For Mary Oliver, the act of writing is at once a means of experiencing most fully her interbeing with the observable world and of rehearsing the provisional distance between self and other upon which this sensation of merging depends. At stake in this effort is Oliver’s self-proclaimed “work” of “loving the world,” a profound ambition that turns not upon the twin gestures of assimilation or exclusion but rather a rigorous, dynamic curiosity, what she calls “an attitude of noticing” (Swann xiv). Such writing-as-mindfulness is hard-earned, as it exchanges the individual ego and its attendant parsing of experience into tidy oppositions for a capaciousness of being that forms the bedrock of compassion—one’s ability to “love the world.” Integrative at its core, Oliver’s poetry facilitates neither self-realization nor self-abdication but the paradoxically selfless practice of full presence. As such, the transformative power of Oliver’s work resides less in its occasional voice of outcry or admonition (witnessed, most recently, in Redbird) than in its resistance to precisely those actions we often think of as prerequisites for making change: repudiation of that which we consider wrong or unjust buoyed by judgment and will. In contrast, Oliver’s devotion to “loving the world” is achieved primarily via acute attention and its spawn, awareness. Consequently, Oliver’s work cannot be accounted for by critical narratives that privilege poetic “breakthroughs” or the “remaking” of style as evidence of creative or even moral maturation—a partial explanation, surely, for the notable dearth of scholarly attention paid to this major American poet.1
Oliver engages this point with unprecedented persistence in her masterful book-length poem, *The Leaf and the Cloud* (2000), upon which this essay will ultimately focus. And yet it would be a (tempting) mistake to over-emphasize this book and its pointed concern with what Emerson referred to as one’s “purpose” as fundamentally distinct from the poetry it follows or precedes. On the contrary, understanding the nature of Oliver’s life-long commitment to “noticing” is crucial to comprehending the transformative potential of “loving the world”—that is, the ethical or moral (indeed, spiritual) valence with which the poet is primarily concerned in *The Leaf and the Cloud*. Hardly passive or transcendent, this “attitude of noticing” summons and is shaped by an experience of being as simultaneously autonomous and interrelated, a sensibility Oliver explores in her earliest works and inhabits most crisply at mid-career. Take, for example, “Wings,” Oliver’s well-known poem from *House of Light* (1992): in following this poem’s measured crescendo of singular vision through its ensuing explosion of self-abandon, we experience the signature drama of an Oliver poem. The speaker-poet begins by articulating not only a loving observation of the natural world but also her own presence as an observer:

I saw the heron
    poise
    like a branch of white petals
    in the swamp,
    in the mud that lies
    like a glaze,
    in the water
    that swirls its pale panels
of reflected clouds. . . . (14)

Typically, Oliver’s heron is drenched in simile, a descriptive gesture that situates the act of observation as at once interpretive, subjective, and associative, relational. This use of metaphor, often deployed by Oliver as personification of the non-human world, invokes human consciousness as both barrier and bridge between the poet’s eye and the world it observes. Whereas in the first line of the poem (“I saw the heron”) Oliver’s overt and unadorned depiction of looking enacts a linguistic, spatial distinction between the speaker/subject and the heron/object, this distance is swept up and inverted in the swirl of associations that follow: “poised” at the outer reaches of the speaker’s visible world, the heron pivots from bird to blossoming branch, a metonymic flourish that sets in motion a swarm of
similes that spans, and thus contracts, the initial gap posed between a poet and world. As the poem moves from the “I” to the heron to the branch to the petals, from swamp to mud to ceramic glaze and finally, to “water that swirls its pale panels of reflected clouds,” it enacts a contiguity of being across registers we often parse as opposites—light and dark, stasis and motion, earth and sky, and the “natural” and the “artificial” or human-made.

Nevertheless, just as Oliver stretches the skin of the speaker’s being beyond its situated, conscious self, she simultaneously tightens the purview of the speaker’s gaze, and hence, our sensation of its presence; each simile is presented as a distillation of the previous image, as in a series of photographs wherein a single subject is captured repeatedly at closer and closer range. While in stanza 1 we witness a heron and the swamp in which it stands, our eye is drawn, in stanza two, first to the mud and water of which the swamp is composed and then, closer in, to the reflections of clouds that dapple the water’s surface. Importantly, this contraction, this narrowing of visual focus, is concurrent with the speaker’s embodied movement outward via both the sweeping reach of metonymy and the staggered, step-like lines of the poem; the more acutely we look beyond ourselves, the more palpable becomes the lens through which we look, that which cinches our sense of singular being. This is why Oliver, toward the end of another poem from House of Light in which she imagines “living / like the lilies / that blow in the fields,” claims that she “will always be lonely / in this world” (12).

