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The Posthuman ‘Othering’ of the World in Mary Oliver’s Poetry

Abstract

The essay argues that, in her poetry, Mary Oliver represents a ‘world’ that is made up of nonhuman animals, vegetables, and minerals, in which she ‘others’ organic and inorganic beings and entities in a posthuman attitude. This is posited by relating to the “earth-others” (Braidotti) on equal terms and in a perspective that decenters and de-emphasizes the human subject by reconceptualizing agency as a shared and interconnected ongoing process. Moreover, Oliver substitutes imagination for reason and language as the distinctive human faculty, which, paradoxically, she proposes at the same time as the interpretive tool that may allow us to ‘cross over’ into the consciousness of the nonhuman. Thus, Oliver performs—and suggests—a cognitive leap that may bring us in touch with the different, embodied and embedded, ‘logic’ in which the earth-others inhabit the ecosystem, and one that human animals may fruitfully learn from in order to honor and preserve that same ‘world.’

Keywords: *Mary Oliver, ecopoetry, posthuman, animal studies, new ecocriticisms*

*This is a poem about the world
that is ours, or could be.*

(Mary Oliver, “Five A.M. in the Pinewoods”)

*No one could think, without first living among living
things. No one would need to think, without the
initial profusion of perceptual experience.*

(Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*)

The purpose of my essay is to argue that Mary Oliver’s attitude towards the ‘others’ that populate the natural world can be defined as posthuman. Oliver’s view of nature has already been described, appropriately, as a “pragmatic mysticism” (Christensen 2002), an “ecological pantheism” (Howard 1991), and as a relation of contiguity—horizontal—in which the poet’s experience of fusion is physical (and not transcendental): it happens in the body, through

sensual perception (Bryson 1999, 130). This relation has been interpreted as dialogic, within a study of the positioning of the contemporary eco-poetic self that has enlightened Oliver's capacity to affirm at the same time our separateness from nature's others and our unavoidable interrelations with them (Binasco 2019, 31). I myself have previously tried to delineate Oliver's position as an ecocentric mysticism (2020; 2021). The critical posthumanities seem to offer, presently, a theoretical space allowing all those previous reflections to merge, so that Oliver's natural 'others' may be thoroughly thought and valued. It will be my aim, here, to try to provide reasons for this contention.

When I refer to a 'posthuman' theoretical frame, I subsume the coalescence of philosophical and literary critical trends that have contributed to the posthuman turn in reconceptualizing subjectivity and agency in our time. I am thinking, in particular, of the new ecocriticism of Greta Gaard (2020), and the currents in animal studies that Matthew Calarco includes in his "indistinction approach" (2015). Concepts such as Cary Wolfe's "infrahuman" (2003; 2010), Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter" (2010), Karen Barad's "intra-actions" (2007), Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's "storied matter" (2014), Bruno Latour's "actants" (2014), and Diana Coole's "agentic capacity" (2013) have provided the notion of a more diffused, porous, and relational agency, developing an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the nonhuman or "earth-others" of Rosi Braidotti (2018).

Mary Oliver's earth-others densely populate a "world"—as she frequently names their diverse totality—which is envisaged in a profoundly philosophical and posthuman perspective. Bears, alligators, and humpbacks; owls, swans, and kookaburras; lilies, peonies, and pines; ponds, waterfalls and stones make up her multifarious animal, vegetable, and mineral—organic and inorganic—environment. They are pondered upon in deep philosophical reflections that question the centrality of the human subject. How do they do this? In the first place by a *via negativa*, or *destruens*, that is, by deconstructing some of the traditional arguments for the superiority of the human species, such as the prerogative of owing a soul, or the faculties of language and reason.

In the well-known "Some Questions You Might Ask," Oliver leads a debate through a series of rhetorical questions on the nature of the soul (its consistency and shape), and particularly on the right to it not only of humans but also of all the earth-others—anteaters, camels, maple trees, blue irises, stones, and grass. The crucial argument for her literal affirmation is that the anteater may be imagined to have it, too, because she loves her children (1990, 1)—a point close to Jeremy Bentham's anti-speciesist claim (1780), based on animals' capacity to have feelings.

I have elsewhere argued that Oliver openly critiques the long-standing rationale of speciesism, which is the human beings' privilege of language. In my investigation of Oliver's two 'species' books, as I have called them—*Owls* (2006) and *Dog Songs* (2013)—I have tried to demonstrate that by carefully listening to the birds she encountered on her walks in nature and to the dogs she lived with, and especially by observing their behaviors, Oliver has been able to present to the reader the reality that these animals do communicate through a form of language (2020; 2021). The scientific explanation would, of course, be biosemiotics. Oliver's poetic explanation—which is also profoundly philosophical and posthuman—is that the earth-others don't live by the logic of human reason, which has produced language, but by the code of life, which is instinctual and honors the duties of belonging to an ecosystem. In this newly conceived 'world,' values are actions, or better *intra-actions*,¹ thus they are constantly negotiated on necessarily equal—that is, material—terms, and not imposed by a predetermined, arbitrary, hierarchical system that is running towards its own destruction.

