The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver

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JANET MCNEW has recently argued that the visionary nature poetry of Mary Oliver presents us with "a world of mythic assumptions very different from those of her famous romantic precursors." These assumptions align Oliver with contemporary feminist writers such as Mary Daly and Susan Griffin who, according to McNew, "transvalue their romantic forefathers' mythic assessments [of women] as they defy the doom of muteness placed on all [the] female Others who inhabit masculine poetic landscapes."1 In Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing, Patricia Yaeger offers a reading of Oliver which, like McNew's, stresses the poet's "capacity for transforming boundaries, for defining her own loci of power." For Yaeger, Oliver serves as an example of "a countertradition in women's writing" constituted by "women who seize words and use them for their own purposes."2

But if Oliver transforms terms inherited from male romantic precursors, the revisionary and transformative force of her poetry is nonetheless far from obvious to all feminist readers. Alicia Ostriker's Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America, for example, discusses or alludes to hundreds of contemporary women poets without mention of this Pulitzer-prize winning poet; and reviews one might reasonably expect to be informed by a feminist perspective — for example, reviews by Carolyn Wright in 13th Moon: A Feminist Literary Magazine and Sandra Gilbert in Poetry — fail even to hint at the fruitfulness of discussing Oliver in specifically feminist terms.3

That Oliver has not been more widely or fully appreciated from a feminist perspective may partly derive from skepticism that identification with nature can empower women to speak or to write. Some feminists dismiss work by women that seems to embrace a link between woman and nature, viewing such work "as regressive or complicit with normative male versions of the female."4 To use Yaeger's terms, the fear is simply too great that "devouring
the father's speech" — for example, the language of romantic nature poetry — "means an inevitable return to phallogocentricism, to patriarchal dominance." Arguments like McNew's and Yaeger's may not suffice to overcome such doubts about Oliver because they do not demonstrate the complexity of the poet's relationship to the language of romantic nature poetry. Beyond showing, as McNew has ably done, how Oliver's poetry radically revises the myths of nature expressed in nineteenth-century romanticism and its modern inheritors, we need to explore the ways in which Oliver's poetry reshapes assumptions about language and poetry that attend those myths.

McNew argues that for Oliver "almost nothing exists as unconscious object," that "everything [in nature] has consciousness and even language of some sort." Such views are implied by the poet's own peculiar use of the traditional metaphor of nature as language. "Isn't it plain," Oliver writes in "Landscape," "the sheets of moss, except that/they have no tongues could lecture/all day if they wanted about/s/ spiritual patience?" The lines allude to a conception of language set forth in the "Language" chapter of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Nature; this chapter presents the language of nature as a hierarchical system of signifiers and signifieds where the true value of natural objects lies in the spiritual "signifieds" to which natural objects correspond. Of the "natural facts" that signify "spiritual facts" Emerson writes: "All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren like a single sex." That single barren unnamed sex is of course the Second Sex, Mother Nature divorced from God the Father or Spirit: "Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language, as the FATHER?" (I, 19).

The "Language" chapter of Nature thus expresses a cultural myth of language that Margaret Homans analyzes in Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing. Her analysis exposes a linguistic equation harbored by the matter/mater/nature identification prevalent in western thought. Allying "woman" with the literal and "man" with the figurative or symbolic, the myth values the figurative and the symbolic over the literal. Oliver's poem suggests not only a different view of nature and of language but also a different valuation of the literal and the figurative. "Landscape" exploits the nature/spirit opposition and the associated possibility that "natural facts" may be used to symbolize "spiritual facts," but it does so in a way that insists upon the contradictory pull of the literal and material reality of the moss ("except that/they have no tongues"). The poem suggests that nature is a perpetual process of literal, nonverbal utterance that has value in its own right, and not merely as it is interpreted or translated into human understanding or by human utterance (the work of
"Spirit" or "Reason" in Emerson's scheme).

