

Women, Gender, and Religion

Edited by Susan Calef and Ronald A. Simkins

The Wisdom of the Owls

Gender, Nature and Spirituality in the Poetry of Mary Oliver

Bridget Keegan, Creighton University

[1] Mary Oliver's poem, "Work" (2000), may be read as her *ars poetica*, but unlike other classic poems of that genre, it is a profession of faith as much as a set of aesthetic standards or an inventory of creative actions. She begins by identifying herself as "a woman sixty years old and of no special courage" (1:1) who is engaged in "a little conversation with God" (1:2) through her commitment to "stare at the world" (1:6). This staring at the world constitutes her work, and, as she also says, her glory. In the poem's seventh and final stanza, Oliver shifts into a Whitmanesque *jubilate* that summarizes the core characteristics of her poetry as post-romantic, ecofeminist, and articulating a sophisticated mystical spirituality through her embrace of the natural world. Oliver proclaims that she will sing for "the mystery of the number 3" (7:16), perhaps alluding to the Christian trinity, and "the spirit of Luke" (7:24); she will also sing for "the ghost of Shelley" (7:25), and "the Jains with their careful brooms" (7:26). But she sings too of the everyday, of "the salt and the pepper in their little towers / on the clean table" (7:27-28) and "the rabbit that has crossed our yard" (7:29). In the second to last stanza, Oliver turns to more mystical imagery, proclaiming that she ". . . will sing for the veil that never lifts" (7:36), as well as for ". . . for the rent in the veil" (7:39). She concludes the stanza:

I will sing for what is in front of the veil, the
floating light.

I will sing for what is behind the veil—
light, light, and more light (7:40-43).

The veil she invokes alludes to a passage from John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, which serves as the epigraph to *The Leaf and the Cloud*, the collection in which "Work" appears. Ruskin describes the veil as having been created "when the earth had to be prepared for the habitation of man." For Ruskin, the veil thus symbolizes humanity's perhaps divinely ordained separation from nature, an alienation that Oliver's poetry, as a whole, aspires to overcome.

[2] Like other Romantic poets, Oliver celebrates the beauty of the everyday and of nature, operating from the hope that in imaginatively inhabiting the humble and the commonplace in nature she might begin to get behind the veil. She is alert to the sacred in all nature, and she understands the holiness of incarnation, of embodiedness, better than any writer alive today. While her commitment to the fleshly, to the material, to nature in its least glorious forms might seem to align her with ideological concepts that feminism has typically seen as inhibiting to women, I hope to demonstrate that Oliver is committed to revising the traditionally negative affiliation of matter and *mater* in a way that is productive for feminists and for other readers as well. As critic Vicki Graham has written, "Oliver's celebration of dissolution into the natural world troubles some critics: her poems flirt dangerously with romantic assumptions about the close association of women with nature . . . But for Oliver, immersion in nature is not death . . . To merge with the non-human is to acknowledge the self's mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity" (352-53).

[3] Oliver's work resists the temptation to transcendence that she inherits from the nature writing of the British and American Romantic period to which she is otherwise indebted. Writing of Oliver's commonalities with and distinctiveness from her Romantic forebearers, Janet McNew observes, "Although Oliver's direction of desire is also toward dissolving individual consciousness, she lacks the male poet's mixture of finality and terror with her longing, perhaps because her sense of movement between her individual consciousness and oceanic immersion is more fluid" (65-66). In poem after poem, Oliver's purpose is to call us into the presence of the sacred in the raw otherness of nature in which she is not afraid to lose herself. Encountering nature when it is most unlike us, when it is most resistant to any comfortable personification, we most fully appreciate God in all things. For Oliver, the first step toward overcoming the gulf between subject and object, the goal of any good mystic, is to recognize and respect the gulf's presence and profundity, and then to jump into it. Her intense attentiveness to nature and her use of language and imagination as a means to reconnect and immerse herself in the non-self is a profoundly spiritual practice. She has even titled a recent prose poem from her collection *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*: "The Real Prayers Are Not the Words, but the Attention that Comes First."

