"Emerson, I am trying to live […] the examined life"
The Transcendentalist Poet Mary Oliver

Emma Charlotte Weiher

ABSTRACT: Even after her passing in 2019, Mary Oliver's poetry continues to soothe and inspire her readers. Celebrated for her mindful and meditative poetic responses to the natural world, her name has been linked to literary movements such as American Transcendentalism and Romanticism. This article traces such Transcendentalist thought in selected works by Mary Oliver through comparisons made to Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul and the position of the poet as presented by both writers. Through this examination, Mary Oliver emerges as a Neo-transcendentalist poet who manages to create an impersonal relation to the natural world and her speakers in it, thereby formulating a new and necessary conception of the interconnectedness between the environment and humanity's place in it.

KEYWORDS: Mary Oliver; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Contemporary Poetry; Transcendentalism

The poem is not the world.
It isn't even the first page of the world.

But the poem wants to flower, like a flower.
It knows that much.

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

(Mary Oliver "Flare")

Introduction

Even after Mary Oliver's passing in 2019, her poetry has not dwindled in popularity but has rather grown in influential and inspirational value.[1] Her most extraordinary and widely-read poems continue to be included in anthologies or cited in lists of America's favorite poems and intoned in times of widespread agitation and unease. Oliver has been credited with the ability to ease, inspire, and comfort, as well as encourage a return to mindfulness and meditative

[1] This popularity has been highlighted in the obituary published in *The Guardian s*hortly after her death as well as through numerous posthumous publications such as the comprehensive collection of her major poems in *Devotions* and virtual readings of her poems by well-known public figures like Helena Bonham-Carter (Parini; "Helena Bonham Carter")

responses to the natural world.[2] In this particular aspect, her speaker-poet walks in the literary and philosophical footsteps introduced by the Transcendentalist writer and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. Besides their similar philosophies, this particular literary heritage is also found in direct echoes and references – such as in "Sand Dabs" and lists made by her naming that "innumerable, fortifying company" of literary ancestors and influences (Oliver *Winter Hours* 20, qtd. in Johnson 88). Oliver has also contributed to the critical reception of Transcendentalist writing, namely in her introduction to *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* in 2000, in which she rejected definitions of the movement as a unified and singular philosophy. Her argument falls in line with Emerson's own inhibitions towards categorization (cf. Oliver *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* xiv). Despite these inhibitions, Oliver has been categorized as more than a mere imitator of Transcendentalist thought; she had also been labeled an eco-poet by Todd LeVasseur, for example, and even called "American poetry's contemporary mystic" (Davis 607).[3]

Oliver's position and significance, then, are marked by her relation to former writers, most of them belonging to the Romantic and Transcendentalist tradition of North American nature writing. Taking into consideration both Oliver's overt references to Emerson's writings and philosophies and the hesitancy towards rigid categorization, I make the argument for Mary Oliver as a Neo-Transcendentalist poet. The following article will first capture and relate Emerson's notion of his Over-Soul to Oliver's embodiment of the three-fold notion of God-Man-Nature in her own poetry, before taking a closer look at Oliver's acts of observation and noticing in terms of Emerson's transparent eyeball. Finally, in order to substantiate a less restrictive categorization, I will view Oliver's format of the prayer poem as an expression of her individual spirituality on the grounds of her status as a Neo-Transcendentalist poet.

The Poet's Purpose and Position after Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson's "Over-Soul" and Oliver's Soul Searching

Emerson's essay "The Over-Soul" aims to characterize the uniting force and soul at the core of existence "whose source is hidden" (2). Similarly, Oliver's poetry calls attention to "our larger self," as noted by critic Lard Christensen, and embodies her continuous engagement with the force that resides beyond a singular, human self (Christensen 140). It is this soul –

[2] Cf. the referenced obituary which describes her poem "Sleeping in the Forest" as "something comforting [as is the case with] almost all of Oliver's poems, even the darkest ones."

[3] American Transcendentalism is best defined as a literary and intellectual movement of the 1830s and 1840s which centered on Ralph Waldo Emerson and numerous other key figures from New England, among them Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. The movement's intellectual basis argued for an understanding of the individual as self-reliant and critical towards society which ultimately fueled Fuller's 1845 feminist manifesto *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* (cf. Buell xiii, 2006). In this paper, specifically, the implicit and explicit responses to Transcendentalist thought in Oliver's works are directly linked to Emerson's main ideas regarding the poet and their relation and responsibility towards the world.

expressed and sought after by both poets – that is formulated as being present in every living thing. At the core of both writers' engagement lies their perceived relation to the world as both negotiate their (limited) perception of Nature and its underlying force.[4] Both are convinced that "holiness is visible, entirely" (Oliver *Devotions* 5). Oliver's poetic speaker recognizes the divine as being inextricably linked to the act of seeking and visibility – if one chooses to engage with the visible that is – like Emerson's characterization of "a surprised spectator" who receives "visions […] from some alien energy" (Emerson "The Over-Soul" 3).