That the figurative (i.e. human language) is Oliver's only poetic means of affirming the value of the literal (i.e. natural phenomena), however, suggests that neither the view of language nor the affirmation presented here is unproblematic. Homans's work can illuminate both the difficulty and Oliver's response to it. Homans claims that "In a literary culture dominated by the symbolic order and its values, the word that women writers . . . most often bear is the word of their own exclusion from linguistic practice"; this occurs because the dominant myth of language "situates [women] as the silent and absent objects of representation," by identifying them "with the literal, the absent referent."  

That is, women writers may become aware that they are, at least from the perspective of the symbolic order, inscribing their own silence and objectification as they write because they inevitably employ a symbolic system founded upon their status as absent objects. But according to Homans's argument, there is another perspective for women. Through her Lacanian reading of the developmental theory of Nancy Chodorow, Homans posits that daughters retain a "literal" or "presymbolic" or "nonsymbolic" mother-daughter language repressed by sons in the male oedipal crisis. As a result, daughters speak "two languages at once," the symbolic language valued by androcentric or phallocentric culture and the literal or presymbolic language — a non-symbolic communicativeness — originally shared with the mother in the pre-oedipal stage. It is clear that by the standards of patriarchal culture — or from the perspective of the symbolic order, which values the figurative over the literal — this pre-symbolic "language" may have no status as language at all. Similarly, to return to Oliver's poem, it is clear that the actual or literal moss, from that perspective, has no status at all as language. Further, from that perspective, there is no escaping the fact that nature's "language" always requires a translation for human understanding and that the translation is always figurative (because human language is always figurative). Nonetheless what Oliver seems to be asserting here is the validity of the material of nature itself as literal language. Such an implicit assertion recurs at the end of the poem, where crows "burst up into the sky — as though// all night they had thought of what they would like/ their lives to be, and imagined/ their strong, thick wings." Here the speaker credits the crows (nature's creatures) with a power traditionally assigned to God (the creator) and, in the traditional analogy, to "the poet," presumed to be created in the image of that God: the power to express imagination, to embody — give body to — thought.

It is of course precisely this power that Western male-dominant thinking about language and nature implicitly denies to women. In Emerson's Nature,
"woman" enjoys no "substantial existence" (I, 29) but is rather the vehicle in the informing metaphor of nature as a woman, a trope that manages to idealize woman even as it identifies her with nature's "heaps and rubbish" (I, 25) — the literal and the material. Reality, substance — these belong to the realm of the symbolic and to that animating, fertilizing power of Spirit, which Emerson also calls — upon occasion — Imagination. "[S]ubordinating nature for the purposes of expression" (I, 31), Imagination is the poet's power: the power to speak, to name, to bring forth the word. Through metaphorically relocating this power in nature and associating it with the literal, Oliver's poem challenges assumptions in our literary culture that implicitly deny women the power of imagination and the power of speech by objectifying woman as mute matter (for example through the trope of maternal nature); thus the poem implicitly claims these powers for women without giving up the identification with nature that clearly empowers Oliver's work.

Shifts between figurative and literal, Homans shows, are often "heavily charged with mythic and thematic significance" in the writing of the women she studies, with shifts in the direction of the literal gesturing toward a return to the non-symbolic communicativeness or literal language shared with the mother. While not moving toward a literal language necessarily to be identified with the preoedipal, Oliver's poem does shift toward valuing a more literal language. That this shift is accomplished through a figure of speech, however, suggests the nature of the dilemma: "... literal meaning cannot be present in a text: it is always elsewhere"; or, as Homans later claims, it is "impossible for the daughter to find the lost relation to the mother" — or to the literal — "in any figure for it" since that relation "preceded the entry of the daughter into the world of figures, the symbolic."