[4] As is evident from poems such as "Work," the inspiration for Oliver's song throughout her prolific career is religious and literary – from Percy Shelley and the Gospel of Luke to the religious practices of the Jains, who believe that every living creature has a soul and who, long before the term "deep ecology" was invented, believed in the equality of those souls. However, Oliver's inspiration is also gathered equally from the world around her, and the rabbit in her yard is of equal – if not greater – importance as any cultural or theological

artefact. Her poetry is devoted to writing about the space of humanity's encounter with nature and with the divine. Poem after poem explores the space of the veil – the veil being a distinctly feminine metaphor. Her poetry allows a glimpse through the veil, imaginatively lifting the veil that separates the realms of the human and the earthly that Ruskin describes.

[5] Oliver has been an immensely prolific poet; thus, organizing a discussion of the relationship of nature, spirituality, and feminism in her work is a monumental endeavor in so far as each of her poems touches upon one or more of these topics. In an essay entitled “The Swan,” from her collection *Winter Hours* (1999), Oliver writes explicitly about the importance of spirituality in her poetry. She identifies “spiritual purpose” (24) as one of the three “rules” that she has set for herself for every poem she writes. Beyond this spiritual purpose, moreover, she requires that her poetry has “a pulse, a breathiness, some moment of earthly delight” (24). The carnal and the spiritual cohabit in tension in her verse. What she says of her beloved forebearer Gerard Manley Hopkins, in her essay “The Poem as Prayer, the Prayer as Ornament: Gerard Manley Hopkins” (1999), might as easily be applied to her – she too appears to “wish to transcend the mere words that listed the earth-evidences of God, and to merge with him completely. Such is the fierce desire of the mystic – impossible, yet ever present” (59).

[6] In order to structure my observations about Oliver's post-romantic ecofeminist spirituality, this essay will focus on Oliver's numerous bird poems. Birds, after all, are powerful religious and literary symbols, typically figures of transcendence, as with Keats's Nightingale or Shelley's Skylark. Yet they exist throughout Oliver's work not only as emblems of spirit but also as flesh and blood creatures, who recall to us our own bodies as humans and sometimes as meat. In this respect, Oliver writes against the grain of poetic tradition that privileges birds for how they soar away from the earth. Oliver's birds are very much of this world. One of Oliver's most frequently anthologized poems nicely illustrates the tensions her bird poems enact. Entitled “Field Near Linden, Alabama,” from *New and Selected Poems* (1992), the poem is devoted to vultures. Anyone who has ever encountered a vulture up close and personal knows it can be an unnerving, uncanny experience, not only because of their prehistoric appearance but also because they announce the presence of death and decay, which is their sustenance. After observing them “huge and shifty, / in their leather wings” (13-14), Oliver reflects

The story about Jesus in the cave
is a good one,
but when is it ever like that,
as sharp as lightning (17-20).

Spirit cannot escape seamlessly from matter. We are connected to our bodies and to the flesh that rots and serves as food for other creatures, much as we might fantasize that we are above and beyond such baseness. All creatures – ourselves as much as any others – are meat as well as vessels of the divine. To acknowledge this is levelling, and as Oliver will go on to argue, liberating, because it enables us to think toward a relationship with God that acknowledges the totality of our being, body and soul, flesh and spirit.

[7] She extrapolates upon this in another poem entitled “Vultures,” which first appeared in her collection, *American Primitive* (1983). Here the intercessor is not a disembodied spirit but

these creatures who look “Like large dark / lazy /butterflies . . .” (1-3). Yet they perform an essential, vital function. They “eat” death, and thus “. . . make of it the miracle: / resurrection . . .” (8-9). Oliver calls these birds “ministers” because they remind us of our mortality and force us to ponder “how it will be / to feel the blood cool, / shapeliness dissolve” (23-25). Watching them fly above “the grassy / miles” (12-13) that they have scoured clean of the decaying carcasses, we both honor and loathe them for they remind us of what the Psalmist writes: “As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. / For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more” (Psalms 103:15-16). Oliver observes in the poem’s last lines that death is needed “. . . to fuel / those powerful wings” (35-36). Death and life are not opposites, but complementary and inseparable conditions. Vultures defeat death and transform it into life, accomplishing the promise of many religions.

