



On Douglas Oliver's *Penniless Politics*

by Patrick Wright

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Any adequate account of British poetry in the eighties would give prominence to Douglas Oliver's *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985). In this remarkable long poem Oliver revived the stanza and allegorical atmosphere of the late medieval poem, *Pearl*, to fashion a prism through which to view the British scene in the first years of Margaret Thatcher's leadership.

The poem pursues its quest with the help of a blue Bentley equipped with 'adjustable futurity' and full of Tory politicians and other 'television wraiths' which swirl and crackle on the unreliable video screen. A corrupt and unreformed Britain slides by outside the window, a 'hoar-frost land', its distant hills ghosted with 'Churchillian blue', and its society governed by a gruesome parody of 'chivalric hierarchy': the poor and the immensely rich all over again, but no 'golden chain of charity' to join them. Oliver blasts both Thatcher and the old Labour left, discouraging the idea that his lament for the compassionate 'centre' of British politics has anything to do with the Social Democratic Party.

In its own use of medieval idiom, the poem also offered a timely illustration of the limitations of tradition in a revivalist age: those ancient forms are no sooner recovered as sources of idea meaning, than they threaten to go all tacky, breaking down into a series of cheap special effects or redeeming the present only in its most archaic prejudices.

Oliver experienced the seventies in Britain as a claustrophobic period of political deadlock and destructive polarisation, and since 1982, he has chosen to live abroad. To begin with this meant Paris, where *The Infant and the Pearl* was completed, but a year or so ago he married the American writer, Alice Notley, and now resides in the disintegrating city of New York. He lives in a street full of hustling aggravation at the beginning of the Lower East Side, where Bohemia meets Skid Row.

The visitor approaches an old red-brick building faced with much-battered if once rather grand classical detailing and rusting fire-escapes, negotiating his way past the desperadoes hanging out on the front steps, and then rises up through a



narrow, tunnel-like corridor, into a tiny, crumbling apartment shaped, in Oliver's own description, like a telephone receiver: a thin passage with a modest thickening at either end.

Jammed in above the chaotic din of the street, Oliver doubles back over his childhood in Dorset, pausing to speak admiringly of William Barnes, the 19th century Dorset vicar and poet, once remembered as 'the last of the believers' but now known mostly for his use of a rich Wessex dialect that has long since died. He then describes how much has changed since the days of Dylan Thomas or Auden, whose plaque is to be seen just up the road, when the American reading public still looked to Britain for poetic inspiration.

Some of Britain's theorising literary academics may still find agreeable refuge here, but a poet depends more on his voice and, as Oliver has found when reading to audiences in various parts of the States, the English accent is not revered these days: indeed, it is more likely to be distrusted as a sneaky and duplicitous thing. People come up afterwards and say they were unable to assess what he's reading, so busy are they breaking the spell of his 'plummy' tone and resisting the cultural authority it seems to presume.

On a bad day this can feel like reading into a wall of prejudice, but Oliver is not inclined to protest too much about this situation. Indeed, he links it with the rise of the minorities in the US, declaring himself in sympathy with those, like Amiri Bakara, who argue that American culture should be prised away from its Eurocentric emphasis and adjusted to provide a truer reflection of its population's background. Oliver points a little ruefully to what Eurocentrism has come to mean in practice. Continental theory remains as fashionable as ever, so the turn is specifically against 'the great weight of English language and literature' in American education. Eurocentric has, he suggests, come to mean British-centric.

So what is an English poet in New York nowadays to do? Oliver counts off the options. He could turn his back on the world and seek consolation in the small-minded outrage of the expatriate. He could deck himself out as theorist and head for the nearest university. He might take a leaf out of Terry Eagleton's book, polishing up his Scottish (in Eagleton's case Irish) ancestry and trying to escape the embarrassing epicentre that is England by presenting himself as a displaced native of the Celtic fringe and a lover of jigs and reels.



But none of this seemed satisfactory, and Oliver found a different opening, one that made the most of his lack of status: 'Since I believe that Britain is fairly chauvinist at the moment, it is extremely interesting for me actually to confront a country which is in the process of immense change and trying to cope with that.'

As a place of multi-cultural ferment, New York manifests everything that Britain refuses to countenance. 'The two great complexes – the one I've come out of and the one I've gone into – Europe and America – are in this very interesting relationship at the moment,' and to be here, however tight and squeezed, is actually a 'terrific poetic opportunity.'

Oliver resolved to take on 'the exploding world' in the heart of the American city, but he also retains a thoroughly romantic view of the poet's role in the world. He sits in that tight little apartment, with his late father's dressing gown hanging up behind him like a friar's cowl, and says 'I think the poet has a duty to live fairly poorly.' This duty entails 'not following a poetic career – because it seems to me to lie about the poetry. If you are trying to write poetry that has a genuine politics in it, then you really shouldn't do. So I've usually tried to wiggle through life, and keep the poetry, as far as I can, clear of entanglements.'