But unlike the lilies who “melt, without protest,” Oliver is at once enabled and arrested by the grip of consciousness; while in “Wings” the speaker suddenly “slid[es] free” of her own way of seeing, this climactic liberation is as painful as it is euphoric:

I saw the heron shaking
its damp wings—
and then I felt

an explosion—
a pain—
also a happiness
I can hardly mention. . . . (12)

Though for a moment she is able to see through the heron’s “yellow eyes” and hence to harmonize, however briefly, the dissonance between self and other, this surrender of singular vision paradoxically retards the poet’s capacity to move beyond her self; while the speaker claims in this moment to see “the world” afresh, it is in fact
a freshly ensconced (if expanded) sense of self that she (and we) now focuses upon, standing

like that, rippling,

.........................
under the mottled sky
of the evening. . . . (14)

In her wish to break “free” from self-consciousness, the speaker of “Wings” has forsaken that which provoked her awareness of participate being in the first place. Characteristically, however, Oliver does not resolve but revels in this sensation of self-sundering:

No! said my heart, and drew back.
But my bones knew something wonderful
about the darkness—

................................

. . . they wanted to lie down in that silky mash
of the swamp, the sooner to fly. (15)

It is precisely this complex straddling of self-actualization and self-abandon, central to Oliver’s work, that has proven especially problematic, even prohibitive, to her critics. Such an explanation is affirmed by a close look at the published scholarship that exists on Oliver, a compact but richly contrasting collection of readings that is marked by a tendency to emphasize one dimension of the poet’s longing (the urge to merge) at the expense of the other (the urge to “draw back”).2 Gyorgi Voros, for instance, one of Oliver’s most nimble, if disapproving readers, faults Oliver’s poetry for its “peculiar lack of genuine engagement with the natural world” (231). According to Voros, Oliver’s language is unforgivably one-sided, “unwavering” in its “awe” and “visionary ecstasy,” unlike precursors such as Wordsworth or Dickinson who “rely on a firm foundation of the daily against which the visionary rises in shining relief” (233). The problem, Voros maintains, is that despite appearances, Oliver’s “passion for transcendence” betrays a fundamental disenchantment with the “human experience as hopelessly paltry . . . an unforgivable trespass” (232–33).

At the same time, several critics have praised Oliver’s poetry for the very qualities that Voros finds lacking: Laird Christensen, for example, applauds Oliver for guiding us “toward the fundamental connection that is our larger self,” while Vicki Graham asserts that in Oliver’s poems “[contact] leads to contagion; infected by what she has seen or tasted, [Oliver] begins to copy it spontaneously, ‘miming [it] into being’ through ecstatic identification” (148; 355). To these approving critics, Oliver’s poetic is noteworthy in its bridging of self
and other, poet and world, but in their view this symbiosis is achieved, notably, *in spite* of human consciousness and the language to which it is wed: “Despite the fact that language . . . diminishes presences to objects,” writes Christensen, “Oliver clearly believes that poetry can call attention to . . . a world of presences” (140). Likewise, Graham concludes that for Oliver, the “chief value of ‘entering the body of another’ . . . lies in the temporary loss of human conscious-ness” (368). Note, however, that at such moments, these readings differ primarily in emphasis (not argument) from Voros’s, for whom Gary Snyder’s embrace of language as what she calls an “adaptive, biological trait” triumphs at the expense of Oliver’s depiction of human consciousness as an “obstacle to some idealized, unmediated connection with nature” (242). As Voros makes clear, both Snyder and Oliver acknowledge language as that which marks the human condition, but it is Snyder’s overt refusal to admit of any consequent gap between “human imagination and the world of solid, physical fact,” writes Voros, that renders his work, not Oliver’s, “ecologically sound” (243).

While Oliver’s critics are thus outwardly divided, of particular interest to me is the nature of their more elusive shared perspective, a position no less sundered than the double-edged self that girds so many of her poems. That is, both Oliver’s advocates and outspoken critics underscore the presence of human consciousness in her poetry as an impediment to the poet’s merging with the natural world; that one set of readers finds this aspect of Oliver’s work especially praise-worthy while the other deems it “ecologically unsound” reveals less, however, about Oliver’s poetry than it does the degree to which critical discourse is at times constrained by the very oppositions it strives to bridge: in an effort to distance ourselves from a Romantic (largely Wordsworthian) rendering of nature as human-like and benevolent—a depiction that risks legitimatizing the exploitation of the earth as a “natural resource”—today’s poets and critics are especially wary of un-self-consciously anthropomorphizing the natural world. Consequently, we have ironically come to prize the overtly self-conscious poetic, a quality signaled above all else by the poet’s approach to metaphor, and to personification in particular.³ As Scott Bryson asserts in his introduction to *Ecopoetry*, “the best twentieth-century nature poetry defines itself precisely by opposing, or seeming to oppose, the pathetic fallacy,” for as Robert Langbaum put it nearly fifty years ago, “to feel in nature an unalterably alien, even an unfeeling, existence is to carry empathy several steps farther than did the nineteenth-century poets who felt in nature a life different from but compatible with ours” (3; qtd. in Bryson 3). The tenacity
of Langbaum’s logic, wherein identification is assumed to anchor a self-reflexive consciousness, is evident in what Voros approvingly describes as “the new nature [poet’s] attempt to respect Nature’s integrity as Other” (235).

