

**Dissolution into the Natural World: An Ecocritical Study of
Mary Oliver's *American Primitive***

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama(*)

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to approach Mary Oliver as a poet who loses herself totally in the larger world around her. The study is an ecocritical investigation into selected poems of *American Primitive*, Oliver's Pulitzer-prize-winning collection (1983). It highlights the poet's infatuation with nature and reveals her means for feeling connected to her natural surroundings. It discusses the poet's skillful manipulation of senses in gaining access to the natural world as well as her use of literary devices in shaping her art and attracting the reader to it. It also sheds light on her descriptive power and mastery in creating settings appropriate to her continuing slippage from one natural element into another. In short, the paper is an attempt to examine Mary Oliver's attitude toward nature in addition to her means for articulating it, which is the heart of a new critical approach referred to as ecocriticism.

* Assistant Professor of English Literature,
Department of Foreign Languages,
Arish Faculty of Education, Suez Canal University

الذوبان في الطبيعة: دراسة نقدية بيئية لديوان البدائي الأمريكي للشاعرة ماري أوليفر

حاتم سلامة صالح سلامة

ملخص

ظهر في الآونة الأخيرة اتجاه نقدي جديد يعرف بالنقد البيئي، وهذا الاتجاه يعنى بمدى ارتباط الكاتب بالطبيعة وقضايا البيئة، وهو يتناول الإنتاج الأدبي للشعراء والروائيين وغيرهم من الأقلام المهتمة بالطبيعة والبيئة. وتعد ماري أوليفر واحدة من الشعراء الأمريكيين المعاصرين غزيري الإنتاج، فقد ولدت أوليفر بولاية كاليفورنيا في عام 1935م واهتمت بالشعر منذ نعومة أظفارها ولها العديد من الدواوين التي تعكس اهتمامها الكبير بالطبيعة والعالم المحيط بها، ويأتي ديوان *البدائي الأمريكي* على رأس هذه الدواوين الشعرية التي تتدرج تحت ما يعرف بالشعر البيئي، وما يجذب انتباه القارئ لهذا الديوان هو أن ولع الشاعرة بالطبيعة يصل بها إلى حد الذوبان في عناصر الطبيعة من حولها إيماناً منها أن العالم الذي يضم كل المخلوقات- من بينها الإنسان- كيان واحد لا يعلو فيه مخلوق على الآخر، وهذا الاعتقاد يجعلها تخلع ثوبها البشري لتجد مكانها بين عناصر الطبيعة المختلفة من حيوانات وطيور وأشجار وأنهار وغير ذلك. ولكي تحقق ماري أوليفر الاتصال بالطبيعة فإنها تارة تلتهم بعض عناصر الطبيعة لكي تحقق رباطاً مادياً بينها وبين الطبيعة وتارة أخرى تتأمل عناصر الطبيعة وتستغرق في تأملاتها حتى يحدث الاندماج العاطفي بينها وبين الطبيعة، وما يزيد من تفاعل أوليفر مع عناصر الطبيعة هو إدراكها أن الإنسان كباقي المخلوقات يتعرض إلى الموت والفناء مما يزيل الحواجز بينها وبين العالم من حولها. والهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تناول بعض قصائد ديوان *البدائي الأمريكي* بالدراسة والتحليل النقدي البيئي للوقوف على مدى ارتباط الشاعرة ماري أوليفر بالطبيعة ووسائلها الأدبية في إبراز هذا التفاعل مع عناصر الطبيعة المختلفة كما تعكس هذه الدراسة النقدية البيئية قدرة الشاعرة على أن تسهم في إثراء ما يسمى بالشعر البيئي بديوانها المتميز وكيف استطاعت أن تجذب القارئ إليه.

Dissolution into the Natural World: An Ecocritical Study of Mary Oliver's *American Primitive*

Can a poet lose himself totally in the larger world around him and then regain his individual self as a distinguished ecological voice? And to what extent and by what means? To provide a possible answer to these questions, this study approaches Mary Oliver as a poet who “lives in and for her natural surroundings” (Torrens 24). The study is an ecocritical investigation into selected poems of her Pulitzer-prize-winning collection *American Primitive*, poems that are clear expressions of Oliver’s deep communion with the natural world. It highlights the poet’s adoration for nature and reveals her means for feeling connected to her natural surroundings. It discusses the poet’s skillful manipulation of senses in gaining access to the natural world as well as her use of literary devices in shaping her art and attracting the reader to it. It also sheds light on her descriptive power and mastery in creating settings appropriate to her continuing slippage from one natural element into another. In brief, the paper is an attempt to examine Mary Oliver’s attitude toward nature in addition to her means for articulating it, which is the heart of “a relatively new movement in cultural studies” (Gifford 15) called ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is a recently emerging “study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (Garrard 5). It is also known as green cultural studies, literary environmental studies, environmental criticism, literary ecology, literary environmentalism, or ecopoetics. Though emerging in the 1990s, the term ecocriticism first appeared in 1978 in William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Yet, it was consolidated with the publication of seminal works including Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Kate Soper’s *What Is Nature?* (1995), and Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996).

