his big laughter have stayed like
> a strange design
> Of almost everything. Again and again
>
> In my childhood I wept among the broken
> crockery:
> My failure. I could not master the
> trick . . . . (RS 19; 1-10)

Further, her father's mastery and her own inadequacy have pursued her: "And so I have never lived like that, knowing / Myself to be adept and sure-- / But, rather, in a wild disorder of coming and going . . ." (14-16). Even toward the end of the poem, when the poet comes closest to admitting that she has talents of her own-- "The things I touch have breath and fire" (27)--she still feels that her abilities will always be inferior to those of her father: "And what is broken moves me with a shame" (28). This woman, then, lives in the shadow of a man and, more than that, in the shadow of a man whose abilities she feels she can never equal but whose abilities she must attempt to equal because he continued

to push her to do so: "I try to remember how tender you were with children / How you swept up the wreckage, made us try it again" (35-36).

In "The Lake," by contrast, the poet is lured by nature and makes an attempt to slip out of the grip of her father:

> My father called to me across the water;
> Crouched in the little boat, I would not come,
> But lingered on the blue and trembling waves,
> Rowed in a circle, listening to the thrushes
> Whistle themselves to sleep along the shore.
> (NV 49; 1-5)

She has no resources for dealing with the world on her own, however, and finds herself frightened when she encounters the unfamiliar:

> Here is the place, I thought, where heroes come
> To do their painful and mysterious deeds.
> And then, once more, I heard my father call.
> Blind in the dark, I let the long oars down
> And cried out: Father, Father, I am lonely!
> The stars are strange! Oh, come and fetch me
> home! (22-27)

Although her father is angry when he reaches her, she still welcomes his presence and falls asleep with him holding her and the boat aimlessly drifting. She has not learned to fend for herself and must be protected, ironically so by someone who is angered by her first attempts to cut the cord that binds parent and child.

Woman's living in a man's world, then, creates extreme personal feelings of failure, but there are other attendant problems, much more severe ones, for Oliver and

for women in general. The patriarchy orders its relations according to domination and submission. Not surprisingly, those relations are often violent, reflecting a social structure rife with taking and using. For instance, a peeping Tom becomes such a part of the poet's life that, in "Tom," she grieves for his death. His voyeurism, taken for granted as normal, "wasn't pleasant; yet there are worse things / Than someone standing softly in the dark / Tuned in to episodes of other lives" (RS 4; 1-3). One wonders how many men would adopt such an attitude of passive acceptance in a similar situation.

Such passivity in the face of male violence has its price, though, as we see through the story of a tortured young girl in "The Shooting of the Fox": "The witch-high leap of the broken fox / And the wet red fur / Lived in her dreams in a hundred shapes" (NV 23; 1-3). Nightmares haunt those who witness violence, but silence also often overtakes them. In this poem, the young girl is unable to express to her brothers, the perpetrators of the hunt, what effect the killing has had on her: "To the booted brothers she could not say / What frightened her" (23-24).

The young girl's inability to speak of her discomfort is not uncommon in a patriarchal society. Dale Spender notes, "It is the silence of women, in

language and in the use of language, that has emerged when women are considered in the patriarchal order" (51). Several feminists have commented on the destructiveness of such silence to women.[2] Adrienne Rich declares, "The culture of manipulated passivity, nourishing violence at its core, has every stake in opposing women actively laying claim to our own lives" (Lies 14). And the effects of laying claim are devastating. According to Hélène Cixous:

> Every woman has known the torture of beginning to speak aloud, heart beating as if to break, occasionally falling into loss of language, ground and language slipping out from under her, because for woman speaking--even just opening her mouth in public is something rash, a transgression. (Cixous and Clement, Newly Born 92)

The idea of female speech as "transgression" has, of course, a long history, dating back as far as St. Paul's injunctions against female speech as a result of Eve's secondary status in relation to Adam and also as a result of the problems caused by her first attempt to influence Adam through speech (Homans 32-3). Interestingly, Oliver has her own postlapsarian version of the Adam and

---

[2] Many others have written about societally-imposed female silence. Among them, see Mary Belenky et al. on the problems of achieving selfhood in silence (29), Mary Daly on the oppressiveness of male religion (15), Chris Kramarae on the male determination of labeling systems (58), and Marcia Landy on the problem of seeing silence as a virtue (19).

Eve myth in "The Survival." After being rescued from a plane crash which forced them to bandage themselves and to weave a bed out of leaves, "Back home and famous in their snug apartment, / He tells the brief adventure to their friends. / She listens--combed, serene . . ." (RS 36; 5-7). Such female silence, as Shirley Ardener explains, is not a biological attribute; rather, "it is seen to be a phenomenon of structural relationships and a product of society" (20).

Mary Oliver's first two books of poetry repeatedly acknowledge women's silence. As has already been noted, the young girl in "The Shooting of the Fox" cannot tell her brothers why their actions disturb her so and remains alone with her nightmares of the incident. In "How I Went Truant from School to Visit a River," another young girl, in quite different circumstances, can escape the oppressiveness of the school building only by silently creeping "the echoing halls, / Slipp[ing] like a needle out of doors . . ." (NV 7; 6-7). And in "After My Grandfather's Death: A Poem of the China Clock," the clock echoes the silence of the dead grandfather. His silence makes sense because he is dead, but noteworthy here is the powerlessness of the grandmother to wind the clock in such a way that it will function properly now that the grandfather is no longer present. She feeds

chickens and rounds up cows but is forced into her own silence. It would seem that in the space left by the grandfather she could speak, but the implication is that the only speech allowed has been his. Now that his speech is not possible, the grandmother becomes "the truly lost one" (25).

Perhaps this same grandmother is depicted in "A Country Gift." The poet remembers, "My grandmother used to leave a bowl of milk / At night on the back porch" (RS 11; 1-2). When the poet/child asked what sort of creature the milk was provided for, "She only smiled, and would not give a name" (4). The reason for this silence is given later in the poem through the grandmother's philosophy that "It's better not to doubt or to offend / What we don't know of darkness and the soul-" (20-21). Rather than aspiring to the power to explore and to name, the grandmother takes the culturally sanctioned female stance of remaining quiet and in the dark. It is doubtful whether any of women's questions would be answered anyway; in "Dancers at Banstead," the poet is baffled by what she has seen in life, but she receives no satisfaction from asking: "I flung my questions to the air. / But nothing cared to answer me" (NV 9; 12-13). She has no forum for dialogue.

Cultural expectations also demand that women be silent nurturers. Speaking of her memories of elderly

women, Oliver writes in "The Grandmothers":

> We smiled for them, although they never spoke.
> Silent as stones, they merely stared when birds
> Fell in leaves, or brooms wore out, or children
> Scraped their knees and cried. Within my
> village,
> We did not think it odd or ask for words;
> In their vast arms we knew that we were loved.
> (NV 3; 6-11)

Clandestinely, these women would sometimes gather during summer nights to hang paper lanterns and to play the concertina,

> Till music hung like ribbons in the trees
> And round my bed. Oh, still within my dreams,
> Softly they gather under summer stars
> And sing of the far Danube, of Vienna,
> Clear as a flight of wild and slender girls!
> (20-24)

This poem is one of the earliest indications that the seemingly pervasive female silence is neither natural nor desirable for Oliver or for women in general. If words are not permitted, an alternate "speech" must be found, in this case through music. Music is not necessarily an adequate alternative to speech, however, because it contains the tone but not the content of what must be communicated. Music's ineffectivendss can be seen as the poet listens to the fanciful flute-man in "The Flute-Man" and realizes, "Like him I only seem / To sing, so sweetly, for nothing" (NV 20; 3-4).

In stark contrast to the culturally silenced grandmothers, Oliver paints a picture of self-silenced

men in "The Old Men":

> Having seen death rise up, and clasp his sword,
> And scuttle darkly through his crumbling door,
> The ancient men sit in the sun and hoard
> Their thoughts of trouble that has come
> before,--
> The girls like rainbows no man learned to keep,
> The land like stone they could not teach to
> give,
> Fevers that slipped towards stiff and lonely
> sleep,--
> And how, through all of these, they meant to
> live.
> Now for the sake of children, brothers, pride,
> They rarely speak, or speaking, merely jest;
> Heads down, pipes up, they line the bench and
> hide
> All they are thinking as they quip and rest
> Their bony backs, or scan the hills for night
> Like soldiers waiting on the banks of light.
> (NV 51; 1-14)

At first glance, this poem seems not to uphold the idea that men are the speakers and women the muted ones in society because the men in this poem do not speak, or "rarely" do; however, their silence is of their own choice. They have seen the world and have decided that speaking is futile; the women in "The Grandmothers" are not allowed to make that choice.

Other seeming inconsistencies in the pattern of speaking men and silent women are those poems in which Oliver portrays women who do indeed speak. Before her death, the grandmother in "A Castle on the Danube" told her grandchildren of her early life in Europe. The poet realizes, though, that the tales told were fabrications or, at the least, exaggerations:

Say the old,
"I remember, I remember," but surely it is not
any more
The truth they offer. For what, from those
narrow files,
Would draw small listeners from the sun?
Grandmother,
It was no harm, I think,
The way you called to us and, when we were
gathered
Like a last fragile blessing,
Rowed us to that blue river,
Borrowed in your need another kingdom, and drew
us
One by one through the mad castle door.
(RS 13; 13-22)

Though the poet was charmed by her grandmother's words during her childhood and remains charmed and apologetic for liking them in her adulthood, it is clear that the words were no more than fairy stories and therefore had no power in the real world.

"Anne" describes another female who speaks but whose words also have no power in the real world. Anne is insane, and so the poet is at first frightened by the speculations concerning what behaviors she might exhibit. Interestingly, though, Anne does not rant as the insane are expected to do; instead, "she holds her saucer softly / and sips, as people do, / From moment to moment making / Comments of rain and sun" (RS 22; 3-6). On the surface she seems the picture of civility, but this attention to politeness is what ultimately terrifies the poet because it is obvious that the civilities hide what is really seething underneath. The discrepancy between

the stories that the villagers have told about Anne and her true demeanor further disturbs the poet:

> O Anne, sweet Anne, brave Anne,
> What did I think to see?
> The rumors of the village
> Have painted you savagely.
> I thought you would come in anger--
> A knife beneath your skirt.
> I did not think to see a face
> So peaceful, and so hurt. (9-16)

Once the poet knows that there is more to Anne beneath the surface, she is deeply affected by this knowledge:

> I feel my heart go wild, Anne,
> I feel my heart go wild.
> I know a hundred children,
> But never before a child
> Hiding so deep a trouble
> Or wanting so much to please,
> Or tending so desperately all
> The small civilities. (21-28)

There is more beneath the surface, too, of the author of the letter in "A Letter from Home." While this woman has the courage to write, she only "Lightly . . . speaks of cold, of pain, / And lists what is already lost" (NV 13: 4-5). She does not have the courage to tell the whole truth, and the poet knows that "She will not tell me if she cries" (19). The most that the author of the letter can do is to send "scraps of borage, woodbine, rue" (23) to indicate her emotional state.

Yet another woman speaks in "Aunt Mary," but she too speaks in an ineffectual way and is even ridiculed through the sing-song rhythm of the poem and the images associated with her:

> Fat Aunt Mary, on my mother's side,
> Weighed three hundred pounds, maybe more.
> The threshold trembled when she came to visit;
> The hinges squealed on the kitchen door.
> She sat in Papa's chair, while yards of gingham
> Flowed away to hide her socks and shoes.
> Her voice rolled through the farmhouse deep as thunder
> While great Aunt Mary rumbled through the news.
> (RS 23; 1-8)

The poet admits to ridiculing Aunt Mary when she describes finding an old picture of her aunt in a photograph album, a picture taken "in a time before her glands / Grew wild as pumps, and fleshed her to a joke" (21-22). The picture reveals that there was once another Mary, one who did not make hinges squeal and who did not "rumble." That Mary has been lost now, though, and the poet asks us, "How shall we guess the spirit that lies hidden?" (9). Once this obese woman no longer could belong to the world of the beautiful, shapely, desirable females, she was relegated to a world of booming speech, one which could easily be held up to ridicule. Only when fishing, the poet tells us, was Aunt Mary happy, "out there upon the blue and quiet waters" where "she could recall a loveliness" (15-16). Mary lost the ability to express what was positive in herself and had to escape from society to feel those things once more. "Aunt Mary" is highly reminiscent of Marge Piercy's "High Frequency," in which plants scream because they have been separated from their natural environment:

like a woman who's been told
she can't carry a tune,
like a woman afraid people will laugh
if she raises her voice,
like a woman whose veins surface
compressing a scream,
like a woman whose mouth hardens
to hold locked in her own
harsh and beautiful song. (95; 29-37)

Ironically, when Oliver as persona herself does speak, she sometimes adopts the persona of a male. In "The Letter," the speaker asks his estranged lover, "What news shall a man put down / To send his tolling pulses through the mails?" (NV 30; 3-4). He is in pain, but language is his solace. He at first fails to find the words and expresses only his frustration:

He [the nightbird] psalms in his blackwings
while I sit
Swollen with things to say, in an empty room
Where lines on the page fail the pattern I am.
(9-11)

However, with perseverance, his self-identity and his access to language return: "And yet I must be found in ink and grammar. / At three o'clock I fall from you towards poems" (12-13). It is a torturous process, but in the end language enables him to survive:

There as I sit among my descending wishes,
The marble night presses on towards the only
verb;
And my lips take up some formal urge,
A language punished into simplicity;

And ink begins, and bends my want like wire,
Addressing nothing, or the bird or stars.
From a room where the silence roars in my ears
I send you the black stanzas of myself

In which I forget you, in order to endure. (18-26)

In "The Crossing," the persona identifies himself as "being modern man" (NV 15; 9) and speaks to his lover of what he has learned about distance and language from their separation: "The sea is metaphor" (12). The male persona is necessary here for consistency because in the first poem of this volume, the poet has portrayed men as those who leave, especially when grief comes, and has portrayed herself as one who has decided to stay at home to cope with the situation. Men's leaving is not viewed as positive but, rather, as a defense mechanism--"men never go somewhere, they only leave / Wherever they are, when the dying begins" (NV 1; 7-8). Nevertheless, they are the ones who can escape their situations. In contrast, the persona, here female, decides that the best approach to solving her problems is to remain within the confines of her own domestic situation: "yet I turn back / To sort the weeping ruins of my house" (18-19).