Both writers then agree in their belief in God's presence in Nature and its untraceable origin, as "there is no proof of the soul. / But isn't the return of spring and how it / springs up in our hearts a pretty good hint?" (Oliver "Whistling Swans" 6). In the same poem, Oliver – ever the true Romantic – accepts the limits of human knowledge in recognition of the divine and immediately celebrates that very fact: The speaker knows that "God's silence never breaks, but is / that really a problem?" (6). Her search for God remains colored by humility and patience and presents less of an ambitious search for intrinsic truth than the recognition of its nebulous presence that is felt but never concretely expressed (and if so, in myriad shapes and forms). This surety of a divine presence, and the speaker's humility in the face of it, marks Mary Oliver as an Idealist and Romantic after Emerson (cf. Oliver *Devotions* 3). For example, in Oliver's "I Wake Close to Morning," dedicated to the morning hours, the speaker laments the common need for "God's identity papers" – that is, the exact and definable nature of divinity – in the face of the humble acknowledgement that "the darkness opening into morning / Is more than enough." (Oliver *Devotions* 3).

For an Emersonian idealist like Mary Oliver, there is no need for empirical research in the observation of Nature and its expression of the Sublime or the presence of a higher being. At the root of her poetry lies the simple recognition of limited perspective and the arising confidence and peace that such a reassurance brings forth. Accordingly, the speaker admits that she does not "know what God is. / I don't know what death is. / But I believe they have between them / some fervent and necessary arrangement" (Oliver *Devotions* 104). What Oliver here terms a "necessary arrangement" can be found in Emersonian terms recalling "that unity; that Over-Soul" which binds Man, Nature, and God (Emerson "Over-Soul" 3). More specifically, he likens it to "that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the *worship*" (3, emphasis added). Here, Emerson introduces the key aspect of worship and praise – all of which originate in the recognition of a glorious source and presence within all things. In "This Morning," Oliver depicts "a simple / neighbourhood event" in the frame of miracles (Oliver *Devotions* 4). The daily and common event of eggs hatching – emblematic of birth and the natural cycle – is worthy enough of worship and perceived and framed as a miraculous

[4] In this article I will capitalize terms that were key in Emerson's definition of his Over-Soul and overall cosmology in order to differentiate between his particular understanding of these terms and a more general use of such terms. Terms such as Nature, Revelation or Man, when capitalized, directly reference Emerson's usage of these terms in his writings (cf. "The Over-Soul" and "Nature").

event. A core principle expressed by Emerson in *Nature*, which dictates both writers' views on life and death, is the belief that one and all is "part or particle of God" (Emerson "Nature" 36).

A direct echo of this can be found in Oliver's musings on decay as well as the acknowledgment of her death especially, in her poem "Gravel". In it, she proclaims that "everything is participate. / Everything is a part of the world […] / and then it is dust. / Dust at last." (*The Leaf and the Cloud* 39). This final line speaks to her inherent spiritual peace and resignation to life as well as its shadows and negations. Behind this resignation lies the belief in the "oneness with all, and the corresponding loss of self" which is met with fear and consternation by Emerson but allows Oliver to express a desire "to merge with an awe-full nature" (Johnson 81). This notion extends beyond the poem and its specific lines but allows, as Oliver herself has remarked, that "no poem is about one of us, or some of us, but is about all of us" (*Blue Pastures* 109). Emerson originally expressed the soul's presence in each thing as the notion that "within man is the soul of the whole […] to which every part and particle is equally related" ("Over-Soul" 3). Given the somber tone of "Gravel" and its conscious confrontation with the speaker's own death, the implied loss of the speaking and observing self must "baffle modern skeptics," according to Johnson (95). In the same breath, however, both Oliver and Emerson express a consolation in the form of *vanitas* in their shared recognition of the Over-Soul and "some larger significance, even if we cannot fully know it" (Johnson 95).

Despite this belief in the soul's and God's presence in each thing, both writers are equally aware that the poet must ultimately fail due to human limitations of understanding and expression. Emerson, in one of his more humble moments, speaks only of his ability "to report what hints I have collected of the transcendent simplicity and energy of the Highest Law" ("Over-Soul" 3). His resulting rhetoric and lyrical expression, even before its inception, is imbued with this knowledge of its limitation. And yet, alongside this admission lies the mission of Emerson's poetry: The recognition of not ever being able to know and discern completely the world beyond and even within the self. Instead, it is the attempt to express that truth and divine force that lies in every living thing. In this, both participate in the decidedly Romantic "adventure of not knowing" (Johnson 81).

In her attempts to express that truth, Mary Oliver opts for simplicity in language and register rather than the more stinted rhetoric of original Transcendentalist writing. Above all else, Oliver must speak in conversational and didactic terms in order to fulfil that desired effect of epiphany at the end of each of her poems. Oliver's much-quoted epiphanies and emblematic lines are equated with Emerson's term of Revelation in which "we distinguish the announcement of the soul, its manifestations of its own nature" ("Over-Soul" 10). Both Oliver's epiphanies and Emerson's call for Revelation are more explicitly expressed as "an influx of the Divine mind into our mind" ("Over-Soul" 10). An exemplary instance of divine inspiration, relayed as an expression of epiphany, appears in Oliver's "Franz Marc's Blue Horses": The observing speaker proclaims, in the face of human creation and creativity, that "maybe the desire to make something beautiful / is the piece of God that is inside each of us." (Oliver *Devotions* 21).

