

## Book Notes:

### *Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence

Dr. Andrew Roth

**Mary Oliver**

*New and Selected Poems.*

(Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

**Jack Gilbert**

*Collected Poems.*

(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

“When it’s over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my  
arms.  
When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder  
If I have made of my life something particular,  
and real.  
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this  
world.”

“When Death Comes”

Mary Oliver

in *New and Selected Poems*, pp. 10-11

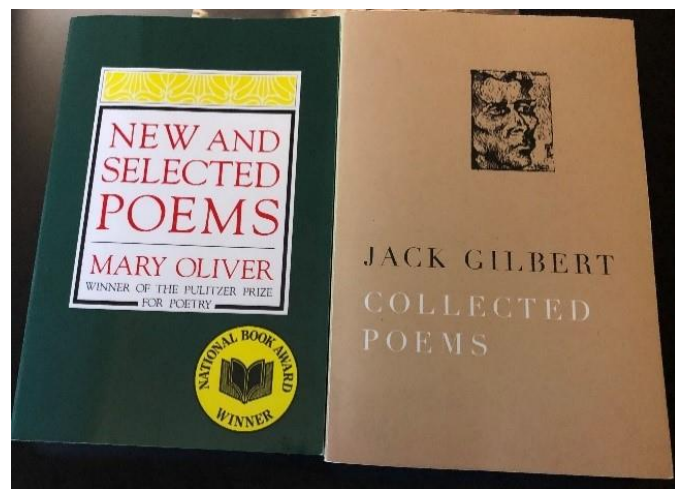


This week in **Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus** I want – I almost said ‘to take a side trip’ – to set aside history, particularly history since 1968, to visit the *real*. Which would seem to imply that we live in the *unreal*, whilst all the time just over there somewhere the real is going about its business whether we attend to it or not. And, it just might be. Those who seek to live in the real and occasionally report back to us are called *poets*. Two of the most sensitive reporters of the *real* – *poets* – of recent generations are Mary Oliver and Jack Gilbert. Now coupling Mary Oliver and Jack Gilbert is, for many reasons, indeed, an odd coupling, but they share this: they were both acutely alive to the *present* and the shimmering *real*.

They both understood implicitly what Albert Camus meant in “*The Myth of Sisyphus*” when, perhaps riffing on Shakespeare’s “To be, or not to be, that is the question,” Camus stated: “There is but one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest ... comes afterwards.” [1] In our time of social distancing, our time of quarantine, our time of plague, one oscillates between work, boredom, a mild dread, then work again and a lingering dread. If one is of the demographic most vulnerable to the wandering virus, then the present has an added edginess.

So, as we “shelter in place,” slow down the pace and become *present-to-the present*, one of COVID-19’s benefits, ironically, is that we are more alive to the “*is that is.*” The cliché states “taking time to smell the roses.” Clichés are clichés because, hackneyed as their expression might be, they possess a kernel of truth.

With our mortality nearer than we are comfortable acknowledging, we



look up from ourselves, we look closer at that picture of an absent child, we watch with a bit more focus the glistening cardinal in the tree outside the door, and we listen to the sound of the wind as it skates across the pond.

Samuel Johnson said something to the effect that ‘there is nothing like the prospect of a hanging to focus one’s attention’. Which is yet another way of saying, like Camus and Shakespeare, that one of life’s great ironies is that one only comes fully alive when one realizes that one dies. It’s sort of what he meant when amending Plato’s “Education is wasted on the young,” G.B. Shaw quipped “Life is wasted on the young” foreseeing the young fool on the Florida beach who said he wasn’t going to let the virus interrupt his partying! So, if one cannot celebrate COVID-19, then, unlike the fool on the beach, take this moment, these days, these weeks, to visit the now, to visit the *real*, to savor the “is that is” – *to be present-to-the present*.