Simply put, ecocriticism is a kind of “environmentalist interpretations of fiction, poetry, and so-called nature writing”

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

(Phillips, "Ecocriticism" 37). It investigates writers' attitudes toward nature and how they are influenced by the ecological "recognition of nature as a spontaneous and naturally organized system in which all parts are harmoniously interrelated" (Oelschlaeger 8). It approaches their means for gaining access to the natural world as well as their use of literary devices in shaping philosophies and ideas. To shed extra light on the scope of ecocriticism, Ursula K. Heise raises the following questions:

In what ways do highly evolved and self-aware beings relate to nature? What roles do language, literature, and art play in this relation? How have modernization and globalization processes transformed it? Is it possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisites for such a change? (504)

Ecocriticism therefore brings new dimensions to literary criticism through this intimate relationship between "the experiencing body and experienced environment" (512).

One target of ecocritical study is a new form of romantic nature poetry referred to as ecological poetry. This new form has its distinct character since

The land has entered into western identity in more subtle and complicated ways than as property to be owned and fought over....In a sense, westerners have long been conversing with the landscape as well as with each other, and their imaginations have been altered by that conversation beyond easy telling. (Worster, *Skies* 235)

Ecological poetry has nothing to do with the traditional romantic flights that isolate man from the material world and society. Rather, it is an attempt to overcome the dualism that separates human from non-human for "life requires interaction with one's environment and other beings." (Knickerbocker 4). Another point in case is that while a traditional romantic poet's interaction with natural surroundings often ends in self-accentuation, an ecological poet's usually works against individualism. In other words, a traditional romantic poet's communing with nature is a vehicle for self-exaltation whereas an

ecological poet's is a strife toward self-effacement. That is why much of the nature poetry rising today is different from that produced by Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats.

The end of "a green poet or an environmental poet or an ecological poet" (Dosa 18) is to establish a new poetic tradition that stresses the interdependent nature of the world, viewing everything as connected to everything else. To reach this end, ecological poets insert all things into one world community denying the traditional classification of the world into creatures and natural beings inferior to the privileged human self. There further runs a sense of humility in ecological poetry since humanity, like the seemingly least remarkable members of the world community, undergoes the same processes of death and decay. Added is the assumption that "the more we move into space, the more we recognize its vastness as it expands before us, helping us to understand our own smallness and producing an attitude of humility" (Bryson 171). This awareness leads ecological poets to overcome human arrogance and gets them into further interaction with the non-human world. Major voices of contemporary ecological poetry are Wendell Berry, Joy Harjo, and Mary Oliver.

Mary Oliver is a leading American voice of ecological poetry. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1935. Her reputation as "the prolific Mary Oliver" (Pettingell, "Perennials" 29) has steadily increased with the publication of several poetry collections: *No Voyage and Other Poems* (1963), *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems* (1972), *The Night Traveler* (1978), *Twelve Moons* (1979), *American Primitive* (1983), *House of Light* (1990), *New and Selected Poems* (1992), *White Pine* (1994), *Blue Pastures* (1995), and *West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems* (1997). The poetic distinction of these collections earned her the Shelley Memorial Award (1972), a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1972-73), Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (1980-81), an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Achievement Award (1983), the Pulitzer Prize (1984), and the National Book Award (1992).

Oliver's engagement with nature reaches the extent that her poetry becomes a kind of strife toward establishing a new poetic tradition privileging the beautifully natural over the painfully human.

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

This attitude indicates that identity matters less to Oliver and that immersion in the natural world is her deep interest. Hence is Oliver's declaration of herself as an ecological poet: "I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. But not me" (qtd. In Johnson 81). Central to her ecological achievement is her Pulitzer-prize-winning collection *American Primitive*. Each poem in the collection is a shot of the poet's unflinching dissolution into the natural world, an aspect that weaves together these different shots into a tenacious fabric offering "many bodies for us to inhabit; we can become, by turns, bear, fish, whale, swamp, and Pan. We can run with the fox, fly with the owl, dig with the mole, and finally, losing all outward form, dissolve into the totality of nature" (Graham 352). These "many bodies" impose on the poet a continuing change of setting, a challenge emphasizing Oliver's descriptive power and mastery of poetic technique.

It may be true that there are moments in man's life when he is driven to dream, long, or even wish he could step into the body of another. Though Western culture approves of no yearnings against individualism, Oliver meets the challenge with her belief in the multiplicity of the self. This belief may be attributed to her mother:

Pull yourself together,' my mother used to say, and!
Would grope wildly, hoping to catch even one of the
selves that spun around me. But I have never been able
to pull myself together, and works of art that tempt me
to drop the fiction of singularity and invite me to enter
the body of another fascinate me"

(qtd. in Graham 352).

Hence, the urge to exhibit multiple selves through intimate contact with the non-human world becomes Oliver's stimulus for writing *American Primitive*.

Significantly, the poems in *American Primitive* are clear assertions that "almost nothing exists as unconscious object. . . everything has consciousness and even language of some sort." (McNew 66). To reach nature's "consciousness" entails a proper means of communication, one that is likely to decode the non-verbal "language" of natural surroundings. Oliver has her means of communication, of embracing and being embraced by nature. One

means, Oliver exploits, is her consuming parts of nature or even the natural element itself with which she is interacting. This is to establish some physical connection with the natural world since the word consuming is Oliver's synonym for recreating, not destroying, the natural element as well as the self. Another means is her observing natural surroundings till an emotion for the thing keenly observed rises to evacuate the human and let the non-human stand forth. These means rely on the interplay of senses in providing access to the natural world, stirring the process of dissolution into the totality of nature, and, as a consequence, producing poems for which the "natural world, in its variety and mystery, is the source" (Hudzik 400).