Most of Oliver's revelatory sentences or passages combine an observation made in the natural world that functions as the main focus of a poem and its revealed place and position within the larger framework of her cosmology – which, in essence, speaks to the "necessary arrangement" that Emerson terms the "Over-Soul." Needless to say, both writers engage in highly religious frames and narrations. With regards to Oliver, Emerson himself presents a viable characterization of her faith in its likeness to an attitude of awe: "Everywhere the history of religion betrays a tendency to enthusiasm […] that shudder of awe and delight" ("Over-Soul" 10). Her humility in the face of a divine presence has already been noted, but Oliver's awe in the face of Nature further relies and expands upon that sentiment that is articulated in her essay "Winter Hours" in the collection of the same name:

> I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. But not me. For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple […] I walk in an ascendant relationship to rapture, and with words I celebrate this rapture. I see, and dote upon, the manifest. (Oliver *Winter Hours* 98-9)

Furthermore, the Idealist Mary Oliver exudes Emersonian principles in her "Sand Dabs" poems in which she "challenges modern scepticism" and instills the speaker's observational sphere with the three-fold conception of "The arena of *things*, the theatre of the *imagination*, the everywhere of *faith*," overtly addressing and encompassing the unified notion of the world in its singular parts (original emphasis). The sixth part explicitly recalls Emerson's "Self-Reliance" when the speaker intones that "In order to be the person I want to be, I must strive, hourly, against the drag of others." (Oliver *Winter Hours*). A similar sentiment – a conscious distancing of oneself from the burdens of another – is found in the sixth part of "Flare" in which the speaker rejects the weight left on their shoulders by their parents: "But the iron thing they carried, I will not carry […] I will not give them the responsibility for my life" (Oliver *Devotions* 230). Most instances of such distances established between the speaker-self and a second person within Oliver's poems occur alongside a conscious focus on the natural world. Poems such as "Wild Geese" and the closing stanzas of "Flare" exemplify this process of achieving a more intensive proximity to Nature which often transpires in the midst of human conflict, grief, or loneliness.

In the opening lines of "Sand Dabs," Oliver names Emerson explicitly – thereby inviting a comparative reading of both writers' texts – while she is also engaged in defending herself "against a charge often made against Emerson, that she writes only of a sunny and benign nature." (Johnson 87). According to Oliver's Emersonian Idealist position, she must join the same battle fought by the Romantics; and in this, the writers of American Transcendentalism are united in their reactionary stance against the Enlightenment (cf. Davis 610). The frame of her decidedly Romantic and Idealist attitude is most applicable to her "Mysteries, Yes" in which the speaker confirms that "truly, we live with mysteries too marvellous / to be understood" (Oliver 85). The poem includes her recurring notions of resignation to the unknowable and her innate humility – the effort to "bow [one's] head[…]" (85).

This resignation to the unknown is reiterated in "Flare," a poem in which Mary Oliver bridges the "entry into otherness," a notion that further informs her treatment of the observing speaker-self within her poems and also introduces her self-aware position as a poet recalling and capturing Nature through poetry. The speaker, faced with their own hurtful and inhibiting memories as well as the onslaught of loneliness, advises themselves and the reader to "go into the fields, consider / the orderliness of the world" (Oliver *Devotions* 232). The loneliness felt through the absence of human contact (or the disappointment felt at the hands or lack of it) allows the speaker to open themselves to "stare hard," to "let grief be your sister" and finally, "rise up from the stump of sorrow, and be green also, like the diligent leaves" (232). The concluding paragraphs foresee an eradication of the self and the active search after everything that lies beyond it. In Oliver's own words, her vision, which the poet is waiting to receive, "transcends the actual," which is the observed world and culminates in the nourishing "dark bread of the poem" (Oliver qtd. in Johnson 97, Oliver *Devotions* 233). As the speaker disrobes themselves of their individual self and unites with the leaves, the beetle, and the wind, we discern the purpose of the poet, as Emerson attempted to discern it, which is to "live more lives than your own. You can escape your own time, your own sensibility, your own narrowness of vision" (Emerson qtd. in Johnson 97). Furthermore, as Oliver's poem clarifies, the fulfillment of the poet's purpose requires the recognition of the self in the abject other – (the other) which is Nature, which is Death, which is God.[5]

Mary Oliver's "Lens of Attention"

Emerson and Oliver both engage in a continuous conversation that takes place between the natural world and the poet in it. In "The Over-Soul," the Transcendentalist names that "reality […] which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand" and recalls the poet as a part and therefore expression of the Over-Soul as the natural extension of Nature (3). The essential purpose of the poet is to engage with the world and recapture it into thought and hand. The means and methods through which this purpose is articulated, in the cases of both poets, are conscious acts of observation and noticing. Oliver's poetry has aptly been characterized by a "dynamic curiosity, what she calls 'an attitude of noticing'" (Swann xiv). Most of her poems link the two core aspects of the speaker-poet and the non-human-object through the process of her noticing. The natural world, as represented within a singularity of its essence – herons, wild geese, snakes on the road, a pond – "stretch the skin of the speaker's being beyond it situated, conscious self" (Hotelling Zona 125).

