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Priests of the Invisible

'Madness, Rack, and Honey,' by Mary Ruefle

By DAVID KIRBY
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Last summer and fall, the Museum of Modern Art displayed a work called "Tapestry of the Thousand Longest Rivers in the World." A witty, complex piece by an Italian artist named Alighiero e Boetti, it deserved the long look that museumgoers gave it. But visitors who saw the work during a previous exhibition, in 2008, were at least as tickled by the text of an accompanying plaque: "In 1968 Alighiero Boetti changed his name by inserting an 'e' ('and' in Italian) between his first and last names to indicate that he (and by extension, anyone) was not a single but a multiple self."

A lot of people who read this felt big
Alfred E. Neuman-style grins spread
slowly across their faces; you could
almost hear them sliding the "and" in
and out of their own names. But then
that's what people do when
confronted by something deeply intelligent and thoroughly
silly — they grin and adopt it, if only for a moment.

Readers will react the same way when they turn the pages of Mary Ruefle's "Madness, Rack, and Honey," in which good sense and nonsense alike appear as steps on the path to enlightenment. But how many readers will that be? This is one of the wisest books I've read in years, and it would be a shame to think that only poets will read it.

Yes, poetry is the nominal topic. For 15 years Ruefle, a much published poet, gave a lecture every six months to a group of graduate students, and those lectures are collected here. But Ruefle's mission is not to — yawn — remind everybody how precious poetry is; rather, it's to give pleasure by showing how the mind works when it's working most pleasurably.

In this she succeeds. Typically, she begins a thought with a quotation from a sage ("Gaston Bachelard says the single most succinct and astonishing thing: We begin in admiration and we end by organizing our disappointment"), then develops the thought to give it her own spin (concluding, in the case of Bachelard, that we can at least dignify our dashed hopes "by admiring not the thing itself but how we can organize it, think about it"). Now this sounds like poetry to me, but it also sounds like my thoughts on the last overpriced restaurant meal I ate, as well as the American political system. And that's the point: we begin in one place, then we're all over the map, but we've been up a time or two before, so now we're bringing that thought in for a nice soft landing.

Often, Ruefle seems less interested in diligently amassing knowledge than in swatting away the wrong kind, as when she condemns the "standing-up-only party when everyone is tired of hearing there are 1,003,295 words used by the Eskimo for snow" and proposes instead that, as Ezra Pound learned from Ernest Fenollosa, "we each only really speak one sentence in our lifetime. That sentence begins with your first words, toddling around the kitchen, and ends with your last words . . . in a nursing home, the night-duty attendant vaguely on hand. Or, if you are blessed, they are heard by someone who knows you and loves you and will be sorry to hear the sentence end."

As a theorist, Ruefle muses the way the Master Thinkers of Paris did in the 1960s. Her title essay begins, "I don't know where to begin because I have nothing to say, yet I know that before long I will sound as if I'm on a crusade." But her prose is mercifully homespun, even colloquial; she likes ordinary language and uses italics and exclamation marks as often as an excited teenager on Facebook. In a single paragraph, she'll compare poets to "those women who sell makeup in the department stores," the ones "who wear white lab coats in an attempt to take seriously the great fun of painting your face," then cite Keats's assertion that all a poet needs is "a feeling for light and shade" and then, in one of her signature doublings, toss in Wallace Stevens's insistence on the poet's "passion for restraint."

In many ways, "Madness, Rack, and Honey" reads like a steroid-boosted version of a commonplace book, those thinking persons' scrapbooks that became popular in early modern Europe and contained quotations from the classics, scraps of conversation, poem fragments, recipes, proverbs and lists of every sort. With all of Ruefle's borrowings and rephrasings, it's difficult sometimes to tell exactly who's talking, which may be the idea. One authority burrows into another, as when the painter Cy Twombly is cited as quoting the poet John Crowe Ransom's assertion that "the image cannot be dispossessed of a primordial freshness which ideas can never claim." I believe the rappers call this "sampling."

Alternately smart and silly, Ruefle is best when combining those two properties — dismissing the idea of theme in literature, for instance, by asking what it would be like to organize her books in terms of their themes. (She'd have to buy three copies of some so they'd fit into the different sections of her

library, and saw others in half.) Yet at times she lays out ideas with a Zen minimalism, as when she notes the most important fact about our greatest playwright: "In the beginning William Shakespeare was a baby, and knew absolutely nothing. He couldn't even speak."

Yet out of that baby came "King Lear," and out of other babies came the Declaration of Independence, the formula for Prozac, the business plan for Microsoft. Nothing in this book argues the "supreme importance of poetry to human civilization," to borrow Robert Hass's facetious phrase; everything in it argues the supreme importance of humans to civilization. Poets, women who sell makeup in department stores, night-duty attendants: we need them all. And there'd be a whole lot more civilization out there if we were all as knowing and merry as these essays.