In fact, Oliver's argumentation about animals' language goes deeper. Even in the case that "we came by some miracle/ upon a language which we both knew," she says of herself and the owl, "what is it I might say/ there in the orange light of early morning,/ in the owl's resting time,/ that would have any pluck and worth in it?" ("This Morning Again It Was in the Dusty Pines" 1992, 23)—and of course the implication is that "wild words can do nothing better than the expression of wild things" ("Morning" 1992, 44). Even if imaginatively we could share with nonhuman animals what has traditionally been considered the distinctive trait of human beings, namely language, our ignorance of the possibility to co-inhabit 'zones of indistinction' in which we, *as* imaginatively, 'become animal,' would make *us* unintelligible or uninteresting to *them*. 'Zones of indistinction' can be thought of as crucial, emotional experiences we share with animals, such as suffering, happiness, life, and death, which may generate a common area of referents, or at least a common cognitive horizon. I emphasized my use of pronouns to point out Oliver's clear implication in the poem, which Matthew Calarco's indistinction approach seems to make explicit when he suggests that we consider not our identity with animals, nor our distinction from them, but the areas of common experience that we may discover if we focus on how *we* are similar to *them* instead of conceding that *they* may, in some ways, be similar to *us* (2015, 5). It is also, of course, the significant reverse of the famous statement by the language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him,"

¹ The *intra-actions* of Karen Barad's agential realism indicate an agency that is "not an inherent property of an individual or human" but "a dynamism of material forces" (2007, 141).

because lions don’t have “any conceivable share in our world,” so *the lion’s* utterances would be meaningless to *us* (2008, 190).

I do not need to recall the debated paradox at the core of animal and posthuman studies, which posits for us humans, who argue in a human language and a discursive logic, the possibility of reaching out into the mind and existence of nonhuman beings or entities. I do want, though, to illustrate Oliver’s methodological solution to the problem. First of all, she overcomes the impasse by either dismantling the delusion of pathetic fallacy, as in “The Lilies Break Open Over the Dark Water”:

But the lilies

are slippery and wild—they are
devoid of meaning, they are
simply doing,
from the deepest

spurs of their being,
what they are impelled to do
every summer. (1990, 40-41)

Or, otherwise Oliver uses the pathetic fallacy ironically and purposefully, as the unique device for describing the analogies she sees between the human and the nonhuman worlds. At times, her ironic use of anthropomorphism may seem to come very close to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s tropes, which develop, in a Transcendentalist conversion, the natural analogies of Puritan typology. This line from her “Landscape” might figure in the Sage of Concord’s “Nature” as evidence of the second tenet of his theory of language (“Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts” [1983, 20]): “the moss lectures all say about spiritual patience” (1986, 68). On the ground of various similarities in Oliver’s and Emerson’s attitudes—such as a mystical quest in nature—Oliver has already been seen in the past as a direct heir of the father of Transcendentalism (Johnson 2005; Alicia Ostriker in the *Nation*, “Mary Oliver”). In fact, Emerson’s concept of nature and of man’s relation to it was humanistic, whereas Oliver’s could never be. Her posthumanism lies precisely in the opposite quality of her use of anthropomorphism, which is determined by her *ecocentric* vs his *anthropocentric* intentions.² In

² The distance between Emerson’s and Oliver’s positions was covered, of course, by the evolution of American (and not only American) nature poetry—and nature writing in general—in the intervening one and a half centuries, which saw poets and writers turning from a Transcendentalist to an ecopoetic vision (see especially Langbaum 1959; Marx 1964; Bate 2000; and Buell 1996; but also Elder 1985 and Bryson 2002).