Oliver's poem thus both exemplifies the dilemma Homans has described and represents a poetic response to that dilemma. Something quite different is going on than in the scheme suggested by the claim, "Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts" (Emerson I, 17). Oliver's moss does not symbolize "spiritual patience," nor do her crows "symbolize" imagination. Rather their presence in the landscape motivates reflection on a poetic inheritance that both enables and disables the poet who attempts to express her intuited sense of connectedness with nature, of the interpenetration of the natural and the human.

In conceiving nature's language as process of utterance rather than a system of signs, as parole rather than langue, Oliver is far from alone. One might cite, for example, D.H. Lawrence — an obvious influence on Oliver — who frequently employs the metaphor of "utterance." But even though Lawrence's respect for the intrinsic worth of nature is keener (and his concep-
tion of nature’s language more dynamic) than that of many writers in the romantic tradition, he rarely if ever overcomes the “alienated consciousness which [can] regain only fleeting and ambiguous glimpses of union with body, objects, nature.”17 In his famous poem, “Snake,” for example, the speaker never overcomes the division from the snake; he sees the snake in human terms (it has lips and throat, it muses); and in calling the snake “a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,” the speaker projects his own alienation from nature on the snake.18 Oliver’s speaker in “Black Snakes,” like Lawrence’s speaker, laments a lack of connection with the snakes (she wishes “they were [her] dark friends” [DW, p. 75]). At the end, however, the speaker shifts perspectives and identifies with the snakes:

Not knowing what I would do
next, their tongues
shook like fire
at the echoes of my body —
that column of death
plunging
through the delicate woods. (DW, p. 76)

The double perspective offered by the end of the poem — that of the speaker who observes the shaking tongues (without projecting human feelings or values on them), that of the snakes that react to the speaker’s presence — testifies to the fluid ease with which Oliver’s poems, as McNew has written, move between individual consciousness and immersion in, or identification with, nature.19

The body of Oliver’s poetry makes it plain, however, that this fluidity — this apparently spontaneous shift in perspective — does not result from some inborn capacity; nor are the apparently “permeable” bounds of the speaker of many of Oliver’s poems associated with specifically feminine or female identity. Indeed, while there is a sense in which Oliver’s poems seem profoundly “woman-identified,” there are few explicit indications of the gender of the speaker in her poems. For these reasons, we should avoid identifying this poet fully with writers like Mary Daly and Susan Griffin, whose work seems to presume women possess some female essence which makes them closer to nature than men. A poem like “Whispers,” in which the speaker laments the inability to enter “the heaven of sensation” — “blood’s heaven, spirit’s haven” — suggests that the sense of intimate relation to nature informing many of Oliver’s poems has been won through difficult and conscious struggle (DW, pp. 29–30). And indeed, many of Oliver’s poems suggest an educative — to be more precise, a self-educative — process which
has resulted in the speaker’s ability to move fluidly between individual consciousness and identification with nature.

“Aunt Leaf,” for example, suggests an active seeking out of such an education through the speaker’s invention (in childhood or youth) of a female familiar: an “old woman made out of leaves,” a “friend” that the speaker “had to have,” a “great-great-aunt dark as hickory/called Shining-Leaf, or Drifting Cloud/or The-Beauty-of-the-Night.” A personification of all that the speaker most closely identifies with in nature, Aunt Leaf is capable of bringing about metamorphoses, transmutations, of the speaker and herself into foxes, snakes or fish. In her fluidity or volatility, she is the antithesis to the speaker’s family who are “kind, but solid as wood/ and rarely wandered.” Neither mother nor sister, the figure of Aunt Leaf avoids exact congruence with traditional figures or constructions of nature, either patriarchal or — for that matter — “matriarchal” (i.e., with neither Mother Nature nor the great goddess).

