

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Deadly Pollen, by Stephen  
Oliver

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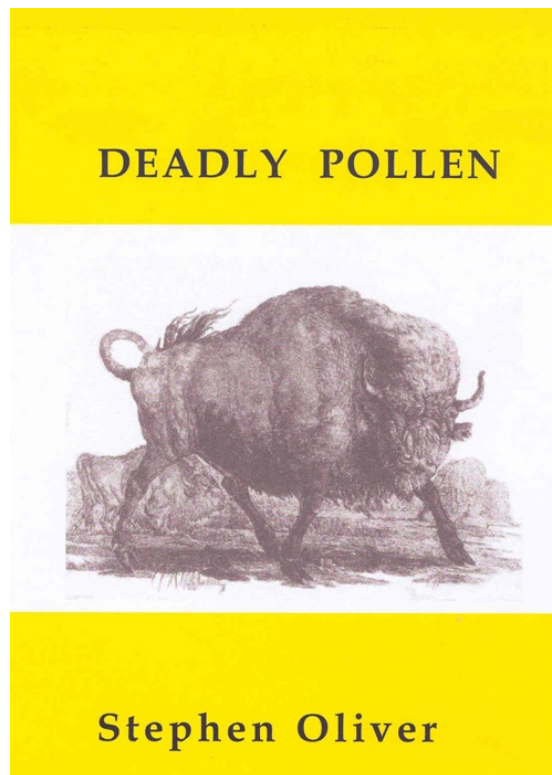
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# Deadly Pollen

by Stephen Oliver

WORD RIOT PRESS

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Books by Stephen Oliver

Henwise (1975)  
& Interviews (1978)  
Autumn Songs (1978)  
Letter To James K. Baxter (1980)  
Earthbound Mirrors (1984)  
Guardians, Not Angels (1993)  
Islands of Wilderness - A Romance (1996)  
Unmanned (1999)  
Election Year Blues (1999)  
Night of Warehouses: Poems 1978 - 2000 (2001)

Deadly Pollen (2003)  
Ballads, Satire & Salt (2003)

#### Recordings

Earthbound Mirrors, a selection, Stephen Oliver,  
Ode Records Label, Auckland, (cassette) 1984

For more information on Stephen Oliver visit:  
<http://people.smartchat.net.au/~sao/>

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An Actual Encounter With the Sun On / My Balcony At France Street: a  
parody on Frank O'Hara's 'A True Account Of Talking / To The Sun At  
Fire Island' who in turn based his account on Mayakovsky's more robust  
poem, 'A Most Extraordinary Adventure'. POETS' PALACE: a name given by  
the author to an old Kauri, weatherboard guest house in France Street  
(the upper story of which he occupied in the early '80s) near the  
prostitute's strip off K'rd, Auckland. Various 'emerging' poets &  
artists lived downstairs at intervals during this period. As the last  
of its kind in Newton Gully this 100 year old wooden building was  
finally demolished at the close of the decade.

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-

# Deadly Pollen

ZIONISM:

to carry forward the cultural gene -

O bright-lit destiny of the chosen!

The child's bouncing ball lands in mud

on the other side of the wire;

footsteps are paradoxical in a minefield.

His heart ticks fast as a metal detector,

slowly, the yellow ball rolls to a stop.

Proposition: to advance onto ancestral  
territory, or return into gentle, familial lands,

a footfall journey backward. His eye

shrinks the land to desert.

\*

You return to the stupa, yearly,  
to seek your return. You wish to  
come back as forest deer but  
that deer is extinct. The stupa is a rock  
upon which your dreams founder,  
yearly, - you return that which  
you do not have. Meanwhile, in the  
West, under ragged skies and beneath a  
hundred spires no longer dreamt of -  
attendance comes tumbling down;  
each stone, unturned, in an emptied  
space within a space caved under.

\*

The stones collected. Ground levelled and swept. The first cubicle erected with four windowed-walls, an open doorway. One man on a step looking out to sea. Civilization open for business. Soon, marble was made smooth and square. The Idea locked into permanence. Curiosity stimulated commerce; others came and conquered then went away. That first step never forgotten became a throne - history's seat.