"August" is Oliver's opening example of transcending the human through her consuming parts of nature. It is one of various manifestations that "Woodland and marsh are Oliver's kingdom, animals and plants her kin and alternative selves" (Ostriker 149). The title month of the poem is the time "When the blackberries hang / swollen in the woods, in the brambles / nobody owns" (1-3). Hung "swollen" in such a way, these "blackberries" serve as so catching a bait of nature that the speaker spends

all day among the high
branches, reaching
my ripped arms, thinking
of nothing, cramming
the black honey of summer
into my mouth . . . (4-9)

Seeing and tasting are the speaker's sensory means for feeling connected to the natural world: while seeing establishes the speaker's emotional connection with nature, tasting reinforces and makes physical such a connection. The phrase "thinking / of nothing" indicates that the speaker overthrows her human distinction and becomes more of a bear found "all day among the high / Branches" in search of the "black honey of summer." This ecological attitude can be justified when we know that "thinking" places humanity on top of the evolutionary ladder, a barrier the speaker in *American Primitive* is trying to cross.

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

Oliver's choice of a bear in particular for interaction has its cultural background since "the bear has a reputation for wonders of self healing" (Bonds 11). Yet, the bear in "August" has a shadowy presence, sensed rather than stated:

. . . In the dark
creeks that run by there is
this thick paw of my life darting among
the black bells, the leaves; there is
this happy tongue. (10-14)

Here is a vivid picture in which the bear is introduced through the synecdoche of the "dark creeks," the "thick paw," and the "happy tongue." This "happy tongue" is also a reference to the speaker, which asserts the poet's virtuosity in effecting another kind of interaction through one image.

For all the bear's happiness, the speaker is satisfied with her transformation into such an animal: ". . . all day my body / accepts what it is. . ." (9-10). It is a kind of sensual satisfaction leading to further transformations in a series of bear poems relying on the same mechanism of consuming parts of nature for the sake of gaining access to it. "Honey at the Table," for instance, displays a number of complex transformations whose catalyst is the "black honey of summer" referred to in "August." That is why Oliver tempts her readers to partake of her viable means of achieving the physical contact intrinsic in the process of copying: "It fills you with the soft / essence of vanished flowers" (1-2). Here, Oliver plays on the reader's sense of taste, considering it the one possible means of temptation in such a situation. Maybe, she is trying to get the reader into contact with the natural world to experience the self-same process of copying. A main reason is that "For nearly 50 years, Mary Oliver has been falling in love with the world and writing poems that invite readers to fall in love right along with her" (O'donnell 28)..

Instead of focusing on her expected transformation into a bear, the persona in "Honey at the Table" stuns the readers that the honey itself

. . . becomes
a trickle sharp as a hair that you follow
from the honey pot over the table

and out the door and over the ground,
and all the while it thickens,
grows deeper and wilder, edged
with pine boughs and wet boulders. (3-8)

The metamorphosis of honey from “vanished flowers” to “trickle” to creek conjures up the bear image before mentioning the bear itself overtly. It seems as though the poet is preparing the stage for a hero long expected and very much adored.

As the bear appears on the scene, the reader unconsciously finds himself “deep in the forest” (10), acting like a bear as a result of his having responded to the speaker’s temptations:

. . . .you
shuffle up some tree, you rip the bark,
you float into and swallow the dripping combs,
bits of the tree, crushed bees. . . (10-13)

The “essence of vanished flowers” is no longer a means but an end in itself, which leads the speaker to “shuffle up some tree,” “rib the bark,” “float into and swallow” such honey. This portrait is Oliver's other means of entangling the readers further in the ecological nets from which she herself is unable to break free. The use of the second person indicates that the reader's and the speaker’s copying has already taken place synchronously.

The distinction of Oliver’s honey lies in that it has “a taste / composed of everything lost, in which everything / lost is found” (13-15). Naturally “composed of things lost,” this honey saves the speaker from loss by awarding her the bear image she is all the time seeking. It appears to be a metonymy of the bear: to taste this honey is to taste the bear itself and sense its presence. In other words, it leads to contact with the natural world and copying simultaneously to the point that one can hardly recognize where contact ends and copying begins.

The “happy tongue” concluding “August” urges the poet to entitle one of her bear poems “Happiness.” The poem speaks of both means and end, contact and copying. It opens with a clear division between the voice as a watcher and the she-bear as an actor:

In the afternoon I watched

the she-bear; she was looking
for the secret bin of sweetness -
honey, that the bees store
in the trees' soft caves. (1-5)

While the verb "watched" reflects to what extent the speaker is indulged in the ecstatic life of the she-bear, the progressive form "looking for" implies that it is no easy task to reach the "secret bin of sweetness- / honey." Yet, the process of "looking / for the secret bin of sweetness- / honey" seems to be unending since the target is the elixir of both the she-bear's life and the speaker's happiness.

Provided that Mary Oliver "does not wish to write about plants and animals 'but on their behalf.'" (Flower 325), she attempts to dissolve the opening division between watcher and actor through her detailed description of the she-bear: "Black block of gloom, she climbed down / tree after tree and shuffled on / through the woods. . ." ("Happiness" 6-8). In these lines, Oliver does more than telling the story of the she-bear. Rather, she is trying to evoke copying through detailed description, tempted by the fruit of the she-bear's search:

. . .And then
she found it! The honey-house deep
as heartwood, and dipped into it
among the swarming bees - honey and comb
she lipped and tongued and scooped out
in her black nails. (8-13)

The phrase "And then / she found it" is a piece of evidence on the she-bear's suffering for the sake of reaching the verbs "dipped," "lipped," "tongued," and "scooped out." These verbs move in succession and with notable arrangement in order to describe the she-bear's escalating happiness aspired to by the speaker.