Oliver is not the first to do this, understandably, as Lawrence Buell names the "aesthetics of relinquishment" as one of the key themes in American nature writing, more specifically

[5] All of these embodiments of Otherness in Oliver's poetry culminate in those aspects and fields which the speaker is ignorant of, as formulated in "Sometimes": "I don't know what God is. / I don't know what death is" (Oliver 104). The Other is first and foremost that which we cannot grasp, understand or even know. While such a prospect might fill some with fear, Mary Oliver actively chooses a joyful and humbled approach to this resignation to the unknowable.

defined as "the collapse of the distance between the subject and object" (Buell 144). Considering Buell's critical focus on American Transcendentalist writing, this relinquishment is particularly linked to those "optical metaphors" so often attributed to Thoreau and Emerson. We find this relinquishment in Thoreau's "sauntering of the eye," Emerson's "humbling of the ego before the natural" world through his transformation into a "transparent eyeball" and, finally, in Mary Oliver's "lens of attention" (Thoreau 99 and Emerson *Nature and Selected Essays* 39; Oliver *Devotions* 406). All of these cases – which essentially form a single action in three varying ways – require a "fluidity of borders, especially the borders between bodies" and the observed, surrounding world (Davis 615). Additionally, this seamless transgression of borders encourages the conceptualization of an inherently unified world. This unity, this Over-Soul which Oliver attempts to encompass through the act of looking, requires one—similar to Emerson's position on the heath—to "not just stand […] around, but stand […] around / as though with your arms open" (Oliver *Devotions*186). In this highly receptive attitude of noticing, one can clearly discern Emerson's idea of man's position within Nature as the observer and spectator who "put[s] [him]self in the *attitude of reception*" ("Over-Soul" 3, emphasis added).

However, Emerson's human observer, unlike Oliver's speaker, takes a more passive stance within the natural world and is merely poised to receive. Oliver's "attitude of noticing" highlights a more active presence on the part of the observer who consciously adopts a position of noticing and acknowledgment (Hotelling Zona 123). This particular position expresses a close link to the notion and necessity of attention in Oliver's poems and worldview. It is always her speaker's choice to look and single out minutiae and singular details as part of natural phenomena – her so-called "miracles" (cf. "Logos"). Not so with Emerson's "reception" (experienced by the poet), who only has to stand and allow Nature to affect him. The act of seeing and looking is required of both of them, but while Emerson remains a transparent eyeball – essentially a vessel, Oliver's speaker "looks so intensely that things become […] entryways into vision […] Here is the voice of high Romanticism in our time" (Johnson 85).

Both observers are aided in their act of reception and looking through the Revelation, as marked by Emerson, and the "gift" of "imagination" as noted by Oliver: "It's in the imagination / with which you perceive / this world." (Oliver *Devotions* 332). This guiding quality appears remarkably close to the paragraph in Emerson's essay which speaks of an "alien energy" from which "the visions come" and aids the observing poet in the act of reception. However, Mary Oliver is more inclined to state and describe her receptive noticing and active looking in exact terms. In "Yes! No!" she reminds us "how important it is to walk along, not in haste but slowly, / looking at everything and calling out" (Oliver 264). Herein lies an active engagement with Nature and the recognition of its necessity.

When speaking of Oliver it is still relevant to acknowledge how the poet embodies the "transparent eye-ball". Like Emerson, she discerns and characterizes her observing self. In the prose poem "How I Go to the Woods," the speaker expresses this embodiment of

transparency through invisibility: "when I am alone I can become invisible. I can sit / on the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of weeds, / until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing" (Oliver 64). It is this moment of solitude that brings forth the ability to embody an ego-less, self-less, and almost body-less presence in which only the act of observation matters and must remain as the sole means of engaging with the world. Through this transpires an act of "self-abandon" which encapsulates both the observation made by the speaker-poet and her "own presence as an observer" (Hotelling Zona 124).

Mary Oliver recalls this abandonment of the self-centered speaker through her writing. Here she highlights meditative responses and the conscious treatment of the individual self and its relation to others. Each of her poems reads like a love-letter to both her encounters within the natural world and her fellow companions (most of which are small animals such as her dogs). This intimacy imbues her poetry with tenderness and a compassionate, empathetic attitude – a quality that expands on and humanizes the more self-reliant eyeball of Emerson's. In one of her poems in her *Dog Poems* collection, "Percy (Nine)," Oliver further distances herself from traditional Transcendental thought while simultaneously recalling her debt to it (34). The speaker engages in a form of anti-intellectualism through the adoption of the dog's perspective as a means to escape a more rigid, decidedly Emersonian approach: "Emerson, I am trying to live, / as you said we must, the examined life. / But there are days I wish / there was less in my head to examine" (34). On observing her companion, the speaker ponders: "How would it be to be Percy, I wonder, not / thinking, not weighing anything, just running forward" (34). This daydream implies a desired distance from the feverishly verbose intellectualism that is intrinsic to much of Emerson's works. While both writers credit simplicity of life and rural pragmatism, Oliver is the one to actively reject a self-conscious and self-centered (decisively phallocentric) worldview.

The question remains as to whether this decidedly non-human perspective is the antithesis of the transparent eyeball or its very realization. What remains is the recognition that the human speaker must be abandoned, a notion that goes against the more self-conscious poets and speakers in most other contemporary poetry (cf. Hotelling Zona 127). Emerson hints at this in his passage depicting "the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object" as one ("Over-Soul" 3). Therefore, the poet appears both in Oliver and in Emerson as being intrinsically linked – and, in essence, equal to – the world surrounding them and their vision of it. More remarkably, in Oliver's "From the Book of Time," the speaker longs for an instance in which humankind is absent and declares that that very vision "the world, without us, / is the real poem" (*Devotions* 234). Here, too, is perhaps the most striking difference to Emersonian principles of Self-Reliance.