\*

“With digital, there is no past,”  
says Jean-Luc Godard. Either way,  
the button is redundant. Voice-command  
is thought - the fear deep and futureless  
as history, desire to appease which  
remains featureless, not the disorganized  
weather it truly is, as much a part of  
the breathing stars as constancy of rock.  
The ‘Mr Whippy Man’ weaves  
Greensleeves in and out of suburbia; a  
caravan in search of a trade-route -  
via the village that never existed.



\*

How is it the floating island  
detaches itself from horizon in dream -  
its first appearance, otherworldly,  
but of this world, a wheel loosened  
from the world's ratchet, out of time,  
riding above it and inhabited by  
folk fixated upon a particular  
theorem-thought; elevated imponderables,  
whereby you access this island by door  
set underneath as you sail under?  
Islands, a dream of round towers!  
the sudden rush of water under hulls.

\*

Mediocre raiders lie in wait.  
Teeth clack in sleep, dreams fraught  
with ambush. Orders intercepted,  
encrypted to the house style.  
The litterateur tracked back through  
his ISBN to no man's land -  
the robotic verb activated, sent  
in under barbed metaphor strung out  
where trees once stood as  
camouflage. The voices from his  
hill-bunker a wind turbine. Accusations  
tumbled in the night. For months he  
heard soft hammering, mimicry;  
they failed. Could not beat back the  
weather on his chosen ground.

\*

Time passes - that pressure in  
space again - return of the unoriginals  
tinkering with the power-box -  
such fine work - setting traps out  
for darkness. Time passes -  
talons curve and hook - how the  
mouth chokes with ash. Feet drag  
muffled under dungeons. Time passes -  
that pressure in space again - a  
new proclamation from Semiotic City -  
this custom built dome and  
aquarium light, pulsing: henceforth,  
no corners to hide around - no zone  
permitted for surprise to leap.

\*

Hugely, our indifference squats -  
unleavened as fear, blood is contained  
within news footage. Archaeologists  
stop digging deserts because of  
landmines. Camels wait for sand dunes  
to drift into ridges - blue flags flutter  
back at Fort Apache on brave  
white trucks (what gets through  
is the scent of coffee). A footless boy  
hobbles past, bargain hunting,  
a life at odds & ends - smoke drifts  
over Manhattan, out across the Hudson  
river as from a Bedouin campfire.

\*

Circuit; right hand wise,  
homage to the sun - as did ancient  
Celts, Scythians, too - host to  
the Milesians on their last leg to  
Ireland as the first Celts castaway -  
whose home precinct the Black Sea,  
the right hand to the centre;  
memoried in standing stone circles.  
Yet homage to a sun as walking  
pillar of fire, with hell for a coronet?  
The world's breath and mystery  
end here, earth's innards engorged -  
sprawled redly coast to coast.

\*

If streets had cobblestones  
blood would flow in tatters - torn  
flags to a revolution lost. Streets  
smoothly ease to drains. The cut deep,  
and blood wakes from its blackness,  
crushed as berries in the runnels  
of a wagon, oozes its oil from  
the body's casket - til flesh becomes  
porcelain, perfect surface for moon,  
ice, the glass-edged sky to play upon;  
in silences deep as birch in the  
bayoneting dark - and leaves finally  
resemble paper money piled up  
under the turbined lamplight.

\*

A Public Works draughtsman  
spent thirty years designing the City  
Sewerage Reticulation System  
he eventually hoped to escape through -  
a masterpiece! A prairie dog would  
have been proud of it. Complex of  
accented runs, angles, drops, sluices,  
pumps, ditches, endless unbowed  
archways, treatment ponds breaking into  
sunlight - the architects of Athens  
would have been proud of it.  
Only on paper - not one trowel lifted!  
miles and miles and miles of it.

\*

Pyrrha, your dewy hair,  
yellow, scented, doubly wreathed  
in Jasmine, fresh from the trellis  
this morning - your new lover yet to  
arrive, breathless. Your tantrums  
are as sea-storms, heart-wrecking  
for that unsuspecting voyager - maybe  
as survivor, I might warn him  
against your squally lust, he won't  
find safe haven in your arms! This note  
is record enough - that I set down  
against your lubricous hold.

See: Horace's 'Pyrrha' ode. I,v.