Today’s two poets – reporters of the *real* – who never played the fool for anyone, spending their lives disciplining themselves to be *present-to-the present*. They were intrepid observers who, like Wallace Stevens’ “Snow Man,” beheld “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”. [2] Of the two, Mary Oliver is much the more famous, her “poetry having won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and a Lannan Literary Award for lifetime achievement”. [3]

Oliver was born in Maple Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, in 1935 and died in January 2019. She attended both Ohio State University and Vassar College, from neither of which she earned a degree. Ohio, and to a certain extent its early history (see the “*Tecumseh*” poem later in these notes), played a role in Oliver’s early poetry, but she spent the bulk of her life with her partner Molly Malone Cook in Provincetown, Massachusetts. It is the Cape Cod landscape, the salt marshes and the sea which grounds her keen powers of observation, her eye for the telling detail, her sensitivity to the rhythms of the *real*. As in:

## ***Wild Geese***

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You have only to let the soft animal of your body  
    love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

A video of Mary Oliver reading Wild Geese can be found [here](#):

Oliver has been called a nature poet, but that reductionist description misses the point. She explores the nexus where the subjectivity of the observer and the objectivity of the observed interpenetrate one another. Working that intersection, Oliver queries how both the observer and the observed meld to become something else. They become “another,” the fusion of observer and observed. They become the present absorbing both the limits of the observer’s culture and the boundedness of the observed in a transcendent experience – an almost mystical apprehension of the “*is that is*.” This could easily descend into English department jabber, from which I walked away a long time ago. Rather, let’s listen to Oliver:

from ***Lonely, White Fields***

Every night  
the owl  
with his wild monkey-face  
calls through the black branches,  
and the mice freeze  
and the rabbits shiver  
in the snowy fields –  
and then there is the long, deep trough of silence  
when he stops singing, and steps  
into the air.

Or:

from ***Some Herons***

The poet's eyes  
Flared, just as poet's eyes  
are said to do

when the poet is awakened  
from the forest of meditation.  
It was summer.

Or:

from ***The Buddha's Last Instruction***

“Make of yourself a light,”  
said the Buddha,  
before he died.  
I think of this every morning  
as the east begins  
to tear off its many clouds  
of darkness, to send up the first  
signal – a white fan  
streaked with pink and violet,  
even green.

Oliver calls us to “Make of yourself a light” by which not only you but others can **see**, “eyes flared,” like the awakened poet and can hear the “deep trough of silence” on a winter’s night. Being *present-to-the present* is Oliver’s gift to her readers.

I mentioned earlier that Oliver was from Ohio, that its land and history played a part in her early poetry. Being also from Ohio and interested in its early history, especially as it relates to my ***The American Tapestry Project***, particularly “the other trail of tears,” the removal of the Ohio Indians, I have always loved Oliver’s “*Tecumseh*,” here in its entirety:

### ***Tecumseh***

I went down not long ago  
to the Mad River, under the willows  
I knelt and drank from that crumpled flow, call it  
what madness you will, there’s a sickness  
worse than the risk of death and that’s  
forgetting what we should never forget.  
Tecumseh lived here.  
The wounds of the past  
are ignored, but hang on  
like the litter that snags among the yellow branches,  
newspapers and plastic bags, after the rain.

Where are the Shawnee now?  
Do you know? Or would you have to  
write to Washington, and even then,  
whatever they said,  
would you believe it? Sometimes

I would like to paint my body red and go out into  
the glittering snow  
to die.

His name meant Shooting Star.  
From the Mad River country north to the border

he gathered the tribes  
and armed them one more time. He vowed  
to keep Ohio and it took him  
over twenty years to fail.  
After the bloody and final fighting, at Thames,  
it was over, except  
his body could not be found.  
It was never found,  
and you can do whatever you want with that, say

his people came in the black leaves of the night  
and hauled him to a secret grave, or that  
he turned into a little boy again, and leaped  
into a birch canoe and went  
rowing home down the rivers. Anyway,  
this much I'm sure of: if we ever meet him, we'll know it,  
he will still be  
so angry.

