

Masterclass

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Bridging Opposites: An Ecocritical Approach to Mary Oliver's Poetry

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ABSTRACT This paper looks at the poetry of Mary Oliver from an ecocritical perspective, arguing that her poetry works to undo the dichotomous pair nature/self and the associated pairs: woman/man, body/soul. Most scholarship devoted to Oliver's celebrated works has found it hard to categorize her production, and I argue this is because most attempts have tended to force her works into the categories which these same works disarm. This paper attempts to reflect on the value of this type of poetry which is frequently disregarded as apolitical, and which, contrary to hasty conclusions, has great potential to foster social change.

Introduction

Mary Oliver (born Ohio, 1935) has been writing meaningful poetry for almost four decades now, she has won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. However, it took some time before scholarly attention was paid to Oliver, and when attention finally came, opposite views emerged as critics tried to categorize her poetry. While some saw her as a poet in the tradition of romantic nature poetry, others argued that her writing differed greatly from the canonical English Romantics. While some feminists believed that Oliver's poetry offered the possibility to see women's relation with nature in a new light, others stated that this same poetry continued to place women in a subjugated position. While some critics saw her poetry as extremely spiritual, others emphasized the important role played by sensuality and the body.

There is one thing, however, we can easily agree on: in Oliver's poetry the natural world plays an essential role and the human being is seen as just another creature in the eco-system. Her notion of nature goes far beyond presenting it merely as a setting for the human experience, or considering it as a resource for human development. Nature and human beings are intrinsically connected, both sharing the experience of existence. Consequently, this paper aims to look at the poetry of Mary Oliver from the framework of ecocriticism, arguing that it is precisely Oliver's ability to move beyond Cartesian dual oppositions that makes her poetry so valuable and impossible to categorize with confining labels. She finds the opposite

elements of a dichotomy non-restrictive and the boundaries between them permeable. Oliver reconnects seemingly mutually exclusive opposites in her poetry and in doing so fulfils the ecocritical task of reframing the pair nature/self, as well as the associated pairs woman/man, body/soul (body/mind).¹ Though nature poetry is often considered apolitical, I believe that the task performed by poetry which challenges these fundamental pairs has great potential for encouraging new perceptions and, therefore, may contribute greatly to social change. This paper will look at Oliver's treatment of dichotomous pairs, mainly the pair nature/self, illustrating the discussion with quotes from her most celebrated volume, *American Primitive*.

Ecocriticism

Current environmental problems and an apparently inevitable ecological crisis have made man re-evaluate his relationship with nature. Clearly, man's belief in his independence and superiority, and his resultant abuse of nature, are to blame for the deterioration of our planet.

Many ecocritics have traced the series of events that made man become more alienated from nature, identifying the scientific revolution as one of the main instances that consolidated the breach. According to Garrand, "For both deep ecologists and eco-feminists the view of the universe as a great machine put forward by, among others Francis Bacon (1561-1623), René Descartes (1596-1650) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) represents the decisive blow to the organic universe inhabited by our ancestors" (61). This modern scientific view identified parts in the whole and organised these parts in dichotomous pairs. It fostered the idea that men could get to know the mechanisms of nature completely and, in doing so, could become "masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes qtd. in Garrand 62). Ecocriticism aims to recover the lost unity and, therefore, encourages a vision in which human beings understand their interconnectedness with and dependability on other members of the ecosystem. Ecocriticism is, according to Scott Slovic, "the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text..." (Slovic 160). Ecocriticism, then, as Oliver's poetry, is primarily concerned with the duality nature/self. However, while revising this binary opposition, it also

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1. Though "mind" and "soul" are not interchangeable terms, they will both be considered here as opposites for "the body". They both represent immateriality in contrast to the body's materiality.

inevitably addresses its associated pairs, among them: woman/man, body/soul, matter/spirit.

Born to liberate nature from a subjugated position, ecocriticism is associated with political action. As Loretta Johnson states in her discussion of the different waves and publications in ecocriticism, “some political praxis is still associated with ecocriticism” (8). Although some authors still conceive the need for political action to be overtly explicit, this paper will speak in favor of literary works that challenge the notions on which we base our beliefs and actions, believing that, in these types of work, there is more potential to encourage change than in open admonition.