At issue here is a deeply rooted conception of ethical—moral—agency as rooted in the reasoning, autonomous self, a course of thinking that unwittingly affirms the ego in the name of empathy, a curious triumph of self over other. Indeed, as Neil Evernden notes in his classic essay, “Beyond Ecology,” “the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego-clencher. Metaphoric language is an indicator of ‘place’—an indication that the speaker has a place, feels part of a place.” As such, continues Evernden, the “motive for metaphor may be as [Northrop] Frye claims, ‘a desire to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part . . . we are also a part of what we know’” (qtd. in Glotfelty 101).4 Crucial here is Frye’s rendering of ecological awareness—“we are part of what we know”—as born of a contiguous, as opposed to either a distinct or subsumed consciousness—the awareness that “we know in part.” It is, as Oliver persists in showing us, the sense of being as partial, as part of a larger whole, that provokes the illusion of self and thus, Frye’s sensation of “joy.” This emphasis on interrelatedness, not just interdependence, is precisely what accounts for the “subversive nature of Ecology” because, as Evernden concludes, “preservation of the non-human is ultimately a very personal crusade, a rejection of the homogenization of the world that threatens to diminish all, including the self. There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place” (103).5 Consequently, ecological awareness, that which roots our capacity to “love the world,” is signaled less by the “self-conscious” preservation of nature’s otherness than by “an attitude of noticing”—a disciplined, daily effort to simultaneously summon and subvert the slippery seam between self and world.6

Nowhere does Oliver sustain this point with more passion or nuance than in The Leaf and the Cloud (2000), whose title she borrowed, notably, from Ruskin, the nineteenth-century critic who first coined the “pathetic fallacy.” The origins of this title are revealed in the epigraph to Oliver’s book, a passage from volume 5 of Ruskin’s Modern Painters. I quote it here in part:

We have seen that when the earth had to be prepared for the habitation of man, a veil, as it were, of intermediate being was
spread between him and its darkness, in which were joined ... the stability and insensibility of the earth, and the passion and perishing of mankind. But the heavens, also, had to be prepared for his habitation. Between their burning light,—their deep vacuity, and man, as between the earth’s gloom of iron substance, and man, a veil had to be spread of intermediate being. ... Between the earth and man arose the leaf. Between the heaven and man came the cloud. His life being partly as the falling leaf, and partly as the flying vapor.

Sustained by his conviction that “the peaceable movements of the world” will be fortified by an understanding of “botanical law,” Ruskin devoted seventeen years to the writing of Modern Painters, a sometimes cantankerous, often witty, astonishingly poetic treatise on “landscape artists” of all genres that culminates in his own portrait of the natural world as both “subordinate” and “teacher” to humankind (Ruskin 26). When the “race of plants” obtains the “boundless affection and admiration” from us that it so deserves, Ruskin proclaims, it then becomes “a perfect test of our being in right temper of mind and way of life” (24). According to Ruskin, nature—that is, what we as humans can apprehend of the natural world through our senses—is a layer of “intermediate being,” an incarnation of life in which human beings may recognize their own “vicissitude” and “feebleness” in an otherwise insensible and infinite universe (140). At the same time, though, this venerable “race of plants” is figured as a veil, a covering that partially hides, and in doing so draws attention to the hidden. Ruskin’s metaphor for the natural world—a metaphor, moreover, born of overt moral imperative—summons a distance between artist and nature that in turn provokes human “affection and admiration” and thus, a “right temper of mind and way of life.”

Clearly, Ruskin himself was no stranger to the use of personification that he went to such lengths to disclaim, a wrinkle he seeks to smooth by delineating “two orders” of metaphor: the “good” kind, epitomized by Homer, through which the poet conveys a “faith in the animation of Nature” and thus perceives “something in, and greater than, the waves . . . that which he calls God,” versus the “bad” kind of personification, exemplified for Ruskin by Keats, wherein metaphor is generated by “violent feelings” that “produce in us a falseness in our impressions of external things” (204). At stake for Ruskin, as for Oliver, is the poet’s capacity to perceive and render the natural world so as to nurture the “right way of life” without possessing or colonizing nature in the process. And yet, we cannot overlook the degree to which Ruskin’s disdain for the “pathetic fallacy”—and hence his blueprint for moral agency—betrays a fundamental
and at times vituperative fear of the emotional, the irrational, those “violent feelings” that paralyze a poet’s apprehension of that which supposedly transcends and thus legitimates the vagaries of human being: an objective God, accessible via the enactment of logic, which invariably affirms the sensation of isolate being or, more to the point, our fundamental superiority to nature and non-reasoning creatures.