Like Emerson’s Nature, then, the poem “Aunt Leaf” represents an effort to forge “an original relation to the universe” (Emerson, I, 7), one uncontaminated by inherited structures of consciousness. And like Emerson’s essay, Oliver’s poetry suggests that “reading” nature plays a vital role in that enterprise. But for the tradition represented by Emerson, in which the “true position of nature in regard to man” (I, 36) is subservient or “thoroughly mediate” (I, 25), reading nature’s language or text means projecting human significance upon the landscape. Employing such metaphors as “the myths of the morning” (TM, p. 20) and “the patient parable/ of . . . spring” (DW, p. 11), Oliver’s poems suggest that attending to nature’s utterance or reading nature’s text means cultivating attentiveness to nature’s communication of significances for which there is no human language, that is, for significances that elude consciousness dominated by patriarchal constructions. The most fundamental demand that Oliver’s nature makes of human beings is “Listen, attend!” When the speaker of “Winter Trees” learns to meet this demand, she learns “there’s no end to it, the kingdoms/ crying out — and no end/ / to the voices the heart can hear once/it’s started,” each flake of snow “singing with its tiny mouth . . ./ whispering about love, about darkness” (TM, p. 73).

Oliver’s poems repeatedly stage scenes of instruction in love, where love is defined as attention to “the kingdoms/crying out.” This enterprise is celebrated, for example, in “Entering the Kingdom,” where the speaker longs “To learn something by being nothing/ A little while but the rich/ Lens of attention” (TM, p. 21). In Oliver’s reading of the language of nature, a reading which assumes that nature has something to teach that eludes the symbolic texts of patriarchal culture, nature teaches not through symbolization but through sensible attributes, and the student learns through sensation, in
particular through a form of sensitive attention which must be cultivated. In "Starfish," the speaker spends a whole summer placing her hand in the tide among some sea rocks, waiting "for the gritty lightning" touch of the starfish, watching "as they bloomed through the water/ like flowers"; "reaching/into the darkness," she learns "little by little to love/ our only world" (DW, pp. 36–37).

An analogy for this reaching into the darkness is provided by Luce Irigaray in "La Mystérieuse," where she writes of the difficulty of charting the course by which the "soul" must struggle "outside herself" in order to "flee the [male] logic that has framed her." In this essay Irigaray examines "mystic language or discourse," language that explores "the place where consciousness [and therefore the inherited structures of patriarchal thought] is no longer master, where, to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames . . . where 'she' — and in some cases he, if he follows 'her' lead — speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed . . ." (p. 191). It is precisely this source that the speaker of many of Oliver's poems seems to speak through the activity that Oliver calls "love," through the speaker's dedicated and "selfless" attention to the world. The language of "The Starfish," as the speaker forces herself repeatedly to reach "into the darkness," to lower her hand among "the sea rocks/ in the stone pockets/ under the tide's lip/in water dense as blindness" evokes the mystic "she"'s path, as described by Irigaray, "through narrow doorways and along . . . paths, dark and terrible . . . between two walls . . . through slits in order to move into the full light of the caves to be explored" (p. 194). Irigaray's emphasis on movement "Onward into a touch that opens the 'soul' again to contact with divine force" (p. 193) finds a parallel emphasis on sensation or touch in Oliver. It is important to note, however, that while Irigaray's essay refers to "neither a this nor a that, not a here any more than a there" (p. 193), Oliver's "mystical" explorations are always firmly located in the materiality of nature.

Although nothing can finally guarantee that these explorations will not be contaminated by the structures of consciousness they seek to elude, it is important to stress that the context of these explorations in Oliver's case is a powerful and critical rereading of theological and ethical assertions associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition (and by implication, all of Western metaphysics). The world is created, in "Morning Poem," not in the Beginning but "Every morning" (DW, p. 6). According to "Wild Geese," "You do not have to be good./ You do not have to walk on your knees/ for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting" (DW, p. 14). In the Florida landscape of "At Loxahatchie," "Everywhere the reptiles thrashed//while birds exploded into
heavenly/ hymns of rough song and the vultures/ drifted like black angels and clearly nothing /needed to be saved” (DW, p. 85). The Kingdom of God is replaced by the “small kingdoms” of nature, kingdoms paradoxically possessing their own kind of infinitude and eternity, as we have seen, in “Winter Trees” (“there’s no end to it, the kingdoms/crying out” [TM, p. 73]). In “Vultures” those birds who “eat” death “make it vanish./ . . . make of it the miracle:/ resurrection.”

