

"Glory is My Work: Mary Oliver's Search for Order"

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Eric Voegelin developed a rich body of concepts for interpreting literary symbols. This essay will use those concepts to interpret some of the verse of the contemporary American poet Mary Oliver. "The poem most popular today is the fairly brief lyric poem" (APH 84).¹ [1] Oliver's *oeuvre* consists almost exclusively of such poetry. Thus it will be appropriate to begin by recalling what Bruno Snell and Voegelin tell us about the lyric poetry of ancient Hellas .

Lyric poetry emerged in Ionia in the 7th century B.C. from the religious feeling and practice of a culture formed by the Homeric epic.² [2] In epic poetry, the speaker "stands in as the deputy of a public voice, a singer of tales narrating the larger tale of the tribe." ³ [3] In the lyric, the poet speaks as an individual in his or her own voice. There are two types of Hellenic lyrics. Songs of praise were composed for festivals celebrated in honor of gods or men. Personal lyrics were composed by poets such as Archilochus, Anacreon, and Sappho and are concerned with the poet's personal problems. Such poems articulate the conflicting feelings brought on by experiences of unrequited love, being betrayed by a friend, or other suffering. For example, at the beginning of a poem Sappho speaks of an unhappy state of luckless love:

Once more *Eros*, looser of limbs, drives me about,

1 [1] The end of the paper provides a list of the abbreviations used to provide citations to Mary Oliver's work.

2 [2] The next two paragraphs draw from Snell, Bruno, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Harper, 1960), Chapter 3, from which the translation of the verses of Sappho is taken..

3 [3] Hirsch, Edward, *How to Read a Poem* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1999), 288.

a bitter-sweet creature which puts me at a loss.

Those lines were written within the mythical horizon of the Homeric epic. Within that horizon, the gods, human beings, society, and the natural world are not sharply distinguished but experienced as consubstantial elements of the one reality of the cosmos. Human feelings and decisions are experienced as caused by the gods; for Sappho love is not a passion that wells up from within, but a gift of Aphrodite or Eros. Yet in calling Eros a "bitter-sweet creature," Sappho voices an experience of simultaneous joy and pain, which the Homeric epic does not express. Her words symbolize an experience that can neither be attributed to the gods nor reduced to the sensations of the body. Thus, with these lines we hear the beginning of the differentiation from the cosmos of the non-physical, non-spatial, transcendent dimension of human experience that Heraclitus and later philosophers named *psyche* or soul. As Voegelin observes, the century of the lyric "marks the beginning of the life of the soul."⁴ [4]

Voegelin finds in the Hellenic lyric a symbolic form that recurs whenever specially gifted persons engaged in differentiating the soul from the cosmos begin to symbolize new truths about the order of man and society that are in tension with the values of the surrounding society.⁵ [5] In that form, the differentiating soul names a series of goods, qualities, or excellences that conventional opinion deems to be of highest value and then states, in dramatic contrast, an authoritative, superior preference. The following stanza from Sappho, from a poem about a girl she loves, provides a striking example of the form:

Some say a parade of horse, some of the marchers,

⁴ [4] Voegelin, Eric, *Order and History*, vol. 2, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 118.

⁵ [5] *Ibid.*, 200-202.

Some say a naval display is on the dark earth
The most splendid thing (*kalliston*): But I say it is
What one ardently loves (*eratai*).⁶ [6]

Those lines announce the poet, by virtue of her *eros*, as the source of authoritative insight into what is truly beautiful or fine, against the delusions of conventional opinion, which reflect inferior affective preferences for things that appear to be worthy but are not. The stanza expresses an awareness of the distinction between appearance and reality, the insight that *eros* is the source of true knowledge of reality, and the qualitative differences among men as expressed in their varying affective preferences.