Oliver seems to find no relevant words to depict the she-bear's ecstasy symptomatic of consuming honey:

maybe she grew full, or sleepy, or maybe
a little drunk, and sticky
down the rugs of her arms,
and began to hum and sway. (14-17)

There is no definite diagnosis of the she-bear's case, as inferred from the repetition of "maybe" and the conjunction "or." Yet, there is logic

in the arrangement of words since being “full” is a cause for becoming “sleepy.” On the other hand, the verbs “hum” and “sway” are natural symptoms of becoming “a little drunk.”

Oliver then stuns the reader with her identifying the she-bear with a bee:

I saw her let go of the branches,
I saw her lift her honeyed muzzle
into the leaves, and her thick arms,
as though she would fly -
an enormous bee
all sweetness and wings -
down into the meadows (18-24)

Oliver's she-bear turns from a consumer of honey into a producer of it. The she-bear, like the speaker, steps into the body of another, into an “enormous bee,” a fellow-creature all the time sought by the she-bear. It seems as though Oliver's ecological contagion has moved to the natural world as a result of her adhesion to nature.

Oliver's mechanism of finding the self through consuming honey is also at work in “The Honey Tree.” It dawns out to the reader that honey is the speaker's password into the realm of bears unifying these four poems. Once there is mention of honey, there is merging with the bear:

And so at last I climbed
the honey tree, ate
chunks of pure light. ate
the bodies of bees that could not
get out of my way, ate
the dark hair of the leaves,
the rippling bark,
the heartwood. . . (1-8)

The phrase “And so at last” indicates that it is a long way from contact to copying and that the poet's patience can defy all troubles and distances from means to end. The “honey tree” is the poet's window into a “joy” (9) expressed savagely at the cost of the “bees.” The speaker therefore is in a state of imbalance leading to her “frenzy” reflected by the three-time repetition of “ate.” Maybe, eating in such

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

a way is an attempt to intensify contact with the bear, which reveals the speaker's incessant adoration for the bear image and fear of returning human again before having her complete dose of "joy." That is why so many of Oliver's poems are "long on praise for the physical world, short on humanity" (Phillips, "Light" 521).

As "The Honey Tree" advances, the speaker emphasizes her great satisfaction with the self conferred on her through union with nature:

how I love myself at last!
how I love the world! Climbing
by day or night
in the wind, in the leaves, kneeling
at the secret rip. . . (22-26).

The use of "at last" comes to stress the weariness of that journey from human to non-human referred to in the opening line. Yet, once the journey reaches its terminal, the speaker forgets all worldly troubles to the extent that

. . . the cords
of my body stretching
and singing in the
heaven of appetite. (26-29)

These lines are a reflection of the speaker's "joy" first expressed with "frenzy." Here, such "joy" takes an auditory form of expression in that her "body" becomes both musical instrument and singer simultaneously out of her indescribable happiness.

Though Oliver's bear poems may remind the reader of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," the latter is a traditional romantic poem. It is Keats's envy for the nightingale, not the belief in the interconnectedness of all things, that stirs his desire to be in the company of that ecstatic bird far away from

The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,

Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow. (23-30)

To live, Keats assumes, is to “groan,” to fall victim to “palsy” and consumption, to become desperate as a result of thinking, and to lament that “beauty” and “love” are short lived. This sombre view explains why Keats’s lines are regarded as the most pessimistic in English poetry.

Written under the strain of Keats’s failing health and the tragic death of his brother, “Ode to a Nightingale” is a traditional poet’s effort to escape from reality. Unlike Oliver, who seeks her location in the realm of bears, Keats first tries the effect of wine as a strategy of escape from the travails of life:

. . . . I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known.
(19-22)

Since the soothing effect of wine soon vanishes, Keats exploits the liberating power of his poetic imagination, which is manifest enough in his apostrophe: “Away! away! for I will fly to thee, / Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, / But on the viewless wings of Poesy” (31-33). The metaphor that he will use “the viewless wings of Poesy” shows to what extent he trusts his vehicle for “imaginative participation in the bird’s life” (Hough 174). The metaphor also expresses the poet’s accentuation of his individual self, terms that have no existence in the ecological dictionary.

As Oliver remains faithful to the ecological tradition that there is “a harmony found in nature, offering a model for a more organic, cooperative human community” (Worster, *Nature’s* 363), she develops her gustatory means for feeling connected to the natural world. She is no longer satisfied with her consuming parts of nature since her ecological hunger stirs her into wholly consuming the element itself with which she is interacting. A good instance is “The Fish,” in which the title creature serves as both catalyst and target. The poem skillfully displays a double form of transformation taking place at once. This sense of immediacy shows that the speaker wastes no time to attain her goal:

The first fish
I ever caught
would not lie down
quiet in the pail
but flailed and sucked
at the burning
amazement of the air
and died
in the slow pouring off
of rainbows. . . (1-10)

The words “first” and “ever” are pieces of evidence on the speaker’s strong urge to commune with her natural surroundings. In addition to referring to the inner state of the speaker’s “first fish,” the phrase “would not lie down / quiet in the pail” is also a reflection of the speaker’s self-inquietude. This feeling is manifest enough in the speaker’s thorough description of her “first fish” as it “flailed,” “sucked,” and “died.”