By invoking Ruskin’s metaphor as the title of her book, Oliver is asking us to read the poem itself as the veil, a view intimated in her introduction to *Poetry Comes Up Where It Can*, a collection culled from issues of *The Amicus Journal* (now *Onearth*) whose year of publication coincides with that of *The Leaf and the Cloud*: “A poem,” writes Oliver, “is less important as a literary achievement than as a passage between the world—Otherness—and the solitary mind. It wishes to bring the reader to awareness and thought—two powerful agents of change. When we read poems about nature, we . . . are able to reach beyond ourselves,” and in doing so can “begin or deepen our own journey into the leaves and the sky—into an attitude of noticing” (xiv, my emphasis). While each of Oliver’s books is born of this “attitude of noticing,” *The Leaf and the Cloud* embodies with singular force its capacity to provoke in us “agents of change” in service of “loving”—and thus, transforming—“the world.”

“Welcome to the silly, comforting poem,” begins the book:

It is not the sunrise, which is a red rinse,
which is flaring all over the eastern sky;

it is not the rain falling out of the purse of God;

it is not the blue helmet of the sky afterward,

or the trees, or the beetle burrowing into the earth. . . . (1)

Cognizant of Ruskin’s caution against “irrational” personification and perhaps, more pointedly, of the premium his mandate enjoys in today’s poetic parlance, Oliver’s speaker is careful to distinguish between poem and natural world. Nevertheless, by generating a series of metaphors out of the very act of naming what the poem is not (the “red rinse” that “flares” over the sky, the “purse of God,” the “blue helmet of the sky”), Oliver dramatizes the way in which poetry at once inhabits and consumes the provisional gap between self and other, between human consciousness and the world we observe. In the process, Oliver underscores Ruskin’s primary concern with cultivating “the right . . . way of life” via engagement with the natural world just as she points up the fallibility of an ethics rooted in reason alone—an ethics, that is, doomed to subvert its urge toward empathy
via an apriori allegiance to the autonomous (if fleeting) mind. Although the “poem is not the world,” asserts the speaker in the first section of *The Leaf and the Cloud*, it does want

to open itself
like the door of a little temple,
so that you might step inside and be cooled and refreshed,
and less a part of yourself than a part of everything. (5)

The poem-as-temple is a prevalent metaphor throughout Oliver’s book-length poem, an image she credits to Emerson and also to Whitman, who in the midst of joyous communion with the world found himself asking, “what is it then between us?” (Whitman 146). Like her Romantic forebears, Oliver is compelled by the conundrum of human consciousness; in experiencing the oneness of being we sense ourselves most acutely as distinct, for it is the very act of consciousness, of revelation, that engenders a sense of self—that is, of being-in-relation. For the poet whose “work” (as Oliver puts it) is wed to observation, there is no paradox more promising, or lethal. Consequently, Oliver’s poetic forces not only a reckoning with our unwitting allegiance to ego over interbeing but, inevitably, a more nuanced account of her Romantic predecessors, Emerson chief among them. It is in this vein that Mark Johnson astutely challenges readers to observe Oliver’s “latter-day Romanticism” while chastising those critics who dismiss her “Transcendental project” as “naı¨ve and overly optimistic” (78–98). As Johnson points out, the error of such readings has less to do with a misapprehension of Oliver’s poetic than with a primary misinterpretation of the Romantics themselves: “Thoreau certainly questioned the superiority of human consciousness, and both he and Emerson describe the bliss of merging with nature. But neither they, nor Oliver, long to forgo consciousness itself (though they all entertain the idea), and in Oliver’s work, as in Thoreau’s encounter with his Canadian woodchopper, that conflict is a crux of their project” (78–98).

The tendency among some of Oliver’s critics to reduce the whole of Romanticism to what Albert Gelpi has referred to as its “self-aggrandizement of the individual ego” is due in part, I suspect, to a modernist flinching at some of Emerson’s most popularized terms, phrases that are, moreover, often quoted out of context. Take, for example, the moment from “Nature” in which Emerson describes himself “Standing on the bare ground,” his “head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted to infinite space,” an experience wherein “all mean egotism vanishes.” At this moment Emerson becomes, famously, “a transparent eyeball”: “I am nothing; I see all; the
currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God” (39). As this passage, quoted in full, makes clear, Emerson’s experience of transcendence is hardly a conduit to the “individual ego,” nor is it an escape from the material world. On the contrary, as in Emerson’s paradoxical articulation of “self-actualization,” it is a rapt and sensuous attention to his singular, fleshy engagement with nature that provokes an emptying of ego and thus communion, however provisional, with what Ruskin describes as the “darkness” and “deep vacuity” of the “world.”