Oliver’s poetry thus 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. Her far-reaching recognition of the disastrous consequences of such separative ideology is nowhere more apparent than in “The Shark” (DW, pp. 69–70) in which the predator (the shark) becomes the prey, and “men/ lifting the last bloody hammers” to the winched fish (in a kind of crucifixion scene) provide an analogy for the God of patriarchal Christianity, a master who lifts this world and lets it spin “in a darkness you can’t imagine.” The central scene of this poem also provides a powerful and critical analogy to the process by which patriarchal ideology denies to (female) nature utterance or the power of utterance. The fishermen haul “their bloody prize” home, “well-gaffed,” its “death song of vomit and bubbles” of blood running from a mouth “that had no speech to rail against this matter”:

speech, that gives us all there may be of the future, speech, that makes all the difference, we like to say. And I say: in the wilderness of our wit we will all cry out last words — heave and spit them into the shattering universe someday, to someone.

Whoever He is, count on it: He won’t answer.

The difference that speech makes (as “we like to say”) is the difference between creatures capable of symbolization and those incapable of it. This is the difference (we like to say) between man and beast, and it is the broken connection between the human and nonhuman that Oliver here attempts restore, not only through casting doubt on the distinction (“we like to say”) but through casting us (the generic “he” of patriarchal ideology) in the role of the shark vis-à-vis God, who does not care, does not hear, so intent is “He” on spinning his little world.

The difference that speech makes, patriarchal ideology also likes to say, is the difference between male and female. “Whoever He is count on it: He won’t answer”: “The inventor is like the hunter — each/ in the crease and spasm of the thing about to be done/ is lost in his work. All else is peripheral,/
remote, felt. The connections have broken.” Thus Oliver’s poem obliquely suggests the stance of the male poet as God-Creator in relation to the nature he constructs as maternal (the tow line is a “birth cord”), then abandons, the nature whose literal utterance he will neither acknowledge nor deign to engage in dialogue.

The implied allegory of the (male) rape of (female) nature points us toward the violence frequently directed at women in what Oliver calls “the peopled kingdoms” (DW, p. 10). Because a good deal of Oliver’s poetry avoids explicit engagement of life in social contexts, this poet runs the risk that her work will be identified with the romantic project that feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has described as a “project of return to nature” that is “aesthetic, personalistic, and escapist.”23 Therefore, it is especially important to recognize that counterpoised to Oliver’s nature poems are poems keenly attuned to a social world in which violence is almost always present in some degree or another. Examined closely, this world is the world of the rapist, of the incestuous father — of silenced, brutalized women and silencing, brutalizing men. An extreme example is provided by a poem simply entitled “Rage,” where a father, one of “the wise and powerful” ones who make “all the days/ possible in the world,” destroys the daughter by stumbling nightly to “the damp rose of her body” (DW, p. 12). A subtler violation is dramatized in “Spring” (TM, p. 10), a poem about the daughter’s entrance into the systems of exchange governed by the fathers. In “Spring” the speaker rides home a mare after it has been bred by a neighbor. Though the child is “chased away” from the actual coupling of the horses, she hears “the cries of the horses . . . /And the laughter of the men.’ The “laughter” of the men implies the humiliation of the Morgan (and perhaps of the little girl). Though the absent father pays for this “humiliation,” the daughter is expected to be his agent in the transaction, an expectation that, the poem hints, violates both her bond with the animal and with her father. The end of the poem, however, underscores the child’s affirmation of the bond with the animal and the way in which she seizes what little power lies at her disposal by letting the mare ride home “at her leisure” and “Tear . . . roughly,/ Blades from the fields of spring.”

