Unarrestable: The Poetic Development of Sharon Olds

What do you get as a reward for being a poet like Sharon Olds? For having written five-hundred-plus poems that plumb the range of family dynamics and intimate physicality with a precision and metaphorical resourcefulness greater than ever before applied to those subjects? For having permanently extended and transformed the tradition of the domestic poem? For doing as much, single-handedly, to win readers to American poetry, as any poet of the latter twentieth century? For making poetry seem vital and relevant to young and not-so-young adults all over the place?

Well, you win great popularity. You are loved by many, for reasons alternately well founded and misconceived. You are run down by envious peers and overlooked by academics. Your name is invoked like a brand name to denote the obviousness of confessional poetry. You are accused of repetition, narcissism, and exhibitionism.

And you get some very weirdly flavored critical reactions from American literary critics. Here's William Logan, reviewer for the *New Criterion,* discussing *Blood, Tin, Straw,* Olds's sixth collection of poems:

> If you want to know what it's like for Sharon Olds to menstruate, or squeeze her oil-filled pores, or discover her naked father shitting, *Blood, Tin, Straw* will tell you. If you want to know what her sex life is like (it's *wonderful,* trust her!), she'll tell you, and tell you in prurient, anatomical detail the Greek philosophers would have killed for—she's the empirical queen of lovemaking, of every secret session of the body. . . .

> She may start a poem complaining about her labia, but, before she's through, her womb is heaven and her husband's French-kissing her god-tongues. (You'd think the god's small tongue would be the clitoris. How lucky of Olds to have more than one.)
>
> . . . Olds may someday become the laureate of the bedroom; but for all her radical pretense (she claims if she hadn't married she'd have been a Weatherman bomber), she's a homely *Redbook* moralist, believing in motherhood, family, and honey on her nipples. By the time she's reduced to giving sex tips, or calling her husband's member "the errless digit," all her shallow pretense is greedily on display.

The kindest thing you could say about this is that it is shockingly ungenerous—but that would be too kind. In fact, Logan's tone is so swollen with spleen, and so obsessive, that its private underpinnings seem obvious. What's additionally disturbing and even embarrassing about this review is the unconcealed fascination of the critic with naming body parts, like a little boy looking through a knothole in a neighbor's fence, touching himself while cursing in Latin. It is criticism flavored with weird jealousy, topped by puritanical disgust and condemnation. Therapy, anyone?

And here are some excerpts from an essay on Olds by Adam Kirsch, a younger critic:

> There is a reason why there have been so many poems about love and so few about sex, I mean the act of sex: and these examples demonstrate it. . . . It is only when sex is made to serve as a metaphorical focus for more elaborate and entangled feelings that it rings true, and becomes poetically alive. And since Olds has one simple and finally unsurprising feeling about sex—that its bodily goodness refutes its social or religious badness—the varied descriptions of sex in her poetry are monotonous.

But Kirsch, for starters, may be missing the poet's point: that biology is never just biology either; it is its own legitimate counter-

theology. Here is "Prayer," one of the poems Kirsch offers as evidence for the prosecution:

> Let me be faithful to the central meanings:
>
> the waters breaking in the birth-room which suddenly
> smelled like the sea;
>   that first time
> he took his body like a saw to me and
> cut through to my inner sex,
> the blood on his penis and balls and thighs
> sticky as fruit juice;
>   the terrible fear
> as the child's head moves down into the vagina.

It is hard to imagine why these images would seem simpleminded and monotonous to the critic. Perhaps because they are so corporeal. On the other hand, to call these fundamental human experiences the "central meanings" seems quite plausible for many people who have lived through them. In fact, the speaker's suggestion that these are *the* central meanings seems not sexually but *conceptually* provocative. Perhaps they are central meanings precisely because they are experiences that resist codified understanding to which we must submit. Perhaps they are central because they humble the part of human nature that would prefer to hover above experience, as a rational angel.

Here's Kirsch again, with a condescension for daily life that American poetry outgrew eighty years ago:

> Her poems are written directly out of the trivia of her life and can be directly assimilated by the reader; there is no abstraction and no surprise, only the videotape of life played back at full volume. . . . A reader of Olds is never made to question himself, only to congratulate himself on his fine sensitivity.