Mary Oliver and the permeable boundaries of the self

The failure of the attempts to categorize Oliver’s poetry stems principally from the fact that Oliver sees all life as a process continually moving within the two poles implied in a dichotomy and, thus, continually connecting these poles. She cannot, therefore, be associated with only one side of the slashed pair. Oliver does not leave opposites behind by finding a new paradigm, instead, she disarms opposites by thinking of them as not being mutually exclusive and restrictive, but permeable.

The treatment of traditional dichotomies in Oliver’s poetry may be compared to the way in which H el ene Cixous transforms oppositions into mere differences helping to disinter the repressed terms. As Andermatt Conley explains: “Reasoning in dialectics that requires the death of one term so that the other can live is thus, in a strong sense, deconstructed, its genesis exposed”(149). According to Slovic’s definition quoted above, ecocriticism makes use of a wide range of methods in order to perform its task. While this paper will not look at length into Cixous’s deconstruction of binary oppositions, it is important to mention how her vision relates to Mary Oliver’s poetry, for they share similar concepts. Being used to thinking in dualistic terms, we may find it impossible to do away with binary pairs altogether. However, a way to disarm these dyads may be, precisely, to think of traditionally opposite terms as mere differences, which are necessarily interconnected heterarchically, rather than hierarchically, and to let both elements in the pair have a voice. This is precisely what Cixous advocates, and what Oliver performs in her poetry.

FIRST DICHOTOMY

nature/self

(Romantic and not)

Oliver seems to be faithful to the original tendency of Romanticism to reunite the self with nature. However, the terms of this reunion seem to be different for her than they were for canonical Romantic male writers such as Wordsworth and Keats. Though these writers approached nature in search of unity, nature for them soon became the experience that triggered self-consciousness and imagination, bringing the focus back to what was “human” in this experience. As Janet McNew states, “most male Romantic nature poetry is about achieving an identity that transcends nature” (McNew 75). This process is very different in Oliver’s poetry. She seems to be willing to “merge” with nature, simply because of the joy of this experience in itself. As the creature that she is, she rejoices in the intrinsic bond that connects her with all other beings, for it brings happiness, rest, and a feeling of completion. In the poem “August”, the narrator refers to the sensual joy of eating the blackberries which swell in the woods. The “thick paw of [her] life dart[s] among / the black bells, the leaves” (lines 12–13), and her “body/accepts what it is” (lines 9–10). This action of “eating wildly” or “eating in the wild” grants her the pleasure to experience her own wilderness.

In Oliver’s poetry the unity with nature is always accessible by means of the senses, which are doors to the communion with the “natural other”. By means of her senses, the poet awakens the creature that she is, and perceives the connection with other creatures. Several poems in *American Primitive* refer to “eating”, as can be exemplified by “The Fish”. In this poem, by eating the fish, the speaker consummates the merging with this creature. The “natural other” and the self become a unity, which is in turn susceptible of further future mergings.

I opened his body and separated
the flesh from the bones
and ate him. Now the sea
is in me: I am the fish, the fish
glitters in me; we are
risen, tangled together, certain to fall
back to the sea. ...(lines 11–17)

All of us being creatures, the human being can also be the one that seemingly “disappears”, dissolving itself in the merging. In fact, this dissolution, which clearly shows our belonging to a greater “natural whole”, is evident in the prelude and the end of all existence. In Oliver’s poetry, feeling the fluid boundaries of the self seems something to long for. In “The Sea”, the narrator who is swimming senses how her bones “long to give up the long trek/inland, the brittle/beauty of understanding,/and dive,/and simply/become again a flaming body/of blind feeling” (lines 21–27). It seems that there are times when even that which is human wants to give up humanity in order to return to the “insucking genesis, that/roaring flamboyance, that/perfect/beginning and/conclusion of our own” (lines 32–36).

There is in Oliver no fear at the prospect of dissolving individual consciousness, and this is probably so because she conceives of the movement between self and nature as fluid. There is no denial of her human consciousness, and there is no fear at departing from it temporarily as much as it is possible. Her human condition implies this interrelation with nature and the possibility to be immersed, albeit momentarily, in the connection with “the natural other”. One thing does not exclude the other.