\*

The flames above the wall,  
private show for the Gods, the city  
burned three days, at night, smoke  
warmed the stars. Border forest  
shifted with shields - scritch-owl,  
a horse's impatient breath - the hawk  
wheeled under a pennant moon.  
In the grey dawn men turned North.  
The druid notched these events  
onto trunks that lead to deeper wood -  
envisioned - silence, incantation;  
the God found within the stone.

\*

Once cradle of civilization -  
now crucible, a sandstorm of tanks,  
a battery of rocket-launchers  
each one bright as a guiding star  
slams home to its birth place, sand sprites  
leap dervishly, limbs gad about,  
horses buckle back upon themselves -  
empty out like exhausted bellows.  
A beggar (in nameless rags) calls  
out in either prayer or curse to  
the desert night first refuge for saints;  
Cross and Crescent belch fire.

\*

Forty thousand tons. Space  
dust, diamond and sapphire, snips  
of light, collect on earth yearly.  
Dust breaks bread on our too dusty  
planet; on our twice dusty planet;  
on our overly dusty planet made  
available to wind; dust breaks  
down glaciers. Broken deserts from  
sand storms deliver dinosaur dust,  
highways loosen tyre dust, your  
home a time capsule - our earth bent  
dustward forsworn to decay.

\*

A giallo antico moon framed  
within cratered ruins. Country turned  
up at the edges like a dirty postcard.  
Poplars, broken spars of pine,  
cypress. Dusty plane trees rubbed raw  
by abrading tanks in the market  
square. Two ambulances shoved aside.  
Kabul. The Republic of Georgia's  
snowy mountains [backdrop to some  
desolate soccer field]. A few lean  
men shouldering grenade launchers pass  
by and grin, heading for the glaciere.

\*

'The Breaking of Nations'  
a horse cough, as history laments  
its own passing. What ghosts  
urge these riots? Memory is dead,  
flags and banners dissolve back  
into thoroughfares. The East  
is reliquary; bone splinter and shrapnel  
mixed in daily. What ghosts urge  
these riots? Barbarism looms in  
the triumph of immediacy, a final exit  
from the Garden of Eden, bombs  
bristling moments ago at cockcrow.

\*

'A line is taking a full-stop  
for a walk,' said Klee. A straight  
line is the supreme act of cruelty;  
is intent without reprieve, ambush  
and final judgement; Alpha  
and Omega, the beginning and end,  
(bullet-to-victim); the scroll of  
credits, a squadron of lines;  
the banding of speech, a geology  
of sound; the blade tilt of horizon  
that bloodies a sun; is gravity  
compressed and a disk flung wide,  
is flatness departing life to nothing -  
spear cast on a plain at sunset.

\*

Buildings off the crustal shelf,  
drop shouldered - lean to, against the  
sky in crazy surrealist back drop,  
expressionist haze is shock amongst  
rubble and safety helmets spotted  
lamp-lit - an engine harvests an infant,  
luckily, dead pale but pained; dust  
cakes sudden caves by a broken  
10th floor grounded, bedraggled beneath  
re-inforcing caged. Tectonic plates  
lock brake drums an instant on the  
Richter scale. Taiwan slips  
on the tooth of a cog.

\*

Generalization of Old World  
caught in the plane's sweep. Look up!  
sound makes memory after.  
Dragging loss is violence; O ye  
who suffer banishment, nourishment  
grounded. Dearth 'tis. Rabble is  
ordinary, a thing apart, the jackal  
at play, toying with world's diamonds,  
spittle aglitter. Laughter strewn,  
down-compressed to mud. From whence  
the swing and arc, blood's roar rose,  
gave judder to the first step - before  
the word, the wind in the word;  
rabble speech was. In the beginning.



\*

CEOs in castles cascade  
in cash, silent as a cyber virus -  
the invisible hides cause-and-effect,  
stock taken, bartered in Japan -  
via Belarus every back yard where  
falls a city's shadow looming  
over the last, dead chimney pot,  
not even moon can empty its  
chamber pot of yellow, silver slops  
into alleyways crackling with  
plastic syringes, used condoms,  
blood trails, slewed off into a  
wilderness of free ways, high rise.  
O the dead arise in elevators nightly  
as Pharisees burst into the Temple.