[8] Vultures, hawks, crows, and other carnivorous birds abound in Oliver’s poems. However, if one bird truly predominates in her work, it is the owl. Indeed, one of her most recent collections is called *Owls and Other Fantasies* (2003). As predatory birds like the vultures, owls are noted for their immense powers of observation. Moreover, in Western mythological tradition, the owl is best known as the symbol for Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Because they are nocturnal, owls are associated in many cultures with the world of the spirits, and some Native American cultures see them as carriers of the spirits of the elders. It is thus not surprising that Oliver would be drawn to owls, and that these birds most often appear in poems where she meditates upon death and attempts to refigure death not as an end, as oblivion, but as an important place of passage, as a site of that veil between nature and the divine.

[9] In a prose essay on “Owls,” from the collection *Blue Pastures* (1995), she reflects on how these creatures are “the pure wild hunters of our world . . . I know this bird. If it could it would eat the whole world” (20). Listening to the screech of the owl, Oliver describes it as “the sheer rollicking glory of the death-bringer”:

When I hear it resounding through the woods, and then the five black pellets of its song dropping like stones into the air, I know I am standing at the edge of the mystery, in which terror is naturally and abundantly part of life, part of even the most becalmed, intelligent, sunny life—as, for example, my own. The world where the owl is endlessly hungry and endlessly on the hunt is the world in which I live too. There is only one world (20).

In “Bone Poem,” from the collection *Twelve Moons* (1979), she observes the remains “Of the owl’s most recent feast” (13). While most of us might find ourselves repulsed by “rat bones, gull debris—” (3), for Oliver, these items prompt a meditation upon “Where time sits with her slow spoon, / Where *we* becomes singular . . .” (5-6). Her reflection leads to a prayer of rapture “. . . O holy / Protein, o hallowed lime, / O precious clay!” (8-10). Mortal matter, the foundation of flesh, reminds Oliver of “The seepage, the flowing, / The equity . . .” (16-17) in a world where death is part of a larger cycle of life.

[10] Writing of the bird’s beauty in “White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field” (2003), she describes how it descends from the sky “with its depths of light, / like an angel, / or a buddha with wings” (3-5). Yet it is an angel of death, for the poem also describes the owl as

hunter with “. . . the grabbing / thrust of its feet, / and the indentation of what had been running” (11-13). Watching the owl hunt, Oliver comments, “maybe death / isn’t darkness, after all, / but so much light / wrapping itself around us— / as soft as feathers—” (22-26). Here and elsewhere, we see Oliver working within and against the dichotomous thinking that informs Western, patriarchal theology and poetry. Her striking images invite us to question hierarchical dualisms, spirit above matter, life above death, male above female, human above nature, very much in keeping with the strategies of contemporary feminist thought. As McNew notes, “Something else disinclines Oliver to tremble over boundaries between herself and nature, or subject and object, as philosophers would have it” (66). She knows that these conceptual oppositions are semantically co-dependent and cannot be thought independently. Hence, to ascribe to one superiority over the other is dubious logic. McNew observes, “For her, almost nothing exists as an unconscious object” (66). By representing owls in concrete, authentic language, as fellow living subjects, she can forego the disconnected logic and convoluted style of deconstructive thinking to make her point even more effectively than any theorist. Diane S. Bonds also has noticed how in her poetic strategies Oliver “employs the terms of patriarchal Christianity to repudiate a dualistic and sometimes otherworldly ideology which splits or separates human and nonhuman nature, spirit and matter, signified and signifier” (8).