In Bruno Snell's translation of the stanza, the poet affirms that "the fairest thing is one I love," which indicates that Sappho is speaking of her beloved, who a few lines later she calls "far-off Anactoria".⁷ [7] Voegelin's less intimate rendering hints that the verses compactly symbolize experiences that were articulated more precisely in Hellenic philosophy. Thus, the lines prefigure the distinction, made in the speech by the goddess Diotima's reported by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* (211a), between the beautiful things of this world and the changeless, everlasting Beauty of which they partake. The verses also compactly contain Plato's insights that there are superior and inferior loves in conflict in the soul and that our capacity to know depends on the degree to which the higher *eros* orients us towards and moves us to desire what is truly beautiful.

⁶ [6] Voegelin's translation.

⁷ [7] Snell, *op. cit.*, 47.

Voegelin's interpretation of Hellenic lyric poetry sheds light on the gifts we may receive through devoted study of a poet's work. We may resonate with the feelings that comprise her affective life, to participate in her love of beautiful things, and to love her beautiful poems. Thus may our own capacities for experiencing and loving beauty be nourished and strengthened. We may sense, in the beautiful things of which she speaks and the beauty of her poems, the presence of everlasting Beauty. In addition, as our awareness and love of beauty grow through devoted study of her work, we will be able to recollect and love more fully both all beautiful things and everlasting Beauty.

We may also hear a poet singing of the voice of God speaking through the cosmos He has made. For we are spiritual heirs not only of the Hellenic experience of the things of the cosmos partaking of everlasting Beauty, but also of the Israelite experience of hearing the Word spoken by the Creator. And we may hear that Word in the heavens and the earth just as much as in scripture or in the voice of gentle stillness in our hearts. Consider the opening lines of Psalm 19:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world. (1-4a)⁸ [8]

⁸ [8] Translation from *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, quoted in Mann, Thomas W., *God of Dirt: Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004), 4. Mann's perceptive theological study includes a useful discussion of Psalm 19 and the psalmic qualities of Oliver's verse.

Voegelin notes that those verses adapt the symbolism of a Babylonian hymn to the sun-god Shamash to symbolize the experience of God revealing himself in the cosmos.⁹ [9] The vault of the sky, the day and the night, are no longer intracosmic gods, but parts of creation that, though literally silent, tell, proclaim, and speak of the glory of God manifest in them. They are His handiwork, which through synonymous parallelism is equated with His glory. Because they are created by God, the heavens reveal His glory in their very being, and that being praises His glory revealed in them. God and creation are joined in a single event of divine gift and creaturely response of praise.

Further, we may hear a poet who writes personal lyrics telling us about the life of the soul. Of the author of Psalm 19, we can be sure only that, in writing a hymn that praises the Creator who reveals His glory in the creation that praises Him, he was conscious of participating in the divine creative act and in the creaturely chorus. The psalmist concentrates so heavily on the divine glory revealed in the heavens above, that there is no room, one might say, for him to speak directly to us. That concentration reflects Psalm 19's closeness to the cosmological symbolism of the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East. It also reflects the fact that Israel did not differentiate the soul in the manner that began in lyric poetry, was achieved by Heraclitus and Plato, and was continued in Christianity. Voegelin comments on that limitation of the Israelite experience and symbolization of order:

With regard to philosophy, one must say that its development in the Hellenic sense was prevented by the [Israelite] irresolution concerning the status of the soul. The *philia* reaching out toward the *sophon* presupposes a personalized soul: the soul must have disengaged itself sufficiently from the substance of particular human groups to experience its community with other men as established through the common participation in the divine Nous. As long as the spiritual life of the soul is so diffuse that its status under God can be experienced only compactly, through the mediation of clans and tribes, the personal love of God cannot become the

9 [9] Voegelin, Eric, *Order and History*, vol. 1, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 308.

ordering center of the soul. In Israel the spirit of God, the *ruach* of Yahweh, is present within the community and with individuals in their capacity as representatives of the community, but it is not present as the ordering force in the soul of everyman, as the Nous of the mystic-philosophers or the Logos of Christ is present in every member of the mystical body, creating by its presence the *homonoia*, the likemindedness of the community. Only when man, while living with his fellow men in the community of the spirit, has a personal destiny in relation to God can the spiritual eroticism of the soul achieve the self-interpretation that Plato called philosophy.¹⁰ [10]