Oliver then establishes some physical connection with the natural world when

. . . Later
I opened his body and separated
the flesh from the bones
and ate him. . . (10-13)

The speaker’s act of opening “his body” and separating the “flesh from the bones” is rather a means to get herself an opening into the non-human she is now seeking. Ironically, the death of this “first fish” breathes a new life into the speaker as the cells of the “fish” become the speaker’s as the natural outcome of having been eaten and digested. The result is:

. . . 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. . . (13-17)

Here is a reference to the speaker as both “sea” containing the eaten-up “fish” and “fish” in need of a “sea.” We are now before three seas: the one of the narrow “pail” rejected by this “first fish,” the other

of the speaker's body imposed on the "fish," and the third of the actual into which the "fish" and the speaker in her new garment will be falling.

Oliver justifies her double transformation by regarding it as a way ". . . Out of pain, / and pain, and more pain" (17-18). While the three-time repetition of the word "pain" shows to what extent the speaker is in suffering, the use of "more" indicates that the speaker's suffering is escalating. However, Oliver's outward show of "pain" contrasts with her inner light generated as "the fish glitters" in her. This contrast leads the speaker to "feed this feverish plot" (19) that gets her and the "fish" "tangled together." Describing such a "plot" as "feverish" indicates that the speaker's desire to remain in her non-human coat is something similar to a serious disease. Yet, the speaker is unwilling to recover, insisting that ". . . we are nourished / by the mystery" (19-20) of escaping into the body of another far away from the world's "pain, / and pain, and more pain."

Oliver's triumph over earthly "pain" through immersion in the natural world gets her into further "feverish" plots with the non-human. Significantly, the effect of her "first fish" is still at work, nourishing her aspiration to join with ". . .the great whale, (that) / throbs with song" ("Humpbacks" 54-55). She is ravished by the whale's hugeness and ecstatic life, as inferred from the adjective "great" and the phrase "throbs with song." In addition, the whale's ecstasy is a usual, not a momentary state, which the present simple tense of "throbs with song" comes to imply. This ecstatic state is also part of the whale's greatness in addition to its huge bodily form.

While providing a shot of the poet's dissolution into the natural world, "The Humpbacks" is a manifestation of Oliver's philosophy:

Listen, whatever it is you try
to do with your life, nothing will ever dazzle you
like the dreams of your body,
its spirit
longing to fly while the dead-weight bones
toss their dark mane and hurry
back into the fields of glittering fire. (46-52)

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

Such “dreams” are so varied and successive that they invoke a substitute world where the mind has no place and where nothing is impossible. Evading the mind on her flights, the poet splits the body into “spirit” and matter or “bones.” She privileges the physical over the non-physical as the “spirit” longs to “fly” far away while the “bones /toss their dark mane and hurry / back into the fields of glittering fire.” It is a scene of separation between “spirit” and matter since they both take opposite directions as “the ‘spirit’ shows a tendency to move skyward while the ‘bones,’ often her image for bodily quintessence, dive downward into a singing, earthly communion” (McNew 68).

The above lines are also a good expression of Oliver's mastery of poetic technique, which is manifest enough in her choice of the means through which she attracts the reader's attention to her message. Here, she plays on hearing as a means of sensory perception viable enough in a state of dazzled eyes or on a journey from the “dark mane” of the body and the spirit into the “fields of glittering fire.” May be, she is also stimulating the reader's sense of hearing so as to receive the ecstatic “song” of the “great whale” awaiting us at the end of the poem.

Oliver’s eating mechanism leads her to define the joy extracted from her deep communion with the natural world in gustatory terms:

. . . . Joy
is a taste before
it's anything else, and the body
can lounge for hours devouring the important
moments. . . (“The Plum Trees” 8-12)

The metaphor that “Joy / is a taste” is elucidated by the other metaphor of “the body...devouring the important moments.” Both metaphors present “Joy” as so delicious a meal that “devouring,” not eating, is the one possible process of having it.

Oliver’s view of “Joy” as something tasty is also enhanced by the following combination of personification and simile:

. . . . Listen,
the only way
to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it
into the body first. like small

wild plums. (12-16)

These images embody Oliver's philosophical claim that the "body" is the "first" entry into the "mind." Furthermore, to become another necessitates some sensuous contact with the targeted element for the "body" is believed to sense the presence of such an element rather than the "mind." To convey her philosophy, the poet knocks on the reader's auditory sense "first" by using the verb "Listen." Then, she stirs the reader's gustatory sense through the "small wild plums" in order to make clear her claim. This ordered variation in the use of senses asserts that Oliver knows well how and when to exploit the different means of sensory perception.

Since "Oliver's powers of observation are keen" (Torrens 25), such "powers" become her other means for feeling connected to the natural world. It is a non-physical connection rising from the skillful interplay of sight, hearing, and touch. "White Night" is a point in case as the poet diverts from her usual mechanism of establishing connection with the natural world through eating. Here, Admiration for natural elements is her other means of turning from human into non-human:

All night
I float
in the shallow ponds
while the moon wanders
burning,
bone white,
among the milky stems. (1-7)

The speaker transcends all human boundaries to have her location in the glittering picture created by the calm surface of the "shallow ponds" as it reflects the moon's "bone white" beams. She loses the will to choose movement direction, as inferred from the use of the dynamic verb "float." She is content with becoming in the company of "the moon" as it "wanders" to get the "ponds" dressed in "white."