Thus not only do Oliver’s poems take a critical stance toward the metaphysical assumptions dominating Western patriarchal culture; they show — even if they do not dedicate themselves solely to developing — a firm grasp of the material conditions of women.24 In a context shaped by such attitudes, mystical communion with nature unquestionably has a far different intent and significance from that it might hold in poetry having “its origins in alienated white male consciousness seeking restoration of its lost ties with
nature." Rather than seeking a lost unity, Oliver's poems for the most part presuppose a connectivity with nature that Oliver ritually celebrates. They reimagine the sacred for us, not through focusing on the human body — as do many of the women's poems discussed in Ostriker's *Stealing the Language* — but through embracing the body of the world.

In a number of poems this embrace takes the form of rituals of "communion" that celebrate the interpenetration of the human and the natural through imaging the actual eating of animals. Perhaps the most overtly ritualistic of these is "Hunter's Moon — Eating the Bear" (*TM*, pp. 50–51) which, like other poems where Oliver focuses on the figure of the bear, has its roots in archaic bear ceremonialism. Oliver's poem takes the form of a ceremonial bear-hunting prayer. From a feminist perspective, of course, the question raised by such a re-imaging of the sacred is the relevance of such ritual to contemporary women. In the case of Oliver, such verbal ritual appears to be a means of developing the capacity to overcome the apparent oppositions on which western, male-dominant thinking is founded in order more fully to experience the connectivity that her poetry celebrates. The purpose of eating the bear is to reach "some invisible dead center," where the bear "will come to live inside" the speaker; and insofar as it involves both entering and being entered by the bear, this ritual celebrates the interpenetration and interconnectivity of self and nature.

And I will put you into my mouth, yes.
And I will swallow, yes.
So. You will come to live inside me:
muscle, layers of sweet leaves
hidden in the pink fat, the maroon flesh.

The speaker here envisions a kind of communion in which she eats the bear as a means of incorporating its "grace," "breath," "hairiness," in "the small sinue of [her] prayers". "And I will swallow, yes./So." The "So" indicates the performative nature of this utterance. Her prayer is a verbal ritual in which she accomplishes the incorporation of which she speaks by speaking it. That is, eating the bear is an act of spiritual nourishment which makes the prayer — the poem — possible.

That rituals like this specifically empower "speech" — prayers, and the poems which Oliver sometimes identifies with prayers — is confirmed by the use of the figure of the bear in *American Primitive*, the collection following the one in which this poem appears. In this collection the speaker, rather than hunting or seeking the bear, is in some poems almost entirely identified with figure of the bear. In the opening lyric "August," for example, the speaker
spends all day “in the brambles/nobody owns” picking berries with “ripped arms,” “cramping/ the black honey of summer” into her mouth. Careless of personal harm (the bear has a reputation for wonders of self healing), the speaker is “this happy tongue” to which the poem refers.9 Here the singular importance of the tongue specifically links the bear and the poet, and the centrality of the image of the “happy tongue” in *American Primitive* makes it possible for Yaeger to draw from this poet the archetypal image of the “honey-mad woman” — of “someone mad for the honey of speech.”30