The differentiation of the soul from the other partners in the community of being is a millennial process that extends in time from the Hellenic lyrics through classical philosophy, the Christian centuries, and the modern period, and into the postmodern era in which we live. A poet writing today may be familiar with the most important symbols articulated in that process and with the experiences they articulate. She may have an awareness of mutual divine and human participation in the coming-to-be of her poems as strong as that of the author of Psalm 19. She may feel deeply the presence of the Spirit that has been softening her heart and opening her soul over a lifetime. And in her verse she may seek to communicate the formation and order of her soul, using and refining symbols developed over the millennia to articulate its life. In her poems we may read lines like these--written by another great contemporary poet, Wendell Berry--which situate the life of the differentiated soul within the order of the cosmos and consciously draw on the language of philosophy and revelation to articulate that life:

And so the mind

That comes to rest among the bluebells

Comes to rest in motion, refined
By alteration. The bud swells

Opens, makes seed, falls, is well,
Being becoming what it is:

¹⁰ [10] *Ibid.*, 240.

Miracle and parable
Exceeding thought, because it is

Immeasurable; the understander
Encloses understanding, thus
Darkens the light. We can stand under
No ray that is not dimmed by us.

The mind that comes to rest is tended
In ways that it cannot intend:
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
By what it cannot comprehend.¹¹ [11]

A poet writing today who desires to share with us the gifts adumbrated above faces formidable obstacles. As Voegelin showed us, ours is an age of Gnostic projects and dream-worlds, of lusting to build man-made kingdoms on this earth, of trying to extend an ersatz grace to ourselves. For many men and women, the creative use of symbols to illuminate existence in the cosmos and to articulate the life of the soul has been largely eclipsed by the strife of Gnostic dogmas--religious, ethnic, and national--that feed and justify greed, pride, and the lust for power. Relatively few in our society pick up books of poems, and not all of those readers have experienced the loving, playful, inspired exchange of symbols by likeminded souls that is the heart of poetry and philosophy.

Most important, ever-fewer men and women live and work immersed in the rhythms of the natural world, in the continual presence of wild things. Our collective consciousness is so fragmented and pervaded by acosmic Gnostic fantasies that many of us have largely forgotten the experience, so alive in the Hellenic lyrics and the Psalter, that all things--clouds, stones, grass, trees, water, the grasshopper, the little foxes, human beings--are intimately linked with one another and permeated by divine presence. How difficult it is for us to hear the divine Word spoken through the birdsong of the morning that may evoke, if we truly listen, the answering psalm of

¹¹ [11] Berry, Wendell, *A Timbered Choir* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 1998), 6-7.

praise from the depth of our hearts. Only with great effort can we recollect our innate, primary awareness of all aspects of reality as a divinely ordered Whole.

How can a person faced with those obstacles come to offer us the gifts of poetry? She must learn, as did Mary Oliver, to read the great poetry of the world "the way a person might swim, to save his or her life." (BP 65) She must also learn to hear the words and feel the movements in the soul symbolized in those poems. Further, she must learn to devote loving, patient attention to the things of the world in their concrete immediacy. As the critic Nathan A. Scott, Jr., tells us,

poetic art is, in its deepest aspect, a way of loving the concrete, the particular, the individual. But, of course, to love is to enter the dimension of what the French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel called *presence*: it is to approach a given reality out of a sense of its having the character of a *Thou* ♦. And, having the dimension of presence, things exist always for the poetic imagination in relationship: the world is a body wherein all things are "members one of another."¹² [12]

"Attention," Oliver says somewhere, "is the beginning of devotion." And from devotion to concrete things may emerge, like a long-submerged treasure, the compact, deeply sensuous experience of the Whole as a vast "membership", to use Wendell Berry's memorable symbol. A poet who practices that devotion and is conscious of participating in the cosmos may, through her verse, help us to become similarly devoted and to recollect our place in the Whole. She may also, by symbolizing the movements by which the personal soul is differentiated from the cosmos, help us experience those movements. From within the cosmos, by grace, she may sing to us, and we may hear, of the life of the spirit.

¹² [12] Scott, Nathan A., Jr., *Visions of Presence in Modern American Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 2-3.