It's unusual, in an age of deconstruction, to hear someone claiming without a smirk that 'poetry is a vocation,' but Oliver has no qualms, insisting that there is no 'priestcraft' or hocus pocus involved – only 'a sacred calling to look for the truth.' Does Oliver claim a prophetic role for his work? Not at all. But premonitions can certainly be expected if the poet's antennae are properly tuned. Oliver's previous books bear him out on this. He was writing about Margaret Thatcher's charisma in 1972, long before anyone else had seen her coming.

So Oliver put down his suitcase and went to work. Together with Notley he launched 'Scarlet', a little magazine which gathers up loose shards from the New York poetry scene and prints them next to serious expositions in which Oliver defends the idea of poetic truth against the theorising hordes who trample along in the footsteps of Jacques Derrida. He looked back into his southern English childhood for long enough to complete a fine autobiographical sequence called 'An Island That is All the World'. But New York was waiting on his doorstep, and it wasn't long before he walked back down that narrow corridor, and stepped out into the seething and disordered street below.



We may imagine him standing there. A pious founding father without a nation to establish. A moralist who believes that the possibility of perfection is alive at every passing instant, but who has no system to impose on the world. A man of high poetic ambition and a Barnes-like ear for dialect, stepping out into a street where the foulest words known to humanity, carefully gathered from diverse languages, roll down the pavement like rocks bouncing along in a perpetual landslide, assisted by those of the city's dispossessed (barking mad, drug-crazed, or just the victims of hard circumstance) who spend the day steering them into the most offensive combinations imaginable. Tight-lipped parents walk their children to school through this aural sewer. Well-meaning immigrants struggle to be helpful in an English vocabulary that consists almost entirely of curses. And Oliver too has stood firm against the tide, allowing it to wash up against him, but then pressing back to find redemption in the flood.

To begin with, as he explains, Oliver had to break through one of the leading taboos of white liberalism. It is normally judged 'extremely racist for whites to try to represent or ventriloquise black experience'. But Oliver felt it absolutely necessary for white people not just to support the black experience with abstract expressions of approval which, as he points out scoldingly, probably only serve to incorporate multiculturalism into white career structures, but to try to think their way all the way into it. So on to this tricky ground did our poet go, claiming so much, and then excusing himself with a laugh: 'I am simply doing a number on my own soul . . . trying to open to this incredibly interesting transition in American culture.'

The first sustain product of Oliver's engagement with the multi-cultural ferment of the Lower East Side is called *Penniless Politics*, a long narrative poem which Oliver has tested as he has gone along, reading excerpts at poetry slams at the nearby Nuyorican Café, or at the St. Marks Poetry Project where a similarly multicultural audience gathers. Oliver calls the poem a satire and he's certainly done nothing to stop it reading as a burlesque of his own seriously good intentions. The poem is full of high moral ambition, and yet it is written in the exuberant language of the street, its foulness intact and its diverse cadences caught at their most vivid. As with *The Infant and the Pearl*, there is a medieval source, although this time it is less obvious.

Penniless Politics is Oliver's retake of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio's 14th century epic which opens with an account of Florence's destruction by plague, and then follows a party of survivors out into the nearby hills where they pass ten days hearing a hundred famously exuberant and sometimes lewd stories which, as



Oliver suggests, offer 'a magical representation of how the reform of Florence ought to happen.' The stanza is an *ottava rima*, a traditional Italian form adjusted to produce a bumpy New York rapping tone full of repetition and internal rhyme.

Penniless Politics imagines the down-trodden minorities coming together to 'create a new USA' in a public park. The starting point is the realisation that half the American electorate doesn't even bother to vote in national elections, and the vehicle is a new and, of course, quite different kind of political party named Spirit, set up to gather in the disenfranchised and establish a true commonality – quite different from a Rainbow Coalition, as Oliver tells us sternly – in the forsaken heart of the American city. The initiative is launched with a chain letter, a suitably penniless way passing the word around, and it takes off like wildfire.

There are rousing scenes in the Bronx, Brooklyn and the Lower East Side, and Oliver conjures up an extraordinary collection of characters – all drawn from the minorities and their voices ventriloquised with peculiar gusto: Emen Penniless, a Haitian woman who comes in ablaze with voodoo incantations; Mama Johnson; Dolores Esteves, a 'dumpy, hunch-backed and chipmunk-eyed' Hispanic woman from the Bronx. Yuhwa Lee is a Korean of 'bright Republican mind' who comes in when it is decided that Spirit, rather than taking the usual anti-business line, should use those skills to set about 'Buying Back the Neighbourhood': repossessing the local economy from the drug barons and property sharks, setting up housing co-ops, luring the big chainstores into mistaken contracts, cheating the drug barons of their money. High John is an Afro-Cuban boxer who throws his prize money into Spirit's ring, and eventually gets assassinated by disgruntled drug dealers.