As Kirstin Hotelling Zona explains in her essay “‘An attitude of noticing’: Mary Oliver’s Ecological ethic” both critics that disapprove of Oliver, concluding that she despises human consciousness (for instance, Gyogi Voros, qtd. in Hotelling Zona 126), and those who praise the fact that she can leave behind this human consciousness to connect with “the natural other” (Laird Christensen and Vicki Graham, qtd. in Hotelling Zona 123), have something in common. In both cases their positions exemplify the fact that critical discourse is still “at times constrained by the very oppositions it strives to bridge” (Hotelling Zona 123). Both positions stress individual consciousness as an impediment for the poet’s merging with nature. Oliver, however, does not seem to think about it in this way. While consciousness, in a sense, delimits the boundaries of the self, it also enables the self to actively stretch these boundaries in order to perceive the connection with “the others”. Consciousness is not done away with, it is momentarily suspended. It no longer holds the main focus, but it moves to the background to allow a different type of experience to take place.

“I know many lives worth living”, says Oliver in “Humpbacks” (60), and so she allows herself the possibility not only to contemplate these lives, but to go as far as possible in imagining what existence might feel like from these bodies, to imagine what these beings may think or say in their particular language. Greg Garrard tells us that canonical Romantic

poet William Wordsworth is “on the whole, far more interested in the relationship of non-human nature to human mind than he is in nature in and for itself” (Garrard 43). This is not so for Oliver. Nature has intrinsic value beyond the human being that contemplates it. For Oliver, all beings, animate and inanimate, have a soul and a voice and she longs to listen to what they say. True, in the end, it will always be the self listening, and putting what she hears and sees down in words. But Oliver does whatever she can to become quiet, and to see and hear what other creatures experience.

Oliver’s poetry does not refer to Nature as something “pretty” or benevolent. Nothing could be further from Oliver’s goal to relate to nature in all its beauty and horror. Violence and death are not left out of the picture, for “we keep ourselves alive,/if we can, taking one after another /the necessary bodies of others” (lines 20–23) (“Cold Poem”). Oliver perceives how creatures such as the crow and the owl relate to each other through death and destruction:

How the crows
dream of you, caught at last
in their black beaks. ...
Feathers
falling from your breast like leaves,
and your eyes two bolts
of lightning gone to sleep. (line 2–4, 6–9)
 (“In the Pine Woods, Crow and Owl”)

Oliver does her best to take nature in its beauty and its cruelty, and she does not fear loosening the grip on the self in an attempt to merge with “the natural others”, and to listen to what they have to say. This approach is entirely in consonance with the earth-centred vision advocated by ecocriticism.

ASSOCIATED DICHOTOMIES

*woman/man, passive/active modes of engagement
(Feminist and not)*

Parallel to the dichotomous pair nature/self, is the pair woman/man. Traditionally associated with nature and irrationality, “the feminine” has long stood for passivity, while man has been regarded as the rational active element subduing nature and women. Being born within this mythical

narrative, it is no wonder that women have felt the need to break their symbolic association with nature in an attempt to free themselves from dominance, and exercise their legitimate powers.

Feminist critics such as Margaret Homans have, therefore, insisted that a “‘feminine tradition’ in visionary poetry must turn away from myths that associate women with nature.” (qtd. in McNew 60). It is along these lines that some critics have argued that Oliver’s poetry, which presents a feminine subject merging with nature, puts women at risk. However, consistent with her treatment of dichotomies, Oliver does not conceive of nature as purely active or passive. Activity and passivity are simply roles that can be played alternately. Nature is both active and passive, and, therefore, the association with nature presents no danger of submission for women.

As “Cold poem”, quoted above, exemplifies, the self (and any other creature) may at times play an active role, even to the extent of exercising power over the others, taking their lives to subsist. In the same way, however, there is no negative connotation in deciding to become temporarily passive. Observant passivity is often celebrated as this is the attitude that makes “receiving” the gifts of nature possible. In the poem quoted below, the poet becomes wilfully passive while floating in the pond all night.