Kirsch's distaste for the poetry of the everyday is a replay of the aesthetic battle that Williams, Pound, and Eliot fought in the era of early modernism (and which was fought again in the fifties), about what the "proper" matter of poetry might be. There's no need to wage that war again: contemporary high-concept verse and domestic poetry coexist comfortably. As for the accusation of "simplicity," the only rebuttal required is to read a poem like "The Elder Sister" from Olds's *The Dead and the Living:*

> When I look at my elder sister now
> I think how she had to go first, down through the
> birth canal, to force her way
> head-first through the tiny channel,
> the pressure of Mother's muscles on her brain,
> the tight walls scraping her skin.
> Her face is still narrow from it, the long
> hollow cheeks of a Crusader on a tomb,
> and her inky eyes have the look of someone who has
> been in prison a long time and
> knows they can send her back. I look at her
> body and think how her breasts were the first to
> rise . . .
> but now I
> see I had her before me always
> like a shield. I look at her wrinkles, her clenched
> jaws, her frown-lines—I see they are
> the dents on my shield, the blows that did not reach me.
> She protected me, not as a mother
> protects a child, with love, but as
> a hostage protects the one who makes her
> escape as I made my escape, with my sister's
> body held in front of me.

Merely literal? Lacking in surprise? In fact, "The Elder Sister," like many of Olds's poems, is a poem of complex recognitions: an explora-

tion of memory, complicity, empathy, and power. As its reader, I'm not given to congratulate myself, nor do I think merely of my own family story. Rather, I consider how many intimate relationships are forged by the advantage of circumstance, and shaped by subconsciously consented-to pacts; that we are surrounded by barely submerged yet ignored dramas of competition, injustice, and power.

Kirsch seems to be oblivious to the complexity of metaphor, Olds's greatest gift. In "The Elder Sister," the rich intelligence of image welters up into a tangle of evocative association—*Crusader, tomb, brain, prisoner, shield, hostage.* To be more specific, consider the way that the "dents" on the speaker's "shield" echo the implied indentations on the sister's skull, left by her passage through the birth canal. The poetic nature of image is that it cross-pollinates, refracts, and echoes in ways that are quicker and stranger than rationality, evoking a host of intersecting contexts and subtexts that would take a discursive writer much longer to explicate.

Psychoanalysis may no longer function as a dominant paradigm in American poetry, as some have claimed, but its insights are not exhausted. In fact, those insights seem relevant to the vehement reactions of these two critics. As rite of passage in many societies, boys achieve manhood by striking their mothers and walking away, moving from a women's world into the male one. This is one way boys achieve autonomy, by pushing away the feminine and the corporeal. The desired consequence is essential: independence of self; but the side effect can be a lasting, anxious contempt for all things feminine.

It's no big revelation that misogyny is scripted so deeply into our cultural consciousness that it leaks out like radioactive fuel, but still, it is dismaying to see it dripping from the mandibles of the highly cultivated. Terror and embarrassment at the stuff of the body are quintessential symptoms of puritanism. Admittedly, a preference for abstraction and rationality over the less-controllable, corporeal, and emotional realms doesn't have to be neurotic. Yet the criticism so regularly showered on Olds seems just another form of the smirking treatment of the candidate Hillary Clinton in the political realm—the Rush Limbaughs and Bill O'Reillys, like apoplectic pit bulls of the

commentating profession, alternately brand her a crybaby weakling and a ball-busting bitch.

Kirsch again, in his claim that Olds's sexual preoccupation is with scenarios of incest: "Across her six books, every permutation of this sin is played out: Olds imagines her parents having sex, and she imagines having sex with her parents, and imagines her children sexually." Kirsch goes on to quote from the poem "Saturn," in which Olds's drunken, stuporous father is imagined eating her younger brother:

> as he crunched the torso of his child between his jaws.
> crushed the bones like the soft shells of crabs
> and the delicacies of the genitals
> rolled back along his tongue . . .
> he could not
> stop himself, like orgasm.

Isn't this, again, not prurience but empathy, recognition, curiosity, and courage? Isn't one job of the artist to imagine his way vividly into the unfashionable nooks and crannies of experience, the central meanings of the real? I have always found the account in "Saturn" of the child-eating father a completely credible description of unconscious power, masculinity, and fathers. To me, this is not Olds's "prurient" imagination, but the real human story, embedded in myth and poetry, the tangle of primal psychological relationships. If this is an example of Olds's "prurience," then Ovid is a pervert, Dante a porno king, and *The Iliad* a splatter film made by a blind Italian director.