"The Crossing" also offers another contrast between men and women in its echoes of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." The idea that "The sea is metaphor" (NV 15; 12) appears in both of these poems, and the value of human connections is likewise explored. In "Storm" the poet also echoes Matthew Arnold in the final line: "Love, we shall survive" (NV 2; 28). In this poem a storm ravages

the land in such a way that makes the poet and her companions powerless as they "settle in the shuttered house, / And speak of things [they] cannot save" (15-16). When the storm has finished its bruising, raking, shaking, raving, scraping, and whipping, the poet turns from the violence to her love, as Arnold turns to his love after violence to his faith, but for this female poet it is a turning done for survival, not for self-fulfillment. It is enough for the woman to live through the storm; to hope for more is impossible.

Mary Oliver's first two books, No Voyage and The River Styx, are less powerful than her later three, Twelve Moons, American Primitive, and Dream Work. Part of the reason for this is that Oliver often describes rather than participates in the actions of the poems. Also, she primarily uses traditional forms. These two choices are tied to the idea of silence in that she is, in effect, silent herself through her refusal to break free even though she has put words onto paper and into poems. As will be shown in Chapters II through V, a large part of her power comes through the exploration of the process of seeking and finding a voice through nature. As Oliver carries out this process in her own poetry, she experiments with forms and begins to write less in the dominant modes that have been used by male poets and more in forms that are free-flowing and that

mirror the rhythms of her body and of nature. In her first two books, though, there is less present that is authentically Oliver, and this has led to some of the critical reactions to these books. Of No Voyage, James Dickey writes, "She never seems quite to be in her poems" (74). John Freund finds that "the poems in No Voyage are quiet and unobtrusive" (185). In a similar response, Robert Glauber calls No Voyage a "murmuring book" (278) and remarks:

> There is little that truly speaks out here. All is muted. All is held within the narrowest range of possible responses. The control is so strict and detailed that one can only conclude that Miss Oliver quite intentionally holds down both her own expression and the reader's response. (278)

Glauber goes on to say:

> In the out-of-doors . . . there are moments of high-pitched drama. There are delighted cries and shrieks of pain and confusion. . . . One longs almost desperately for moments (or at least echoes) of this here. (278)

Such moments are only possible, however, when one is able to find and speak through an uninhibited voice. For Oliver, these moments become possible only as she begins to search for a voice in nature, a search which we are able to participate in with her from Twelve Moons on.

CHAPTER II

"THE KINGDOMS CRYING OUT": LISTENING IN THE EARLY AND MIDDLE POEMS

For a woman to remain silent, or even for a woman to continue to observe silence in others, and not move to a position of speech is for that woman to refuse to grow. Like feminist critics who have recognized that focusing on oppression while ignoring possible avenues for liberation is stifling to women, Oliver also acknowledges in her poetry that silence is not a destination. In spite of the sentiment expressed in "A Walk from the Asylum"--"It is not true caught things strive to be free--" (RS 39; 17), even in her early poems, where silent women predominate, the tension to break free through meaningful speech is present. Oliver explores the failures of male language, searches for females to emulate, and begins to listen to music and nature as alternative voices. Although not the end of her poetic journey, this turning toward the possibility of speech is crucial to her poetry. During this transition she finds the subject matter for her later poems as well as the environment within which her own powerful voice will emerge.

There are signs in Oliver's early poetry that the male language is not necessarily ideal. At points it

breaks down or exhibits flaws. In "The Eskimos Have No Word for 'War,'" the male speaker admits, "Trying to explain it to them / Leaves one feeling ridiculous and obscene" (RS 34; 1-2). He cannot communicate with the Eskimos because, as he says, "While I talk on / Of the southern kingdoms, cannon, armies, / Shifting alliances, airplanes, power" (17-19), they go about their lives that are in no way related to his culture's warfare and power struggles. Their lives are simpler, gentler: "They chew their bones, and smile at one another" (20). Male speech, especially male speech of violence, does not work in the Eskimo world because theirs is a world of human connections and survival. The male persona here only has words for domination and divisiveness in his vocabulary.

Perhaps male speech does not work in our world either, and Oliver addresses this possibility by searching for female role models. According to Mary Belenky et al., the shift from following male patterns to searching for female patterns is a typical next step after silence toward women's understanding and power:

> When . . . women are just beginning to make the transition into subjectivism, they are no longer willing to rely on higher status, powerful authorities in the public domain for knowledge and truth. Instead they consider turning for answers to people closer to their own experience--female peers, mothers, sisters, grandmothers. (60)

In an eloquent tribute, aptly entitled "Answers," Oliver

discloses:

> If I envy anyone it must be
> My grandmother in a long ago
> Green summer, who hurried
> Between kitchen and orchard on small
> Uneducated feet, and took easily
> All shining fruits into her eager hands.
> (RS 32: 1-6)

This woman, uneducated and immersed in traditional behaviors, was able to become for Oliver a guide to something better:

> That summer I hurried too, wakened
> To books and music and circling philosophies.
> I sat in the kitchen sorting through volumes of
> answers
> That could not solve the mystery of the trees.
>
> My grandmother stood among her kettles and
> ladles.
> Smiling, in faulty grammar,
> She praised my fortune and urged my lofty
> career.
> So to please her I studied--but I will remember
> always
> How she poured confusion out, how she cooled
> and labeled
> All the wild sauces of the brimming year.
> (7-16)

However, as loved and admired as the grandmother was, she was not able, even in her labeling of confusion, to free herself from the imprisonment of her "faulty grammar." And so the poet turned to another role model. Noting restrictions placed on women in our world, she created her own version of a woman to emulate, "Aunt Leaf":

> Needing one, I invented her--
> the great-great-aunt dark as hickory
> called Shining-Leaf, or Drifting Cloud
> or The-Beauty-of-the-Night. (TM 47: 1-4)

This woman could speak:

> Dear aunt, I'd call into the leaves,
> and she'd rise up, like an old log in a pool,
> and whisper in a language only the two of us
> knew
> the word that meant <u>follow</u>. . . . (5-8)

Further, this woman could take the poet out into nature, liberating her, as the poet's real family, being bound to the social structure, never could because they ". . . were kind, but solid as wood / and rarely wandered" (19-20).

Such liberation from social restrictions is a recurring motif in Oliver's poetry and appears again in "Strawberry Moon," a narrative poem about the poet's great-aunt Elizabeth Fortune, who was engaged to a "young man / full of promises" (<u>TM</u> 16; 5-6) and then jilted while pregnant. Spending the next forty years of her life hidden in the attic--"It was considered a solution / more proper than shame / showing itself to the village" (17; 22-24)--and only coming down at age sixty-one to take in boarders because her caretakers had died, she becomes for the poet an emblem of what men can do to women. However, Elizabeth Fortune's story also provides the necessary inspiration for other women to want to break free:

> Now the women are gathering
> in smoke-filled rooms,
> rough as politicians,
> scrappy as club fighters.
> And should anyone be surprised

if sometimes, when the white moon rises,
women want to lash out
with a cutting edge? (18; 44-51)

Liberation from social restrictions also appears in "Spring," wherein the poet feels empathy for a mare whose forced breeding is accompanied by "the cries of the horses" (TM 10; 2) and "the laughter of the men" (3). After the breeding, the poet "rode her home at her leisure / And let her, wherever she wanted, / Tear with her huge teeth, roughly, / Blades from the fields of spring" (7-10). The poet, even as a young girl, recognizes her connection to the female of another species. As sister creatures, they are potentially subject to manipulation by males for profit. The mare's rough tearing of the grass indicates to the poet the pain and anger inherent in one who is used and "the fields of spring" a place where solace can be found.

It is not only important to break free; it is also important to break free with a voice. Alicia Ostriker notes the necessity of such speech by remarking on what happens to those who do not speak: "Among women poets, the inability to speak signals, however, just as it does in Prufrock, a state of passivity, marginality, and self-hate" (67). As early as No Voyage, Oliver recognizes the importance of speaking as an equal with men. Describing her changing relationship with God, who began for her as "a quick father who never dropped a child" (NV 8; 2), she

tells of relating now as an equal: "And when I jump too quick or fall too far / My father and I / Sit down and talk it over" (16-18). It is also important to talk and to make decisions as an equal with other women. In "The Black Walnut Tree," the poet and her mother discuss what to do about the aging black walnut tree in their yard: "We talk / slowly, two women trying / in a difficult time to be wise" (TM 56; 8-10). Though their talking appears futile--"So we talk, but we don't do / anything" (20-21) --they make the decision not to sell the tree for mortgage money because ". . . something brighter than money / moves in our blood . . ." (16-17). They have discussed the matter, then, as equals with the power to act.

Finding a voice among others is necessary to finding power, and finding a voice at all is necessary to selfhood because the internal drive to communicate is insistent. In "On Being Caught under Some Trees with My Notebook," Oliver notes that seemingly inexplicable drive in which ". . . words / Leaped through my heart like hounds" (RS 10; 25-26). This will to speak is an uncontrollable, necessary urge, so much so that she admits: "I only stood / And looked, a little while, at everything; / Until I had to run, or die, or sing" (26-28).

If one is to be alive and fully human, then, one

must speak. But how is a woman to speak? Separated from the language of power, must she be silent, hate herself, or die? Oliver discovers that there is another avenue open to her, an avenue that she uses forcefully in her middle two volumes, Twelve Moons (1979) and American Primitive (1983). Before she can transverse the avenue, however, she must discover it, and that discovery takes place as she senses her connection with nature and begins to listen carefully to it.

The discovery of a path to speech begins as a hint in her first book. In "Morning in a New Land," the poet relives an Edenic experience. She remembers a morning when the singing of birds caught her attention; likening herself to Adam, she remembers:

> I stood like Adam in his lonely garden
> On that first morning, shaken out of sleep,
> Rubbing his eyes, listening, parting the
> leaves,
> Like tissue on some vast, incredible gift.
> (NV 44; 1-2).

This expectant listening to what is around her in nature is part of a new way of life for the poet, and it is no wonder that its first experience occurs in an Eden-like environment, for when Oliver fully gives herself to her new world and her new voice, her poetry takes on a new life.

Listening occurs again in her second book. Ellen Moers finds that women writers after Bradstreet have had

a hard time using singing birds as emblems for their own singing in their poetry because of the association of birds with caging and oppression (249), but in "The Nightingale" Oliver does not hesitate to hearken back to Keats: "Once in London I heard / Faintly and for a moment only / A nightingale . . ." (RS 29; 1-3). The bird was far in the distance and could barely be heard, but she "leaned for hours that night" (8-9) because the music gave her solace. She found herself "Glad, glad of a little word" (13). Lauter sees this type of listening as not uncommon in writing by women:

> The women whose work I have examined are often concerned to hear the speech of animals and to penetrate beneath the names and identities assigned to them for human purposes. (185)

In her first two books, not only does Oliver begin to listen to nature, but it is almost as though nature overwhelms her with its power. She needs to exert little effort to feel its effects or to hear its voice. In "Spring in the Classroom" she remembers having difficulty concentrating in school because of "the old mud blood murmuring" (RS 7; 7) that drowned out the sound of her teacher. She also recognizes nature's beckoning in "Indian Pipes": "The longer I live the more I sense / Wilderness approaching; I used to walk / Miles to find wild things; now they find me" (RS 8; 5-7). Nature's voice is so insistent that it demands to be heeded.

Oliver finds nature's voice so irresistible that she spends a large part of her poetry in her next two chapbooks, Night Traveler (1978) and Sleeping in the Forest (1978), many poems of which are included in Twelve Moons (1979), remarking on it. In "Creeks" she describes the peacefulness of sitting in the midst of nature and just listening:

> The dwindled creeks of summer,
> Unremarkable except,
> Down pasture, through woodlot,
> They are so many
> And keep such a pure sound
> In each roiling thread,
> Trickle past the knees of trees,
> Dropped leaves, salamanders,
> Each one scrubbing and cooling
> The pebbles of its bed.
>
> My back to hickory, I sit
> Hours in the damp wood, listening.
> It never ebbs.
> Its music is the shelf for other sounds:
> Birds, wind in the leaves, some tumbled stones.
> After awhile
> I forget things, as I have forgotten time.
> (NT 1-17)

The sounds of nature perform the same function for her here, helping her to forget burdens and oppressions, just as the sounds of music later do in "Music Lessons":

> Sound
> became music, and music a white
> scarp for the listener to climb
>
> alone. I leaped rock over rock to the top
> and found myself waiting, transformed,
> and still she played, her eyes luminous and
> willful,
> her pinned hair falling down--

forgetting me, the house, the neat green yard,
she fled in that lick of flame all tedious
bonds:
supper, the duties of flesh and home,
the knife at the throat, the death in the
metronome. (SF 56 & TM 26; 6-16)

The music provides a potential for peace and freedom, invoking a place wherein anything is possible but also a place that is not readily found in the everyday world. In "Stark County Holidays," Oliver notes with sadness any separation from the world of liberating sound:

Our mother's kingdom does not fall,
But like her old piano wanders
Slowly and finally out of tune.
There are so many things to do
She rarely plays it anymore,
But there were years of Bach and Strauss;
The chords flew black and rich and round
With meaning through our windy house.
We fell asleep, we wove our dreams
In that good wilderness of sound.

. . . . . .