As one reviewer has noted, however, Yaeger’s critical strategy in offering this reading of Oliver looks “suspiciously, historically familiar”; Barbara Correll suggests that this emphasis may echo the Romanticism Yaeger “claims, in her introduction, to have left behind. If so, then honey-madness is only too rational and the product of the same thought structures that Yaeger would see women’s writing and feminist critical practice emancipated from.”31 The difficulty that Correll discerns results from Yaeger’s tendency to present celebratory readings of specific images, readings that pay little attention to rhetorical matters (such as the movement between literal and figurative) or the full poetic context of those images. Yaeger’s reading of “Humpbacks” (*AP*, pp. 60–62), for example, celebrates the way in which the poem exemplifies the female writer’s power to “breach” the signified, to break out of discourse “that has weighed the woman writer”; Yaeger understandably focuses on the moment when the lyric “I” of the poem “suddenly finds new voice.”32 What the reading fails to suggest, however, is Oliver’s answer to the most pressing question of all for the female writer: *how* does the speaker manage to find new voice? In Yaeger’s reading the question, “How is such transformation possible?” immediately becomes, “Why is it that we, as feminist critics have not begun to theorize this power?” While Yaeger’s effort to undertake precisely that task ranges widely, drawing on such theorists as Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault among many others, it overlooks the way in which Oliver’s own poetry accounts for the occurrence of such seemingly unpredictable and spontaneous moments of transformation: they arise from efforts of attention — otherwise known as love — conducted according to an ethos of respect for the literal.

Yaeger’s allegorical readings of Oliver’s poems, while illuminating and justifiable on a number of grounds, imply the traditional conception of nature as language (as system of signifiers for abstract truths) that the body of Oliver’s poetry questions — and questions in a way that can help feminists “theorize” the transformative power Yaeger detects operating in Oliver’s poems. To read Oliver’s poems as allegories of “the woman writer’s ecstatic espionage, her expropriation of the language she needs,” equating Oliver’s “heaven of
sensation” with the female writer’s “pleasure in discovering [the] ownerlessness” of language, is to overlook not only the patient cultivation of relationship with the literal, so central to Oliver’s poetic enterprise, but also the tension that arises from Oliver’s persistent questioning of the appropriation of nature as a means of symbolizing human activities or consciousness.33

The conflict that this poetically necessary “use” of nature creates for the poet is dramatized in “Singapore,” from Oliver’s 1990 volume, House of Light.34 The setting is the women’s bathroom in the Singapore airport; the plot — the speaker’s encounter with a woman on her knees in front of a toilet bowl, using it to wash out the metal trays from airport ashtrays. The poet’s challenge — to get a “poem” out of this situation: “A poem should always have birds in it,” the speaker laments; it should have rivers, trees, “A waterfall, or if that’s not possible, a fountain rising and falling” — i.e., the accoutrements of romantic landscape poetry. While “beauty” and “embarrassment” struggle on the woman’s face, “disgust” and attraction argue in the speaker. To make a poem about this situation, the poet needs to find “a happy place” to stand, but watching the woman at her work leads the speaker to the impulse for metaphorical flight: “She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river./ Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.” Now the speaker is torn between a sentimental certainty that the woman “loves her life” and a desire for the woman “to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river”: “This probably won’t happen./But maybe it will.” The speaker reasons: “If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?” But, she admits, “Of course, it isn’t.” She continues,

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth, the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

The poem is filled with trees and birds only in the form of linguistic signs — metaphors and similes — pointing toward the happiness (Coleridge’s joy), the light (Shelley’s fountain), whatever it is that the speaker sees — or wants to see — when the woman smiles. (“[H]er smile was only for my sake,” of course, contains a deep ambiguity.) On the one hand, though the speaker struggles with her desire to see the woman “rise up . . . and fly,” she is clearly unwilling to use linguistic means to transcend the literal slop and crust (Emerson’s “heaps and rubbish” of nature). But neither is she, on the other hand, willing to throw away the only language she has to convey “the light that can shine out of a life.”
Does such light shine out in the episode recounted in this poem or is the speaker’s perception inescapably shaped by the metaphors of her literary inheritance? While clearly weighting its sympathies toward the former, the poem allows for both possibilities. The nimbleness necessary to move between such positions without being overwhelmed by either is evident in the structure of many of Oliver’s poems. In her work, the oppositional force of such elements, for example, as pleasure and pain, light and darkness, rising and falling, is often undermined by rhetorical movement so fluid that little opportunity exists for a settling into polarized relation. For example, the opening lyric of “Dogfish,” the first poem in Dream Work, moves from the lyrical descriptiveness of “Some kind of relaxed and beautiful thing/kept flickering in with the tide” to the conversational chattiness of “you know/what a smile means,/don’t you?” Such a “descent” in levels of discourse also characterizes “Bowing to the Empress” where the imagistic loveliness of the description (“she flows/to her nest/of a thousand/broken and braided sticks”) gives way to ironic juxtaposition of contrasting images (“to her chicks/yelping like tiny wolves/like downy/emperors for her return,/for her attention,/for red meat”) to the blandly prosaic and conversational, intermixed with the “lovely” (“so many soft jewels”):