Mary Oliver's Androgyny

Up to this point, I have not yet explored Mary Oliver's status as a gender-neutral poet. With regards to her poetry and the philosophies explored so far, all of which have been considered

on Emersonian principles, I would like to focus on the poetess' process of erasing herself, consciously rejecting the "He" so often invoked by Emerson in "The Poet". Mary Oliver herself has made numerous references towards a conception of a genderless speaker and self that wanders and observes throughout her poems. She does this without explicit rejections of gender but rather through pleas towards a universal speaker who ideally becomes "the exemplum of the general" and can manifest as any person who relates to them (*A Poetry Handbook* 80). In this vein, Oliver initiates a conceptual and implicitly gendered dialogue with Emerson through poems such as "Each and All" and "The Kitten," "Stones," and "Turtle". Both speak of a desire to pick up and own any physical evidence of their encounters and thereby possess them. This desire, however, is mitigated by the knowledge of pure possession, and in Emerson's case, is only realized after the object has already been taken. In its culminating lines, "Each and All" shows the speaker bringing home a bird, along with its nest. Then comes the quick realization that "it pleases not now, / For I did not bring home the river and sky" (Buell 450). Both poets seek to recapture and retain a singular effect that a particle of Nature has shown them. Both also realize that "each and all" do have their specific place of belonging, but Emerson, in a perhaps strikingly masculine act, requires a possessive act of power first.

Here is the paradox that is only hinted at in Emerson but that comes to fruition in Oliver's worldview of absolute interrelatedness, connected to what Zona has termed her "interbeing," and the loss of self within that relation.[6] It requires a complete abnegation of self to come to the conclusion of so many of Oliver's poem. Such a loss of the speaker-self and the absence of the poet in the reading of her poetry allows each reader to "bring to the poem, to the moving pen, a world of echoes" (Oliver *Blue Pastures* 109). In an attempt to bridge the self and the Other, Oliver makes continuous "use of metaphor […] invok[ing] human consciousness as both barrier *and* bridge between the poet's eye and the world it observes" (Hotelling Zona 124-6).

The meaning behind many of Oliver's poems is expressed in her very final, culminating stanzas that explore the universal meaning behind singular phenomena. In these epiphanies, Oliver reveals the metaphor's meaning and purpose and articulates another quality within that "necessary arrangement" (cf. "The Swan"). Even Oliver's shorter poems are remarkable for their choice of perceived objects that she singles out to include and highlight. Small animals like the heron or any other natural phenomena for that matter are often emblematic of the speaker's inner life and reflections and appear only as ordinary events – like the wild geese heading home (cf. "Wild Geese"). Critics of her poetry have also noted that the poet finds Emersonian "revelation of the wonderful in the apparently ordinary" (Levertov 491). Within this process of projecting the self onto a larger, emblematic Other, the poet reveals a tender love for and joy over that which transpires and exists beyond the speaker-self (cf. Davis 618,

[6] Here, Zona uses the term "interbeing" in reference to the interconnectedness experienced and articulated between Oliver's speakers and their external world. It is also a term that can be loosely applied to Emerson's own concept of the "Over-Soul" which views the self and the surrounding world as a single, interconnected unit.

cf. Oliver *Devotions* 76). Due to this love, joy, and delight at the sight of the natural world and at the felt presence within it, Oliver continuously expresses in her poems "a longing to merge, unconscious, with the earth and stones and pond-mud she loves" (Doty 267, cf. "Kingdom").

This, however, is not entirely new in the Transcendentalist tradition, as both Thoreau and Emerson refer at times to the joy of "merging with nature" (Johnson 80). Oliver here demonstrates a radicalization of Emerson's transparent observer in the form of "self-sundering," only to appear as "the empty, waiting, pure, speechless receptacle" (Hotelling Zona 126, Oliver *Devotions* 215). Throughout her quest of observation and noticing, the poet refers to a very consistent, wandering and observing, receptive "I" in her poems – an "I" whose identity remains as nebulous and unspecific as possible. In numerous interviews, Oliver has also "insisted that she had always tried not to speak from a specific sex so that any reader can enter her work" (Johnson 79).[7] It is precisely this gender– and sexless persona which arises from her poems that allows for an abandonment of the poetic self.

Mary Oliver's (Neo-) Transcendentaliscalit Poetry

Mary Oliver's Spirituality and Prayer-Poems

Any casual reader perusing a few of Oliver's poems will detect her innate spirituality in almost all of her writing, combined with and articulated through her poetic speaker's constant attention to the divine and the miracles of ordinary life. Oliver's acts of noticing and acute attention to the natural world, along with her minute observations, mirror the Christian perception of attention "that resembles or in some cases is identical to prayer" (Eggemeier 59-60). This poem as prayer – and observation as a spiritual exercise no less – culminates in what Davis has described as Oliver's "progressive cosmology" which positions God's own body within the folds of Nature (607). This aspect is intrinsically linked to Oliver's insistence on observation and meditative sojourns in Nature, when, for instance, the speaker implores the reader to "sit now / very quietly / in some lovely wild place, and listen / to the silence. / And I say that this, too, / is a poem" (Oliver *Devotions* 74). At any point, her engagement with the world transpires at once through her "attitude of noticing" and her direction towards the divine within that observable field. All of these deeply spiritual engagements are formulated in sacramental terms, resembling prayer in its essence and resulting in a poem in its final lyrical form (cf. Eggemeier 65). After having described the purpose of her poems as the attempt to fully engage with the natural world through observation and meditation, an enlightened and attentive reading of her best poems would, ideally, be "able to reach beyond ourselves" (Oliver qtd. in Hotelling Zona 130).