Our mother's kingdom does not fall,
But year by year the promise fades;
Dreams of our childhood warp and pall,
Caught in the dark fit of the world.
Now, less than what we meant to be,
We watch the night and feed the fire.
We listen as the bent chords climb
Toward alleluias rich but wrong;
We sing, and grieve for what we are
Compared with the intended song.
(NT & TM 62-3; 1-10, 28-37)

This music, as liberating as it is, is not a natural music and thus cannot be maintained when worldly cares intervene. In nature, however, the sounds continue in spite of activities in the human world. In "Dream in Two Parts" Oliver describes the enthrallment occasioned by

the sounds of nature:

> I listen
> to the birds crossing the air,
> the big trees slowly breathing,
> the small plants whipping upward.
>
> I think:
> I could stay here forever,
> like a lapsed apostle,
> listening to the earth at its work.
> (SF 58; 1-8)

If in these early four volumes Oliver begins to speak of listening, it is in Twelve Moons that her listening commences in earnest. She listens to birds and insects in "Sleeping in the Forest": "All night / I heard the small kingdoms breathing / around me, the insects, and the birds" (TM 3; 11-13). She hears flowers in "Neutralities": "the small gospels of the fields-- / dry stalks of goldenrod, tansy--whispering / la la la" (TM 69; 10-12). She lets us listen with her to frogs in "Pink Moon--The Pond":

> You think it will never happen again.
> Then, one night in April,
> the tribes wake trilling.
> You walk down to the shore.
> Your coming stills them,
> but little by little the silence lifts
> until song is everywhere. (TM 7; 1-7)

She listens to virtually everything in "Last Days":

> Things are
> changing; things are starting to
> spin, snap, fly off into
> the blue sleeve of the long
> afternoon. Oh and ooh

come whistling out of the perished mouth
of the grass, as things
turn soft, boil back
into substance and hue. As everything,
forgetting its own enchantment, whispers:
I too love oblivion why not it is full
of second chances. Now,
hiss the bright curls of the leaves. Now!
booms the muscle of the wind. (TM 52; 1-14)

Even rocks speak, it seems in "Stone Poem":

Most are standing,
Flat, like tongues,
Still full of poems, and back-fence gossip.

Some are ponderous, pressed
To the earth, the length of bones.
Good-bye, they say. Good riddance.
(TM 12; 1-6)

In "Winter Trees," entitled "Listening" when it was first published in Ploughshares, Oliver admits feeling that everything in nature has a voice. She catalogues her experiences listening first to the trees, "their boughs eloquent at midnight / with small but mortal explosions, and always a humming / under the lashings of storm" (TM 72; 2-4). She then hears the ice in the ponds "shore-slapping and rock-leaping" (11), then the ocean, and then the rocks "flicking their silver tongues all summer, panting / a little on their damp under-sides" (17-18). Finally, the voices are everywhere, and the poet gives in to them:

Now I listen as fall rides
in the wagons of the wind, lighting up the
world

with red, yellow, and the long-leaved ash
as blue as fire, and I know

there's no end to it, the kingdoms
crying out--and no end

to the voices the heart can hear once
it's started. (72-3; 19-26)

Oliver here echoes the words of Hélène Cixous: "There is no silence. The music of things always resounds, waiting for us to hear it faithfully" (Stanton 168), as well as those of Gary Snyder:

> "Everything was alive--the trees, grasses, and winds were dancing with me, talking with me; I could understand the songs of the birds." This ancient experience is not so much--in spite of later commentators--"religious" as it is a pure perception of beauty. The phenomenal world experienced at certain pitches is totally living, exciting, mysterious, filling one with a trembling awe, leaving one grateful and humble, the wonder of the mystery returns direct to one's own senses and consciousness: inside and outside; the voice breathes, "A!" (439)

If Cixous, Snyder, and Oliver's words seem to indicate that nature will speak even to the passive, for its voice is everywhere and strong, this is a misconception. Oliver admits that listening and hearing are not always so easily accomplished. In fact, at times the voice of nature resists her grasp. In "Mussels," she enters a cave to collect bits of singing nature. As she goes deeper into the cave, the mussels

make a sound,
  not loud,
    not unmusical, as they take
nourishment, as the ocean
  enters their bodies. (TM 4; 14-18)

She listens and then reaches, only to find:

Even before
I decide which to take,
which to twist from the wet rocks,
which to devour,
they, who have no eyes to see with,
see me, like a shadow,
bending forward. Together
they make a sound,
not loud,
not unmusical, as they lean
into the rocks, away
from my grasping fingers.
(TM 4-5; 25-36

In spite of her failure here to take hold of the sound, Oliver continues to listen in poem after poem in Twelve Moons. It is almost as though if she listens carefully enough she will hear what she needs to hear to free herself. Although she is speaking of visually observing nature in "Entering the Kingdom," the motivation is the same as for her listening:

The dream of my life
Is to lie down by a slow river
And stare at the light in the trees--
To learn something by being nothing
A little while but the rich
Lens of attention. (TM 21; 7-12)

Belenky et al. note that some women, especially those "unlike the silent, who think of themselves as 'deaf and dumb' and are unaware of the power of words for transmitting knowledge" (37), find that they can learn by listening. But what does all of this listening matter? How can listening to nature in any way help a woman who exists in a world in which women are silenced by men? Oliver begins to answer these questions with questions

of her own in "Blackleaf Swamp":

> If I am a woman, and tame,
> Does it mean I cannot be
> Part bird, part beast?
>
> And if this is so, why does a wing in the air
> Sweep against my blood
> Like a small sharp oar?
>
> And if I am alive, but must die,
> Is it not proper to study
> Darkness and trees and water?
>
> Along the shore
> The grass is so green and fine,
> It feels like the love of my mother.
> (NT 13-24)

The same connection to nature is sensed as Oliver speaks of "the dark things of the wood" (NT 1) in "The Family":

> We remember the cave.
> In our dreams we go back
>
> Or they come to visit.
> They also like music.
> We eat leaves together.
>
> They are our brothers.
> They are the family
> We have run away from. (NT 17-24)

Marge Piercy ends her poem "Councils" with, "It is not I who speaks but the wind. / Wind blows through me. / Long after me, is the wind" (117; 34-36). The voice of nature is the voice of all things. As Carolyn Kizer expresses in "Singing Aloud":

> And, often, I sing aloud. As I grow older
> I give way to innocent folly more and more
> often.
> The squirrels and rabbits chime in with
> inaudible voices.
> I feel sure that the birds make an effort to be
> antiphonal. (5; 17-20)

It is necessary, in other words, for Oliver to listen to nature in order to sense her connection to it in its various forms, and it is necessary for her to sense her connection to it in order to find the voice with which she then speaks so powerfully in her later poems. Holly Prado says of Oliver's later work in her Pulitzer-prize-winning book entitled American Primitive, "Her wisdom is that of the seasoned observer, bringing us half-heard, half-seen things we might otherwise miss" (9). Through listening Oliver is able to find a way to merge with nature and to define herself as a woman in the world in such a way that she can be heard and in such a way as to make herself heard more clearly.

CHAPTER III

"EVERYTHING TOUCHES EVERYTHING": NATURE AND VOICE IN THE MIDDLE POEMS

In a review of Twelve Moons, Publishers Weekly labels the volume "a breakthrough book" (121). In this book Oliver first takes up her relationship with nature as her primary subject matter. However, as Chapter II explains, there is also a great deal of distanced listening taking place in Twelve Moons before Oliver ever begins to interact with nature. In addition, most of the poems in Twelve Moons appeared a year earlier in her two chapbooks. For these reasons, it might more appropriately be said that the breakthrough occurred with the chapbooks, was furthered in Twelve Moons, and became fully developed in American Primitive. What is clear, however, is that through listening Oliver finds a kinship with nature. Building on this kinship, her voice develops as she explores her strongest subject matter.

Those who find Oliver too sentimental toward or joyful in nature fail to see that as much as she delights in it, she acknowledges humanity's separation from it. In "Inside" she likens spring to an opossum and remarks how separate we are from the experience of the natural world:

Thump, thump down the night
The old opossum in her bulky furs
Winds weeds along the walls, scratches the
wards,
Cries that it can't be so,

But we know.
Dry from crown to toe,
We laugh when she cries,
And when she sings we cry,

And won't grow. (RS 17; 21-29)

Further, the desire to be one with nature does not always make the oneness possible, as she observes in "Tree Poem": "Of course, it's only a whim-- / trees are no breathing brothers--" (SF 55; 8-9). Indeed, tension arises when the desire to be one with the natural world is in contradiction with what Oliver has observed to be true--that oneness is sometimes impossible. For instance, In "Entering the Kingdom," such tension is central, and the impossibility of oneness wins out over desire. Oliver sets up the poem in a three-part progression. In the first stanza she depicts the crows observing her as she enters their world:

The crows see me.
They stretch their glossy necks
In the tallest branches
Of green trees. I am
Possibly dangerous, I am
Entering the kingdom. (TM 21; 1-6)

In the second stanza, she expresses her desire to become a part of their world:

The dream of my life
Is to lie down by a slow river
And stare at the light in the trees--

To learn something by being nothing
A little while but the rich
Lens of attention. (7-12)

In the final stanza, however, she acknowledges the impossibility of maintaining this fantasy of oneness because reality proves to her that it is not possible:

But the crows puff their feathers and cry
Between me and the sun,
And I should go now.
They know me for what I am.
No dreamer,
No eater of leaves. (13-18)

Oliver's kinship with James Wright and Robert Frost can be seen in that she also sees, as David Dougherty says, that "nature is the source of beauty and nurture, but . . . also a source of anxiety because it frustrates our aspirations for unity with our environment" (27).

The preceding examples show that Oliver is not blind to the fact that there are problems for human beings who would interact with nature. She also is not always certain that nature is a force with which it is wise to interact, for its "dark side" is readily apparent. In "The Burial Ground," for instance, she tells of digging through the dirt to remove a stump in her family's pet burial spot and finding "not a particle or sign" (RS 14; 14) of any of the buried animals. She is disturbed by nature's ability to destroy and "appalled at learning how / The crystals of the earth forget" (15; 31-2). Oliver's experience in the burial ground is not

unlike that of the woman in "The Garden":

> She kept three gardeners. Nevertheless, at night,
> Her heart could hear the lopped vines crawling back
> Over the lawn and up the gravel walk--
> Could hear the fences groan with their looped weight,
>
> And was afraid. (RS 48; 1-5)

Even as we try to control nature, Oliver finds, we always discover that it ultimately controls us. We have no real power in its presence. Eloise Healy, speaking of Twelve Moons, finds, "What excitement or agitation takes place in these poems occurs when Oliver confronts the fact that nature holds at once both solace and terror" (5). Joan Wilcox agrees: "It is necessarily a selective picture that she paints but never a sentimental one. For her Nature is neither wholly benevolent nor wholly malevolent" (55).

Echoing Thomas Hardy's poem entitled "Neutral Tones" and his philosophy that nature is indifferent to us, Oliver's "Neutralities" describes a situation in which one person is killed and another critically injured by a fall through ice. The day after the accident she returns to the ice to find it solid enough to support skaters safely and surrounded by "dry stalks of goldenrod, tansy--whispering / la la la" (TM 69; 11-12). Nature is not malevolent, just indifferent to the pain that it has

caused, but its musical indifference seems almost brutal. For Oliver, learning of this indifference and of the dangers is a painful awakening, but one that must be experienced if one would live effectively in the world. Alluding to Blake and speaking from the perspective of a lamb who is in the process of moving from innocence to experience, in "The Lamb" Oliver describes what happens when one is unaware that parts of nature are dangerous. The lamb has eaten poisonous berries and now lies "swelled and cracked on the grass" (TM 6; 16) because, as the dying creature laments, "I did not know that in the world there lurked / Various death" (1-2).

The "dark side" of nature appears in several other poems in American Primitive. There are mushrooms, in the poem of the same name, "looking innocent as sugar / but full of paralysis" (4; 28-9). In "The Kitten," there is the "stillborn kitten / with the one large eye / in the center of its small forehead" (6; 3-4). But in this poem Oliver also recounts burying the deformed creature rather than donating it to a museum or telling newspaper reporters about it. She wishes to affirm its existence rather than make a curiosity out of it; her affirmation is expressed during the burial:

> saying, it was real,
> saying, life is infinitely inventive,
> saying, what other amazements
> lie in the dark seed of the earth, yes,

I think I did right to go out alone
and give it back peacefully, and cover the
place
with the reckless blossoms of weeds. (16-19)

Affirming the existence of the painful parts of nature is important for Oliver. Such affirmation permits knowledge of danger, as in "The Lamb," and it also promotes understanding of the deeper mysteries of life and death. Most people are afraid of grappling with the idea of death even though it is a certainty. As Oliver notes in "Vultures":

No one,
moreover,
wants to ponder it,
how it will be
to feel the blood cool,
shapeliness dissolve. (37; 20-25)

Because of our fear, we distance ourselves from those parts of nature that remind us of death, in this case vultures:

Locked into
the blaze of our own bodies
we watch them
wheeling and drifting, we
honor them and we
loathe them,
however wise the doctrine,
however magnificent the cycles,
however ultimately sweet
the huddle of death to fuel
those powerful wings. (37-8; 26 36)

But, Oliver also insists that we must overcome our fears and focus on all parts of nature if we are to understand our lives. As she says in "Skunk Cabbage." "What blazes the trail is not necessarily pretty" (44; 27). According

to Wallace, "This reconciliation is self-knowledge, acceptance of life as a perfect imperfection" (9). And as we attempt to understand, we come to see, as Oliver does, that we are not as separate as we may have thought. The majority of Oliver's poems in the chapbooks through American Primitive express strong connections between the human and the natural worlds, often to the point of her merging with the natural. "Dream in Two Parts" in Sleeping in the Forest is typical. She listens first:

> I listen
> to the birds crossing the air,
> the big trees slowly breathing,
> the small plants whipping upward. (58; 1-4)

Next she moves away from her ordinary existence:

> I think:
> I could stay here forever,
> like a lapsed apostle,
> listening to the earth at its work.
>
> Then: sleep. (5-9)

In Part 2 of the poem, she wakes to find that during her sleep she has merged with the natural world:

> When I wake, darkness
> has found every crevice.
> Pieces of my flesh
> have turned into roots and leaves. (10-13)

This merging is at first troubling because she has lost control:

> I try to swing my legs over into the wet grass,
> but I cannot.
> I try to call out for help
> but I cannot. (14-17)

She lies in this paralyzed state and looks toward home and the trees, "One by one--maples, willows, oaks-- / . . . strike like bells" (23-4). The ending is enigmatic. Music has been associated with freedom in Oliver's previous poetry, but here the striking sounds also remind one of funeral bells. They are calling out in a way that she in her merged existence cannot. It should be noted, though, that this poem is a dream; thus, the merging is not actual but in the mind. The dream state mitigates the possible negativity of merging by making the negativity, as well as the merging, a fantasy.

Sleep serves as the vehicle for merging in several poems in The Night Traveler as well. In "Sleeping on the Island," she moves toward sleep as she moves away from her corporal existence:

> Step by step I descend
> Darkness; sleep at the bottom
> Shines like oil
>
> And the borders of my body fail.
>
> I flow forth cool as water,
> The blue leaf,
> The narrow leaf of the ash,
> Looking for the rest of itself. (1-8)

Here, however, there is a joy associated with such merging:

> This is wonderful!
> One by one
> I take off the five senses
> Like five masks.
> Beneath is the heavy stone without lips,

Without eyes,
That knows everything.