Surely Oliver has not only this paradox in mind but the degree to which it is often simplified when she writes in her introduction to The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson—published, notably, conterminously with The Leaf and the Cloud in 2000—that “transcendentalism . . . is hardly a proper philosophy; certainly it is not a school of thought in which all members were in agreement” (qtd. in Emerson xiv). Indeed, for Emerson, “the value and distinction of transcendentalism was very much akin” to “swerving and rolling away from acute definition” (xiv). Thus, writes Oliver, Emerson the transcendentalist (a label, tellingly, of which he himself was wary)8 “would not turn from the world, which was domestic, and social, and collective, and required action,” but neither would he “swerve from that imperturbable inner radiance, mystical, forming no rational word but drenched with passionate and untranslatable song” (xiv). Like Emerson, Oliver is equally inspired by the twin callings of self-assertion and self-abandon. As Rose Lucas has observed in her prescient discussion of Oliver’s work, poetry is a “site of productive tension between the persistent desire of rational, human knowledge . . . and a concomitant recognition of the limits of such rational endeavor” (2). Crucial to Oliver’s reading of Emerson, and thus to our reading of Oliver and her ecological ethic, is this textured yet elusive seam between the reasoning, discrete being and his experience of “mystical” communion: “It is as if the combination—and the understanding of the combination—the necessary honoring of both—were the issue for Emerson of utmost importance,” that which girds “man’s inclination, once awakened . . . to turn all the sails of his life to a moral purpose” (xiii; xi).9

Throughout The Leaf and the Cloud, Oliver is passionately engaged in the dual act of both articulating and exercising her “purpose,” what she refers to repeatedly as her “Work.”10 Highly conscious of herself as observer, the speaker of The Leaf and the Cloud attempts again and again to cross the distance between her amorous eye and the object of her disciplined gaze: “Everyday—I stare at the world;
I push the grass aside / and stare at the world . . . Everyday—I have work to do . . .” (10). As in her earlier poem, “Wings,” this act of observation climaxes in ecstatic fusion between the speaker and world:

Everyday I feel my body rising through the water
not much more than a leaf . . . I am the snail in the universe of the leaves trudging upward
. . . I am the dusty toad who looks up unblinking. . . . (10)

Such immediacy, however, inevitably leads to verbal arrest, those recurrent moments in Oliver’s poems of incantatory stuttering and repetition, as when “finally the mind comes running, like a wild thing, / and lies down in the sand,” an experience, we are told, of “eternity” that the speaker can only render as “Roses, roses, roses, roses” (22). While such instances in Oliver’s poetry have been dismissed as “artless” by some of her critics,11 I read them as expressions of reverence, strategic moments of linguistic failure. As Paul Woodruff observes, “reverence declares itself through silence, more deeply and more truly than through speech” (187). Clearly, Oliver “works” tirelessly in hopes of achieving these moments of self-surrender: “It is this reaching out toward the nonhuman—the ultimate, the mystery,” Oliver has written, “that can make of our brief lives something not only successful and cheerful and interesting but—I do not whisper but say it boldly—divine” (xiii). But what nurtures Oliver’s sense of divine communion does not always feed her as poet; no matter how rapturous the identification, it is this writer’s love of language that triumphs in the end, a love whose progeny is, of course, the poem itself.

It is with this understanding, however sobering, that the speaker begins the third section of The Leaf and Cloud:

I rose this morning, early as usual, and went to my desk.
But it’s spring,

And the thrush is in the woods,
somewhere in the twirled branches, and he is singing.

And so, now ................................

I am touching a few leaves ......................

And I am thinking: maybe just looking and listening
is the real work.
Maybe the world, without us,
is the real poem. (17)

Lured away from her writing by the beauty of the natural world, Oliver confronts that most tempting and debilitating of doubts: maybe our work as poets proffers only an illusion of communion; perhaps the solitary act of writing guides us toward love at the cost of real connection. Such reasoning, however—for this is rationality at its sharpest and most lonely—propels the speaker into recollecting an extraordinary dream in which she is

Traveling
from one country
to another

jogging
on the back
of a white horse

whose name
was Earth. (20)

In this notably speechless realm of the unconscious, Oliver’s dreamer is fused with the “Earth” via the archetypal white horse in a jubilant sensation of physical freedom. And yet, as soon as the dreamer-speaker employs simile in the next stanza—“the sun / went down / like a thousand roses”—announcing, in effect, her presence in the dream as director and hence her differentiation from the experience of the dream itself, her vehicle of communion (the horse) suddenly changes like a veil-like

bolt of white cloth
opening
under the cloth-cutter’s hands into a “swan” (19–20). The dream concludes with the speaker’s “great surprise,” her “huge and unruly pleasure” and “almost unmanageable relief” as she is not only safely buoyed across the water but, more significantly, “perceived” by the swan whose flickering tongue registers the palpable gap between itself and the passenger on its back (20, my emphasis). Provoked by the sensation of interbeing with the physical world to question the isolate nature of writing itself, Oliver’s speaker is answered by a dream wherein metaphor becomes the pivot between ecstatic disembodiment (or an embodiment that is radically enlarged) and distinct being (as
perceived by the swan), a movement we now recognize as not only central to Oliver’s poetic but the source of her “unruly pleasure.”