To do justice to the fourteen books of poetry and three books of essays that Mary Oliver has written to date would require a volume. The limits of a brief essay will allow me to reflect on only a few of her poems. The great theme of her work is the order of the soul achieved through devotion to "the beauty and the mystery of the world" (BP 64). The poems examined in this essay illustrate the movement in Oliver's work from more compact to increasingly differentiated symbolization of that order.

My reflections are offered in the manner of meditations such as one might hear after the singing of a psalm or hymn or the reading of a gospel. Mary Oliver's poems are prayers of praise. "Writing poems," she observes in her most recent book of essays, "for me but not necessarily for others, is a way of offering praise to the world. In this book you will find, set among the prose pieces, a few poems. Think of them that way, as little alleluias." (LL xiv) Her poems are also calls to repentance and renewal of life. She first heard that call, as a child, in "the natural world" and "the world of literature" (BP 64), and has responded to it passionately in her work and her life.

This I knew, as I grew from simple delight toward thought and into conviction: such beauty as the earth offers must hold great meaning. So I began to consider the world as emblematic as well as real, and saw that it was--that shining word--virtuous. That it offers us, as surely as the wheat and lilies grow, the dream of virtue. (LL 87)

Beauty, she tells us, "is the challenge to be sane, to be thoughtful, to be wholesome." (BP 115) It is the challenge to be virtuous. That awareness has fueled Oliver's search for order and her lifelong effort to communicate order and its obligations. Her abiding intention is that each of her poem's "have a spiritual purpose":

I want the poem to ask something and, at its best moments, I want the question to remain unanswered. I want it to be clear that answering the question is the reader's part in an implicit author-reader pact. (WH 24)

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Oliver has written, "like all great literature ♦ has a deeper design: it would be a book for men to live by." (WH 72). That is likewise her aim. "I am a performing artist; I perform admiration. / *Come with me*, I want my poems to say. *And do the same*. (WH 80)

The title of *Twelve Moons*, Oliver's third collection of verse, refers to twelve poems named for the moons of the year. The first of those poems is about spring.

Pink Moon -- the Pond

You think it will never happen again

Then, one night in April
the tribes wake trilling.
You walk down to the shore.
Your coming stills them,
but little by little the silence lifts
until song is everywhere
and your soul rises from your bones
and strides out over the water.
It is a crazy thing to do --
for no one can live like that,
floating around in the darkness
over the gauzy water.
Left on the shore your bones
keep shouting *come back!*
But your soul won't listen;
in the distance it is unfolding
like a pair of wings, it is sparking
like hot wires. So,
like a good friend,
you decide to follow.

You step off the shore
and plummet to your knees --
you slog forward to your thighs
and sink to your cheekbones --
and now you are caught
by the cold chains of the water --
you are vanishing while around you
the frogs continue to sing, driving
their music upward through your own throat,
not even noticing
you are something else.
And that's when it happens --
you see everything
through their eyes,
their joy, their necessity;
you wear their webbed fingers;
your throat swells.
And that's when you know
you will live whether you will or not,
one way or another,
because everything is everything else,
one long muscle.
It's no more mysterious than that.
So you relax, you don't fight it anymore,
The darkness coming down
called water,
called spring,
called the green leaf, called
a woman's body
as it turns into mud and leaves,
as it beats in its cage of water,
as it turns like a lonely spindle
in the moonlight, as it says
yes (TM 7-8).

The poem symbolizes compactly the tension between life and death in the soul and the cosmos. Order is realized through acceptance of the mystery that "the secret name / of every death is life again" ("Skunk Cabbage", AP 44). The woman--everywoman--desires renewal of life but has thought that spring would never come again. When the "tribes" of the pond awaken, she walks to the pond, where "song is everywhere" and her soul, rising from her "bones", "strides out over