When the rain begins I too know everything,
And fall into an easy sleep. (9-17)

Speech has been put aside in favor of something better--knowledge--but the concluding image of the poem raises again questions about the desirability of this state: "Around me / Fish are moving / Like flames under the waves" (18-20). As I will discuss later, Oliver frequently uses water imagery when attempting to imagine a return to the origins of life. Here, that imagery linked with "flames" creates ambiguity about the wisdom of pushing toward such a return. In this poem, as in the previous poem, Oliver does not need to make a judgment on the matter because the merging is set within the context of slumber. This aligns her with the transcendentalists, who, according to Buell, "refuse to commit . . . either to a straightforwardly literal or an out-and-out metaphorical approach to the subject at hand" by trying to bring the external world and imagination into harmony (144). Oliver does this by using sleep to express what she would have the external world be if she could.

Her decision to merge with nature, while still couched in unconsciousness, seems more positive in "Winter Sleep." In this poem she has another creature with her as she moves toward sleep and toward merging:

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--
Two old sisters familiar to each other
As cups in a cupboard--
We would burrow into the yellow leaves
To shut out the sounds of the winter wind.
(NT 1-9)

Except for the tentative beginnings of song, here the union seems positive:

Deep in that place, among the roots
Of sumac, oak, and wintergreen,
We would remember the freedoms of summer,
And we would begin to breathe together--
Hesitant as singers in the wings--
A shy music,
Oh! a very soft song.

While pines cracked in the snow above,
And seeds froze in the ground, and rivers
carried
A dark roof in their many blue arms,
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

The family name. (10-26)

There is union here as well as the liberation of speech. The fact that these occur within the context of sleep and bear the opening "If I could" suggest that the merging still is not taking place in any real way for Oliver.

What troubles Oliver seems to be that in some way we are and yet are not like our fellow creatures. As in "Winter Sleep," a bear, this time male, figures prominently in "The Bear." This bear has a human urge:

" . . . something / In the ponderous body wants / To wrinkle with happiness" (NT 13-15). He is not human, but he seems to be becoming so: "He has not smiled yet, but the muscles of his mouth are growing / Soft as a girl's" (21-22). The union, in other words, seems possible. Maybe we, with our civilized ways, are standing in the way of the oneness. Oliver indicts the human race for such separation in "The Family":

> Put another log on the fire;
> Mozart, again, on the turntable.
> Still there is a sorrow
>
> With us in the room.
> We remember the cave.
> In our dreams we go back
>
> Or they come to visit.
> They also like music.
> We eat leaves together.
>
> They are our brothers.
> They are the family
> We have run away from. (NT 13-24)

In Twelve Moons, however, Oliver explores the ways in which we are not separated from nature. The title of the book evokes one example of female unity with nature through the monthly lunar cycles, and other poems in the volume continue this motif of union. In "Buck Moon--From the Field Guide to Insects," even though sleep is present, Oliver has the reader become a part of nature's spirit before sleep takes over:

> Where you feel
> a power that is not you but flows

into you like a river. Where you lie down and
breathe
the sweet honey of grass and count
the stars; where you fall asleep listening
to the simple chords repeated, repeated.
Where, resting, you feel
the perfection, the rising, the happiness
of their dark wings. (TM 27; 10-18)

In other instances, Oliver tries to join with nature by eating parts of it. In "Mussels" she moves through a cave to collect and devour the singing crustaceans (TM 4).[1] In "Hunter's Moon--Eating the Bear," the persona tells the bear: "And I will put you into my mouth, yes. / And I will swallow, yes. / So. You will come to live inside me" (TM 50; 15-17). In "August," she is able to ignore the pain inflicted by the blackberry thorns and allow herself to become pure creature as she eats:

When the blackberries hang
swollen in the woods, in the brambles
nobody owns, I spend

all day among the high
branches, reaching
my ripped arms, thinking

of nothing, cramming
the black honey of summer
into my mouth; all day my body

accepts what it is. (AP 3; 1-10)

Tasting honey also often acts as a catalyst for feeling connected to nature. In "Honey at the Table,"

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[1] See Chapter II, pages 39-40 for a discussion of listening in "Mussels."

It fills you with the soft
essence of vanished flowers, it becomes
a trickle sharp as a hair that you follow
from the honey pot over the table

and out the door and over the ground,
and all the while it thickens,

grows deeper and wilder, edged
with pine boughs and wet boulders,
pawprints of bobcat and bear, until

deep in the forest you
shuffle up some tree, you rip the bark,

you float into and swallow some dripping combs,
bits of tree, crushed bees--a taste
composed of everything lost, in which
everything
lost is found. (AP 57; 1-15)

The same sense of finding the self through eating honey appears in "The Honey Tree." First the eating occurs:

And so at last I climbed
the honey tree, ate
chunks of pure light, ate
the bodies of bees that could not
get out of my way, ate
the dark hair of the leaves,
the rippling bark,
the heartwood. Such
frenzy! But joy does that,
I'm told, in the beginning. (AP 81; 1-10)

Later comes the acceptance of the body, the union with nature, and the singing:

Oh, anyone can see
how I love myself at last!
how I love the world! climbing
by day or night
in the wind, in the leaves, kneeling
at the secret rip, the cords
of my body stretching
and singing in the
heaven of appetite. (AP 81; 21-29)

Patricia Yaeger uses Oliver's image of the "honey-mad

woman" as a paradigm for "someone mad for the honey of speech" (4), someone "engaged in the necessary business of stealing and recontextualizing language" while feeling both the pleasure and the exhaustive effort of such a task (75-6). Yaeger comes dangerously close here to making Oliver's task much like that of the typical male exploitative view of nature. However, Yaeger's interpretation is not in line with Oliver's overriding emphasis in her poetry, not to control but to become that with which she is interacting. She does not destroy by eating but, rather, recreates that which is eaten as well as herself. Bruce Bennett agrees:

> Recurring images of ingestion serve a dual function: Luscious objects and substances--blackberries, honey--are devoured with a joy approaching frenzy, but as we take into ourselves the labor and bodies of others, we are continually reminded of our involvement in a process in which what consumes will be consumed. (10)

Such unbridled joy is what Kristeva describes as jouissance. For Oliver it comes through merging with nature through eating. She says in "The Plum Trees":

> Joy
>
> is a taste before
> it's anything else, and the body
>
> can lounge for hours devouring
> the important moments. Listen,
>
> the only way
> to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking
> it

into the body first, like small
wild plums. (AP 84; 8-16)

Eating parts of nature is, then, an active way to achieve a union with it, but frequently in American Primitive Oliver finds that union occurs even if she remains passive. She describes such a feeling of being part of everything in "Clapp's Pond":

How sometimes everything
closes up, a painted fan, landscapes and
moments
flowing together until the sense of distance--
say, between Clapp's Pond and me--
vanishes, edges slide together
like the feathers of a wing, everything
touches everything. (AP 21-2; 18-24)

She also unites with nature in "Crossing the Swamp" as she tries to gain a foothold but finds that the swamp will take over and make her a part of it:

I feel
not wet so much as
painted and glittered
with the fat grassy
mires, the rich
and succulent marrows
of earth--a poor
dry stick given
one more chance by the whims
of swamp water--a bough
that still, after all these years,
could take root,
sprout, branch out, bud--
make of its life a breathing
palace of leaves. (AP 58-9; 22-36)

The swamp produces in her the ecstasy of the promise of new life as it takes her into itself.

Sometimes becoming a part of nature causes an

urge for sexual union, as occurs in "Blossom":

> What
> we know: we are more
> than blood--we are more
> than our hunger and yet
> we belong
> to the moon and when the ponds
> open, when the burning
> begins the most
> thoughtful among us dreams
> of hurrying down
> into the black petals,
> into the fire,
> into the night where time lies shattered,
> into the body of another. (AP 50-1; 21-34)

Our participation as part of the cosmos heightens and is heightened by our own ability to unite with others of our own species. What Boruch calls Oliver's "drive toward union" (135) is a typically feminine trait, according to Nancy Chodorow:

> From the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (169)

Three important qualities of the female experience emerge in Oliver's poetry as she unites with nature. First, her body increasingly plays a part in her poetry. Second, she sees connections to her sister creatures and to mother earth. Third, she imagines ways to return to the origins of life. These three effects allow her to

begin to speak as a female without the restrictions that were present for the women in her first two books.

Nature helps Oliver see and accept her own body, for, as Moyer notes, she "writes as if the natural world were her body" (454). Oliver's most eloquent acceptance of the body as a part of nature appears in "Humpbacks." The breaching whales produce an intense emotion in the watcher:

> We wait, not knowing
> just where it will happen; suddenly
> they smash through the surface, someone begins
> shouting for joy and you realize
> it is yourself as they surge
> upward and you see for the first time
> how huge they are, as they breach,
> and dive, and breach again. . . .
> (AP 61; 23-30)

The intense emotion occasioned by this vision causes the observers' bodies to move in harmony with the whales: "they crash back under those black silks / and we all fall back ..." (61; 39-40). In the end, such harmony causes the poet to comment on the value and restraints of all bodies:

> Listen, whatever it is you try
> to do with your life, nothing will ever dazzle
> you
> like the dreams of your body,
>
> its spirit
> longing to fly while the dead-weight bones
>
> toss their dark mane and hurry
> back into the fields of glittering fire

where everything,
even the great whale,
throbs with song. (62; 51-60)

Although enthusiasm for the body is present in "Humpbacks," this feeling is also tempered by the realization that the actual physical body has weight, is pulled down by gravity. In other poems, however, Oliver does not temper the enthusiasm. For example, In "Pink Moon--The Pond," listening to frogs calls the soul out of the body and, sensing that the soul will not be restrained, the body decides to follow. As it does, the body comes to be united with everything:

You step off the shore
and plummet to your knees--
you slog forward to your thighs
and sink to your cheekbones--
and now you are caught
by the cold chains of the water--
you are vanishing while around you
the frogs continue to sing, driving
their music upward through your own throat,
not even noticing
you are something else.
And that's when it happens--
you see everything through their eyes,
their joy, their necessity;
you wear their webbed fingers;
your throat swells.
And that's when you know
you will live whether you will or not,
one way or another,
because everything is everything else,
one long muscle. (TM 7-8; 22-42)

As the body becomes a part of everything else, it also accepts itself:

It's no more mysterious than that.
So you relax, you don't fight it anymore,
the darkness coming down

called water,
called spring,
called the green leaf, called
a woman's body
as it turns into mud and leaves,
as it beats in its cage of water,
as it turns like a lonely spindle
in the moonlight, as it says
yes. (8; 43-55)

Every bit as enthusiastic as Molly Bloom's final affirmation, "yes I said yes I will yes" (Joyce 783), Oliver's "yes" here is an affirmation of the female body as a part of all that is.[2] Such an affirmation is a vital step for a woman toward achieving a voice because first, to quote Tillie Olsen, "Telling the truth about one's body [is] a necessary, freeing subject for the woman writer" (255). Speaking the body allows the woman to get to other things, and it also gives the woman a sense of confidence because the woman trusts her body as she does not trust outside authorities (Ostriker, Stealing 11). Cixous calls for each woman to: "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" ("Laugh" 250). Ann Rosalind Jones finds the body as voice powerful in another way: "to write from the body is to recreate the world" (252). Bennett, Brumer, and Wilcox, in their reviews of American Primitive, note the

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[2] For a discussion of Oliver's exploration of the rhythms of the female body through the rhythm and form of her poems, see Chapter IV.

omnipresence of Oliver's body in her poems (10, 21, and 53 respectively), and surely the presence of her body is part of the reason for the powerful, authentic, female voice that now develops in her poetry. Oliver's own advice to budding writers argues as much:

> Go out, I say, and build a boat, or drive race cars, or learn astronomy, or pick tomatos, or wash dogs. Let your body feel and your mind record, so that when you get to the writing there will be true threads between you and the world. ("For the Man" 733)

Further, Oliver affirms the female body not only in its human form but also as it exists for other creatures. Boruch calls this "her stubborn near personification of natural life" (134), but, as Stitt finds, there is strength in her ability to personify without falling into the pathetic fallacy (433). She succeeds in making "animals and plants her kin and alternate selves" (Ostriker, "Natural" 149) and falls in line with other women writers who relate to creatures of nature "as our sisters" (Lauter 199). The black bear in "Snow Moon--Black Bear Gives Birth" has "tough nipples," which provide her nursing cubs with "the rich river" (TM 74; 15-16). The fish, in the poem of the same name, has a "belly" that contains "life that is to be" (TM 14; 12-13) and its body is compared to the "body / of any woman come to term" 15; 32-33). In "Ghosts," a cow gives birth "secretly / and with the tenderness of any caring woman"

(AP 30; 55-6). The mare in "A Meeting" gives birth and amazes Oliver because "She is the most beautiful woman / I have ever seen" (AP 63; 15-16). These other creatures help her to see that all female bodies might be cherished and move in harmony with one another in what Adrienne Rich calls "the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order" (On Lies 39).

In addition to speaking of the experience of union with other female creatures, Oliver's poetry increasingly expresses a desire to unite with the primordial Mother. As early as "Sea Memory" in No Voyage, Oliver speaks of memories of the origins of life:

> I remember a place
> Soft and salt as tears and wool
> And nine kingdoms down
> Something that flickered as if it burned
> Like a small bright fish under all
> The drag and drift of the sea.
>
> Long before light I lay there under the tides,
> Long before thought I rolled there with my
> blind smile
> And dreamed my wordless sea-black dreams.
> (NV 34; 1-9)

In "White Night" Oliver associates the origin of life with a female presence as she wishes, "I want to flow out / across the mother / of all waters . . ." (AP 54; 27-9). A similar sentiment appears in "Blackleaf Swamp":

> And if I am alive, but must die,
> Is it not proper to study
> Darkness and trees and water?