For Oliver, as we’ve seen, the poem’s capacity for provocation resides less in its ability to suture or secure the gap between self and other than in keeping it alive and pliant: “What is it I need to know,” pleads the speaker in “Evening Star,” “What is it I don’t know that I need to know?” (52). This interrogative stance suffuses *The Leaf and the Cloud*, shaping a speaker at once situated and unsure, unmoored, and urgent. Indeed, in her

mind, the arguers never stop—
the skeptic and the amazed
the general and the particular, in their
uneasy relationship. (25–26)

It is this constant movement between insecurity and awe that enables the speaker’s parallel movement between differentiation and identification—the crux of her ecological ethic. Oliver, having sustained tirelessly this movement between individuation and inter-being, is now able to articulate as clearly as she ever has the stake of her “work”:

O what is beauty
that I should be up at
four A.M. trying to arrange this
thick song?
What is beauty that I should
bow down in the fields of the world, as though
someone, somewhere,
made it?

O, what is beauty
that I feel it to be so hot-blooded and suggestive,
so filled with imperative
beneath the ease of its changes,
between the leaves and the clouds of its thousand
and again a thousand opportunities? (26)

To notice simultaneously the world’s beauty and the nature of our noticing is to straddle the line between the observer and observed, self-abandon and actualization—that is, to feel the joy of provisional wholeness, that paradoxically coherent state of selflessness, because we glimpse the essential contiguity of being. As such, “beauty” provokes in Oliver a understanding of “thought”—that “agent of change”—as not only “elaborating” and “organizing” but as “doubting” and “crying out.” The mind, locus of consciousness, is
inextricable from the sensate body that bows “down in the fields” and is thus home in equal measure to the experiences of reason and rapture, the root sensations of individuation and interbeing: “It is our nature,” writes Oliver,

not only to see
that the world is beautiful
........................................
but to stand in the dark, under the stars,
or at noon, in the rainfall of light,
........................................
frenzied,
wringing our hands,
........................................
half-mad, saying over and over:
........................................
what does it mean, that the world is beautiful—
what does it mean? (42)

Importantly, in Oliver “work” the enactment of reason—“what does it mean?”—is not anathema to but embroiled in the experience of madness, of acute and self-conscious uncertainty. And it is precisely this certainty of limits—rather than an experience of either radical lack or absolute integrity—that generates for Oliver’s speaker a distinctly corporeal version of what we might call transcendence: “But what is it then that sits in my heart, / that breathes so quietly, and without lungs— / that is here, here in this world, and yet not here?” (Oliver 29). In Oliver’s experience, “the body never gets away from the world,” a felt conclusion that demands a simultaneous reckoning with that which she cannot control: “Does the body have a soul?” asks the speaker in the very next lines, “Does the weedy mussel clinging to the rocks have / a soul?” “The body has a soul,” answers the speaker, a response proffered by a voice we have come to understand as perennially sundered and thus especially supple (29; 29–30). Importantly, Oliver’s “soul” is brought into discursive relief via the volley of the “arguers,” that is, through a series of questions and answers that renders its presence provisional, hence (in Oliver’s poetic) all the more real.

Such qualified knowing enables the speaker’s “supplication” by this section’s end, a posture we must read as at once an act of self-affirmation and of radical surrender (Oliver 30). This hard-earned vulnerability peppers Oliver’s book-length poem, signaling a self that is conscious of itself as participate and thus, responsible to the world. As hinge between self-surrender and realization, “supplication” is for Oliver a transformative practice, at once a function of faith and of
community, of being-in-relation: “My hands touch the lilies / then withdraw,” continues the speaker in *The Leaf and Cloud*,

> my hands touch the blue iris
> then withdraw

> and I say, not easily but carefully—
> the words round in the mouth, crisp on the tongue—

> *dirt, mud, stars, water—*
> *I know you as if you were myself.* (44–45)

This is not the straw-man’s voice of a pallid transcendence, but of an ethical imagination that finally makes possible the poet’s ability to “love the world”15:

> the heart
> strives, fails, strives again. The world is perfect.
> Love, however, is an opera, a history, a long walk, that includes falling and rising, falling and rising. . . . (36)

These lines toward the end of “Rhapsody” are echoed overtly in the final lines of *The Leaf and the Cloud*, wherein the speaker sings her love in language both measured and ecstatic:

> alleluiah alleluiah
> the red tongue of the white swans
> shine out of their black beaks
> as they shout
> as their wings rise and fall

> rise and fall

> oh rise and fall. . . . (53)

In this final image of *The Leaf and the Cloud*, several earlier moments from the poem are summoned and fused: the white swan from the dream-poem, whose flickering tongue registered the speaker’s isolate being and thus the provocation for her “work”; the doubter, moved by her own “elaborating and organizing” to cry “out for faith,” “looking for it everywhere”; and the graceful “rise and fall” of love’s pulse as it conjoins the speaker and the world in an embrace destined to culminate in the dissolution so vital to desire. This integration, for Oliver, is poetry at its best. In its slow, rapt dance of caress, the poem—“words round in the mouth, crisp on the tongue”—is no less than a call to love: the work of a lifetime nurtured by the “peculiar” remove of observation as much as it is by the urge to merge. As such, Oliver’s poetic tills not only the distance between
a poet and world, but also the gap we too often contrive between self-actualization and abandon, ethical valence and astonishment. In doing so, Oliver’s poetry prompts us to rethink not only our ingrained assumptions as poets and critics, but to beware the well-trod paths of American poetry that such assumptions tend to privilege.

Notes

1. While there exist a handful of interviews and twice as many articles on Oliver’s poetry, only one book-length study of her writing has been published to date (a seventy-seven-page exploration of Oliver’s use of religious language by Thomas Mann. See God of Dirt: Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God, Cowley Publications 2004) and no collection of essays devoted to Oliver’s work has been gathered. It would be a mistake, however, to sum up this state of affairs via recourse to a scholarly penchant for the sort of “difficult” poetry that Oliver’s plain-spoken work appears to eschew; not only does this easy opposition often obscure a parochial or partisan agenda, but, more to the point, it allows us to overlook the ways in which Oliver’s poetic resists, and is thus rendered invisible by, interpretive lenses wherein the posture of mindfulness is mistaken for stasis or lack of discrimination. For an in-depth discussion of the “break-through narrative” endemic to American criticism in the second half of the twentieth century, see James Longenbach’s Modern Poetry After Modernism in which he coins this now ubiquitous phrasing. My invocation of the “remaking” of style and its equation with poetic evolution refers to Helen Vendler’s notorious rewriting of Yeats: in “the breaking of style it is ourselves that we remake” (Vendler 95).

2. In his lucid essay “Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology: The Interiority of Outdoor Experience,” Scott Slovic observes that “Virtually all nature writers in Thoreau’s wake perpetuate his combined fascination with inner consciousness and external nature” (Glotfelty and Fromm 354). As such, these writers are, Slovic argues, best understood not as “merely, or even primarily, analysts of nature or appreciators or nature,” but as “students of the human mind, literary psychologists” (351). But while the authors upon whom Slovic focuses—Dillard, Abbey, Berry, and Lopez—“represent with particular clarity modern variations of Thoreau’s two opposing modes of response to nature: disjunction and conjunction” (355), Oliver unnerves this dichotomy by situating her speakers as simultaneously distinct from and conjoined with nature. Thus, my analysis builds upon Slovic’s observation to suggest that Oliver’s poetic points up not only the degree to which we have assumed and thus naturalized Thoreau’s either—or posture as indigenous to ecological consciousness, but the need for a critical vocabulary with which to account for the poet whose engagement with nature is not mere conduit to, but literally coterminous with, her probing of the human mind.
3. It is, I believe, just this sort of risk that Mark Long wisely cautions against when he writes that the “the ecological poet must not be limited in subject matter such as the environment or to the ideological shape of a belief such as saving the environment” (67). Long’s warning echoes a deeply ingrained strain of Anglo-American criticism that since at least the debacle of Pound’s last days has wisely advised against the subordination of poetry to politics. At the same time, Long’s caution points up the special case of today’s nature poet who, inhabiting a moment of acute environmental crisis, must inevitably contend with the tension too often perpetuated between ideology and aesthetic enterprise.

4. In the Summer 2008 issue of ISLE, Scott Knickerbocker offers a nuanced analysis of Emily Dickinson’s “Ethical Artifice” that intersects with the point I am making here: Although Knickerbocker argues that “Dickinson’s relationship to nature suggests epistemological doubt even as it grants nature autonomy and otherness,” he locates the crux of Dickinson’s ethical poetic in her refusal of the opposition between “ethics” and “aesthetics,” or “the literal and the figurative,” a supposed choice to which we have become “habituated” for “political (environmentalist) reasons.” Tellingly, Knickerbocker also borrows from Neil Evernden’s “Beyond Ecology” as he establishes his interpretive footing: “Environmental literature that tries to avoid or suppress the inevitable artifice of language,” writes Knickerbocker, “undermines its own political effectiveness. As Neil Evernden claims, ‘Environmentalism without aesthetics is merely regional planning’ (103)” (186).