\*

Footprints for satellites?  
An old game. The Mayas knew it;  
land forms camouflaged, star  
charts, airy bestiaries, eagle, lama,  
beastback mountain sides, white  
pebbled Milky Way, an ancestral  
footbridge. Look down or up,  
backwards or forwards. Weirdly,  
rotating our options, weighing odds;  
caught in bristling cyberspace  
or a stone corbelled chamber.  
Either way, it'll make you dizzy.  
Once is as it ever was, ever shall be:  
Gods walk out upon a path of stars.

\*

Is recollection seeing anew,  
old pieces, rearranged, seemingly?  
Letting go of nothing suggests: -  
(like) air conditioning, computer hum.  
Waiting for nothing. Omphalos;  
world-centre, mind nadir, still point  
about which everything revolves.  
God's paper chase. Omphalos,  
mind's umbilical. Stone sunk  
to bottom of the lake is memory,  
incarnation. Mind skip back before  
instinct saw dark eclipse. Sky shield.  
Moon boss. Through vast chthonic  
reservoirs, horizon, swept aside.

\*

So. Earth's most dramatic  
'bald spot', (ozone hole) is down  
to 15 million sq miles over  
Antarctica as of Oct, 2002. Shrinkage,  
Big Time. One year's reading on  
reduced cfcs doth not a trend make.  
Is this happy hour? Fewer recalcitrants  
maced? Hair-gel instead of hair  
spray? Asthmatic winds rake pebbles  
in dry Arctic valleys. Presidents  
and dictators square off. Puritanism  
v Tribalism. Doomsday's a  
syndicated affair. Life's Good.

\*

I wanted to reach my hand into  
the side of that mountain.  
The Romans waited, the Jews died.  
Made a sacrificial altar,  
such as Abraham had to his God.  
A small cave, pocketed at the  
base of Massada. Better death than  
surrender - a courageous act  
for living against the odds. Day  
by day danger renews, retribution  
neither diminishes nor goes  
away. To every Age a new generation,  
bigger weapons to sound the void.

\*

Your breasts in the mirror,  
still life of gourds. Bossed shields.  
The white-washed room peeled,  
flaked, wooden shutters opened  
on the small harbour quay -  
a restaurateur tipped his garbage  
casually into the Mediterranean.  
A night of fish bones, cigarette butts,  
bobbed in an oily slick. West,  
into shadow, Antnos anchored off  
the headland, outboard silenced,  
dynamite exploding like an octopus  
under a shoal of fish beneath.

\*

Alcatraz not Minoan ruins.  
Morning mist hangs its garden off  
Golden Gate bridge. Men in  
fog loom large. Fog or ram's horn?  
Container ship - warrior barge,  
passes under with another load of  
Japanese cars to feast upon  
freeways. 'Straight guys are at a  
premium' you said. (Or so I  
overheard). Seven months under  
your roof in your bed. I never got  
to Texas - never hit Route 66.  
Marooned on my Isle, deep within  
that lustful, solitary confinement.

\*

Do words bring to mind flat  
sided buildings, cliff face, waterfall?  
Each emotion to its respective  
season and climate. Age means era,  
epoch, each physical transformation  
(our) body plays out. Journey  
from foot to fossil print, the single  
breath, misting to humidness.  
Blood shadows a dense valley;  
untidy buildings, an old saw-mill;  
blood thins to Gods' ichor. I approach  
you like a drive-in movie. Memory's  
what we miss, we spool reels of it.



\*

Serpent-backed bridge profiled:  
the city, chalk-toned, laid out like a  
shooting gallery. From Green  
Point (sub-net ghosting to Georges  
Head) a V of gulls speedily hugging  
the harbour; its surface serried,  
grey disturbances. Wind grain. Yachts  
coasting, canvas slap. Manly ferries,  
(green, beige upperwork) slide  
between white, salt-shaker buoys.  
Trouble in Paradise? Never!  
Spring thunder ain't no car bomb.

\*

One quadrant of sky turns,  
face up, black as the ace of spades.  
Much as a God can manage  
muttering from the side of his mouth.  
Star flecks, nova spittle. Rage of  
emptiness pours through, for the hell  
of it, endlessly. Looking back to  
what beginning. The whole shebang  
advances toward, beyond our  
best efforts. We live under a Niagra  
of star fall, huge optics dilate time,  
blackness like velvet slips over  
chrome. Sounds of nothingness  
strung between a singlet of lights.