Along the shore
The grass is so green and fine,
It feels like the love of my mother.
(NT 19-24)

The body wants to return to the female from which it came. Swimming, in "The Sea," triggers the memory of such a desire:[3]

Stroke by
stroke my
body remembers that life and cries for
the lost parts of itself-- (AP 69; 1-4)

The memory then reawakens the intense desire for reunion:

Sprawled
in that motherlap,
in that dreamhouse
of salt and exercise,
what a spillage
of nostalgia pleads
from the very bones! (14-20)

In her discussion of Wordsworth, Margaret Homans finds the Mother Nature concept easier for male poets to use than for female poets because "Mother Nature is not a helpful model for women aspiring to be poets. She is prolific biologically, not linguistically, and she is as destructive as she is creative" (13). Oliver, however, turns the problems that Homans finds into advantages. By accepting both the positive and the negative and by speaking about those parts of herself that she finds in Mother Nature as well, she is able to speak more

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[3] For a discussion of the increased use of water imagery in Oliver's poetry, see Chapter IV.

powerfully. If, as Bly says in Sleepers Joining Hands, "In mother consciousness there is affection for nature, compassion, love of water, grief, and care for the dead, love of whatever is hidden, intuitive, ecstasy" (33), Oliver almost becomes mother consciousness in her poetry. This may be what Cixous has in mind when she says of woman that "There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" ("Laugh" 251).

Even so, potentially troubling is the invisibility that overtakes Oliver in almost every poem in which she merges with nature. In "The Sea," discussed earlier, she speaks of the desire to be "vanished" (69; 30). In "White Night," also mentioned previously, Oliver describes her desire to unite with the mother with the words, "I want to lose myself" (AP 54; 30). In "Pink Moon," she tells the reader, "you are vanishing" as you merge with nature (TM 7; 28); and in "Sleeping in the Forest," Oliver remembers that as she slept in the woods and dreamed of being reunited with the earth, "By morning / I had vanished at least a dozen times / into something better" (TM 3; 16-18). If Oliver truly is achieving her voice as she interacts and becomes one with nature, how is it that her voice is any more effective than in those poems of the silent women in her early books? Does not

her vanishing in order to sing about what she becomes negate the effectiveness of her voice? Alicia Ostriker would think so:

> The contemporary woman who declares herself to be Nobody, nowhere, empty and blank, registers the continuing power of a culture which defines her as, at her best, genitally defective, sexually pure, and personally self-effacing. Nobody is, in effect, a perfectly good woman. (Stealing 63)

Vanished woman thus perpetuates the marginal role that she has been assigned by the patriarchy. Ostriker, however, considers only women poets, such as Emily Dickinson, who declare their invisibility among other human beings, and she contrasts such invisibility, which she sees as defeating, with the type of invisibility that Wallace Stevens displays in "The Snow Man" (60). His ability to merge with the nonhuman world gives him power and understanding exceeding that of everyday men, and it is precisely this same power and understanding that Oliver achieves in her poetic merging.

Oliver's power is striking because it is engendered by a female impulse that Cixous describes as "her capacity to depropriate herself without self interest" (Newly 87) so that she becomes all and all becomes her. For Keats, such a capacity was "negative capability," "the poetical character, [which] . . . has no self--it is everything and nothing" (Gittings 157). In speaking of contemporary poetry, Paul Breslin writes that "absence"

may be "authentic self" (367). If this is true, this vanishing does not negate Oliver, the woman, as a forceful, speaking presence precisely because it aligns her with the most powerful female presences of life. To say this another way, Mari McCarty feels that this movement toward unity is precisely the way for women to achieve power, for they "can only overcome their Otherness by becoming consciously marginal, by reveling in marginality" (367).

As Oliver revels in nature, her voice develops. Elizabeth Gaffney notes,

> It is not hard to recognize the voice in American Primitive, for Oliver is always present, reassuring, celebrating, making offhand comments. Her voice calls us to join in and demands that we respond . . . .(496)

Although Gaffney is speaking in large part about Oliver's style, which will be covered in Chapter IV, her calling attention to the distinctiveness of the voice and the authentic authorial presence should be noted. As Alicia Ostriker notes, "One of the ways we recognize that a woman writer has taken some kind of liberating jump is that her muted parts begin to explain themselves" (Stealing 92). Oliver's "muted parts" in her earlier books were her body, her connections to nature, her very presence in her own poems. In American Primitive Oliver provides, according to Brumer, "almost a saga, of a woman's committed decision to create a life of meaning

and independence via her interactions with nature" (21). Oliver's poem "Trilliums," published in her most recent book, Dream Work, recounts how nature came to be for her the place of self-development and expression:

> Every spring,
> among
> the ambiguities
> of childhood,
>
> the hillsides grew white
> with the wild trilliums.
> I believed in the world.
> Oh, I wanted
>
> to be easy
> in the peopled kingdoms,
> to take my place there,
> but there was none
>
> that I could find
> shaped like me.
> So I entered
> through the delicate buds,
>
> I crossed the cold creek,
> my backbone
> and my thin white shoulders
> unfolding and stretching. (1-20)

Unable to feel comfortable in the human world, she sought and found her ease in nature. With that ease came her voice.

Voice, then, as it has been used in this study is synonymous with the expression of the self, in Oliver's case the self as a being in nature, but it is also used literally to mean the ability to verbalize effectively. The subject matter of Oliver's later poems contributes to their effectiveness and to her voice because nature and

she have become parts of the same whole. As Lauter finds,

> It is one thing for Robert Bly [or any male poet] to ground his energy in nature as an aspect of the external world. It is quite another for the female poet to do so, recognizing, as she must after centuries of reminders, the similarity of nature's body to her own. (178)

Woman in nature breaks free of the patriarchal taboos and finds herself aligned with powerful forces (de Beauvoir 169). Rather than continuing to listen to voices outside of herself, Oliver lets nature teach her to listen and then speak from her own body. Changes in Oliver's technique, which will be discussed in Chapter IV, add even more to her achievement of a distinctive voice as her work progresses.

CHAPTER IV

"NAILS OF LIGHT IN THE LOOSE RACING WATERS": TECHNIQUE IN THE MIDDLE POEMS

Mary Oliver's content changes as she comes into her own in her middle poems, but it is not solely the shift to a focus on her relationship with nature that allows her voice to develop. As her new subject matter comes to the forefront, the technical characteristics of her poetry also change. Whereas Oliver's early poems are dense on the page with long lines and long, uninterrupted blocks of print, her middle poems use shorter lines and discrete sections, which allow for smoother movement. Staggered lines contribute to the same effect. In addition, marked changes in the use of rhyme and rhythm can be seen in the middle poems. No longer dependent on traditional forms, Oliver uses form to reflect content, often matching the rhythm of her poems to the rhythms of nature and the body. She also interacts with the reader much more frequently in the middle poems by using the second person pronoun and by asking the reader questions. Finally, her use of imagery changes in the middle poems, and water imagery in particular begins to predominate. As she breaks with tradition by using these techniques, her powerful feminine voice begins to emerge.

Although traces of these techniques are present even in Oliver's first two books, they become distinct in her chapbooks. It is likely that the chapbooks served as a "trial run" for her new voice because since they stand as less formal collections, they serve to provide a less constrained environment within which to introduce her technical innovations.

Four stanza forms predominate in No Voyage and The River Styx: quatrains, quintets, two or more stanzas of from six to nine lines per poem, and poems of twenty or more lines with no stanza breaks. Appearance on the page is of large blocks of print, the density of which the reader must plow through. The density is increased by the length of the lines, most running from eight to thirteen syllables. The first two stanzas from "The Maze," a poem from No Voyage, are typical:

> I leave you, then, among the gulls and sand.
> Let wings, now, and the sun and the tides
> Trouble you lightly with their voiceless deeds
> As you wake and walk between the sea and the
> land.
>
> At three o'clock in the morning the mind
> surrounded
> Listens to the tarnishing of what matters most.
> But knows not what it is, nor where it lies
> In danger among trifles and threatening to be
> lost. (21: 1-8)

In the chapbooks, Oliver increasingly uses couplets and tercets, which produce an airier and more fluid effect. The difference can be seen by comparing the

appearance of the two stanzas above with four stanzas from "Snakes in Winter" in Twelve Moons:

> Deep in the woods,
> under the sprawled upheavals of rocks,
>
> dozens lie coiled together.
> Touch them: they scarcely
>
> breathe; they stare
> out of such deep forgetfulness
>
> that their eyes are like jewels--
> and asleep, though they cannot close.
> (66; 1-8)

The larger chunks of print and the tendency to use end-stopped lines at the ends of stanzas in the earlier poems slow them down. The smaller units and the enjambment between stanzas in the later poems pick up their pace.

Even in poems of twenty or more lines, all in one stanza, the earlier poems are denser. Compare "New England Houses" from The River Styx and "Flying" in American Primitive :

> Said the old carpenters, "There was never much
> We could count on. Weather, whiskey, girls
> Warmed us for a while, then left us swamped or
> dry.
> So we were happiest at our tasks of wood,
> Shaped and hammered like disciples of time
> Thinking, someday when we wake from an old
> man's sleep,
> And there's no more women or whiskey, what
> Will we dream of under the shifting weathers?"
> So they drove the nails in straight and deep,
> Pounding for love and a kind of salvation.
> "Now," said the old carpenters, "the world
> Has changed; the winds confuse our eyes;
> Our thin arms reach in vain for boards;
> The whiskey's gone, the women ghosts."
> And time took them then, dry as sawdust,

And set them down among the uncut boards
That curl beneath the ground. But in our town
And the next, and the next, there are famous
houses:
No matter how fierce the weather, they are warm
and fast;
No matter the deaths of their owners--they last
and they last. (RS 18)

Reading the preceding lines is quite a different

experience from reading the following later poem:

Sometimes,
on a plane,
you see a stranger.
He is so beautiful!
His nose
going down in the
old Greek way,
or his smile
a wild
Mexican fiesta.
You want to say:
do you know
how beautiful you are?
You leap up
into the aisle,
you can't let him go
until he has touched you
shyly, until you have rubbed him,
oh, lightly,
like a coin
you find on the earth somewhere
shining and unexpected and,
without thinking,
reach for. You stand there
shaken
by the strangeness,
the splash of his touch.
When he's gone
you stare like an animal into
the blinding clouds
with the snapped chain of your life,
the life you know:
the deeply affectionate earth,
the familiar landscapes
slowly turning
thousands of feet below. (AP 34-5)

In the latter example, the shorter lines and the

enjambments pull the reader swiftly through the poem. Oliver has her own interpretation of the effects of long and short lines. "The long line (longer than five feet)," she writes, "suggests a greater-than-human power. It can seem by its simple endurance--beyond ordinary lung capacity--grandiose, or prophetic" ("Some Thoughts" 41). She goes on to say that long lines can also produce the effect of abundance (41). Of short lines, on the other hand, she says:

> Excitement of all kinds, with its accompanying physical and psychic tension, "takes our breath"; any line shorter than pentameter indicates this. The reader is brought to attention as the shorter line reveals a situation which is in some way out of the ordinary. ("Some Thoughts" 41)

The reader moves with Oliver's experience rather than merely reading her pronouncements about it, which is sometimes the case in the earlier, longer-lined poems. The poems in Twelve Moons and American Primitive, with their shorter lines, draw the reader into the excitement of the experience. They also provide more fluidity, a key characteristic of the feminine, according to Irigaray. Woman's sexual experience is not monolithically unified, as man's is; similarly, woman's essence is constantly in flux (79).

The staggered lines, which are used frequently in Twelve Moons and American Primitive, have the same

effect. The first fifteen lines of "The Bobcat" serve as a good example:

> One night
> long ago,
> in Ohio,
> a bobcat leaped
> like a quick
> clawed
> whirlwind of light
> from the pines
> beside the road,
> and our hearts
> thudded and
> stopped--
> those lightning eyes!
> that dappled jaw!
> those plush paws!
> (AP 16; 1-15)

The staggered movement of the lines causes the reader's eye to imitate the movement of the leaping bobcat, and the shifting beginning space of each succeeding line produces a kind of uncertainty and excitement in the reader to correspond to the experience described in the poem. Even in "Crossing the Swamp," wherein the effect intended is laborious movement, the staggered lines pull the reader along with the poet. The movement is not rapid, but it is accomplished by the poem, not by the reader:

> Here is the endless
> wet thick
> cosmos, the center
> of everything--the nugget
> of dense sap, branching
> vines, the dark burred
> faintly belching
> bogs. Here
> is swamp, here
> is struggle,

closure--
pathless, seamless,
peerless mud. My bones
knock together at the pale
joints, trying
for foothold, fingerhold,
mindhold over
such slick crossings, deep
hipholds, hummocks
that sink silently
into the black, slack
earthsoup. . . . (AP 58; 1-22)[1]

In addition to increasing the flow, the format on the page for these later poems produces more white space, and white space is a meaning-filled part of the total poem (Fussell 155). More white space gives the feeling of something left unsaid, and this effect is particularly significant to the expression of Oliver's feminine voice. Jeanne Kammer posits that white space indicates "an acknowledgment of the void" and a fear of chaos for male writers but operates quite differently for female writers, who want to explore the blank spaces and decipher them (158). Linda Gregerson finds that the white space in Oliver's poems "establish[es] a necessary margin of silence, so that the poems may be built in a clearing" (39). Whereas the earlier poems present the impression on the page of "saying it all," the poems from the chapbooks on do not present this illusion. In these works, there are mysteries in nature and in the self

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[1] Flow is also affected by meter. See pages 85-7 for a discussion of the changing rhythms in Oliver's poems.

which Oliver willingly accepts without always having to state directly that they are present.

An additional technique used by Oliver to create the sense of gaps or incompleteness is that of dividing some of the poems into discrete sections with either numbers or illustrative symbols marking the divisions. "Turtles," for example, is divided into seven numbered sections with several spaces placed between each section. There are, in other words, visible gaps on the page. Gaps exist within the content of the poem also. Sections one through four comprise a coherent narrative about a friend who found two turtles a year apart and later observed them becoming mates in a nearby pond. Stanza five, however, does not continue the narrative. Instead, it contains an enigmatic, chant-like quatrain:

> I eat no meat.
> I break no leaf in idleness.
> I listen to the rocks breathing
> In the wet meadows. (TM 25; 19-22)

This seems to be the voice of the turtle speaking, but which turtle? There are two in the narrative. Maybe it is the voice of some greater spirit in nature. However, if this is so, what exactly is that spirit, and why does it enter the poem at this point? Adding to the puzzle, the poet enters the poem in section six:

> When I heard this story, I said:

The dead have no eyes.
The dead can cherish nothing
But their own white bones.
That is what being dead is. (25; 23-27)

Yet, the turtles swim off into the pond at the end of the narrative. Where has death entered the poem? The final section of the poem does little to answer these questions: "But there is a way, one, / To live forever" (25; 28-9). Even so, the concluding couplet is a certain pronouncement. The poet has learned from the turtles what immortality means. The answer is obviously intended to be found in the narrative that has been shared with the reader. But, no answer is here, only more questions. Spaces on the page become, then, spaces in the content of the poems.

