Our proper place: The poetry of care and loss

by Ellen F. Davis in the June 15, 2010 issue

Likely no culture has been so ignorant and contemptuous of place as is contemporary industrialized society. We may not even qualify as a *culture*, since that word generally connotes a form of social organization that connects people and places through time. By that criterion, industrialized society fails miserably. Its practices of blowing away mountains to extract coal or razing forests on a continental scale to grow animal feed reveal its essential characteristics: disregard for time and contemptuousness of place. Indeed, the global economy depends fundamentally on ignoring the particular character of places and violating their physical limits.

By contrast, one of the functions of poetry is to help us discover and keep our proper place in the world. By "proper place," I mean not our various arbitrary social locations, but rather the place of the human species within the created order. Keeping one's place entails keeping in health the places that we physically occupy.

We find such poetry—what I call the "poetry of care and loss"—in the work of a few contemporary North American poets. While industrialization is characterized by carelessness, waste and depredation of the created order, these poems express a commitment to honoring beloved places, caring for them and, when need be, remembering and lamenting what has been lost.

These poets are direct descendants of the psalmists, who often wrote song-poems about the ordering of the world by God. A good poem, says Wendell Berry, is "the product of a convocation"; it represents multiple voices, each adding its own fresh contribution that develops and deepens through time. As Hermann Gunkel showed a century ago, the Psalms themselves are products of a convocation. They are not sui generis works of individual genius, but rather traditional compositions whose forms were largely given to the artist.

Anne Porter and Mary Oliver are two contemporary poets who acknowledge their debt to the Psalms and participate in the convocation. Consciously or not, these poets clarify what is at stake in the Psalter: nothing less than the possibility of

praising God truly. Its Hebrew title is *Tehilim*, “Praises,” and the Psalms as a whole explore the conditions for offering authentic and convincing praise in a pain-wracked world falling daily toward death.

These poets write as creatures giving voice to other creatures. Here Porter speaks for the *rosa humilis*, the pasture rose, who gives “free and for nothing . . .

> . . . her prickles
> Her five translucent petals
> And her golden eye
>
> And so to thank her
> I try to learn that dialect of silence
> Which is her language
> And then translate it
> Into human words
>
> As if the Lord had told me
> Listen to the rose
> Be the voice of the rose.

Porter translates the creatures with notes of praise, following her spiritual and poetic model, St. Francis: “Give praise with psalms that tell the trees to sing,” she writes, and with the little peepers “when they fill the marsh with a shimmer of bell-like cries.” Thus she makes audible those “smallest creatures, who do not know they have names,” as they

> Praise the moist ground and every winking leaf,
> And the new sun that smells of the new streams.

Like the psalmists, Porter gives praise with thunderstorms, with sun and moon, with stars

> . . . glittering in the dark
> Of steepest heaven
>
> Their brimming drops of light
> So fresh so clear

That when you look at them
It quenches thirst.

We might never notice the bold inventiveness of the Psalms of creaturely praise when we encounter them in church. Porter helps us see both the intrigue and the inherent difficulty of interpreting wordless lives that seem impossibly unlike and indifferent to our own. In this she is kin to the poet of Psalm 104, who knows that when lions roar, they are asking God for food (v. 21) or that "the trees of Yhwh are *sated*" (*yisbe'u*, v. 16) by what God provides, no less and not much differently than humans are *sated* (*yisbe'u*, v. 28) with God's goodness (translators of the Hebrew often obscure that parallel).

Perhaps the most important consequence of the poetic interpretation of creatureliness is helping us recognize that humans are not uniquely capable of giving glory to God. For instance, Psalm 96 shows a nonhuman world animate with praise: "The field and everything in it exults; the trees of the forest ring with joy" (v. 12). In Psalm 29, the confines around what we call the natural world burst open, as the forest-breaking *qol Yhwh* ("voice of the Lord"), heard in a late- winter storm, makes the Lebanon dance, roils the wilderness, sends does into early labor—"and in his *hekhal*—the heavenly palace or the temple—*kulo 'omer kavod*—all of it says 'Glory!'" (v. 9). Heaven, nature and cult are all spheres electric with God's glory. With keen sensory awareness, these poets ancient and modern celebrate a world of material creatures, wordless but far from silent. They point obliquely to the fact that our human activity and experience constitutes but a small part of the world on which God lavishes such beauty with infinite caring.