\*

Barrel of the sun, gun-wad,  
cloud packed, cools to Napoleonic  
afterglow. The sun is soldier  
and hero, after all; always on call  
to strike the last pose, profiling  
its rays across the grateful landscape.  
Ragged mountains lift up to meet  
it, plains puff out chests, the sea  
a carnival of light, ice packs  
bristle, glaciers growl. Time spins  
on a coin. Horizon shakes its  
dirty mat over cityscape, over glass  
and concrete conspiracies -  
roads burn fuses into nightways.

\*

Rubbed off sky exposes an  
undercoat of white that is really  
fuzzed, mid-day heat. Birds  
change over shifts. Things settle.  
Shadow drops under eaves, tier  
by tier. Melaleuca is a snowstorm  
of bloom in a backyard.  
Planes arrive from here and there;  
holiday makers, the injured  
and dead, today's interchangeable  
destines. A night club blows up  
in a tropical paradise. In the  
slipstream above the stratosphere,  
fear drifts about the globe  
as deadly pollen.

\*

The day combustible as a  
nightclub. Destruction works  
in big, blunt gestures. An  
explosion is no rediscovery, it's  
return without guide to the  
deepest sink hole from whence  
hell's laughter issues. A  
sucking into nothingness; void  
behind the twin masks of  
light and dark. Not repetition  
but continuance. Pre-beginnings.  
A precise point of death  
qua death, not infinity but  
limitlessness, pain's spectrum.

\*

Compression of bees,  
shrub-shaped, in proton loops,  
on cushioned air. Spring!  
See the counter, its bright ticking  
with fail-safe growth. Who put  
it there? this tubular, tight package,  
green and red wires running to  
hidden terminals - watch the numerals  
flick over, air fill with warmth,  
this thing ready to go off at a season's  
notice, a bursting forth, flash  
of filmic green and bloom  
too quick to catch as we exit our  
buildings in a rush to see it.

\*

Scent makes the air visible,  
seasonal; autumn lays its long  
scaffolding of shadow under wood  
smoke; winter smells of damp  
brickwork; spring lifts the lid on  
lighter smells - is something  
between cleaning fluids or garden.  
Only late at night true secrets  
and scents are disclosed; summer  
tightens. Scent is a map of an  
ancient journey. The poem prints -  
makes a seal of every season,  
its message delivered and read.

An Actual Encounter With The Sun On  
My Balcony At France Street

( for Gloria Schwartz )

When the moon slipped its knot  
and left a ring for the night to drop  
through, and a baggage of stars  
thudded on the loading bay  
at the other side of the world,

I heard,  
"Ho! get up you slack-arse poet,  
I want to have a word with you."

It was the sun.

"This is a surprise," I yawned.

"Shouldn't be - you're the one whose  
been whingeing about his own personal light."

"I must admit," I conceded, "I  
was worried there for a bit."

"Right," answered  
the sun. He spat at the window turning  
it molten.

"You must know by now Stephen,  
I visit with a poet every thirty years or so.  
Last time it was Frank O'Hara,

and before that,  
Mayakovsky. Can't say it's your turn  
but I'll stop by anyway.

You're not a poet for all time but  
for your own time. Don't worry about it.

And forget those supposed poets  
the M=E=Z=A=N=I=N=E=S as you call them

caught between the floors: they ain't going  
nowhere.

So get up and make a cup of tea!"

"Sure, care to join me?"

"Only for a minute," he said, "I've got more  
important things to do today, like glinting  
off the Hauraki Gulf and the iron-clad poppy  
of Sydney Tower.

Oh, that reminds me,  
then I'm off to San Francisco to wake up that  
ex-girlfriend of yours you keep pissing  
off with late night calls and false promises."

By now I could  
see the sun was pretty worked up.

"C'mon, forget that crap.



You write some good stuff but you've got to  
hang in there, and like me it'll  
come to light."

"Thanks sun."

"And knock off the guilt trips and stop  
getting pissed (in your Sydney dreams, pal!) you'll  
burn yourself out - I recognise the signs."