"The Lost Children" in American Primitive (12-15), also in seven numbered sections, ends with the same sort of puzzling certainty. The poem tells the story of Lydia Osborn, an eleven-year-old lost in the woods of Ohio, and Isaac Zane, a nine-year-old stolen by the Wyandot tribe. The concluding two sections of the poem explain the mysterious disappearance and kidnapping this way:

6

I know why the old Wyandot chief, Tarhe,
laughed and would not barter back for anything
in any world
Isaac, the captured boy, his delight.
I know.
He did it for his own sake.

> Yet, because he was an old man, and a wise man,
> I think he'd understand
> how sometimes, when loss leans like a broken
> tree,
> I like to imagine
> he did it
> for all of us. (AP 24-5; 67-78)

Even though all of the questions are not answered, Oliver draws us into her own declaration of certainty and makes us one with her in the spaces and in the knowledge found within the narrative.

Oliver's relationship with the reader can also be seen in her frequent use of the second person pronoun. "Pink Moon--The Pond" begins, "You think it will never happen again" (TM 7; 1); and "At Blackwater Pond" opens with, "You know how it feels" (TM 49; 1). The reader is immediately engaged in a relationship with the poet from the first line because she speaks to him/her and because the use of the word it implies antecedent conversation. In "Sturgeon Moon--The Death of Meriwether Lewis," the implied previous interaction between poet and reader is even more obvious within the context of its opening: "Take, for example, Meriwether / Lewis. . . ." (TM 35; 1-2). The reader's presence is also obvious in "In Blackwater Woods," as Oliver calls out an imperative:

> Look, the trees
> are turning
> their own bodies
> into pillars

of light . . . . (AP 82; 1-5)

And Oliver's repetition of "You know what I mean" in "Humpbacks" (AP 60-62) is her attempt to make the reader feel what she feels (Yaeger 108). According to Alicia Ostriker, women's poetry typically tries to bring reader and writer into "an active personal transaction" (Stealing 205). Creating dialogue within the poem creates an openness (Ong 176), which eliminates didacticism and domination. Belenky et al. find that "in 'real talk' domination is absent, reciprocity and cooperation are prominent" (146). Oliver's middle poems engage in such "real talk" that is easy to listen to and to which one readily responds.

Oliver's use of questions engages the reader in much the same way that the use of you does. Culler feels that questions to the reader presuppose prior conversation (114), and Kristeva asserts that questioning "postulates the existence of the other" (Revolution 152-3). In the early poems, Oliver's questions are mostly rhetorical, e.g., "Who will blame him . . . ?" (NV 20; 16) or directed toward the speaker of the poem, as in "The Letter," in which the persona asks himself, "What news shall a man put down / To send his tolling pulses through the mails?" (NV 30; 3-4) and then proceeds to answer the question through the content of the poem. In contrast,

the questions in Oliver's middle poems seem directed to herself, to the reader, and to the cosmos in general, as if to say, "Whoever can answer, please do." It is difficult to read her questions without being pulled into Oliver's thought. In "Bluefish" she asks:

> Have you ever wondered
> where the earth
> tumbles beyond itself
> and heaven begins? (AP 79; 24-27)

In "Ghosts" she asks us four times about the vanished bison: "Have you noticed?" (AP 28-30). In "Music" she queries: "Do you think the heart / is accountable?" (AP 73; 30-31). There are no easy answers to any of these questions. She knows it, and we know it, and the knowledge adds to the effectiveness of her feminine voice. As Cixous says of the feminine spirit, "We like uneasiness, questioning" (Newly 93).

The same questioning spirit that produces the riddles in the middle poems also calls into question traditional poetic form. Whereas her early poems are traditional and formal (Marvin 2611), so much so that Robert Glauber "wish[es] she would let herself go" (278), her middle poems dispense with artificial devices (Gregerson 38) in favor of more natural sound devices and more bodily rhythmical flow.

For example, traditional rhyme schemes are used frequently in the first two books. Oliver's favorite

rhyme patterns include aabb couplets:

> Kites and eagles do not sing;
> The vulture is a silent thing,
> And hawks float songless down the day
> And rise up songless from their prey.
> (NV 6; 1-4)

lines with alternating rhymes (abab):

> Now time has broken every leaf
> And windy vines lie thin and black
> And spill down hillsides loose as grief,
> And time will never bring you back.
> (NV 42; 1-4)

and alternating rhymed and unrhymed lines (abcb):

> Dearest: between us now the long Atlantic
> In the heavy wind lies, blue or gray
> Under the various weathers, dark in the dreams
> Of all men who have ever gone away.
> (NV 15; 1-4)

Such rhyme schemes, though traditional and familiar to us all, produce a forced, artificial effect. In her middle poems, when Oliver begins to sing more freely, rhyme and other sound effects are used more subtly. Rather than exact rhyme, Oliver often uses near rhyme, as in "Mussels": "make a sound / not loud" (TM 4; 14-15). Sound and loud create an echoing effect but do not overwhelm the reader because they are buried between lines that do not rhyme in any way. When Oliver does use exact rhyme in her middle poems, she also buries the rhyme, choosing not to rhyme every other line as she did in No Voyage and River Styx. The reader's attention is called to the words rhymed for effect but not so often that an intrusive effect is produced. In "Spring" (TM

10), for example, stallion and done at the ends of lines four and five are rhymed, but no other lines rhyme. The rhyme then seems incidental to the poem, not contrived.

Assonance and consonance are also frequently used by Oliver in lieu of rhyme as her poetic style develops. Lines one through three of "The Fawn" (TM 13) end with the words metal, went, and instead, the short e producing continuity but not rhyme. Similarly, the use of words ending in s to end lines in "Harvest Moon--The Mockingbird Sings in the Night" gives a rustling effect. A series of lines toward the beginning of the poem starts this rustling:

> out of the clouds
> and into the leaves,
> glazing the creeks,
> the smallest ditches!
> and so many stars! (TM 38; 5-9)

In the succeeding lines, words within the lines repeat the sound: "sky seems stretched" (10), "celestial" (13), "steps" (15), "luminous masks, brushing" (17). From line eighteen onward, the last word in each line again takes up the sound:

> everything as she passes
> with her slow hands
> and soft lips--
> clusters of dark grapes,
> apples swinging like lost planets,
> melons cool and heavy as bodies--
> and the mockingbird wakes
> in his hidden castle;
> out of the silver tangle

of thorns and leaves
he flutters and tumbles . . . .
(TM 38-9; 18-28)

The oppressiveness here matches the oppressiveness of the environment that Oliver is describing/experiencing. It is not an oppressiveness of sound effects that are disconnected from the content of the poem.

Repetition serves the same purpose, that of reinforcing the content, in several of Oliver's poems. In wrestling with the issue of exactly who she is or is not in relation to nature, Oliver repeats "I am" at the ends of lines four, five, and sixteen in "Entering the Kingdom" (TM 21). She does the same thing with "day after day" in lines six and seven of "The Roses" (AP 67) to emphasize the abundant continuation of the process that she is describing. All of these sound effects perform the same function as rhyme--to call attention to the words used--but they are subtle effects. Their method of calling attention is in each case matched to the experience being described rather than being fitted to some arbitrary rhyming pattern. The subtlety gives the poems a more natural effect and breaks free from the reins of imposed dominant poetic forms. Breaking free from the prescribed frames of speech is a necessary task in the development of voice for women (Belenky et al. 134), and Oliver accomplishes this task through her abandonment of traditional rhymes.

Oliver's rhythm also breaks free from the chapbooks on. In her early poems, she makes frequent use of iambs, no matter what experience is being described. In "The House," for example, iambic tetrameter predominates:

> Because we lived our several lives
> Caught up within the spells of love,
> Because we always had to run
> Through the enormous yards of day
> To do all that we hoped to do,
> We did not hear, beneath our lives,
> The old walls falling out of true,
> Foundations shifting in the dark.
>
> (NV 4; 1-8)

Once Oliver begins to interact with nature and to accept her body, the rhythms change. There is less uniformity and more of an attempt to match the rhythms of the poem with the rhythms of the experience. As Judith Lesser's review of Twelve Moons comments, "Her rhythms rely on an understanding of the ways of nature" (1604). "Sunday Morning, High Tide," for example, matches rhythms on the page to rhythms of nature effectively. As the tide takes over the shore, so Oliver lets stresses predominate the opening lines of the poem:

A cold slate
full of swirls, rafts
of sea ducks, waves
tossed shoreward on dark tines,
lapping with boiling tongues
up the smooth sand: it is almost
high tide. We watch
the swelling, the billowing
advance . . . . (TM 54; 1-9).

The reader is overcome by stressed syllables just as the shore is overcome by the waves.

In another experiential work, the tension and excitement of the body is captured in the rhythms of "Lightning":

As always the body
wants to hide,
wants to flow toward it--strives
to balance while
fear shouts,
excitement shouts, back
and forth--each
bolt a burning river
tearing like escape through the dark
field of the other. (AP 7-8; 27-36)

Oliver's rhythms here are strikingly akin to Kristeva's

semiotic, "nonverbal signifying systems" (Revolution 24) because they rely on stresses and, like music, lie outside the realm of verbal or symbolic meaning. For Kristeva, the semiotic develops in the preoedipal stage and provides a strong link between the body and the mother (Revolution 27). It is not surprising, then, that Oliver begins to vary her rhythms and to use rhythm as a meaningful element in her poems at the moment during which she also strives in her content to unite with the mother and the origins of life. Rhythm and imagery thus suggest a strong feminine impulse in her developing voice.

Further connecting to the feminine, images of water begin to predominate in Oliver's poetry from the chapbooks through American Primitive. The sea is strongly linked to the maternal (de Beauvoir 144) and as such represents mystery and danger for men but mystery, danger, and trust for women (Ostriker, Stealing 109). In her first two books, Oliver uses water imagery sparingly, and often approaches it from the masculine perspective, as a source of danger. In "The Crossing," for example, the sea is a representation of the distance between the poet and her lover (NV 15). In "The Swimming Lesson" (NV 43), being thrown into the water causes the poet to move from innocence to experience, and in "Indian Lake" (NV

21) the water reminds her of her dead brother. In the early poems, only in "Sea Memory" (NV 34) does Oliver associate water with the merging instinct and with what Moers calls "oceanic feelings" (260). In the middle poems, however, Oliver repeatedly goes to sources of water to seek her union with nature and uses a water source as the key image in a number of poems. She uses ponds in "Pink Moon--the Pond" (TM 7-8), "At Blackwater Pond" (TM 49), "Neutralities" (TM 69), "Clapp's Pond" (AP 21-2), "A Poem for the Blue Heron" (AP 32-3), "Morning at Great Pond" (AP 46-7), "Blossom" (AP 49-50), "White Night" (AP 54-5), and "Little Sister Pond" (AP 64-6); the sea in "The Fish" (TM 14-15), "Sharks" (TM 33-4), "Sunday Morning--High Tide" (TM 54), and "The Sea" (AP 69-70); lakes in "Turtles" (TM 24-25); creeks in "Dreams" (TM 28-9) and "Creeks" (NT); swamps in "Blackleaf Swamp" (NT), "Swamp" (TM 37) and "Crossing the Swamp" (AP 58-9), and rivers in "Climbing the Chagrin River" (AP 75-6) and "Tecumsah" (AP 77-8). In addition, there are references to these same water sources in many other poems and references to other forms of water, such as rain and dampness, in numerous poems. As she begins to use her strongest voice, the images associated with the feminine increasingly find their way into her poetry, adding more authenticity to her voice.

Another type of imagery that Oliver begins to employ at this stage is what Ostriker calls "revisionist metaphor" (Stealing 108), the use of traditional images of "water, moon, earth, and living things" to suggest new meanings, particularly meanings which affirm and accept the feminine in the speaker (108). Prado finds that Oliver's nontraditional use of traditional images provides "vitality" to her poetry (9), but even more than this, it provides her poetry once more with a voice clearly broken free from domination. The heavy bodies of the whales in Moby Dick become the frolicking bodies of the whales in "Humpbacks" (AP 60-2) (Yaeger 77-82). The traditional association of flowers, that of femininity and frailty (Ostriker, Stealing 109), is dispensed with in "The Roses" when she counters Marvell's admonition that the body can be used up if held too long in check (Yaeger 244). Honey flows and flows in this poem, so abundantly that Oliver can say, ". . . there is no end, / believe me! to the inventions of summer, to the happiness your body / is willing to bear" (AP 67; 11-14).

Like her content, then, Oliver's technique changes as she finds her voice. She abandons more traditional forms of rhyme and meter, distance from the reader, and use of familiar imagery to speak in a more distinctly feminine voice about her experiences in nature. Rather

than seeming restrictive and artificial, as her devices often do in the early poems, the techniques used in the middle poems blend with the content of the poems to produce a more confident, authoritative voice.

CHAPTER V

"THE CRYING OUT, THAT'S SO HARD TO DO": COMMENTING ON SPEECH IN THE LATER POEMS

Oliver's most recent collection of poems, entitled Dream Work (1986), is in many ways a retrospective on her process of learning to speak out. Many of the poems deal with the pain of finding a voice as well as the necessity of such a task. Oliver still writes about listening to nature and merging with nature, but in this book the human world increasingly plays a central role as Oliver begins to meld her life, an awareness of social responsibility, and the freedom that she has found in nature.