These literary antecedents are apt in other ways: all are practitioners of artistic luridity and excess, lovers of spectacle; in that sense, they too are "populists." Oscar Wilde said that all art is a matter of exaggeration, and when Homer narrates the slow-motion shot of a Trojan arrow piercing through three Greek bodies, we may complain about his sensationalism, but we don't avert our eyes. There's no question that Olds has a temperamental proclivity for shock, a somewhat insatiable drive for seeking and finding the taboo, the off-color, off-the-record, unsayable urges, sins, and behaviors of the human. A friend of

mine says that Olds's poems are, in this way, like the paintings of Van Gogh: in their extremity of color and motion is a kind of vitality, a testimony to the life force to which the most unsophisticated viewer can respond.

Aside from the critique of her subject matter, the two critical accusations most recurrently leveled against Olds are those of repetition and craftlessness. In fact, though, Olds the poet has developed steadily in craft and style. Since her early books, she has conducted experiments that have largely gone unnoticed—forays toward greater lyric range and more subtle rhetorical strategies, sallies even into that notorious postmodern territory, "reflexivity."

As "The Elder Sister" shows, Olds's most elemental talent is metaphor, the intuitive intelligence of image; most impressively her genius has been for metaphor that describes and mirrors primal psychic relations. In "Why My Mother Made Me," for example, the speaker describes her mother looking at her infant "the way / the maker of a sword gazes at his face / in the steel of the blade." This fundamental poetic faculty has remained central to Olds's poetic strength. Yet real talent shifts and evolves over time. Over the years Olds has tested and enlarged her range to place more emphasis on diction, assonance and consonance, variety of idiom, and rhetoric.

In Olds's collection *One Secret Thing,* examples of such expanded ambitiousness are easy to find. In "Fly on the Wall in the Puritan Home," the poet literally imagines herself as an insect spectator, watching one human abuse another:

> And then I become a fly on the wall
> of that room, where the corporal punishment
> was done. The humans who are in it mean little
> to me . . .
> I turn my back and with maxillae and palps
> clean my arms: in each of the hundred
> eyes of both my compound eyes,
> one wallpaper rose. . . .
> . . . And my looking is a looking

primed, it is a looking to the power of itself,
and I see a sea folding inward,
200 little seas folding on themselves—
a mess of gene pool crushing down onto
its own shore. Then I turn back
to washing my hands of the chaff that flees off the
threshed onto the threshing floor.
Ho hum, I say, I'm just a fly—
fly light, fly bright, pieces of a species dashed
off onto a wall, chaff of wonder,
chaff of night.

The first thing to remark about "Fly on the Wall" is the sustained detachment of its point of view, a detachment of which the "emotionally identified" Olds, according to her critics, is supposed incapable. "The humans . . . mean little / to me," says the fly, and in fact, it is this clinical freedom of perspective that gives rise to some of the distinctive language and perceptions of the poem. Like the fly, the speaker here is "washing [her] hands" of human suffering, with "maxillae" and "palps."

The imagination of *seeing,* of the fly's penetrating vision, is another adventure here: of "looking / primed . . . looking to the power of itself," which sees one person hurting another as "a / mess of gene pool crushing down onto / its own shore." In themselves, these are ingenious conceptual descriptions. But there's a supporting drama of sound and tonal play in "Fly on the Wall" that also supplements and goes beyond straightforward narrative—"pieces of a species dashed," and "washing my hands of the chaff that flees off the / threshed onto the threshing floor." The strong assonance between *crushing, washing, threshed,* and *dashed off,* the internal rhyme, the bold verb choice of *flees;* the ingenious metaphor of *chaff* itself—all are reinforcing subtleties of craft.

The poem's conclusion especially demonstrates Olds's underappreciated rhetorical skills. It commences like a nursery rhyme: "Ho hum, I say, I'm just a fly," a tone that both sustains the poem's regis-

ter of blithe animal indifference while guiding the story into a second tonal layer that soberly joins grotesque detail with dark, understated awe: "pieces of a species dashed / off onto a wall, chaff of wonder, / chaff of night." Terrifically inventive, wonderfully underplayed, this passage possesses the poetic quality Randall Jarrell called "original strangeness." And the effect seems not the least bit strained for.