[7] For instance, in her interview with Tippett she explains her use of the "I" in her poems: "I wanted the 'I' to be the possible reader, rather than about myself. It was about an experience that happened to be mine, but could well have been anybody else's." (Oliver qtd. In Tippett).

This reaching beyond the self ultimately comprises an act of prayer. One of her most overt engagements with the nature of prayer – and the search after it – can be found in her poem "I Happened to Be Standing." After conceding to their ignorance ("I don't know where prayers go, / or what they do") the speaker muses on animals' ability to pray, before recalling moments of "full / self-attendance. A condition I can't really / call being alive" (Oliver 46). In spite of the poem's shifting gazes upon both animals and the speaker's human nature, all linked by the question after true prayer ("Is a prayer a gift, or a petition, / or does it matter?"), it recognizes the possibility and validity of an individual's spiritual conviction and belief. In the last stanza, the speaker distances themselves from the business of others' religion and belief systems and chooses to actively engage with the matter that is closest at hand and most intimate: "the wren's singing" and realizes, for themselves only, which is enough, "what could this be / if it isn't a prayer?" Here, the poet negotiates the necessity of didactic rhetoric in terms of a shared spirituality and the more significant and relevant search for individual content. This moment of content—felt in the instance of facing her own liminal space, immediate surroundings, and private visions—relies entirely on individual choice.

Furthermore, in "Poppies" she muses that the mere sight of a field of flowers "is an invitation / to happiness / and that happiness / when it's done right / is a kind of holiness" (Oliver 291-92). Here stands her argument that holiness is a choice and active decision made by the speaker. This holiness "which she locates in the daily workings of the earth—and with gratitude and reverence she has been redeemed by her love for the earth" resembles the joy that is intrinsic to her world-view (Davis 605). This delight is equally linked to the necessary act of observing and noticing, as in her instructions in "Sometimes": "*Pay attention. / Be astonished. / Tell about it."* (Oliver *Devotions* 105, original emphasis). It is this particular love for the earth that triggers categorizations of her poetry as anything ranging from environmental writings to contemporary Christian poetry. Eggemeier here links both labels in his definition of nature writers as primarily formulating the act of attention to nature "as a form of prayer and as a means of encountering God" (56). The critic still categorizes Oliver within the frames of environmental writing and poetry and argues that "to see the natural with contemplative attention is a spiritual act that is not only significant in its own right, but can also serve to engender ethical action in the world" (Eggemeier 56). In this vein, Oliver's ecological spirituality must be considered as the endeavor to encourage practical environmentalist change through highly conceptual and abstract notions of nature.

In her poems of prayer, we find the argument made by Simone Weil in her *Gravity and Grace* which proclaims that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer" (Weil 117). Therefore, as noted by Eggemeier, Mary Oliver "appl[ies] to the natural world Simone Weil's observation" (60). Furthermore, both Weil and Oliver profess a disappearance or loss of the subjective "I" in the face of nature and in the act of praying. The notion of self-abandon in Oliver's poetry, as described in previous chapters, is perpetuated in its extreme version as "this emptying of the self," also termed "Decreation" by Simone Weil. In Oliver's terms, prayer constitutes an

exchange and merging between the natural world and the self, since "this is how you swim inward, / so this is how you flow outward, / so this is how you pray" (Oliver *Devotions* 337).

Furthermore, if one defines prayer as a conversation with God, Mary Oliver's "Six Recognitions of the Lord" (from her most overtly Christian collection *Thirst)* engages in exactly such an dialogue with the force she refers to as God. It is in this poem that Oliver blends the lines and defining limitations of prayer and poetry: With the direct plea towards "Lord God, mercy is in your hands" the speaker speaks to their God in six parts (Oliver *Devotions* 125). This particular notion and formation of a (one-sided) conversation is remarked upon within the poem itself in such lines as "And we enter the dialogue / of our lives that is beyond all under / standing or conclusion" (Oliver *Devotions* 126-27).[8] There is also, with respect to the essence of prayer, the focus on attention: As in Oliver's "Praying" ("just pay attention," *Devotions* 131), "The Summer Day" equals attention to an act of worship or prayer "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention" (Oliver *Devotions* 316). The Other, in this case, constitutes both her natural surroundings and the desired and felt presence of God. Here, again, Buell's exploration of American relinquishment emerges, which in itself appears as an experience and notion that "bears a close resemblance to the experience of mystical union with God in the Christian tradition" (Eggemeier 61). In decidedly spiritual terms, Oliver suggests that "maybe such devotion, in which one holds the world in the clasp of attention, isn't the perfect prayer, but it must be close" (Oliver qtd. in Eggemeier 61). The title of her last publication, *Devotions*, directly speaks to this sacred sensibility that runs through Oliver's poetry.