As in her first two books, in which Oliver seemed to feel a dissatisfaction with a world in which women did not or could not speak, so "Knife," an early poem in Dream Work, explains that her own silence is painful. As a hawk flies above a stone wall, the poet feels a wound and makes the following realization:

> It wasn't
> about the bird, it was
> something about the way
> stone stays
> mute and put, whatever
> goes flashing by. (15; 9-14)

The mute stone, in fact, reminds her of herself:

Sometimes,
when I sit like this, quiet,
all the dreams of my blood
and all the outrageous divisions of time
seem ready to leave,
to slide out of me.
Then, I imagine, I would never move. (15-21)

These silences are painful because they prevent a life lived fully, and she realizes this as she comes to terms with the source of her pain in the encounter with the hawk:

I was dazzled. But that
wasn't the knife.
It was the sheer, dense wall
of blind stone
without a pinch of hope
or a single unfulfilled desire
sponging up and reflecting,
so brilliantly,
as it has for centuries,
the sun's fire. (15-16; 27-36)

It is not enough, then, for Oliver to sit and absorb the world around her, like the rock "sponging up" the sun, nor is it enough to reflect the light without knowing that there are other, much darker things in the world. As was the case in her first two books, in this poem she finds that muteness has a cutting edge.

If silence is painful, the logical course of action would be to speak in order to avoid pain. However, Oliver is not naive enough to believe that speaking is painless either. In a review of Dream Work, David Kirby writes, "Too little [has been written] about the pain underlying her work" (133). Probably little has been

written because in her earlier poems her interaction with nature seems so easy for her. Her singing out seems a natural part of her life. Not until this book does she explicitly point out what finding her subject matter and learning to speak have cost her. Several of her poems in Dream Work deal with the myriad problems inherent in speaking out. The first problem with speaking is that sometimes the words of truth are simply hard to find. "Dreams" explores the difficulty of the search:

> In the center
> of every petal
> is a letter,
> and you imagine
>
> if you could only remember
> and string them all together
> they would spell the answer. (18; 5-11)

There is consolation in knowing that the world is a text which could be read, but the compulsion to read the text and to speak does not necessarily produce the words that need to be said. For Oliver, the tension in such a situation is knowing that there are words but not being able to find them. She concludes "Dreams" with an evocation both of frustration and hope:

> Finally you have spent
> all the energy you can
> and you drag from the ground
> the muddy skirt of your roots
>
> and leap awake
> with two or three syllables
> like water in your mouth
> and a sense

of loss--a memory
not yet of a word,
certainly not yet the answer--
only how it feels

when deep in the tree
all the locks click open,
and the fire surges through the wood,
and the blossoms blossom. (18-19; 21-36)

The ecstatic moment of realizing that the answers can be felt is here tempered by the loss, the slipping through the grasp one more time, of actually experiencing the ecstasy and the answers together.

A second problem inherent in speaking is that it requires extraordinary effort. When the words do come, they come only through labor. In "Stanley Kunitz," Oliver recounts her discovery of the labor involved. She writes of her original impression of Kunitz as Merlin, a gardener who could make flowers appear just by his presence. Later she realizes that his gardening, as do his and her writing, requires tedious effort:

Now I see him coming from the house--
I see him on his knees,
cutting away the diseased, the superfluous,
coaxing the new,
knowing that the hour of fulfillment
is buried in years of patience--
yet willing to labor like that
on the mortal wheel. (44; 14-25)

Although Oliver seems to find comfort in discovering Kunitz's effort--"Oh, what good it does the heart / to know it isn't magic!" (45; 26-27)--another poem, "Members of the Tribe," uses Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Van

Gogh, Yeats, and Whitman to show that the search for a mode of expression can kill the artist (Kirby 133) whereas "the man who merely / washed Michelangelo's brushes . . . / lived to be a hundred years old" (35: 73-4,77). There is a danger here, and a personal threat to Oliver, that the words may consume the speaker. If she gives up everything to say what needs to be said, she may force herself closer to her own death, thus toward her inability to say anything.

Other poems in this volume indicate that the effort to find the right words, at least for her, requires facing the darkness in her life and in the world. "Dogfish," a disturbing poem about watching fish, blends what Oliver sees in the fish and her own haunting obsession to find her words. In the second section of the poem, Oliver confides:

> I wanted
> the past to go away, I wanted
> to leave it, like another country; I wanted
> my life to close, and open
> like a hinge, like a wing, like the part of the
> song where it falls
> down over the rocks: an explosion, a discovery;
> I wanted
> to hurry into the work of my life; I wanted to
> know,
> whoever I was, I was
>
> alive
> for a little while. (3-4; 13-22)

Later in the poem, Oliver returns to speaking of her life:

You don't want to hear the story
of my life, and anyway
I don't want to tell it, I want to listen

to the enormous waterfalls of the sun.
(4; 36-9)

She justifies her reluctance to speak of her life by saying, "And anyway it's the same old story" (5; 40); however, the concluding two sections of the poem indicate that there is difficulty involved in facing what her life might lead her to speak of. She then returns to the fish:

And look! look! look! I think those little fish
better wake up and dash themselves away
from the hopeless future that is
bulging toward them.

And probably,
if they don't waste time
looking for an easier world,

they can do it. (5; 51-8)

Lisa Steinman perceptively notes that although Oliver rejects her past here, it "is nonetheless felt loitering under the surface of many of the poems" (436), a sure sign of its significance and its need to be faced. Oliver takes a step toward confronting this past in "The Fire," which exemplifies the pain involved in facing one's personal past in order to speak out. She describes a winter when there were many fires. Of her own mental state during that time, she says:

Those days I was willing, but frightened.
What I mean is, I wanted to live my life

but I didn't want to do what I had to do
to go on, which was: to go back. (26; 10-13)

However, going back, at least in this poem, produces a voice:

I began to curse, to stumble and choke.
Everything, solemnly, drove me toward it--
the crying out, that's so hard to do. (16-18)

But with the voice comes ultimate pain:

Then over my head the red timbers floated,
my feet were slippers of fire, my voice
crashed at the truth, my fists
smashed at the flames to find the door--
wicked and sad, mortal and bearable,
it fell open forever as I burned. (19-24)

The door is finally open for her, but she is consumed by the fire. This poem hardly makes the poet's task an enviable one, for it reveals a catch-22 situation. If she does not face the fire, she is tormented, but if she faces it she is destroyed.

As in "Fire," wherein the pain is the source of the sounds that are made, "The Chance to Love Everything" suggests that pain or darkness may be the original source of voice. Oliver concludes the latter poem with the lines: "the dark heart of the story that is all / the reason for its telling" (9; 34-5). In poems such as these in which Oliver acknowledges the dark side of the world, we see that she is not the simple nature poet that many would accuse her of being. Perhaps she stays away from darkness in many of her poems because she realizes just how painful this world can be. Certainly there are

poems in this volume, which Ostriker calls poems "of historical and personal suffering" ("Natural" 150), which would suggest that. "Rage," for example, indicts a child abuser:

> You are the dark song
> of the morning;
> serious and slow.
> you shave, you dress,
> you descend the stairs
> in your public clothes
> and drive away, you become
> the wise and powerful one
> who makes all the days
> possible in the world.
> But you were also the red song
> in the night,
> stumbling through the house
> to the child's bed,
> to the damp rose of her body,
> leaving your bitter taste. (12; 1-16)

This abuse has produced a child "timidly, crouching in corners" (12; 23), a child who is now like "a watch / you dropped on the dark stones / till no one could gather the fragments" (13; 29-31).

"Acid" displays another sort of darkness, that of the poverty in Jakarta, and, in particular, the existence of a child who is willing to disfigure his own mouth in order to gain the sympathy necessary to be successful in begging. The child's world is one wherein the hideous will serve him best. In another haunting poem, "1945-1985: Poem for the Anniversary," Oliver uses the key image of Mengele eating lunch in his lush garden to explore the ways in which the seemingly beautiful and

innocent can often mask the hideous. Facing these darknesses through language may provide some relief, but it does not necessarily change them (Ostriker, "Natural" 150). Oliver makes no attempt to gloss over the evils or to imply that her words make them any less dangerous.

Thus, the final problem with speaking out, as Oliver sees it, is that sometimes it does no good. Even if one can wail through the pain, at times there is no one to hear. In "The Shark," a slaughtered shark becomes the metaphor for the unheard voice:

> as it sang its death song of vomit and bubbles,
> as the blood ran from its mouth
> that had no speech to rail against this
> matter--
>
> speech, that gives us all there may be of the
> future--
> speech, that makes all the difference, we like
> to say.
> And I say: in the wilderness of our wit
> we will all cry out last words--heave and spit
> them
> into the shattering universe someday, to
> someone.
>
> Whoever He is, count on it: He won't answer.
> (69: 17-25)

This poem expresses a typical problem for women speaking out. Belenky et al. find that even women who have achieved their voice, as Oliver has by this time in her writing, often meet only with frustration, the feeling of still not being heard, most particularly not being heard by the Father.

If all of these things are true for Oliver--that words elude her, that effort is required, that the effort is often that of facing pain, and that the words ultimately go unheeded--why would she choose to speak at all? Why explore the silences and the pain to find a voice? Four poems in Dream Work address these questions.

Oliver's first answer, in "The River," is that the words, like certain elemental experiences, can be found and that the words and the experiences are interconnected. She knows that she belongs to the origins of all life:

> Nobody
> told me this. But little by little
> the smell of mud and leaves returned to me,
> and in dreams I began to turn,
> to sense the current. (20; 15-19)

Further, she knows that there are words for expressing this knowledge:

> Home, I said.
> In every language there is a word for it.
> In the body itself, climbing
> those walls of white thunder, past those green
> temples, there is also
> a word for it.
> I said, home. (21; 27-33)

Oliver's second answer to the question of why one should speak is that labor can provide freedom. In "The House" she uses the metaphor of building a house to represent effort which can liberate. As her house takes shape around her, she feels the striking difference in it

and in herself:

> what a change
> from the cramped
> room at the center
> where I began, where I crouched
> and was safe, but could hardly
> breathe! (42; 18-23)

Another advantage of speaking is that it can transform pain. The sunflowers, in the poem of the same name, "have wonderful stories" (88; 14), but their stories have not come easily. She says of these flowers, themselves not unlike poets:

> each of them, though it stands
> in a crowd of many,
> like a separate universe,
>
> is lonely, the long work
> of turning their lives
> into a celebration
> is not easy. (89; 26-32)

However, the emphasis here is not on the effort; it is on the celebration that is finally effected.

Oliver's ultimate answer to the question of why one should strive to find a voice appears in "The Journey." She describes the situation of being pulled and tugged by outside influences and other voices:

> But little by little,
> as you left their voices behind,
> the stars began to burn
> through the sheets of clouds,
> and there was a new voice,
> which you slowly
> recognized as your own,
> that kept you company
> as you strode deeper and deeper
> into the world,

determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save. (38-9; 23-36)

In this poem, finding a voice is the key to finding one's life; and in the dark world that we see in Oliver's other poems, finding one's own life is the most that anyone can do.

There is hope, then, in speaking out. Because speaking out for Oliver is possible through her poems, there is hope in writing them. Poet Audre Lorde explains the nature of this hope, that it may lead to action:

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (126)

Focusing so often on the speaking and writing process, Dream Work is a more self-reflective work than any of the earlier books. In it Oliver uses the voice that she has gradually achieved from No Voyage through American Primitive, but in content she opens up new territory. Within the work as a whole, there is a feeling of transition, almost as though Oliver is pausing to assess how she has reached this place in her writing and in what direction she needs to turn her energies next.

CHAPTER VI

CRITICAL NEGLECT OF OLIVER'S POETRY

With the exception of Patricia Yaeger's Honey-Mad Women, Mary Oliver's work has received little serious critical attention.[1] Most of what has been written about her poetry has come in the form of book reviews, and most of those have been cursory positive or negative evaluations of her use of language and subject matter. Because she is a female lyric nature poet, her work is often brushed aside as trivial or lovely with no attempt by the reviewer to see what takes place under the surface of her poems. This is a great injustice to a poet whose work shows increasing maturity and insight. These reviews clearly overlook much of what gives Oliver's poetry its distinctive voice and its substance.

One way that Oliver's work is devalued is through comparisons of her writing to other poets. She has been favorably compared to Keats (Johnson 7914), Dylan Thomas (Booth 9), Theodore Roethke (Booth 9; Wilcox 53), Sharon Olds (Moyer 454), Rainer Maria Rilke (Absher 232), William Blake (Gibson 1463; Gilbert 116), Elizabeth

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[1] From 1981-1990 the MLA Bibliography lists only three entries for Mary Oliver, meager when compared to sixty-seven for Adrienne Rich, nineteen for Diane Wakoski, and twelve for Maxine Kumin.

Bishop (Gibson 1463; Gilbert 113), D. H. Lawrence (Bravard 480; Gilbert 113), Robert Frost (Stitt 432; Wilcox 53), Walt Whitman (Wilcox 53), and Marianne Moore (Gilbert 113) and unfavorably compared to Edna St. Vincent Millay (Ricks 414), Emily Dickinson (Stitt 432), and James Wright (Lewis 126). Despite the varying critical opinions, none of these comparisons rises above the superficial or the general, and few of the reviewers see that Oliver pushes beyond those poets by whom she has been influenced or to whom she bears resemblance.

For example, Lewis's criticism that "there are still too many echoes of James Wright in her work--references to body, blessing, blossom, and bone" is an apt example of criticism that labels Oliver as derivative. Definitely feeling a kinship and an indebtedness to James Wright, Oliver dedicated American Primitive to him, but she is in no way merely his disciple. An examination of James Wright's "Father" and Mary Oliver's "The Lake" makes her unique voice clear. In both poems there is water, a child in a drifting boat, an angry father who saves the child, and sleep at the end of the experience; however, in Oliver's poem the terror of the child seems more genuine, the aftereffect of the poem more disturbing. Wright begins his poem in a fog-encircled celestial dream:

In paradise I poised my foot above the boat and
said:
Who prayed for me?
But only the dip of an oar
In water sounded; slowly fog from some cold
shore
Circled in wreaths around my head.

But who is waiting? (15; 1-6)

Oliver's poem, in contrast, begins in the world and slowly moves into a misty fantasy:

My father called to me across the water;
Crouched in the little boat, I would not come,
But lingered on the blue and trembling waves,
Rowed in a circle, listening to the thrushes
Whistle themselves to sleep along the shore.
And so I slipped out of my father's hands
And moved, as in a spell, across the lake
That shone like satin dipped in indigo.

Mist gathered then and hid me from the land.
I stowed the dripping oars, content to drift.
The evening stars flickered above my head
And burned like roses underneath the waves
As if I sailed above a second world,--
Till I forgot the earth of birds and leaves,
The shapes of trees, or how my happy town
Lay in the summer's vast and fragrant hills.