Jack Gilbert is not nearly as famous as Mary Oliver, but in their very different voices they both seek to make the *real* vividly present, to draw back our distracted selves to the grace of being *present-to-the-present*. As in Gilbert's:

### ***Highlights and Interstices***

We think of lifetimes as mostly the exceptional and sorrows. Marriage we remember as the children, vacations, and emergencies. The uncommon parts. But the best is often when nothing is happening. The way a mother picks up the child almost without noticing and carries her across Waller Street while talking with the other woman. What if she could keep all of that? Our lives happen between the memorable. I have lost two thousand habitual breakfasts with Michiko. What I miss most about her is that commonplace I can no longer remember.

Michiko was the sculptor Michiko Nogami, Gilbert's wife of eleven years who died at 36 of cancer in 1982. Much of Gilbert's poetry deals with his relationships with women, in particular his wives, the poet Linda Gregg and Nogami. As Megan O'Rourke said in a 2005 article at **slate.com**, "*The Recluse: Rescuing the poet Jack Gilbert from Oblivion*", "Gilbert doesn't help his cause with his decidedly old-fashioned obsession with women...But I find Gilbert's obsession with women not only tolerable but compelling partly because it's more self-conscious...rescuing from the debilitating forces of cynicism a conviction that transcendence can await us in this world." [4]

Gilbert was born in 1925 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he attended Peabody High School. Although he did not graduate from high school, he managed to gain admission to the University of Pittsburgh, from which he graduated in 1954. While at Pitt, he became seriously interested in writing and poetry. After sojourning in Europe, Gilbert landed in San Francisco during the 1950s and early 1960s, earning a master's degree in English at San Francisco State University and becoming deeply involved with San Francisco's "Beat Generation." As John Penner noted in his **Los Angeles Times** obituary of Gilbert, "...he rebelled, not only against the Beats, but against their avant garde language experiments and other endeavors that were in vogue at the time...". [5] As David Haglund remarked "Many of his poems have a straightforward lyricism that grabs you right away." [6] Or, as O'Rourke noted, "He's a poet whose directness and lucidity ought to appeal to lots of readers – the same readers who can't abide the inward-gazing obscurity of much of contemporary poetry." [7]

It has been suggested that Gilbert's greatest work of art was his own life – he was single-minded in the pursuit of his art. Never flinching, never compromising, pursuing his vision of a pure language apprehending the world in clean, direct verse as he, like Oliver, probed the intersection of observer and observed. When his first book of poems, **Views of Jeopardy**, won the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1962 and fame came calling, Gilbert decamped to Europe for the next 30 years where he lived a sparse existence in Paris, Italy,



Greece, and the Netherlands honing his craft, sharpening his vision. In a clear and lucid voice, Gilbert brings us into his world and, bringing us into his world, opens us to the *real* making us *present-to-the-present*.

As in “***The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart***”:

How astonishing it is that language can almost mean, and frightening that it does not quite. *Love*, we say, *God*, we say, *Rome* and *Michiko*, we write, and the words get it wrong...

... Maybe the Etruscan texts would finally explain why the couples on their tombs are smiling. And maybe not. When the thousands of mysterious Sumerian tablets were translated, they seemed to be business records. But what if they are poems or psalms?

Or:

***Pavane***

I thought it said on the girl's red purse  
A kind of sad dance and all day  
wondered what was being defined.  
Wisdom? The history of Poland?  
All the ways of growing old?  
No, I decided (walking back  
to the hotel this morning), it must be love.  
The real love that follows  
early delight and ignorance.  
A wonderful sad dance that comes after.

Or:

from ***Less Being More***

It started when he was a young man  
and went to Italy. He climbed mountains,  
wanting to be a poet. But was troubled  
by what Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in

her journal about William having worn himself out searching all day to find a simile for nightingale. It seemed a long way from the tug of passion.