the water." The bones resist the soul's participation in the song and shout "*come back!*" Her soul does not listen but begins to unfold "like a pair of wings" and to spark "like hot wires." We are reminded of the "wings" of the soul in Plato's *Phaedrus* (246c), which symbolize the soul's innate upward impulse toward abiding reality. The woman ventures to follow her soul over the water. She sinks and begins to vanish, "caught by the cold chains of the water," as she feels in her throat the song of the frogs that do not notice she is "something else." She gains the cathartic knowledge that "you will live whether you will or not," whether you are alive or dead, because "everything is everything else, one long muscle". She knows that as her body decays after death she will continue to participate in the cosmos, the mysterious "it" of the poem's final lines. That knowledge allows her to relax and cease fighting against the "it". The anxiety of existence is assuaged by accepting the death that is life, by joining in the joyful and necessary song of the "it," which is "yes". All things participate in the chorus of the cosmos whose joyful song is life.

For decades Oliver has begun each day with a walk in the wild world before dawn. Each part of the day, she writes, "has its portion of the spectacular. But dawn--dawn is a gift." (LL 21) At first light the beauty of the world is illumined most vividly. Her first collection, published forty years ago, includes a poem, "Morning in a New Land ," in which dawn stimulates awe and wonder.

And under the trees, beyond time's brittle drift,
I stood like Adam in his lonely garden
On that first morning, shaken out of sleep,
Rubbing his eyes, listening, parting the leaves,
Like tissue on some vast, incredible gift. (NSP 251)

Those lines use the language of Genesis to symbolize the differentiated experience, beyond the cycles of the cosmos in which death is life, of the world as the beautiful gift of the Creator. In a poem from her fourth collection, *American Primitive*, Oliver records the effect on her soul of the dawn, in which creation is remade and its beauty revealed each morning.

Morning at Great Pond

It starts like this:

forks of light
licking up
out of the east,
flying over you,
and what's left of night --
its black waterfalls,
its craven doubt --
dissolves like gravel
as the sun appears
trailing clouds
of pink and green wool,
igniting the fields,
turning the ponds
to plates of fire.
The creatures there
are dark flickerings
you make out
one by one
as the light lifts --
great blue herons,
wood ducks shaking
their shimmering crests --
and knee-deep
in the purple shallows
a deer drinking:
as she turns
the silver water
crushes like silk,
shaking the sky,
and you're healed then
from the night, your heart
wants more, you're ready
to rise and look!
to hurry anywhere!
to believe in everything. (AP 46)

Dawn transforms the poet's soul from apathy to attentive desire ("look!"), from illness to healing, and from doubt to faith (belief "in everything").¹³ [13] Oliver uses metaphors of water and fire to symbolize the transformation of consciousness: the heavy, hard gravel "dissolves;" the fields are ignited; the ponds catch "fire". Within the cycles of the cosmos the Creator touches and renews the soul each morning through the dawn.

Oliver uses the word resurrection to refer to the cosmic recycling of waste and decayed matter, of dead things. In "Vultures," the carrion birds "minister" to the earth, "looking / for death, / to eat it, / to make it vanish, / to make of it the miracle: / resurrection." (AP 37) But by resurrection she does not mean any form of personal continuity after death. Another poem, "Roses, Late Summer", suggests that such a notion, when taken literally, is a symptom of disorder in the soul. The poet asks:

What happens

to the singing birds
when they can't sing

any longer? What happens
to their quick wings?

Do you think there is any
personal heaven
for any of us?
Do you think anyone,

the other side of that darkness

will call to us, meaning us?

¹³ [13] I have sharpened the formulation in Thomas Mann's *God of Dirt*, *op. cit.*, 38.

The poet knows that each bird continues to participate after death in the chorus of the cosmos whose song of "yes" is life. But she has greater wisdom to impart and, like Jesus, responds to a misguided question by telling a story. She contemplates the foxes "teaching their children / to live in the valley" and the roses that "have opened their factories of sweetness / and are giving it back to the world." She then states her preference, if given another life, "to spend it all on some / unstinting happiness."

I would be a fox, or a tree
full of waving branches.
I wouldn't mind being a rose
in a field full of roses.