"Yeah, seems I have been  
a little preoccupied."

The sun jumped onto my balcony  
outside the window.

"You don't see much of me down here at  
POETS' PALACE - do you?"

Move over,  
this is the only time I get a look in."

I propped myself up  
on one elbow.

"Remember, you're not  
writing bus-timetables and calling it  
'performance poetry' like a few I  
could name. Stick with the atmospheric,  
the true essence of people.

That's your angle, as mine is now  
to brow beat you.

And don't get into this doomsday kick  
either, leave such things to the (small minded).

Honestly,  
it's straight forward focus."

By now my hangover had  
evaporated.

"Hold on sun,  
I've a few questions."

"Sorry," called the sun, receding.

"We've had our little talk. Give my regards  
to Greece again, if you ever get there."

And he was gone and I got up to  
another beginning, and a day.

Stephen Oliver b. 1950. Grew in Brooklyn-west, Wellington, New Zealand. One year Magazine Journalism course, Wellington Polytechnic. Radio NZ Broadcasting School. Casual Radio Actor. Lived in Paris, Vienna, London, San Francisco, Greece and Israel. Signed on with the radio ship, 'The Voice of Peace' broadcasting in the Mediterranean out of Jaffa. Free lanced as production voice, newsreader, announcer, voice actor, journalist, radio producer, copy and features writer. Poems widely represented in New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, USA, UK, South Africa, Canada, etc. Recently published, Ballads, Satire & Salt - A Book of Diversions, Greywacke Press, Sydney, 2003. Recently completed a CD of poems and music, titled: KING HIT Selected Readings - poems written and recorded by Stephen Oliver with original music by Matt Otley designed for international release. He is a transtasman poet and writer who lives in Sydney.

This book review is included by the request of the author, and with permission of Nicholas Reid:

Stephen Oliver *Deadly Pollen* [Middletown NJ: Word Riot Press, 2003]; and *Ballads, Satire & Salt* [Sydney: Greywacke Press, 2003]. Review by Nicholas Reid. First Appeared: JAS Review of Books.

Stephen Oliver's anthology of 2001, *Night of Warehouses*, brought together the work of a poet who combines an astonishing facility for image with a complete assurance of voice, while showing a deep engagement with the poetic tradition. Two new collections, *Ballads, Satire & Salt* and *Deadly Pollen*, will do much to extend that reputation. The former is subtitled 'A Book of Diversions' and displays Oliver's sardonic wit and verbal inventiveness, along with a fine set of illustrations by Matt Ottley. The book's light verse moves from political satire ('Think Big') to a series of reflections on the poets of this and the last generation, ranging from Larkin and Auden to the major figures in recent New Zealand writing. Wit explained is wit ruined, however, and so I shall not comment at length on what is an impressive work.

Oliver's other new collection, *Deadly Pollen*, is an ambitious undertaking - a meditation, in large measure, on Wallace Stevens and his legacy - and brings together thirty-five short lyrics into a loosely linked sequence which examines the state of the world after 9/11. And the poem is not 'merely' political, for it diagnoses a state of spiritual malaise based on fear, a state of crisis in which the role of the poet is in question. So far, so good. But if this is a crisis poem, it is also a crisis in which (and this is my reservation) I find it difficult to believe, though it has been the subject of much recent American commentary. And in any case, there is also an enormous amount to admire in the language and in the range of reference.

I can convey something of the fineness of Oliver's craftsmanship in his translation of Horace's 'Pyrrha' ode, a translation which fits into Oliver's theme of disillusionment, and of his modernist distrust of beauty in person and in diction. The quiet intensity, and the distanced, almost intellectualized sensuality, of the language in which Oliver brings alive the golden-haired Pyrrha, Horace's femme fatale, is perfect:

Pyrrha, your dewy hair,  
yellow, scented, doubly wreathed  
in Jasmine, fresh from the trellis  
this morning.... (lyric 12)

Nor is Oliver's ambition here as limited as it might seem, for in taking on such a translation Oliver is setting himself up against a history of translations, and most notably one by Milton. It is a challenge in which he succeeds admirably. And in the later lines of the lyric, Oliver marks his disengagement by a withdrawal into a more demotic register. For while he is adept at finding occasion for the lyrical richness of which modernism was always suspicious, he also writes at times in a spare modern voice, as in the following lines which may owe something to the New Zealand poet Curnow's 'Canto of Signs':