Expanding on the form of prayer as attention, Oliver also practices forms of tactile prayer in which she proclaims to have "lived so long in the heaven of touch" (Oliver *Devotions* 125). In "The Storm," published in her *Dog Songs,* the speaker credits their own dog with the ability to create a poem, or formulate a sentiment through his movements. In it, the speaker traces the little dog's progress through the snow "until the white snow is written upon / in large, exuberant letters, / a long sentence, expressing / the pleasures of the body in this world. / Oh, I could not have said it better / myself" (*Devotions* 31). The expressed joy of the world's body—and, given Oliver's cosmology, God's body—is here evidenced through the movements of a small animal. In this extreme, prayer is not limited to human action only, but can be projected onto the earth and God's body by any soul-bearing thing in this world. This projection also echoes the border-crossing, "that porous line / where my own body was done with / and the roots and the stems and the flowers / began," as dealt with in "White Flowers" (Oliver *Devotions* 296).

[8] In the same poem, the speaker also addresses God's presence within Nature: "Of course I have always known you are present in the clouds […] But you are present too in the body, listening to the body […] with disembodied joy." (Oliver *Devotions* 126). All of these lines, along with their individual connotations and associations, capture Oliver's general spirituality and are emblematic of her over-arching conception of God-Nature-Observer, bearing strong resemblance to Emerson's Over-Soul.

All of these philosophical endeavors and notions phrased by Oliver constitute a mindfulness that resembles meditative purposes in contemporary poetry as well as self-help books. Along the lines of the latter's universal attempts at generating a philosophy adapted to a certain lifestyle, both Oliver and Thoreau focus on an increased attention during such daily tasks as waking up. Oliver's morning poems constitute her meditative, reflective prayers at the sight of dawn and the waking world with all its sounds and sights, forming a piece of "poetry that can only be described as a fusion of Transcendental, Buddhist, and Christian thought grounded firmly in the earth" (Davis 607). It is this wonder and practice of waking early ("Why I Wake Early") which grounds Oliver as a poet of mindfulness who caters to the uniqueness of every moment and instance—a practice resembling meditation. For Oliver, prayer and meditation essentially strive towards the same end, which is comfort through a return to nature and the world at large. Here we also find the mindfulness sought after and populated in modern self-help publications, inspired by Buddhist practices of mediation and perpetuated and re-framed in such cultural phenomena as the popularity of yoga. Added to these meditative practices stands Oliver's concern with daily spiritual and divine blessings, to which she appears most receptive in the morning: "Sometimes I need / only to stand / wherever I am / to be blessed." (*Devotions* 72*)*. The poet's cosmology and mindful engagement with the world and life is encapsulated in her very aptly titled poem "Mindful," in which the speaker again proclaims the acts of observation and attention to sound and sight, as well as the loss of oneself, as necessary components for an educated mind. The teacher, in this case, appears as "the untrimmable light of the world" and teaches most pointedly through "the prayers that are made / out of grass" ("Mindful" 174).

In her return to the meditative, contemplative and reflective triggers of nature, Oliver responds directly to the overwhelmingly industrialized conception of the natural world and its resources (cf. Eggemeier 67). Needless to say, Oliver is not the first and only poet to have such a reaction, but forms part of a stalwart gathering of writers battling an exploitative view of nature that is deeply entrenched in American history and thus, as a necessary consequence and extension, into American consciousness. Oliver's tender gestures subvert and oppose the original American sin of subjugation and corruption of the earth, its natural resources and native inhabitants (cf. Lillburn 2; Oliver "The Swan"). Writing in more explicitly pragmatic terms, the eco-theologian Thomas Berry laments that contemporary engagement with the natural world is first and foremost seen in terms of profit and in relation to human use (cf Berry 18-19). He can find no general acceptance of the worldview poets such as Mary Oliver showcase, which conceives of nature-engagement mainly "as a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder, beauty and intimacy" and rejects nature's commodified qualities (Berry 18-19). With the increase of industrialization in Emerson's time, this process of commodification was only just beginning. Arguably, the portion that has been living and continues to live in the throes of an "anthropocentric mode of perception" already battles a notion of the earth as sacred. Therefore, any form of writing constitutes an act of

protest against continuous industrialization and erosion of flora and fauna, as well as the abuse of natural resources (Eggemeier 55).

The practical approach to life through the writing and reading of poetry, one which Oliver encourages, however, is rooted in conceptual changes that would allow "[h]er ideal reader" to "emerge a little different, forever, from what he or she had been before" (Oliver *Blue Pastures* 108-9). In this vein, Oliver writes partially didactic poems by offering practical and meditative responses to the natural world and the reader's place in it, inspired by her own individual struggles and aimed to comfort. For example, when suffering the loss of her dog Bazougey, the speaker formulates their grief within conversational terms, engaging with the reader. Through their instructional rhetoric, the speaker asks to "Come with me into the woods" and "see how the violets are opening" and to ponder what such a sight conjures up in the reader (Oliver "Bazougey" 37). Any observable objects and such things as the speaker encounters in the world "describe the significance of the life of attention for the development of a contemplative form of ecology" (Eggemeier 73). In her environmentalist approach, then, Oliver meets all of this with love and a "voice of joy, of true ecstatic fervor," much like Emersonian rapture (Davis 605). She works decidedly against materialism and indulges in the Romantic acceptance of not-knowing and "an incomplete understanding of the world's workings" and remains content and full of "wonder at these workings" (Davis 611). Still, it is purely Mary Oliver who sees that ray of beauty and formulates it as means of transmitting prayer or resembling such an action as: "The world is not just a little thrill for the eyes […] / It's praising. / It's giving until the giving feels like receiving" (Oliver *Devotions* 77).