Though floating "All night" with the wandering "moon," the speaker never tires out of being driven by some natural force greater than herself. She further devotes her pen to recording the spectacles of this ecological journey:

Once
I saw her hand reach
to touch the muskrat's
small sleek head
and it was lovely. . . (8-12)

The appearance of this moon-engrained "muskrat" on the scene intensifies the link between the speaker and the natural world. Yet, it terrifies the speaker for

. . .Soon
the muskrat
will glide with another
into their castle
of weeds, morning
will rise from the east
tangled and brazen. (16-22)

The speaker's nocturnal journey will "Soon" come to its terminal, and the elements she accompanies will withdraw from the scene, leaving her alone to her all-day search for the "soft / essence of vanished flowers."

Conscious that the first ray of the sun is her opponent that always takes her such dreams into his stride, the speaker reveals:

and before that
difficult
and beautiful
hurricane of light
I want to flow out
across the mother
of all waters,
I want to lose myself
on the black
and silky currents. (23-32)

Though "light" is very much desired by all, it is pictured as a "hurricane" dissolving the moonlit picture haunting the speaker. The use of the conjunction "and" evokes a sense of swiftness and ending strongly taken into the poet's consideration. The repetition of "I want" indicates that the speaker desires no other choice but to join

with the natural elements around her, “even to the obliteration of human individuality” (Pettingell, “Return” 21).

Significantly, “obliteration of human individuality” also runs in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.” Attracted to the “wild West Wind” (1) that stands as both “Destroyer and Preserver” (14), the poet is led to wish:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than Thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be
The comrade of thy wanderings over heaven.
(42-48)

Wishing to be “a wave, a leaf, a cloud” (52) reflects the poet’s desire to lose himself in the natural world around him just as ecological poets do. Here, the poet transcends the boundaries between his individual self and nature in order to enter into harmony with the natural world through self-effacement, which is an aspect of ecological ideology.

Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” though, is a traditional romantic example. The poet returns to the romantic tradition of self-exaltation when he begs the wind to

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth;
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
(62-66)

Torn between self-effacement and self-exaltation implies that “Ode to the West Wind” starts ecologically and ends traditionally. Shelley’s interaction with natural surroundings, unlike Oliver’s, moves toward the accentuation of his individual self as the poem opens with the poet describing

the west wind's effects on the land (earth), in the sky (air), and in the ocean (water) before finally positioning himself, the poet, as the noblest of the four elements,

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

fire (the lyrical speaker urges the wind to scatter his "words among mankind" as if they were "Ashes and sparks" from "an unextinguished hearth," which functions metaphorically for his mind). (McInnis 33)

Living in "a vast nature preserve" (Logan 36), Oliver goes on drawing further pictures of much ecological appeal. "Blossom" is one of these pictures that invite the speaker to be in the company of natural surroundings:

In April
the ponds open
like black blossoms,
the moon
swims in every one;
there's fire
everywhere: frogs shouting
their desire,
their satisfaction . . . (1-10)

Sight and hearing are interchangeably used in these lines to establish the speaker's emotional contact with nature. Here, "the moon" is personified in a visual image as a swimmer across the "ponds" now opening "like black blossoms." To make audible such a picture, the poet inserts a band of "frogs" playing their songs of "desire" and "satisfaction," an aspect reflecting Oliver's "conviction that nature is also an articulate and conscious subject" (McNew 67).

In contrast to the cheerful start of "Blossom," there are Oliver's sad musings that always deepen the speaker's communion with nature:

. . .that time
chops at us all like an iron
hoe, that death
is a state of paralysis. . . (11-14)

These images are embodiments of Oliver's philosophy of life: the former is a simile in which the effect of "time" on man is equated with the sharp cutting of an "iron / hoe"; the latter is a metaphor depicting man in his final stillness that resembles a hopeless case of "paralysis." Both images, in addition, reflect the sense of humility that always intensifies ecological poets' desire to merge with the world of the non-

human. More significant is that “time / chops at us all like an iron / hoe” and “death / is a state of paralysis” can be added to America's proverbial heritage owing to the great wisdom they bear despite their conciseness.

Proceeding with her musings, Oliver adds: “. . .What / we long for: joy / before death. . .” (14-16). Her urge to taste “joy” before she is afflicted with the inevitable “state of paralysis” is irresistible. A main reason is that it is “this thrust / from the root / of the body. . .” (19-21) that calls for the body's portion of sensual “joy.” Ecologically,

. . .we are more
than blood - we are more
than our hunger and yet
we belong
to the moon. . . (22-26)

Led by her ecological belief in the interdependence of the world, the poet inserts man into the lunar race. Her thinking of mortality stirs her into renouncing the human race and belonging to the one world community where she can satisfy her longing for “joy / before death.”

Throughout the poem, Oliver keeps on preferring the body to the mind, giving herself up to senses as a consequence. The poem, like “The Plum Trees,” is a battle between the mind and the body, a battle that ends in favour of the body:

. . .when the ponds
open, when the burning
begins the most
thoughtful among us dreams
of hurrying down
into the black petals
into the fire,
into the night where time lies shattered
into the body of another. (26-34)

The awakening of the natural world still haunts the speaker, offering her a variety of ways to join with the non-human world, “. . .where

time lies shattered / into the body of another.” That is why the “body of another” is the speaker's refuge from the unavoidable hits of the “iron / hoe” firmly held in the hands of “time.”

Standing as “a joyful observer of the natural world” (Makuck 554), Oliver joyfully carries the reader “Three miles through the woods” (“Clapp's Pond” 1) where “Clapp's Pond sprawls stone gray / among oaks and pines, / the late winter fields” (2-4). Oliver has so keen an eye for description that it seems as though she is drawing a map pointing to the location of “Clapp's Pond.” Her purpose, as with her other poems, is to invite “the reader to be present in the world around them, to notice, to appreciate every living thing” (Daly 16).