Porter became a public poet only in old age and widowhood. She published her first book at 83 (it was a National Book Award finalist), and her second in 2006, at age 95. Deep and sometimes painful memory echoes through her testimony, including memory of "another world" where

The streams were clear
The forests all around us
Were deep and strong
And few believed
That Nature could be wounded.

This poem, “In Another World,” implies a second reason why creaturely praise is no less difficult than necessary: because it is offered inevitably in the face of destruction and human destructiveness.

That harsh reality also informs “Leavetaking,” a hymn of thanksgiving that Porter has written in preparation for her own death. It ends with a poignant petition:

> I thank you for that secret praise
> Which burns in every creature,
> And I ask you to bring us to life
> Out of every sort of death
>
> And teach us mercy.

“And teach us mercy” implies that our lack of mercy is precisely what causes us and the other creatures to fall away from praise into death. The logic underlying this concluding line of Porter’s poem resembles that of Psalm 104, an extended song of praise for the wide panoply of creaturely life. The psalmist turns sharply at the end to a plea that “sinners be finished off from the earth, and the wicked, until they are no more.” In both cases, the poet acknowledges that human evil constitutes a fundamental threat to the cosmic, creaturely enterprise of praising God.

Like Porter, Mary Oliver is a creaturely poet who listens beyond the confines of human language and thus develops “the multiple sympathies” that permit entry into what she calls “the other kingdom.” In her poem “Stars,” the night sky prompts a meditation on the “tiny noises” of cosmic speech:

> How can I hope to be friends
> with the hard white stars
> whose flaring and hissing are not speech
> but a pure radiance?
>
> How can I hope to be friends
> with the yawning spaces between them
>
> where nothing, ever, is spoken?
> Tonight, at the edge of the field,

I stood very still, and looked up,
and tried to be empty of words.

The majestic wordlessness of the heavens is of course the very thing that impressed the poet of Psalm 19:

Although they have no words or language
and their voices are not heard,
Their sound has gone out into all lands
and their message to the ends of the world.
(Book of Common Prayer)

Looking up at the stars may be humbling for Oliver, but it also provides orientation and grounding:

What can we do
but keep on breathing in and out,

modest and willing, and in our places?
Listen, *listen*, I'm forever saying,

Listen to the river, *to the hawk*, *to the hoof*,
to the mockingbird, *to the jack-in-the-pulpit*—

then I come up with a few words, like a gift.

Like a sailor, Oliver finds her position by reading the heavens. She situates herself relationally as much as geographically —yet those two tasks are inseparable, if we are "modest and willing, and in our places." Looking at the stars and thus finding a place among the creatures is also the experience of the Israelite poet who wrote these lines:

What is man that you should be mindful of him?
the son of man that you should seek him out?
You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor;
you gave him mastery over the works of your hands;
You put all things under his feet:

All sheep and oxen, even the wild beasts of the field,
The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,
And whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.
O Lord our Governor,
how exalted is your Name in all the world!
(Ps. 8:5–10, BCP)

The poet of Psalm 8 recognizes that to know one's place among the earthly creatures is to know one's place before God.

In her more recent poems, Oliver increasingly identifies that disposition with the attitude of prayer. "The physicality of the religious poets should not be taken idly," she cautions. "He or she, who loves God, will look most deeply into His works."

A common contemporary view of Psalm 8 interprets it as an arrogant assertion of human domination that currently has no positive religious value. But James Kugel suggests that the Psalms of praise serve a different function, the same function as various inscriptions in the ancient Near East. These inscriptions and poems are not about human domination but instead constitute a public declaration of the prince or potentate's subservience to a god. Psalm 8 similarly transfers "personal glory and honor to Israel's God." We see this in its opening and closing verses: "O Lord our Governor, / how majestic is your Name in all the world!"