And so I traveled through the realms of night
And came to darkness like a witch's garden,
Where stars grew diamond hard and did not move
And under me a thickness fathoms deep
And black as pitch slid like a living thing--
Here is the place, I thought, where heroes come
To do their painful and mysterious deeds.
(NV 49; 1-23)

Whereas Wright's poem thrusts the reader into the foreign realm, Oliver's poem slowly takes the reader into that other world, using similes to recreate the enchantment and vague fear felt by the child. As uncertainty grows, both poets write of calling out to the father. In

Wright's version:

> And the wind began,
> Transfiguring my face from nothingness
> To tiny weeping eyes. And when my voice
> Grew real, there was a place
> Far, far below on earth. There was a tiny
> man--
>
> It was my father wandering round the waters at
> the wharf.
> Irritably he circled and he called
> Out to the marine currents up and down,
> But heard only a cold unmeaning cough,
> And saw the oarsman in the mist enshawled.
> (16; 7-16)

Wright's eyes are "tiny weeping," and his father is "tiny" and irritable. The father does not call out to the fog or to the dark but to the "marine currents." All of these word choices make Wright's poem more a diminutive experience than a heartfelt one. For Oliver, though, there is stark fear in the seeming netherworld:

> And then, once more, I heard my father call.
> Blind in the dark, I let the long oars down
> And cried out: Father, Father, I am lonely!
> The stars are strange! Oh, come and fetch me
> home!
>
> Somewhere a boat creaked on the shuffling lake;
> Swiftly it cut across the heavy night,
> Loomed up beside me, and my angry father
> Swung through the dark and took the trailing
> oars.
> The east grew pale, and light began to sweep
> Over the lake where night still hung like
> vines,
> And still I cried in terror to be saved.
> (49-50; 24-34)

Wright's poem concludes abruptly:

> He drew me from the boat. I was asleep.
> And we went home together. (16; 17-18)

The flat finality gives no sense of the significance of the experience for either poet or father. In Oliver's poem, though, there is catharsis. The father and daughter are united in an embrace, and the daughter, through the rhythms of the poem, then drifts into sleep just as she earlier drifted away from the world:

> And then, like bells across the distant hills,
> Far off and faint, we heard the first birds
> singing.
> My father turned,--the little boat was
> drifting;--
> My father held me, and I fell asleep.
> (50; 35-8)

In both poems the settings and characters are similar, even some of the words are the same, but Oliver creates a much more moving poem with her material. She is not simply a James Wright imitator.

In another comparison, Carolyne Wright finds that "The Plum Trees" "seems a response of sorts to Williams' famous 'This Is Just to Say'" (228). Wright's "of sorts" diminishes what Oliver accomplishes by focusing on the emotions in Williams' spare poem. Oliver owns what she feels:

> Disorder and astonishment
> rattle your thoughts and your heart
> cries for rest but don't
> succumb, there's nothing
> so sensible as sensual inundation. Joy
> is a taste before
> it's anything else . . . . (AP 84; 4-10)

By embracing the feeling, she pushes farther than Williams and also exhibits a quality so indicative of her

own voice, the freedom she has found through it to allow feelings to emerge and to be expressed forcefully.

Besides promoting superficial comparisons in the place of critical analysis, book reviews often chide Oliver's poems for their lack of authentic darkness. Although Holly Prado acknowledges the "destruction of instinctual life" (9) and Carolyne Wright sees "a pervading undertone of loss and resignation to loss" (228) in American Primitive, Lisa Steinman's reaction to American Primitive and Dream Work is far more typical:

> But despite the number of times darkness is mentioned, the dark is less detailed, less fully imagined, and less convincing than Oliver's primary subject, namely visionary experiences. (436)

While it is true that in "Rage," for example, Oliver uses metaphors to describe the abuser as "the dark song / of the morning" (DW 12; 1-2) and "the red song / in the night" (12; 11-12) and the abused child as "a tree / that will never come to leaf" (12; 27-8) and "a watch / you dropped on the dark stones / till no one could gather the fragments" (13; 29-31), the lack of factual details here does not soften the effects of the abuse. Nightly newscasts, daily newspapers, and weekly magazines have graphically shown the bruised bodies of children; Oliver's metaphors, on the other hand, ask the thoughtful to consider that it is not just the body that is bruised.

A similar defense can be made for the veiled darkness in "1945-1985: Poem for the Anniversary." Oliver uses images of Mengele eating lunch in his garden and a doe "nuzzl[ing] her child wildly" (83; 65) when she finds that it has been innocently playing with a dog to reveal the true horror--that seeming beauty or tranquility can often mask cruelty. The monstrous Mengele appears even more unconscionably brutal, not sugar-coated, in the pastoral setting. Further, it is difficult to imagine how darkness could be portrayed more convincingly than in the mutilated, "hideous mouth" (73; 5) of the child in "Acid" or in the "death song of vomit and bubbles, / as the blood ran from its mouth" (69; 17-18) in "The Shark."

Because she also celebrates nature, however, particularly in Twelve Moons, her poems are judged by Tom Absher as "too soft, the grace too easy" (234). He goes on to say:

> Clearly, no matter what season it is, every place is not joyful, and to look at the world of nature this way is to be too selective, and nature becomes more refuge than guide. I wish the collection had allowed for more of what has happened to nature in our hands, for how it has been mortally wounded by civilization. (234)

His judgment is, again, too quickly made. For example, Mary Oliver is not unaware of pollution; she addresses the issue in "Bear River," a poem in Commonweal but not included in any of her books:

I got into Bearsville about five
The Catskills blue in the distance.
A mill town.

I parked in the municipal lot,
Put money in the slot,
And gazed awhile at the Bear River

Which pours all year from the mountains
Lacy and cold,
Full of the shadows of trout and fern, full
Of the dream of plenty;

Then slows up;
Then falls willingly into harness;
Then shakes with the influx of toxins;
Then foams under the bridges and out of town.

Later, in a restaurant, I asked for water.
The waitress brought it and I drank it:
A dreamless cloud swirling in a paper cup.

Clearly she is aware of toxins; she is also no doubt aware of endangered species. However, what Oliver primarily chooses to record in her poems is her personal relationship with nature, for it is through nature that she has found her connection to all things. I wonder if it is not possible for a reader to appreciate nature as he/she shares Oliver's experiences in it and to feel concern over its loss without having to be told that the planet is being damaged. Again, the media does a good job of conveying that message. Is there not a place for a celebration of that which we are a part of as an alternate strategy for making us value it?

A further criticism leveled against Oliver is that because she writes of her own experience in nature, her poetry is too personal to be of value. Writing of Dream

Work, Lisa Steinman finds, "As with romantic poetry generally, Oliver's 'world' is centered in the self, or in the self's quests" (437). A review in the Virginia Quarterly Review seconds this opinion:

> But like so much contemporary poetry, her subjects are private experiences, private memories, private affirmations, which make her poetry at times precious, at times sentimental, and almost always thin. (26)

Emily Grosholz and Peter Stitt are also bothered by what they see as Oliver's tendency to slip into sentimentality (303; 432). Commenting on sentimentality in poetry, Diane Wakoski defines it as "weak feeling, foolish feeling, easy feeling, and perhaps my own definition here, 'the disproportionate application of feeling to any event, person, or circumstance'" (5). "A man is sentimental, a poem is sentimental," she believes, "when he/it presents one view of the world, without even the barest awareness of other possibilities" (10). When Oliver "go[es] down to winter with the drowsy she-bear" (TM 53; 2) or exults:

> The rain
> rubs its shining hands all over me.
> My dog returns and barks fiercely, he says
> each secret body is the richest advisor,
> deep in the black earth such fuming
> nuggets of joy! (AP 45; 9-14)

it is true that the experience is hers alone and that her emotions rise to the surface; however, it is not true that there has been no preparation for this emotion. The

body of her work shows that she has labored for the relationship with the natural world and labored for the courage to sing about it in her poetry. The sentimentality perhaps present in any one poem diminishes when that poem is placed within the context of Oliver's canon. As she has faced the darkness and sought her own voice, she has earned the right to sing of those moments of joy that she has found. Oliver herself argues for this right in "The Gift," a poem published in Country Journal:

> I wanted to thank the mockingbird for the vigor
> of his song.
> Every day he sang from the rim of the field,
> while I picked blueberries or just idled
> in the sun.
> Every day he came fluttering by to show me, and
> why not, the white blossoms in his wings.
> So one day I went there with a machine, and
> played some songs of Mahler.
> The mockingbird stopped singing, he came close
> and seemed to listen.
> Now when I go down to the field, a little
> Mahler spills through the sputters of his
> song.
> How happy I am, lounging in the light,
> listening as the music floats by!
> And I give thanks also for my mind, that
> thought of giving a gift.
> And mostly I'm grateful that I take this world
> so seriously. (61)

Finally, the role that Oliver's gender has played in her critical reception should not be ignored. Dale Spender discusses at length the male determination of criteria for "good writing," criteria which create problems for women trying to express themselves genuinely

(200). Cheryl Walker writes of the general "expectation that women's poetry must be trivial, undistinguished, and of interest only to other women" (2). If one believes that mention of a poet's gender does not somehow legitimize that poet's writing (if male) or trivialize it (if female), one need only read Jeff Schiff's review of Twelve Moons: "Not many poets--I must say it--not many poets who are women, are able to strip down to the simple question; not many are able to speak as she does . . ." (213). As receptions to Oliver's first two books show, a woman's voice is not easily heard; as reviews of her books illustrate, her voice, in particular, is not easily heard. An additional problem with Oliver's voice being heard as that of a woman is that by aligning herself with nature she places herself in league with that which culture devalues (Ortner 10). Further, if her relationship with nature is seen as unfettered, truly natural, she also risks threatening the patriarchy, which is most comfortable with woman as "nature restrained" (de Beauvoir 154). Ironically, such power is not a quality readily acknowledged in poetry by women (Ostriker, Stealing 3) either because it is threatening or because it goes unrecognized as the power that it is (Olsen 400). Jeanne Kammer explains:

> The labels assigned to women's poetry by generations of critics have seldom accurately

> described its method because they have implicitly devalued its effect: "subtle," "fine," "graceful," "sharp," "gemlike," "cryptic," "tight"--however positive, the list seldom includes words of power. Strength and truth are missing. Either the art itself is genuinely limited--a conclusion difficult to defend--or the terms and models used to assign value are inappropriate. (153)

A review such as Andy Brumer's of American Primitive supports Kammer's contention. Brumer writes, "The poems are delightfully readable and accessible, not quite charming but not altogether threatening either" (21). Even a female reviewer may be guilty of such damning with sexist praise. Elizabeth Walden remarks of the poems in No Voyage: ". . . Miss Oliver muses upon homey things, intimately known to all of us . . ." (254). Who, looking for poetry of substance, would readily turn to a volume filled with "homey things"? Finally, it is possible for a woman's identity to disappear entirely in a criticism of her work. Although some of Oliver's poems are written from the point of view of a male persona, they certainly are not all written that way, yet John Freund writes:

> She shows us man in nature; she shows us love in man and nature: man does not tame nature, but as part of nature he lives well because through love he domesticates that part of nature which he is. (186)

Oliver's poems clearly speak of woman in nature, but in many reviews she must be patronized for that role or metamorphosed as man in nature so that she might be given credit for what she does.

Admittedly, it is more difficult to ignore Adrienne Rich, whose outspoken treatises on womanhood speak of social, sexual, and political injustices, but to fail to see that Oliver has an equally compelling message, albeit a quieter one, is to do an injustice to freedom of choice and love of diversity. Oliver's poems champion equality through the natural cycles of life in which all human beings participate. As Joyce Carol Oates finds, Oliver's poetry does not "divide the world into victim and oppressor" (28). In her poems, we are all implicated as potential perpetrators or victims of the darkness, and we are all given the opportunity to find another way. Further, her poems call for an acceptance of the body as an avenue for full human experience. That she takes more risks in her later poems (Ostriker, "Natural" 150) signals that something important is happening in her and through her words, and it is more than merely unfortunate that critics do not examine these developments and take them more seriously.

CONCLUSION

> If, as Wittgenstein writes, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life," then contemporary women poets are inventing, through their poems, new forms of constitutive identity; in remaking language, they strive to reinvent themselves. The impetus for this reinvention derives from the woman poet's need to reassert authority over experience, establishing an unmediated relationship with the natural world and, beyond it, with the powers of the word. (Diehl 123)

> Mary Oliver almost seems to have taken pastoral, the most artificial of all literary conventions, at its word, to have hied herself off to the springs and the hills and found there the sources of poetry. (Gregerson 38)

Mary Oliver's poems are not simple nature lyrics. They are the record of a feminine voice achieving its full potential. In content, they move from the human to the natural in search of an identity and a union of all parts of nature. In technique, they move from the traditional and restrained to the more unrestrained and inventive. As the poems develop, we see increased confidence and greater insight on the part of the poet.

It remains to be seen in what direction Oliver's poetry will progress in the future. Poems published in journals since Dream Work indicate that she is now often returning to the human world for subject matter. Enlightened with the knowledge she has gained in nature, she now examines human motives and dynamics.

Whatever her future direction, it is clear that

there is still much of substance in her earlier poems which merits close study. Numerous poems deal with her relationship with her father and would provide valuable material for a critical examination of this topic. Her use of archetypal and pastoral images, especially in the middle and late poems, could also bear further scrutiny, as could her connections with James Wright. No doubt there will be significant developments in her future volumes which, when placed within the context of her total canon, will yield even more material for study and insight into her earlier work.

The Pulitzer Prize is a fine commendation, but it is only the beginning of recognizing Mary Oliver's strength and complexity as a poet. She deserves the ear of women who are striving to find their own voices. She also is readily accessible to other readers. Further, she deserves the careful reading by students and critics of contemporary poetry. As she listened so intently to nature as it called out to her, her words cry out for the same intense listening from her audience.

As the environment of our planet is increasingly changing and being threatened, Mary Oliver's words remind us that nature is to be cherished because it is a part of us and we are a part of it. She points out that which we might have failed to see so that we might appreciate it before it disappears.

On a personal note, I hope that my study of Mary Oliver's poetry will have an impact on my own poetry. It is important for those of us who are young women writing today to realize that power is available through the word. I certainly have learned about the source of that power from this study.

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