Fear has not occurred to them, nor ambition.
Reason they have not yet thought of.
Neither do they ask how long they must be roses, and then what.
Or any other foolish question. (HL 66-67)

The poem symbolizes the tension between life and death, using the literary form that Voegelin discerned in Sappho. Oliver states her authoritative preference for the life of a fox that cares for its young, a tree whose branches wave in the wind, a flower that gives its beauty back to the world, over that of a human being who asks the "foolish question" about a "personal heaven" that he imagines lies beyond the cosmos. The fox, the tree, and the roses participate willingly in the embracing Whole, whereas the man whose soul is disordered by fear and the "ambition" to be God seeks to escape the creaturely status that he experiences as a nothingness that, the poet hints, is all he has to give. The misguided inquiry of the Gnostic "reason" is a symptom of a spiritual disorder, of what Voegelin called a pneumopathological condition. Life consists of the happiness of "unstinting" pouring out of one's being unto death. As Oliver tells us in a later poem, "The Sunflowers" (DW 88-89), the way is difficult:

each of them, though it stands
in a crowd of many,
like a separate universe,

is lonely, the long work
of turning their lives
into a celebration
is not easy.

But the Gnostic alternative--attempting to lose oneself in the demonic quest for an imagined personal immortality beyond the cosmos--is the death of the spirit.

What "factories of sweetness" can we give back to the world in "unstinting happiness"? "The Summer Day," another poem from *House of Light* (HL 60), suggests Oliver's answer. The first lines of the poem begin with several questions:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

Instead of attempting to answer the question, the poet wonders about the origin of three types of creatures that she loves and then of "this grasshopper," which she describes in loving

detail. The inquiry comes to rest in an act of loving attention to an individual creature. The feminine pronoun in the last four lines indicates the intimate connection that such attention provides. Oliver knows that the question is meant not to be answered but to express wonder and awe at the being of the world and the loving orientation of the whole person to that mystery. The lines reveal that orientation in action. The poem continues:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The poet does not "know exactly what a prayer is," but she does know how to be full of wonder and awe, how to contemplate a grasshopper, to swoon in delight upon the grass, to kneel in thanks on the earth, to receive the blessings the world offers on a summer day. She knows how to be like the old couple in a later poem, "Mockingbirds", who

had almost nothing to give

but their willingness
to be attentive--
and for this alone
the gods loved them
and blessed them. (WP 16)

In knowing how to pay attention, the poet knows how to grow in love. Happiness and blessedness are to be found in being present, which is an act of love. We have nothing better to do, Oliver tells us over and over again in her poems, than to be present and attentive to the wild world. From that place we can hear the divine speaking to us through the voices of our fellow creatures, and to love what we see and hear. By giving our loving attention to the world we may be blessed with lives of "unstinting happiness." That is what each person "should" do with his or her "wild and precious life."

As with the mystery of the world's being, the world's beauty evokes wonder that erupts in questioning about its meaning and origin. In "First Snow" (AP 26-27), the earliest snowfall of the year reminds the poet of those questions, already present in her awareness:

The snow
began here
this morning and all day
continued, its white
rhetoric everywhere
calling us back to *why, how,*
whence such beauty and *what*

the meaning; such

an oracular fever!

At the end of the day of the poem, the questions remain without verbal answers, but the blessing of the snow itself provides an affective answer:

walking out now

into the silence and the light

under the trees,

and through the fields

feels like one.

In Oliver's longest poem, *The Leaf and the Cloud*, questioning about the meaning of beauty unfolds into an inquiry into the meaning of life and death. The poet expresses her passionate love of beauty by asking what it is about beauty that stimulates the intensity in her soul that breaks forth in her making of poems and in her worshipful gestures in the fields:

O what is beauty
that I should be up at
four a.m. trying to arrange this
thick song?
What is beauty that I should
bow down in the fields of the world, as though
someone, somewhere,
made it?
O, what is beauty
that I feel it to be so hot-blooded and suggestive,
so filled with imperative

beneath the ease of its changes,
between the leaves and the clouds of its thousand
and again a thousand opportunities? (LC 26)