Transcendentalism after Transcendentalism

I have viewed and analysed the poetry of Mary Oliver in terms of Transcendental thought and those philosophical concepts and notions by Ralph Waldo Emerson, especially those pertaining to poetry and both the speaker's and the poet's position and purpose within Nature. While the first part focused on Oliver's overt Romantic preferences and Transcendentalist echoes after Emerson, and to some extent, Henry David Thoreau, the latter portion argued for a continuation of established literary philosophy as evidenced in Oliver's evolved cosmology and explicit reckoning of the poem as a prayer which is in direct dialogue with God and Nature.

Oliver here joins the ranks of American poets such as Walt Whitman, who respond to Emersonian principles directly and indirectly through their work. Nevertheless, when taking into consideration the already nebulous definitions and varying labels that surround the literary and philosophical movement, I question if one can speak of a purely Transcendentalist poet after Transcendentalism. A direct application seems doomed since Emerson himself opposed this very label. The fact remains, however, that once a movement of such philosophical integrity and influence has been invoked, it is constantly evolving and through this evolution and constant re-adaptation, it continues well into the future. As commonly

stated in literary studies, every piece of writing is an echo and imitation of a former piece of writing.[9] By way of addition or minor changes made to a previously established movement or school of thought, one can introduce the prefix "neo-," which allows for the continuous development of thought given the writer's and poet's specific context. In the previous sections I explored and discerned Mary Oliver's various additions and changes to Emersonian principles; moreover, Mary Oliver herself, in her chapter on "Imitation" invokes the "poetry of the past" in order to further the evolution of any poet's individual and original voice (*Poetry Handbook* 13). The poet here concedes to her Romantic and literary influences, just as she does in her epigraph to *The Leaf and the Cloud* (2000), which cites a passage from John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, speaking of his contempt over the "pathetic fallacy" (cf. Hotelling Zona 129).

And yet, as the previous section has argued, Oliver creates a vision and "hermeneutic" of her own by walking "past the protest of others" which are comprised of poets, theologians and environmentalists who all wish to claim her for themselves (Davis 612, see also LeVasseur 68). She is not as ecologically engaged as LeVasseur has argued since her imperatives and instructional rhetoric are more strongly linked to an individual's perception of the world —the necessary forerunner of any substantial change within a larger community. This aspect, too, paradoxically, mirrors the very hope of Emerson, who equally rejected rigid classification, categorization and definitions (cf. Davis 613). In her rejection of categorization, then, lies Mary Oliver's greatest debt and resemblance to Emerson albeit her readiness to explicitly contextualize her works within the discourse of American Transcendentalism. This rejection is, finally and most explicitly, continued in the poet's continuous and adamantly egalitarian view of the individual value and worth of every living being —as each has its legitimate and necessary "place in the family of things" (Oliver *Devotions* 347).

Conclusion

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mary Oliver, in their poetry as well as in their critical writings, have proposed numerous ways of looking at and engaging with Nature through their attempts to formulate and define that "deepest affinity between [one's] eyes and the world" (Oliver *Devotions* 158). Given her echoes, continuation of and references to Emersonian principles, Mary Oliver has been categorized as a Transcendentalist, Romantic, and eco-poet by various critics and, at the same time, has opposed any rigid categorization of her poetry as either feminist or environmental. An analysis of some of her poems on the grounds of Emersonian thought and concepts such as the Over-Soul and his transformation into a transparent eyeball have proven her explicit mirroring and perpetuation of such previously established notions. In

[9] Cf. Linda Hutcheon's "Historiographic Metafiction. Parody and the Intertextuality of History" (1989). The Canadian literary theorist highlights the interplay between texts within a historical discourse. This interplay is established through allusions and references—be they explicitly or implicitly made.

her own specific soul-searching and "attitude of noticing," Oliver responds to these concepts and adapts them according to her individual lyrical prowess and purpose. Her particular adaptations encourage the reading of her poems as Neo-Transcendentalist thought and employing Neo-Transcendentalist formats, namely that of the prayer poem, in which the act of noticing is equated with direct spiritual contact and closeness.

The question, as introduced by and intoned repeatedly by Emerson and Oliver, remains: How we can change our engagement with poetry and writing in general in order to facilitate a more pragmatic approach to environmental and spiritual changes within a community. While Emerson dictates a strict distinction between Idealist and Materialist individuals, any substantial change should require a tandem between the natural sciences and the humanities. After all, each field contributes to the academic and scientific effort to understand the world with its own significance and different methodology—and through that list of diverse approaches, one could glimpse a version of environmentalism based on longevity and efficiency.[10] Most importantly, however, both Emerson and Oliver posit that any substantial change must originate in the individual—and, more specifically, in the individual's mind and worldview. It is impossible, of course, to demand a radical change in collective and common conceptions, but ongoing encouragements of two-sided conversations that seek to combine, rather than distinguish or separate, are as necessary as ever. This lies at the crux of such Idealistic positions and perceptions that poets such as Mary Oliver and Ralph Waldo Emerson propose, as one must strive for the universal recognition of "everything / as a brotherhood and a sisterhood" (Oliver *Devotions* 285).

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[10] "What wretchedness, to believe only in what can be proven." (Oliver *Devotions* 274).

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