5. William Howarth, in his essay “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” locates the use of metaphor as fundamental to the ecological paradigm itself: “ecology found its voice by studying the properties of species, their distribution across space, and their adaptive course in time. In tracing those relations, ecology often used metaphor” (Glotfelty and Fromm 75).

6. William Rueckert, in an epigraph to his landmark essay “Literary Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” quotes from Francis Ponge’s The Voice of Things to this effect: “When man becomes proud to be not just the site where ideas and feelings are produced, but also the crossroad where they mingle, he will be ready to be saved” (Glotfelty and Fromm 105).

7. Gelpi’s account of Romanticism does not, however, partake of such reductive thinking. Here is the full passage from which I quote: “In the opening years of the new century, leading to the war which seemed to many besides Spengler symptomatic of the ‘decline of the West,’ Modernism aggressively advanced a counterideology to an exhausted Romanticism, explicitly rejecting its epistemological and metaphysical idealism, its aggrandizement of the individual ego, its organic model for the instantiation of seer and seen, word, and meaning” (Gelpi 518).


9. In her segue from Ruskin to Emerson, enacted in The Leaf and the Cloud both overtly from the book’s epigraph to the speaker’s mid-book confession that she is “so busy . . . as always, [with] Emerson,” and more implicitly in her constant movement between reason and rapture, Oliver effectively
exposes and bridges what Rose Lucas has described as “the romantic and post-romantic tension between the experience of the self in relation to the world of nature and of otherness: to what extent can the human only colonize, impose upon the natural world, mining it as a source of metaphor, or objective correlative for an interior state or question; and/or to what extent is it possible to listen, to perceive the language of a world which is exterior to the self?” (Lucas 5).

10. See the following passage from Emerson’s “The Transcendentalist” in which he dramatizes a dialogue between the mass of human voices who are “miserable with inaction,” who “perish of rest and rush,” who do not like the “work” asked of them by the “world”:

‘Then,’ says the world, ‘show me your own.’
‘We have none.’
‘What will you do then?’ cries the world.
‘We will wait.’
‘How long?’
‘Until the universe beckons and calls us to work.’

11. Voros, 234.

12. In this light, we might also think of Oliver’s signature repetitions and sometimes lackluster language as pointed efforts to confront the “silence of nature,” what Christopher Manes describes as “the fact that in our culture only humans have status as speaking subjects” (Glotfelty and Fromm 26). In his essay “Nature and Silence,” Manes provides an excellent genealogy of nature’s silence to “show how various motifs of medieval and Renaissance origins have worked together historically to create the fiction of ‘Man,’ a character portrayed as sole subject, speaker, and telos of the world.” In contrast to a discourse of reason, Manes argues, “environmental ethics must learn a language that leaps away from the motifs of humanism, perhaps by drawing on the discourse of ontological humility found in primal cultures, postmodern philosophy, and medieval contemplative tradition” (26).

13. I find this dimension of Oliver’s poetic echoed in Fanny Howe’s lovely conception of “bewilderment” as “a poetics and politics,” a state wherein the “awareness of both continuum and rupture occurring together may form the very rhythm of consciousness” (Howe 5, 13).

14. While Oliver’s language here (as elsewhere in The Leaf and the Cloud) forecasts the more overtly Christian language of Thirst (2007), I find the core dimension of her poetic (her “attitude of noticing”) best exemplified by the Buddhist conception of the “middle way” and, in particular, the articulation within Buddhism of “Right Concentration”:

...... concentration is neither perception nor non-perception. We recognize that everything is produced by our perceptions, which are, at least in part, erroneous. Therefore, we see that we cannot rely on our old way of perceiving, and we want to be in direct touch with reality. We cannot stop perceiving altogether, but at least now we know that perception is perception of a sign. Since we no longer believe in the reality of
signs, our perception becomes wisdom. We go beyond signs ("no perception"), but we do not become perceptionless ("no non-perception"). (Nhat Hanh 108–9)

With this in mind, I part company with those readers who situate Thirst’s Christian rhetoric as evidence of a profound change in Oliver’s sensibility. Rather, I read Thirst (which opens, notably, with Oliver’s declaration that her “work is loving the world”) as a ripening, an embrace, of the moral quest that has driven her from the start and which she explores most rigorously (and, I believe, most successfully) in The Leaf and the Cloud.

15. The “ethical imagination” is a term coined by Alan Shapiro in his collection of essays, In Praise of the Impure: Poetry and the Ethical Imagination. According to Shapiro, the “ethical imagination is a “paradoxical habit of mind” that allows us to mediate “between that which separates so as to discern and order, and that which merges so as to feel, participating in both, restricted to neither, encouraging flexibility of response when our responses grow straightedged or rigid, and firmness of measure when they’re ill-defined and too pliantly at the mercy of occasion” (12).

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