Oliver then starts her detailed description of the natural elements she comes across in an attempt to prepare the self for the process of merging with nature. For instance, she creates a dazzling picture

where a pheasant blazes up
lifting his yellow legs
under bronze feathers, opening
bronze wings. (“Clapp’s Pond” 5-8)

Here, the poet addresses sight through the dazzling colour of such a bird to attract the reader's attention to the beauty of nature. To make the picture more charming, the poet shifts to “. . .one doe, dimpling the ground as she touches / its dampness sharply, flares / out of the brush and gallops away” (9-11). Inserting the “pheasant” and the “doe” into one picture breathes life into it and increases the speaker's quest for the healing effect of dissolving into the totality of nature to the degree that the “dampness” experienced by the “doe” is now reaching the speaker: “By evening: rain / It pours down from the black clouds, / lashes over the roof. . .” (12-14). Perhaps, the speaker is trying to stimulate the tactile sense so as to identify with the “doe.” She also wants to gallop away into her usual shelter among the elements of nature, where her sensual joy can be realized.

The joy Oliver finds in nature may draw the reader to think that Oliver holds the same Wordsworthian attitude that

. . .Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy. . . (“Tintern Abbey” 124-127)

However, Wordsworth's is a traditional romantic belief in "the loyalty of nature" (Gross 121), that "Nature" is an ever flowing source of "joy," not a world into which his individual self should evaporate. For instance, once wandering aimlessly by the side of a lake, the poet beheld

A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way. ("The Daffodils" 5-9)

Here is an ecstatic picture in which various natural elements are involved in order to provide the "joy" the poet seeks in "Nature."

As the poem advances, other elements are inserted into this Wordsworthian show:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee. (12-15)

While Wordsworth interacts with his natural surroundings, he keeps his identity as a poet intact: "A poet could not but be gay, /In such a jocund company" (16-17). Though over absorbed in his own relationship with nature, he concludes with what the scene provides him as a human:

I gazed - and gazed - but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (18-25)

Wordsworth seeks the healing effect of nature, even through recollection in tranquility, not a location in the one world community that embraces ecological poets.

Unlike Wordsworth's "The Daffodils," Oliver's "Clapp's Pond" takes its ecological direction. The following lines mark the climax of

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

“Clapp’s Pond” since the geographical level withdraws, giving way to the emotional one:

How sometimes everything
closes up, a painted fan, landscapes and moments
flowing together until the sense of distance - - -
say, between Clapp's Pond and me - - -
vanishes, edges slide together
like the feathers of a wing, everything
touches everything. (18-24)

Here is a train of images depicting the process of immersion in nature and highlighting the interdependence of the world. The “painted fan” is there to echo the whirling of both “landscapes and moments” toward swiftly removing distances between speaker and space, an image made clear in the light of the ecological perspectives that “every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit” (White 10) and that “sensitive souls (such as poets) raised in or transplanted to places . . . absorb those spirits as part of their identities” (Elkins xii). The combination of the metaphor in “edges slide together” and the simile in “like the feathers” shows how nature and the speaker are eager for each other’s embrace. The speaker’s love for nature has become requited, a claim asserted by associating the word “together” once with “flowing” and another with “slide.”

The last line of “Clapp’s Pond” reminds us again of the geographical distance when it repeats: “three miles away” (31). At this point, “landscapes and moments” are no longer “flowing together” as they undergo a kind of separation articulated by “Later” (25) and “three miles.” Yet, the speaker’s emotional contact with “Clapp’s Pond” is still so active that though

Later, lying half-asleep under
the blankets, I watch
while the doe, glittering with rain, steps
under the wet slabs of the pines, stretches
her long neck down to drink
from the pond
three miles away. (25-31)

Because “everything / touches everything,” the speaker can watch the “doe” despite the “three miles” geographically separating them.

In summary, Mary Oliver is a contemporary American voice whose poetic utterance has its characteristic appeal. Though influenced by major romantic poets, she expresses a tendency to be counted as a distinguished ecological poet. Her unbridled love for nature results in her total immersion in the natural world to the extent that most of her poems are battles between the painfully human and the beautifully natural. Such battles are set at different locales—“woods,” “forest,” “meadows,” “fields,” or “sea.” They end in the obliteration of the privileged human self owing to the ecological belief in the interconnectedness of all things, which offers the poet a way “Out of pain, / and pain, and more pain.”

Oliver relies on some key images in her communing with the natural world. There is the “blackberries,” the “black honey of summer,” the “soft / essence of vanished flowers” , and the “secret bin of sweetness.” This natural substance becomes the poet's catalyst for conjuring up the “she-bear” image with which she usually interacts. The “she-bear” itself is Oliver's other key image that weaves together “August,” “Honey at the Table,” “Happiness,” and “The Honey Tree.” Going to a water source is a third key image recurrent in a number of poems. There are rivers, ponds, and seas, each of which provides some emotional connection with natural surroundings. This aspect is manifest enough in “White Night,” “Blossom,” “Clapp's Pond” and others.