The poet offers no answer but places the question, and the passionate intensity it expresses, in the perspective of death. "Everything is a part of the world / we can see, taste, touch, hold onto, // and then it is dust. / Dust at last. / Dust and gravel." (39) She acknowledges that all things pass away and confesses her ultimate ignorance: "This is the poem of goodbye. / And this is the poem of don't know." But her trust in the cosmos keeps her from fearing her own death: "*dirt, mud, stars, water--I know you as if you were myself. How could I be afraid?*" (44-45) She is only a part of the Whole, however, and, thus, possesses no certainty:

Oh, nobody runs so hard

as the doubters running over the hot fields,

crying out for faith,

looking for it in the high places and the low places,

looking for it everywhere,

Oh, see how I run! (49-50)

Yet her inner sense of presence is so strong that "nothing could ever convince me / that I was alone." Does that mean that "God" exists? Perhaps, but not in the sense of a wholly benevolent deity:

If God exists he isn't butter and good luck--
he isn't just the summer day the red rose,

he's the snake he's the mouse [whom the snake eats],
he's the hole in the ground [where the snake catches the mouse],

for which thoroughness, if anything, I would adore him,
if I could adore him.
Adore him. (50)

The inquiry about the meaning of life and death comes to rest in adoration for "him" who is present in the things of the cosmos and in the soul of the poet. The obligation to pay attention to the world, when fully obeyed, flows into adoration for the Creator. About "him" Oliver says nothing, except that she adores "him" and that we should, too. One is reminded of the wisdom of the

anonymous author of the 14th century *Cloud of Unknowing*: "Though we cannot know him we can love him. By love he may be touched and embraced, never by thought."14 [14]

Oliver's poems are frequently about listening to birds sing. One such poem, "Such Singing in the Wild Branches" (OOF 8-9), symbolizes the complex relationship between the poet, the poem itself, and the Whole. The poet reports hearing a bird singing "among the first leaves":

First, I stood still

and thought of nothing.

Then I began to listen.

Then I was filled with gladness--

And that's when it happened

when I seemed to float,
to be, myself, a wing or a tree,
and I began to understand
what the bird was saying,

and the sands in the glass
stopped
for a pure white moment
while gravity sprinkled upward

like rain, rising,
and in fact
it became difficult to tell just what it was that was singing--
it was the thrush for sure, but it seemed
not a single thrush, but himself, and all his brothers,
and also the trees around them,
as well as the gliding, long-tailed clouds
in the perfectly blue sky--all, all of them

were singing.

14 [14] Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1996), 54.

And, of course, yes, so it seemed,
So was I.
Such soft and solemn and perfect music doesn't last

for more than a few moments.
It's one of those magical places wise people
like to talk about.
One of the things they say about it, that is true,

is that, once you've been there,
you're there forever.
Listen, everyone has a chance.
Is it spring, is it morning?

The poem has the paradoxical structure of both 1) being a story that refers to an event in which the Truth of the Whole is differentiated and 2) participating in that event. The referential character of the poem is easy to grasp, for at one level it tells the story of an experience in which the poet gains an insight, an experience that begins as she listens to a thrush sing in early spring. To grasp the poem's participatory character, notice that the symbolism differentiates further the meaning of the phrase, "song is everywhere," that appears in the earlier poem, "Pink Moon ♦ the Pond". In both poems, the poet hears a song of all of the things of the world--"all, all of them were singing." In the later poem, the things include the "I" who has been differentiated from the cosmos. The poet's making the poem is symbolized as "singing," that is, as part of the event of the "it" expressing itself in its song. And, the poet hints, she sings to us of the birdsong that awakened her to rapture and led her to compose her poem for the same reason that the bird itself sings--to convey the truth that all things participate, and that human beings can consciously participate, in the joyous "yes" of the "it." Thus, the symbolism conveys the insight that the poet and her poem, like the bird and its singing, participate in the event in which the Whole expresses its Truth in song. Voegelin's interpretation of the opening lines of Genesis applies to "Such Singing in the Wild Branches" as well: "[t]he character of truth ♦ attaches to the story by virtue of its paradoxical structure of being both a narrative and an event."15 [15]

15 [15] Voegelin, Eric, *Order and History*, vol. 5, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 19-27 at 26.