"Straight Talk from Fox," for example, she endows a fox with human language for the purpose of defining a *potential* zone of indistinction, or common area of experience, which is the enjoyment of sheer biological life:

Listen says fox it is music to run
 over the hills to lick
 dew from the leaves to nose along
 the edges of the ponds to smell the fat
 ducks in their bright feathers but
 far out, safe in their rafts of
 sleep. (2008, 11)

The anthropomorphic device is pushed to its paradoxical extreme when the perspective is reversed. In Oliver's representation, it is the nonhuman who is watching the human and commenting, in human language (!), upon their limits, which consist exactly in their capacity to abstract from "natural facts," as Emerson would have called them in chapter four of "Nature":

Don't think I haven't
 peeked into windows. I see you in all your seasons
 making love, arguing, talking about God
 as if he were an idea instead of the grass,
 instead of the stars, the rabbit caught
 in one good teeth-whacking hit and brought
 home to the den. (2008, 11)

However, Oliver's most effective move in her attempt to solve the aporia at the heart of the animal question is to answer a paradox with another paradox. She proclaims a different faculty as the real and sole one able to distinguish the human from the nonhuman, and then applies it to a posthuman effort of interpretation, which can make us conscious of the zones of indistinction we cohabit with the earth-others. She replaces human reason, or language, with the imagination, about which she repeatedly says that it is our saving power. The choice may smack of the old, traditionally Romantic poetic faculty that was responsible, again, of the pathetic fallacy—which only adds a disruptive force to her paradoxical gesture—except that, again, she radically revisits and re-envisions the concept and function of human imagination. In "Spring Azures," she first confesses her desire to give up her humanity ("the opposable thumbs, the kneecaps,/ and the mind clicking and clicking" [1992, 8]) to become a blue azure, but finally opts for the same solution as William Blake, who transcended the limits of his own humanity by escaping into "a life of the imagination"—evidently *not* a part of a bird's

endowment (1992, 8-9). For Oliver, imagination may 'save' us because it can produce a cognitive leap into the world of nonhuman entities. At the moment of the keenest observation and listening, we can imaginatively and momentarily be brought to inhabit spaces within their living experience. Focusing on the realization of what we, as animals, share with at least a lot of other nonhuman animals, for example—in the first place a sensual perception and an intuitive, embodied knowledge that is not entirely, or humanly, conscious—we may yield to an original enmeshment with the embedded, material life of the world. "Imagination—/ that striver,/ the third eye" (1992, 19-20)—may permit us "to be absent again from this world/ and alive, again, in another" (1992, 13).

In "The Sea," Oliver celebrates the sensation of inhabiting the *physical* space of the sea together with fish, and expresses a feeling of nostalgia—apprehended in the body—for her own origins in matter, and the mode of existence these origins determine, that is, a sheer and pure sense of living, of being alive, and feeling complete and fulfilled because of that. The trope here, as Binasco points out (2019, 45), is that of a metamorphosis into a sea animal, which foregrounds the possibility to figure a material continuity between the human and the nonhuman body in a hybrid, posthuman being:

Stroke by
stroke my
body remembers that life and cries for
the lost parts of itself—
fins, gills

opening like flowers into
the flesh—my legs
want to lock and become
one muscle. I swear I know
just what the blue-gray scales
shingling
the rest of me would
feel like! (1983, 69)

After which, Oliver goes on lamenting the nostalgia that pleads from her very bones, and even affirming her longing to give up "the brittle beauty of understanding" of the human inland territory to dive into the sea and "become again a flaming body/ of blind feeling" (1983, 69).

The *via positiva*, or *pars construens*, of Oliver's posthuman discourse is surfacing in this leap of imagination, as I would like to call the cognitive move that she is suggesting the human mind

can make to try to know the *Umwelt*³ of a nonhuman entity through the proximity of affect—her own attempt to think as Thomas Nagel's bat. "You can creep out of your own life/ and become someone else," she writes in "Acid," "an explosion/ in that nest of wires/ we call imagination" (1986, 73). The idea of using the notion of a cognitive leap of imagination was suggested to me by Robert Bly's 1972 anthology of poetry translations *Leaping Poetry*, by which Bly meant the leap that some poetry may perform "from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known" (1975, 1). I thought that this leap can signify literature's potential to focus on and represent the nonverbal cognition of the earth-others, but also our realization of their agentic capacity and even creativity.

In "October," for example, a bear attracts the poet's attention and boldly manipulates it (Oliver 1992, 61). In "The Turtle," the basic form of nonhuman animals' agency is indicated in their instinctual behavior. The turtle is determined "to complete/ what she was born to do [...] filled with an old blind wish" (1986, 57)—the same insuppressible instinct of the awful owl, Oliver's bird of prey par excellence. Even the death-giving instinct of predators is a form of love for the life of the world, a fact exceeding the human way of relating to it. Instinct also entails an ingrained perception of one's self not through individuation, as in human beings, but as a part of an interrelated ecosystem. The turtle "can't see/ herself apart from the rest of the world/ or the world apart from what she must do/ every spring" (1986, 57); "she knows/ she is a part of the pond she lives in,/ the tall trees are her children/ the birds that swim above her/ are tied to her by an unbreakable string" (1986, 58).