It is remarkable that *American Primitive* relies on the interplay of senses. The four bear- poems-- “August,” “Honey at the Table,” “Happiness,” and “The Honey Tree”-- employ the sense of taste since the poet's consuming parts of nature is her means for gaining access to the natural world. Employment of taste reaches its zenith when the speaker begins to consume the element itself with which she is interacting. A good instance is “The Fish,” in which the speaker becomes both “fish” and “sea” as a result of her having eaten the “first fish / I ever caught.” The effect of this “first fish” is so strong that it carries the speaker far away to the “great whale” awaiting at the very end of “Humpbacks.” The word consuming therefore is Oliver's

synonym for recreating both the element with which she is interacting and the self. "White Night," "Blossom," and "Clapp's Pond" exploit sight, hearing, and touch as viable entries into the non-human world. These senses are interchangeably used, which shows the poet's competence in deciding when and how to employ the different means of sensory perception.

Oliver's skillful employment of metaphor, simile, personification, and synecdoche is a notable feature of her poems. Clear instances are "Joy / is a taste," "time / chops at us all like an iron / hoe," "the only way / to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it / into the body first," and "; there is / this happy tongue." These figures of speech are used in harmony with one another to reflect the poet's desire for dissolution into the natural world, her process of copying, and the sensual pleasures she is trying to extract from her deep communion with natural surroundings. They address the reader's senses in different ways to attract him to each picture in Oliver's ecological album.

Oliver's *American Primitive* reflects to what extent she is skillful in her choice and manipulation of words. A large number of words derive from nature: "she-bear," "fish," "whale," "muskrat," "frogs," "pheasant," and "doe." To express her desire and effort for immersion in the natural world, she employs verbs such as "spend," "accepts," "follow," "shuffle," "float," "looking for," "climbed," "want," "longing," and "hurry back." To describe her state after immersion in nature, she exploits words such as "happy," "happiness," "joy," "full," "sleepy," "drunk," "hum," and "sway." Since Oliver's "joy" is a sensual one, her vocabulary includes "cramming," "swallow," "lipped," "tongued," "scooped out," "ate," "feed," "nourished," and "devouring." In short, Mary Oliver's *American Primitive* is a real contribution to ecological poetry, a work in which she manages to connect to the natural world and get her reader connected not only to such a world but to her poetic art as well.

Works Cited

- Bonds, Diane S. "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver." *Women's Studies* 21.1 (1992): 1-15.
- Bryson, J. Scott. "Finding the Way Back: Place and Space in the Ecological Poetry of Joy Harjo." *MELUS* 27.3 (Fall 2002): 169- 196.
- Daly, Meg. "Simple Acts." *Lambda Book Report* 13.9/10 (April/May 2005): 16.
- Dosa, Attila. "Poets and Other Animals: An Interview with John Burnside." *Scottish Studies Review* 4.1 (Spring 2003): 9-23.
- Elkins, Andrew. *Another Place: An Ecocritical Study of Selected Western American Poets*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 2002.
- Flower, Dean. "Scripting the Environment." *Hudson Review* 55.2 (Summer 2002): 319-326.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Gifford, Terry. "Recent Critiques of Ecocriticism." *New Formations*, 64 (Spring 2008): 15-24.
- Graham, Vicki " 'Into the body of another': Mary Oliver and the poetics of becoming other." *Papers on Language & Literature* 30.4 (Fall 1994): 352-372
- Gross, Jonathan D. "Recollecting Emotion in Tranquility: Wordsworth and Byron in Cather's *My Ántonia* and Lucy Gayheart." *Cather Studies* 7.1 (2007): 119-139.
- Heise, Ursula K. "The Emergence of Ecocriticism." *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism* (2006): 503-516.
- Hough, Graham. *The Romantic Poets*. 3rd ed. London: Hutchinson, 1968.
- Hudzik, Robert. "American Primitive." *Library Journal* 108.4 (1983): 400.

Hatem Salama Saleh Salama □

- Johnson, Mark. " 'Keep Looking': Mary Oliver's Emersonian Project." *Massachusetts Review* 46.1 (Spring 2005): 78-98.
- Keats, John. *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- Knickerbocker, Scott. " 'Bodied Forth in Words': Sylvia Plath's Eco-poetics." *College Literature*, 36.3 (Summer 2009): 1-27.
- Logan, William. "Shock & awe." *New Criterion* 27.4 (Dec 2008): 36- 43.
- Makuck, Peter. "Outside, Inside." *Hudson Review* 61.3 (Fall 2008): 553-562.
- McInnis, David. "Humoral Theory as an Organizing Principle in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'." *ANQ* 20.2 (Spring 2007): 32-34.
- McNew, Janet. "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry." *Contemporary Literature* 30.1 (1989): 59-77.
- O'donnell, Angela. "Love's Proof." *America* 200.14 (2009): 28-30.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Have: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Oliver, Mary. *American Primitive*. Boston: Little, 1983.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "Natural Facts." *Nation* 243.5 (1986): 148-150.
- Pettingell, Phoebe. "The Return of Romanticism." *New Leader* 82.7 (1999): 20-21.
- . . . "Three Perennials in Bloom." *New Leader* 87.2 (Mar/Apr 2004): 29-31.
- Phillips, Dana "Ecocriticism, Eco-poetics, and a Creed Outworn." *New Formations* 64 (Spring 2008): 37-50.
- Phillips, Robert. "Light and Dark" *Hudson Review* 57.3, (Autumn 2004): 519-522.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley: Poetical Works*. ed. Thomas

Hutchinson. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Torrens, James S. "Connected to the World." *America* 193.20 (2005): 24-25.

White, Lynn, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Wordsworth, William. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. E. De Selincourt. 2nd ed. Vol.2. London: Oxford University Press, 1952.

Worster, **Donald**. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

. . . *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.