A similar kind of nuanced fluency is visible in "Pansy Coda," which contradicts both Kirsch's and Logan's reductive summaries of Olds's poetic nature. For "Pansy Coda" is a poem of description, and though it dips sideways into a memory of the speaker's mother, it is principally an immersion in sensual seeing, a type of poem impossible to write without lyric resources:

> When I see them my knees get a little weak.
> I have to squat down close to them, I
> want to put my face in one of them.
> They are so buttery, and yet so clean.
> They have a kind of soaking-wet dryness,
> they have the tremulous chin, and the pair of
> ocular petals, and the pair of frail
> ear petals, the sweet dog face.
> Or is it like the vulva of a woman,
> or of some particular woman. My mother
> tended them—purple-black—
> when I kneel to them I am kneeling to my mother,
> . . . .
> . . . —I have no idea
> what she is thinking, I get that nervous feeling
> I've had all my life around my mother. But when I
> see a bed of these, I kneel,
> and gaze at each one, freshly and freshly wowed,
> I love to run my thumb softly
> over the gentle jaw, I would like
> to wrap myself in a cloak of them,
> a cloak of one if it were large enough.

> I am tired of hating myself, tired
> of loathing. I want to be carried in a petal
> sling, sling of satin and cream,
> I want to be dazed, I want the waking sleep.

It doesn't seem so far-fetched to be reminded of Whitman's "What is the grass" passage, or Lawrence's "Bavarian Gentians" when reading this beautiful, erotically descriptive lyric. Both delicacy and strength are alternately employed, with the easy grace of someone who has spent a lifetime shaping language. Here, perceptual generosity is extended not to the "narcissistic" self, nor to the algebras of sex, but to the pansies. The progress of the poem itself recapitulates Olds's development as a poet, from the appealing plainness of the first three lines, to the movement into rich and various metaphor, then its gradual progress into a kind of chanting lyricism. There's the fantastically casual, ingenious, and relaxed moment of "I kneel, / and gaze at each one, freshly and freshly wowed." Then arrives the brilliant, surprising, and intuitively believable last lines, which unite Eros and Thanatos in the most convincing manner. I leave it to any lover of poetry to say that "Pansy Coda" is not a subtle and masterfully made poem.

Olds's later collections are not a dramatic breakthrough into a new aesthetic era for the poet. They contain the same array of poetic styles and strategies she has employed for some time: many of the poems are about family and bodies; many open with the word "When," which situates them in a narrative time and place, setting up a frame for the imaginative explorations that are her specialty. That she doesn't seem to care about not repeating herself, or about impressing critics, seems obvious. Yet Olds is occasionally an extraordinary poet—not just one possessed of a talent for great empathetic insight (nothing to scoff at), but also one of impressive poetic means. Some poets simply produce a lot of poems because they must, and because they can. Their surplus is part of what enables them to make the truly good pieces. It seems foolish and ungrateful to fault for surfeit a poet who has given us many, many extraordinary poems.

Although Olds has recently received the serious recognitions of

the Pulitzer Prize, and the British T. S. Eliot Prize, it is likely that our reception of Sharon Olds as a poet has been arrested, our perception petrified and sealed itself into a version of our first encounter with that work. Often that early encounter was of a family narrative, leading to an imagistically mediated psychological revelation. It's the oppression of habit that makes even her freshest new poems seem already known to us. And it's a misbegotten nervousness about our own literary sophistication that causes us to label her as a "middlebrow" poet, or to be silent about our affection for her work. In fact, any contemporary poet with an ounce of sense would feel lucky to have written as many scintillating poems as Olds, and to have moved so many readers. The jealousy and dustups over the ultimate worth of her poems will continue, but will eventually settle, and we'll see them for what they are—an extended, meticulous, passionate, often deeply meditative testament about the "central meanings"; skilled dramatic expressions of the most archetypal templates, obstructions and liberations of one human life. This is not a matter of "high" and "low" culture. The dismissiveness of some critics only indicates the resistance that still exists to the news Olds carries: consciousness and unconsciousness, body and soul, swim in the same water, and they don't like each other. Fortunate for us to have poets like Olds to preside over the endless negotiations.