Oliver's eleventh collection of poems, *What Do We Know*, includes a poem about the participation by the poet and her readers in the event of the Whole revealing its Truth.

The Word

How wonderful! I speak of the soul and seven people rise from their chairs and leave the room, seven others lean forward to listen. I speak of the body, the spirit, the mockingbird, the hollyhock, leaves opening in the rain, music, faith, angels seen at dusk--and seven more people leave the room and are seen running down the road. Seven more stay where they are but make murmurous disruptive sounds. Another seven hang their heads, feigning disinterest though their hearts are open, their hope is high that they will hear the word even again. The word is already, for them, the song in the forest. They know already how everything is better--the dark trees less terrible, the ocean less hungry--when it comes forth, and looks around with its crisp and lovely eye, and begins to sing. (WDWK 4)

The poem symbolizes the mystery of the Truth of the Whole being communicated through the poet's poems and essays and incarnated in the spiritual community of like-minded souls who are devoted to her work. Many people come to hear the poet read from her works. Most of them do not have ears to hear: some of those leave early; others "are seen running down the road" (perhaps a bit of humor or a reference to "the doubters" of *The Leaf and the Cloud*); others are noisily discomfited. A few people who attend bring open hearts and high hope "that they will hear the word even again." They long to listen to the bird of the forest sing once again in the beautiful, loving verses of the poet. They long to hear again the divine speaking through the voice of Mary Oliver. We are reminded of the wisdom of Heraclitus (B 50): "When you have listened, not to me but to the *Logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one."¹⁶ [16]

In the *Phaedrus* (248d-e), Plato presents a hierarchy of souls in which the highest group is occupied by the philosopher (*philosophos*) and the lover of beauty (*philokalos*). Both are inspired by the

¹⁶ [16] Freeman, Kathleen, *Ancilla to The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 28.

Muses and Eros, possessed by the psychic animation that Plato calls *mania*. The sixth group of the hierarchy includes the poets. Voegelin observes that

the classification shows definitely that the conflict in the *Republic* is not a quarrel between "philosophy and poetry" in the modern meaning of the terms, but the conflict between the poets of the decaying Hellenic society and the true poet of the newly discovered realm of the soul, who is a twin brother of the philosopher, if not identical with him.¹⁷ [17]

Mary Oliver is a *philokalos* in the Platonic sense, a mystic poet of the soul in the cosmos who is a twin sister of a mystic philosopher such as Eric Voegelin. As we seek to resist the disorder of the age, we would do well to listen deeply to her songs of praise for the mystery and beauty of the world. We would do well to take to heart the last lines of *The Leaf and the Cloud* (LC 52-53):

Think of me
when you see the evening star.
Think of me when you see the wren
the flowing root of the creek beneath him,
dark silver and cold

Remember me I am the one who told you
he sings for happiness.
I am the one who told you
that the grass is also alive, and listening.

alleluiah alleluiah
sings the pale green moth
on the screen door,
alleluiah alleluiah
the red tongues of the white swan
shine out of their black beaks
as they shout
as their wings rise and fall

rise and fall

oh rise and fall

¹⁷ [17] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle, op. cit.*, 139.

through the raging flowers of the snow.

List of Abbreviations

Quotations and other references to Mary Oliver's work are cited in the paper with the abbreviations listed below.

AP	<i>American Primitive</i> (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983).
APH	<i>A Poetry Handbook</i> (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1994).
BP	<i>Blue Pastures</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1991).
DW	<i>Dream Work</i> (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).
HL	<i>House of Light</i> (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
LC	<i>The Leaf and the Cloud</i> (New York : De Capo Press, 2003).
LL	<i>Long Life</i> (New York : De Capo Press, 2004).
NSP	<i>New and Selected Poems</i> (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
OOF	<i>Owls and Other Fantasies</i> (Boston : Beacon Press, 2003).
TW	<i>Twelve Moons</i> (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).
WDWK	<i>What Do We Know</i> (New York : De Capo Press, 2002).
WH	<i>Winter Hours</i> (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999).
WP	<i>White Pine</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1991).