The Israelite psalmist belongs to a religious, philosophical and artistic tradition known in the West as the Chain of Being. Its central insight is that all life forms are linked together as harmoniously differentiated parts of the created order that, in the first chapter of the Bible, God pronounces "very good." Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 point to the unique role of humans within that order: we bear some resemblance to the divine, and we are answerable to God, even as we stand in relationships of responsibility and care toward our fellow creatures. Insofar as other creatures are subordinated to humans, it is a benevolent and purposeful subordination, aimed at the thriving of all creatures and ultimately at the magnification of God's glory. As Augustine observed, the healthful beauty of the nonhuman creatures is itself a voice that praises God.

The Chain of Being is conceived theocentrically, not anthropocentrically. Within the Bible, Psalm 148 is the fullest evocation of the creatures' magnification of God's glory. Moving from heaven to earth, the poet runs through all the creatures in the

(approximate) order of creation, and the last-created leads the rest in an interplanetary and interspecies orchestration of the Hallelujah chorus:

> Praise him, all you angels of his;
> praise him, all his host.
> Praise him sun and moon;
> praise him all you shining stars.
>
> Praise the Lord from the earth,
>
> Mountains and all hills,
> Fruit trees and all cedars;
> Wild beasts and all cattle,
> creeping things and winged birds;
> Kings of the earth and all peoples . . . (BCP)

In singing God's praise, says the poet Paul Claudel, "The world ceases to be a scattered vocabulary; it has become a poem," or, we might say, a liturgy, in which humans have a recognizable place and role. Beginning with the naming of the creatures in Genesis 2, human speech contributes to the unity of creation; it is instrumental also in our offering back to God the gift of creation as a totality. In Claudel's words: "I am not whole and entire unless I am whole and entire with this world that surrounds me. It is me in my entirety that you require! It is the world in its entirety that you require from me."

This is a dynamic totality, as biblical scholar Terence Fretheim shows in his treatment of Psalm 148, where he observes a "symbiosis in praise," where "the response of one [creature] will affect the response of the other." All have a direct relationship with God, characterized in the Hebrew scriptures by what Fretheim calls "widespread interresponsiveness."

The Chain of Being tradition is evident in Oliver's "On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate." She begins this reflection on Psalm 145 in sacramental terms, as she seeks to locate God's body within the material order.

> . . . it is not hard to understand
> where God's body is, it is

everywhere and everything; shore and the vast
fields of water, the accidental and the intended
over here, over there. And I bow down
participate and attentive

it is so dense and apparent.

But Oliver remains “still unsatisfied,” a question in her mind:

. . . Where, do you suppose, is His
pale and wonderful mind?

This question leads Oliver to name her aspiration, not solely as a poet but as a human being:

. . . to be God’s mind’s
servant, loving with the body’s sweet mouth—its kisses,
its
words—
everything.

Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden
cloth of the sand and say
some kind of musical thanks for
the world that is happening again—another day—

. . . I want
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable
glory
O Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you.

The Chain of Being is a ladder toward glory, as we have learned from the Franciscan theologian and saint, Bonaventure; it can be climbed only by virtue of grace and imagination, mercy and care for the material order.

These poets, ancient and contemporary, can help us reclaim and cultivate habits of seeing and valuing the world, habits that are radically incompatible with the

industrialized system in which we are all immersed. In contrast to that system, which regularizes the abuse and destruction of God’s creatures, Porter and Oliver belong to a tradition, one that can be traced to the Psalms and is powerfully inspired by them.

Bernd Wannenwetsch aptly defines tradition as “a form of agreement of which we want to be a part.” We should indeed want to be a part of the cultural tradition of care and loss that these poets represent. The reason for that is simple: it is a tradition that has a future. If we can care for what is endangered and mourn what is lost, then we will be cultivating habits that portend a healthful future for our children and the world we love.