I want to flow out
across the mother
of all waters,
I want to lose myself
on the black
and silky currents,
yawning,
gathering
the tall lilies
of sleep. (lines 27–36 “White Night”)

In Janet McNew’s words, what Oliver does in her poetry is not so much “to defy patriarchal boundaries as to ignore their defining powers” (McNew 68). Once again, Oliver does not feel restricted by traditional dichotomies. She cannot wholly escape them, but she can disregard their traditionally coercive force. By doing so, she is less restricted by the power of dual oppositions.

body/soul, body/mind
(*Spiritual and not*)

In Oliver's poetry, the most sensuous physical experience is also the most spiritual, and in this way she manages, once again, to reunite seemingly opposite elements: body and soul. It is only through the body that the experience of unity with "the others" can be felt, and it is only through the body that the self may feel the revelation of being part of a system greater than himself. The body is, in Oliver's poetry, the door that grants access to the mind and the soul. In "The Plum Trees," richness flows "through the branches of summer and into/the body, carried inward on the five/rivers" of the senses (line 2-4). This great sensual inundation brings disorder and astonishment to the thoughts, and the heart "cries/for rest," but Oliver advises the reader not to renounce sensual delight: "There's nothing/so sensible as sensual inundation. Joy/is a taste before/it is anything else" (line 6-10). Her final piece of advice reads:

Listen,
the only way
to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it
into the body first, like small
wild plums. (line 12-16)

Oliver's spirituality seems to be closer to ancient paganism and to Asian religions than to the Judeo-Christian tradition. For Oliver, all natural beings, all natural objects, have a spirit; body and spirit go together, they inevitably imply one another. Animals, for example, have a soul while at the same time they retain the bodies and instincts that make them earthly creatures. They can at the same time be creatures of the earth and of heaven, for, in consonance with Oliver's general vision, earth and heaven are not mutually exclusive. The poem "Bluefish" pictures fish as angels bearing a message, while at the same time it portrays them as hungry and "open mouthed./charging/like small blue/tigers after/some schooling/minnows, darkening/the water, ripping it to shreds" (line 16-23). She asks, "Have you ever wondered/where the earth/tumbles beyond itself/and heaven begins?" (line 24-27). These bluefish are at one and the same time, "immaculate" (line 39) and "meat-eaters" (line 40).

Oliver loves the natural world and takes it for what it is. Love of the world begins with love of the body and the sensual relation it can establish with nature. The recognition of and merging with the other becomes, then,

simultaneously physical and spiritual. Oliver's stand can be compared to that of panpsychism, which is advocated by some ecocritics, such as Freya Matthews. Matthews sees in panpsychism a way to recover the unity of man and nature that was present in ancient animist myths before the pre-Socratics and that can be found in the non-western philosophies of Taoism and Indigenous Australia.

"Christianity ...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it was God's will that man exploit nature for the proper ends" (White 10). For panpsychism, on the contrary, "the universe is a kind of 'cosmic self,' 'a unified, though internally differentiated and dynamic expanding plenum'" (Mathews qtd. in Rigby). What is more, the world is a "nexus of communication" and matter, though not always intentionally and certainly not unambiguously, bears a message. If matter is recognised as having a spirit and bearing a message, then the relation that humans will establish with it is most likely not to be one of domination, but rather "an erotic encounter", "a mutual opening of the one to the other" (Rigby).

Conclusion

Mary Oliver's poetry develops visions of the self, nature, woman, body and soul that go beyond dual oppositions. Her poetry seems to put into action the deconstruction of dual oppositions advocated by Cixous by transforming oppositions into mere non-restrictive differences. Oliver gives voice to the traditionally marginalised elements in the dyads and considers each element as heterarchically related to each other. In doing so, her poetry contributes greatly to the earth-centred approach advocated by ecocriticism.

Considering what happened with the first scholarly attempts to categorise Oliver's poetry, ecocritics should be careful not to easily disregard literary works which do not fall neatly into categories, particularly when it is precisely these traditional categories which they are seeking to question. Another danger that can be easily perceived while reading ecocriticism is some critics' insistence on political activism, believing that any work that wants to be considered ecocritical should make overt admonitions to the reader and should urge action. While action is undoubtedly necessary if we intend to prevent a major ecological crisis, I believe that it is quite unlikely that true engagement with a new vision may occur as a consequence of admonition. A new and genuine perception of nature must occur for new modes of relating with the "natural other" to follow. Poetry such as that of Oliver, which does not seem to be at first sight radical (no overt ecological propaganda and no overt feminist agenda can

be traced), is easily disregarded as not being political. However, this poetry performs a significant task decentring the essential dichotomies on which modern thought has been based. It is only by looking at and reformulating the foundations of our Western thought that true change may occur. “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (White 8).

Poetry that may lead us to genuinely perceiving our connection with “the natural others,” plays an important role in helping us to understand our existence as interdependent on a greater ecological whole, and to proceed in consequence.

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BIOGRAPHY

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