Oliver's posthumanism grants agency also to the apparently inanimate earth-others. "I thought the earth/ remembered me, she/ took me back so tenderly," she writes in "Sleeping in the Forest" (1992, 181). She praises stone for its blindness to unfulfilled desire and hope, and its disposition to reflect, "so brilliantly,/ as it has for centuries,/ the sun's fire" ("Knife" 1986, 15-16). Oliver's admiration for the earth-others is patent here as in many of her representations of nonhuman entities. In this case, she seems to envy the mineral's capability to be 'mindful,' participating in the life of the universe and giving it back through its un-egoic expression. The double sense of the word 'reflect' suggests an attitude of Eckhartian or Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, or yielding acceptance (absorption) and return (release) of the vital energy of the world that is usually represented in Oliver's vocabulary as fire, or flaming. This burning, which is often figurative,

³ The concept of the 'Umwelt' was coined by the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll to describe every creature's world of subjective perceptions and effectors, which are the tools through which it processes reality (1992, 319).

seems to be hinting at a form of animate expression of the love for the beauty that is the world on the part of the earth-others. It affects even the "white rhetoric" of snow, which calls us back "to why, how,/ whence such beauty and what/ the meaning; such/ an oracular fever!" (Oliver 1983, 26). Oliver's posthuman poetic gesture is to put the traditional device of anthropomorphization to the service of animating the earth-others. Finally, for Oliver, agency pervades the world, which constantly "offers itself to [our] imagination" ("Wild Geese" 1986, 14), through which we may correctly perceive it (1990, 17).

Further concepts that shape a posthuman vision in Oliver's poetry are the figuring of a nonhuman logic, which features not only the inability to perceive death and life as opposites but also the unreality of death in the perspective of the "dense, scalding reenactment" of the ecosystem's ongoing life ("Skunk Cabbage" 1983, 44). "In the book of the earth it is written:/ *nothing can die*" (1983, 29, italics in the original), she writes, and, in "Skunk Cabbage" again: "[in the woods] the secret name/ of every death is life again—a miracle" (1983, 44). Loss and light are co-existent, or, rather, light is an answer to loss, as in "Poppies" (1992, 39-40), allowing the poet to imagine "a new nothing/ in the universe" ("Moccasin Flowers" 1990, 2).

In Oliver's posthuman cosmology, the human is decentered, as when in "October" she tries to imagine a world in which animals don't take notice of her, and in which she can picture herself as absent, and even feel happy, relieved, about this because she can trust the world to go on without her: "I thought: // so this is the world./ I'm not in it./ It's beautiful" (1992, 60-62). Having reversed the traditional hierarchical relations of humanism, Oliver can express admiration for the nonhuman, as for their lack of fear, ambition, and disregard of reason, which in humans brings up only "foolish questions" (1990, 67). The sight of animals' behaviors makes her want to live her life all over again, in an utterly wild way (1983, 63), which means in the first place a life led in the temporality of the present, as in "One or Two Things":

The god of dirt
 came up to me many times and said
 many wide and delectable things, I lay
 on the grass listening
 to his dog voice,
 crow voice,
 frog voice; *now*,
 he said, and *now*,

and never once mentioned *forever*. (1986, 50-51, italics in the original)

Egrets have faith in the world that has made them and can open their wings and step over "every dark thing [...] by the laws of their faith not logic" (1983, 19-20).

We may derive knowledge from the earth-others, Oliver suggests, when we observe them with a humble, participating gaze, cherishing our common embodiment in the materiality of the world. When the poet enters "the kingdom," she dreams of learning something "by being nothing/ A little while but the rich/ Lens of attention" (1992, 190). In "White Flowers," she falls asleep in the darkness that makes her think of death and awakens in the embrace of summer, common, white flowers. The redeeming feeling is the leap of imagination that allows her to feel as if in the body, and the physiology, of the flowers. In a dream-like state of mind, she feels her body go "diving down under the sugary vines/ in some sleep-sharpened affinity/ with the depths," while a "green energy" curls over her and takes her in its husky arms:

Never in my life had I felt so plush,
or so slippery,
or so resplendently empty.
Never in my life
had I felt so near
that porous line
where my own body was done with
and the roots and the stems and the flowers
began. (1992, 58-59)

"I know several lives worth living," Oliver writes in "Humpbacks;" and: "nothing will ever dazzle you like the dreams of your body" (1983, 62). She may become a stone sleeping on the riverbed in the forest and wake up in the morning having "vanished at least a dozen times into something better" ("Sleeping in the Forest" 1992, 181). The most powerful leap of imagination she has been capable of has permitted a most valuable piece of wisdom to pass from an earth-other to *our* consciousness, and that is: "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." This, as Oliver affirms, will announce our place in the family of things ("Wild Geese" 1986, 14).

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