Oliver himself steps into the poem as Will Penniless, a tormented but mercifully comical characterisation which allows him to send up his own most serious concerns. Will Penniless is torn between the sermonising Anglo-Scots preacher, who wants to give stiff uplifting lessons to his fellows and the cringing right-on white man who can only cower in abject self-abasement and mutter gruesome lines: 'I represent the problem, the evil one, the oppressor in his weakest form: I'm the penniless envoy of moneyed power . . .'

He revels in whacky sloganising of the kind that might, at least in the sixties, have passed as serious poets' talk: insisting: as exuberant but ideologically sound (ie women on top) coupling takes place all around him, that 'the sexual flame inaugurates the political': pronouncing on the true relationship between the



personal and the political; advocating a politics free of 'messianism, masculine theory'; underwriting the hopeless utopianism that seeks to console the homeless with 'homes in the soul'. In the end, this figure finds a role as clerk to the movement: translating Spirit's inspirational message into tabloid newspaper articles.

The poem culminates in the founding of a secessionist nation called District A1 – a place which, as the police found out, does not exist, even though it represents the one district united by the new politics, and therefore the only district in America that is 'fit to be a state'. The constitution is rewritten to correct 'the abuses and usurpations of the democratic processes', which have left Congress unable to represent the needs of the poor and disadvantaged: "Where the original Constitution reads "life, liberty, and possessions" this be modified to "life, liberty, and those possessions which do not create egregious hoardings of individual wealth . . ."

Penniless Politics isn't written like a dream, but it certainly fades like one. The climax is to be a poll in the park in which District A1 declares its own President and Vice President. No sooner are the results announced, however, than the whole show disappears: 'the evidence unravelled, everything came undone' and 'there was not a trace left behind'. Spirit evaporates and the poem ends with an assault on any ready who ever expected 'a poetic abracadabra' that would charm him past the realities of 'our ordinary political failure'. Such is the disillusioning clatter with which Oliver comes down to ground. There is a diatribe against the destructive blindness of the ruling outlook, and then, in his closing line, our latter-day William Barnes finally surrenders to the obscene dialect of the street.

After we had talked, Oliver took me out through a Lower East Side that could certainly do with some redemption. We passed Tomkins Square, site of famous counter-cultural concerts in the sixties, but now fenced off and under constant police guard, the symbolic bandshell flattened and removed. There are said to be 100,000 people living on the streets of New York and Tompkins Square has been closed since June when a 400-strong police force turned up to clear the homeless who had settled there. The evicts, as they are now called, didn't go far. Their plastic shanties are to be found on derelict lots just round the corner – in streets that seem too shattered to have a name and are only distinguished as Avenues A, B, C and D.

The Lower East Side looks like a vanquished war zone, but it is not without little hints of transcendence. Some of the derelict lots had been fenced and turned into



gardens, complete with potted plants, chickens and huts. Graffiti is everywhere. Some of the more run-down houses declare themselves on the side of the spirit. One promised 'New Life', and another, designated Noah's Ark Church, had a rough wooden cross, fashioned out of old two-by-fours, nailed to the wall.

Eventually we reached the East River, and the small open area where Oliver had imagined a collection of portable lavatories, appropriated by Spirit as meditation cabins in which members of the new party would set aside their self-interest and formulate a truly altruistic policy. The park was drab and empty and the prospects didn't look good. It was time to go. I left Oliver walking through a city that seems only to shrink from his purifying vision, preferring to offer up its own daily tributes to the prophetic power of Tom Wolfe, a less idealistic ventriloquist whose 1987 novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* outlined the scenario which so many subsequent developments have gone on to confirm: the ongoing corruption and incompetence of city government, the growing backlash against the homeless, the black anti-Semitism . . .

Somewhere along the way, I met a joker who suggested that the Chadwick report would surely be coming out soon – implying that, despite all the public welfare measures that have gone down since, New York had sunk back into degradation on a Victorian scale. Even thinkers associated with the New Right appear to be troubled by this thought. On the way to the airport, I picked up a copy of New York historian Gertrude Himmelfarb's new book *Poverty and Compassion*, a study of 'the moral imagination of the late Victorians'. 'We have much to learn from the late Victorians,' so Himmelfarb concludes after reading the last rites over the corpse of the interventionist state, but 'they have no solutions for our problems.' She too can only end by calling for 'a strenuous exercise of the moral imagination to recover the sensibility that came so naturally to them'. It is not just Oliver's Spirit that has evaporated into thin air.

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