Or:

from *The Lost Hotels of Paris*

... But it's the having  
not the keeping that is the treasure.  
Ginsberg came to my house one afternoon  
and said he was giving up poetry  
because it told lies, that language distorts.  
I agreed, but asked what we have  
that gets it right even that much.  
We look up at the stars and they are  
not there. We see the memory  
of when they were, once upon a time.  
And that too is more than enough.

Or: (particularly apt in this time of virus, images of death everywhere on the Nightly News, this meditation on grief):

from *Michiko Dead*

He manages like somebody carrying a box  
that is too heavy, first with his arms  
underneath. When their strength gives out,  
he moves the hands forward, hooking them  
on the corners, pulling the weight against  
his chest...

But now  
the man can hold underneath again, so that  
he can go on without ever putting the box down.

Or: (for any aging Boomer recalling their yellow-back radio or first transistor, any Gen Xer, Y, or Millennial recalling their cassette deck, iPod, or MP3 – substitute the song titles of your time and choice):

from *The Lost World*

Think what it was like, he said, Peggy Lee and Goodman  
all the time...

...Think of being fifteen  
in the middle of leafy June when Sinatra and Ray  
Eberle both had number one records of “Fools Rush In.”

...Helplessly adolescent while  
the sound of romance was constantly everywhere.  
All day long out of windows along the street.

...Me desperate because I wouldn't  
get there in time. Who can blame me for my heart?  
What choice did I have? Harry James with “Sleepy  
Lagoon.” Imagine, on a summer night, “Sleepy Lagoon”!

A video of Jack Gilbert reading several of his poems can be  
found [here](#):

Let's end these notes on this wistful happy note, recalling youth and  
promise and the magic of music in the night. There are several internet  
memes floating about humorously taunting us that in their time of  
social distancing from the plague Newton invented the calculus,  
Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* (which I have not been able to  
corroborate) and, of course, Boccaccio wrote *The Decameron*. Well,  
that might be a bit much; still Oliver and Gilbert, in their different  
styles, remind us in this time of COVID-19 that we can learn what  
Pascal said most humans couldn't, which is to sit quietly in a room  
alone focusing on being *present-to-the-present*, seeing, as Stevens'  
Snowman, “The Nothing that is and nothing that is not there,” being as  
Oliver “a bride married to amazement” or seeing like Gilbert the  
'commonplaces we often cannot remember' and like the Buddha being  
a light to others rejoicing in the shimmering, glimmering *real*.

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All quotes from the poetry of Mary Oliver and Jack Gilbert are from:

Gilbert, Jack. *Collected Poems*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).  
Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

For reading options for Gilbert's *Collected Poems*, click [here](#); and for Oliver's *New and Selected Poems*, click [here](#).

#### End Notes

- [1] Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 4 at <https://postarchive.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/myth-of-sisyphus-and-other-essays-the-albert-camus.pdf> accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020.
- [2] Stevens, Wallace. "The Snow Man", in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), pp. 9-10.
- [3] *Mary Oliver 1935-2019* at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver> accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020.
- [4] O'Rourke, Meghan, "The Recluse: Rescuing the poet Jack Gilbert from oblivion" in *Slate Magazine* (May 9, 2005) at <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2005/05/jack-gilbert-s-refusing-heaven.html> accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020.
- [5] Penner, John, "Jack Gilbert dies at 87; unconventional poet knew fame and obscurity", *Los Angeles Times* (November 14, 2012) at <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-jack-gilbert-20121114-story.html> accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020.
- [6] Haglund, David, "Jack Gilbert, American Poet, Dies at 87" in *Slate Magazine* (November 13, 2012) at <https://slate.com/culture/2012/11/jack-gilbert-dead-poet-was-87.html> accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020.
- [7] O'Rourke, "The Recluse..."

The photo above is a photo taken by Dr. Andrew Roth.

Next week back to history and Jill Lepore's  
**This America: The Case for the Nation.**

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[www.JESerie.org](http://www.JESerie.org)