[11] The importance of the owl within this recurrent thread in Oliver’s poetry is indicated in another poem describing the owl hunting that is titled simply “Nature,” from the collection *House of Light* (1990). The owl’s hunt prompts the poet to reflect upon the transition between night and a morning “in which nothing new / would ever happen, / which is the true gift of nature, / which is the reason / we love it” (18-22). In so many of her poems, not simply the poems of owls, nature is what calls us into presence and the sacred eternity of the present. Another poem from *Owls and Other Fantasies* (2003) is addressed to the “Little Owl who Lives in the Orchard,” whom Oliver imagines looks as if he might be reading “Blake, maybe, / or the Book of Revelation” (5-6). The flight of this owl “. . . tells us / when we’re in touch with something real” (14-15). Invoking Hopkins, Oliver calls the owl “Dear, dark dapple of plush!” (30) and imagines him conveying “A message, reads the label, / From that mysterious conglomerate: / *Oblivion and Co.*” (31-33). At once haunting and gorgeous, his face, she says, resembles a valentine.

[12] In “Lonely, White Fields” (1992), Oliver describes another hunting owl who allows her to meditate upon the impossibility of immortality: “. . . whoever dreams of holding his / life in his fist / year after year into the hundreds of years / has never considered the owl” (14-17). The owl’s relentless nightly hunt teaches Oliver about the illusion of conventional conceptions of eternity as an escape from death. The owl’s hunt is a reminder of the fragility of all life but also of how death feeds into life and thus is inseparable from it. The owl symbolizes the mysteries of death for Oliver, which are also the mysteries of life and eternity, mysteries that must be confronted, and which are central in her understanding of her relationship to this world. The owl flies from behind the veil, it carries the light from the other side of the veil. Speaking more generally about death, in “When Death Comes” (1992), Oliver reflects upon how she hopes she can face her own death “full of curiosity” (9). Because of this, she asserts that she is able to “. . . look upon everything / as a brotherhood and a sisterhood” (11-12). In the end, meeting her death, Oliver speaks as directly and

forthrightly about what motivates her engagement with nature, using language that echoes how Christ talked of his relationship with the church:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was the bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms (21-23).

In short, she writes in a single line, set off from the rest, which concludes the poem: "I don't want to end up simply having visited this world" (28).

[13] Death is a fact of life, an essential component of the sacred mystery of life, and owls are Oliver's constant vehicle for attempting to understand and imagine how death and life are linked, how spirit and matter are linked. In "The Owl Who Comes," a recent poem from *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2* (2005), Oliver finds herself observing her favorite bird, feeling empathy for it but also feeling empathy for the creature it hunts and will kill to survive. In this poem, her watching is anxious rather than purely contemplative. Even though she describes a scene she has written about numerous times before, it still poses itself as a question for her. In the poem's concluding stanzas she considers what it means to witness this destructiveness and still ". . . hope the world / keeps its balance" (31-32). Her poem ends without an affirmation, but with a more honest confession of her own uncertainty:

What we are to do, however,
with our hearts
waiting and watching—truly
I do not know (33-36).

Waiting and watching may be all that we can do, and the best that we can do. Such attention will always be an act of faith. Oliver demonstrates that to be immersed in this world, in all of it, is an act of utmost concentration, which is a spiritual as much as a physical act. The powers of observation and the powers of prayer are one. In Oliver's work, embodiedness is not a sign of our fallen condition but a gift of God's grace. It is our common incarnation with birds and other creatures, and our ability to recollect this, that is the source of any recognizable salvation. In what may be her most spiritually prescriptive poem, "Wild Geese," from the collection *Dream Work* (1986), Oliver begins by informing her reader:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting (1-3).

The poem ends by offering consolation, reminding the reader how "the world offers itself to your imagination" (15). Listening to the harsh cry of the wild geese, you are able to understand ". . . your place / in the family of things" (17-18). Ephemeral nature connects us to eternal truths.

[14] Almost all of Oliver's poetry, whether it is about birds or dogs or skunk cabbage, incorporates an assertion of our relatedness to the rest of the world, which is not the same as an identity. Her poems enable us to imagine otherness as continuity and contiguity, not as alienation. She exhibits more fully than any romantic or modern poet that necessary aesthetic

and emotional capacity that Keats, in his letters, called “negative capability” – the capacity to be “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Gittings: 43). That is her spiritual discipline. She learns this wisdom from the owls, and her poems teach it to us. By encouraging us to imaginatively inhabit the non-human, her poetry recalls us more fully to our own humanity and to a recognition of the divinity in all creation.

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