and you know
theirs is a decent task
in the scheme of things —
the hunters,
the rapacious
plucking up the timid
like so many soft jewels.
They are what keeps everything
enough, but not too many. . . . (DW, p. 55)

Shifts in diction such as those illustrated by this poem insist upon readjustments, reassessments. In poems such as “Singapore” and “Bowing to the Empress” Oliver employs an interruptive, interrogatory style that disrupts poetic convention and notions of propriety — especially those drawn from the romantic literary tradition — which she can neither entirely embrace nor reject. Her poems show a lightfootedness — a verbal energy and stylistic flexibility — that insists on her right to move back and forth between modes of discourse, categories of perception and orders of experience. Such dynamics, not the creative frenzy of the honey-mad woman, are Oliver’s means of exploiting the “ownerlessness” of the word.
Notes


7. Dream Work (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), p. 68. This work will be cited in the text as D.W.


13. It is important to stress, however, that such claims in Oliver's poetry are for the most part implicit only. She avoids publication in "women's" anthologies and says in a recent interview "...I simply don't consciously write as a woman." See the interview of Oliver by Mindy Weinreb in Our Other Selves: Nine Poets Speaking, ed. John Wheatcroft (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1991), p. 150.


19. McNew, pp. 65–66, writes that Oliver's "sense of movement between her individual consciousness and oceanic immersion is more fluid" than that of her romantic precursors, and that because of this Oliver has far less reason than they do to "tremble over boundaries" between herself and nature. Oliver herself has commented on her changing
perspective in this regard: "In Twelve Moons there was not much ego; there was no separation between observer and surrounding world. American Primitive I wanted to be a listing of many perceptual joys. . . . Dream Work is a more social book." See the Weinreb interview in Our Other Voices, p. 143.

20. Twelve Moons (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 47. This work will be cited parenthetically in the text as TM.


One can also cite suggestive parallels between Irigaray's essay and some of the poems surrounding "The Starfish" in Dream Work, for instance "The Fire" (p. 26) and "The Journey" (pp. 38–39).

22. American Primitive (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), p. 37. This work will be cited parenthetically in the text as AP.


24. In addition to "Rage" and "Spring," one might cite a number of her other poems, especially in Twelve Moons, where the repression of women is especially prominent as a theme: "Strawberry Moon," pp. 16–18; "Music Lessons, p. 26; "Lil," pp. 22–23. Even a meditation on tombstones can direct our attention to the theme: "Most are standing,/ Flat, like tongues/ Still full of poems, and back-fence gossip./. Some are ponderous, pressed/ To the earth, the length of bones. /Good-bye they say. Good riddance" ("Stone Poem," TM, p. 12). The good-bye, good riddance inevitably associates itself with the silenced glossips — and the silenced poets — of the first stanza.

25. Ruether, pp. 84–85.


28. See, for example, "Honey at the Table," p. 57, "Happiness," p. 71; "The Honey Tree," p. 81.

29. One of the primary analogies between bears and human beings is that they are both omnivores, and in American Primitive it is the speaker's omnivorous appetite for the things of this world that most strikingly characterizes her stance toward nature.

30. Yaeger, p. 4.


32. Yaeger, p. 82–83.

33. Yaeger, pp. 3, 22.