Rubbed off sky exposes an  
undercoat of white that is really  
fuzzed, mid-day heat. Birds  
change over shifts. Things settle.  
Shadow drops under eaves, tier  
by tier .... (lyric 32)

The language here has a powerful antipodean flatness, and depends on its laconic pauses. And if 'things settle', it is because, as the allusion to Yeats suggests, things are about to fall apart; and we move to images of Bali. Oliver goes on in a following lyric to demonstrate his gift for image, in his intense visualization of Spring's strange bloom, the terrorist's bomb:

Compression of bees,  
shrub-shaped, in proton loops,  
on cushioned air. Spring!  
See the counter, its bright ticking  
with fail-safe growth. (lyric 34)

Political poets do not always manage to capture so well the estrangement which is necessary for successful social comment.

Similarly, Oliver demonstrates an unsettled verbal mastery in a bravura display, a description of architectural form:

... Complex of  
accented runs, angles, drops, sluices,  
pumps, ditches, endless unbowed  
archways... (lyric 11)

The language here is finely controlled, from the way in which the 'x' sound is perfectly balanced in the opening phrase, to the series of falling monosyllables which are released in the enjambed expansiveness of the final phrase with its open vowels. The language is reminiscent of Les Murray's 'Bent Water' (surely Murray's masterpiece). But the lines I have just quoted continue in rhythms which, while still lyrical, are also more unsettling: 'archways, treatment ponds breaking into/sunlight'. For where Murray's language embodies a confident belief in God, Oliver's has been a celebration of a public sewer - and more to the point, a sewer envisioned but (in an act of creative failure) never built.

Late in the poem, Oliver brings together these themes in a grim reflection upon the role of the poet - in a voice in which the emotion is italicized but never allowed to run outside its bounds:

One quadrant of sky turns,  
face up, black as the ace of spades.  
Much as a God can manage  
muttering from the side of his mouth.  
Star flecks, nova spittle. Rage of  
emptiness pours through, for the hell  
of it, endlessly. Looking back to  
what beginning. The whole shebang  
advances toward, beyond our  
best efforts. We live under a Niagra  
of star fall, huge optics dilate time,  
blackness like velvet slips over  
chrome. Sounds of nothingness  
strung between a singlet of lights. (lyric 30).

This is vintage Oliver. The language is elaborate, but perfectly judged, undercut by a colloquial impulse ('black as the ace of spades', 'for the hell / of it'). This undersong speaks of Oliver's awareness of his place as a poet of the vernacular republic; but it also speaks, in its use of cliché, of a loss of faith in the resources of poetic language.

And something similar can be said of its use of Stevens, for where Stevens is the poet who brought romantic metaphysics to its final crisis, and with it the end of any hope of finding essential meaning in the world, Oliver's use of Stevens here seems also an act of deliberate failure. The stanza alludes to Stevens's Jove, a false divinity who 'moved among us, as a muttering king' in 'Sunday Morning', and to that poem's existential conclusion that (contra Milton) 'We live in an old chaos of the sun'. Like Stevens in 'Key West', Oliver laments the 'Blessed rage for order', the 'glassy lights' which gave a bogus sense of structure to the sea. But in a sense, and an important sense, much of the language of Oliver's stanza is the language of Stevens: it is an eloquent testament to a failure to find in the present a viable voice for poetry.

Clearly there is much in this sequence which I find powerful, and respond to warmly. Many of the lyrics are perfect, and thematically the poem traverses many of the issues which are at the heart of poetry today: from the modernist legacy of deep worries over memory and metaphor, to a more contemporary juxtaposition of dictions and registers, and a concern with post-modernism and the end of history. It is a sequence which is not afraid to take on Stevens, or Milton and Hardy and Auden. But I would like to see it slightly reshaped, for I feel that there is a great poem hiding in here somewhere, if only I could be persuaded more of its motivation. I think fear does lie at the heart of its psychology, but the real fear is artistic rather than political; and if this could be worked more into the texture of the poem, along with some editing of the poem's middle section, we would have a major achievement not only in Oliver's oeuvre, but in antipodean writing.

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