Mary Oliver on the Soul

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August 2012

Prepared for delivery at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New Orleans, LA, August 30-September 2, 2012. Copyright by the American Political Science Association.

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This paper offers a meditative reading of three poems by Mary Oliver that speak of the soul. To get our bearings and prepare to read the poems, let us recall briefly the range of experiences that the word "soul" encompasses and how philosophers and artists use symbols to express those experiences.

Voegelin often defines the soul as "the sensorium of transcendence" in man. (CW 5: 215; CW 6: 321; and WOP: 221)[1] This definition rests on an analogy that transfers to the soul a faculty—perception—that only our sense organs possess, strictly speaking. As the eye is the organ of sight and the ear the organ of hearing, by analogy the soul is the organ of human perception of transcendent, divine being. This non-physical, non-spatial dimension of consciousness encompasses the experiences of seeking and inquiring that the Hellenic philosophers symbolized with the term *nous*. *Nous* is man's capacity to seek *episteme* or knowledge about the order of being. In such inquiry *nous* senses and responds to the attraction of transcendent being, albeit with varying degrees of conscious awareness. *Nous* is "[u]sually translated as 'mind,' 'intelligence,' 'reason,' or 'rational intuition,'" but the word "means more of what is connoted in English by 'heart' (an intuitive sense of the directional tension of inquiry)." (CW 34: 170) This affective component of *nous* is akin to *eros*, the loving desire for the *agathon*, the supreme good, implicit in all our particular desires for limited goods. (CW 34: 158)

The soul's perception of transcendent, divine being also encompasses the experiences symbolized with the words *ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek, and *spiritus* in Latin. Wind, air, and breath are among the original meanings of each of those terms. Man is alive insofar as he is open to the infusion of air into his body and actively receives that gift. By analogy, the spirit of man is alive insofar as he is open to and actively receives the infusion of the Spirit of God; or, equivalently, insofar as he hears, allows himself to be formed by, and obeys the Word spoken to him by God. Another equivalent metaphor appears in John 6:44, where the power of Christ to draw all men to himself is identified with a pull exerted by God: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (CW 12: 189) The various metaphors articulate the experience of being existentially opened and kept spiritually alive by the initiative, the gracious gift, of

[1] The end of the paper provides a list of the abbreviations used to provide citations to the works of Eric Voegelin and Mary Oliver.

a divine reality that radically transcends the world yet is formatively present and active in the soul.

The use of metaphor and analogy to articulate these experiences reflects our essential ignorance of the mystery of the soul—indeed, of the mystery of reality as a whole. This ignorance was expressed with admirable clarity by the early Greek fathers of Christianity. "The essence of our own soul is not fully known to us," according to John Chrysostom, "or rather it is not known to us at all." The reason for our ignorance, according to Gregory of Nyssa, is that we are made in the image of God. "An image is only truly such in so far as it expresses all of the attributes of its archetype…. One of the characteristics of the divine nature is to be in its essence beyond our understanding; it is altogether necessary, then, for the image to resemble the archetype in this respect."[2] Voegelin echoes these teachings in the Introduction to *Israel and Revelation*: "At the center of his existence man is unknown to himself and must remain so, for that part of being that calls itself man could be known fully only if the community of being and its drama in time were known as a whole." He goes on to say that the act by which the part of being calls itself "man" is "an act of evocation, of calling forth," but it "is not itself an act of cognition." (IR 2) To express our participation in reality, we must use the language of symbols to articulate, and evoke in others, an awareness of the concrete experiences that all men share in common, as least potentially. Hence a philosopher must rely on analogy and metaphor to define the soul and to articulate the experiences, the inner movements, which constitute the soul's life.

Mary Oliver is a literary artist. Art may be defined as man's use of visual, auditory, and linguistic symbols to express the various dimensions of his experience of participating in reality. As Bernard Lonergan has stressed, a work of art manifests our spiritual freedom and our desire to know by asking questions about and exploring human possibilities. As Glenn Hughes has put the matter, explicating Lonergan: "An artwork … is not an *explanation* of anything. It is an *exploration* of a way of seeing, or of hearing, or of shaping one's living, expressed in the prereflective, concrete language of symbols."[3]

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[2] The texts are quoted in Kallistos Ware, "The Soul in Greek Christianity," in Crabbe, M. James C., ed., *From Soul to Self* (Routledge: London and New York, 1999), 49-69 at 49.

[3] See Hughes, Glenn, *A More Beautiful Question: The Spiritual in Poetry and Art* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 26-32, for a discussion of "Lonergan on Art." The quotation is from p. 41.

Art explores possibilities of human seeing, hearing, and living by *showing* them to us and *inviting* us to participate in them. In her essays, Mary Oliver has reflected on how this is done in the art of poetry. In "a successful poem," she writes, "feelings and insights wait to be felt through … in an individual and personal way" (BP 108). Successful poems offer a reader "affirming reenactments/experiences" that can enlarge his or her life (BP 112). Although the perceptions, feelings, or apprehensions of meaning offered in a poem have their temporal origins in concrete experiences in the life of the poet, the arrangement of words that is the poem transcends those origins. For a poem must

> rise from its own singularity, its own instance, which is relatively unimportant, to a less particular, through just as exacting, conceptual level. Poems must employ language to illustrate idea, that sacred smoke above the fire of instance. And the "I" of the poem must gesture to the threshold, in invitation (BP 114).

Echoing Lonergan's account of art as a manifestation of our freedom and our desire to know, Oliver intends that each of her poems "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)

Each of Mary Oliver's poems asks an existential question: can we undergo the perceptions, feelings, and insights that wait for us in the poem and, in response to those experiences, change our lives?

To make these reflections on poetic art more concrete and to introduce the verse of Mary Oliver, let us turn to a poem from *White Pine*, her eighth collection. The poem evokes the loveliness of the world, our reverent response to that beauty, and the capacity of a poem to communicate both experiences.

"At the Lake"

A fish leaps
like a black pin—

then—when the starlight
strikes its side—

like a silver pin.
In an instant
the fish's spine
alters the fierce line of rising

and it curls a little—
the head, like scalloped tin,
plunges back,
and it's gone.

This is, I think,
what holiness is:
the natural world,
where every moment is full

of the passion to keep moving.
Inside every mind
there's a hermit's cave
full of light,

full of snow,
full of concentration.
I've knelt there,
and so have you,

hanging on
to what you love,
to what is lovely.
The lake's

shining sheets
don't make a ripple now,
and the stars
are going off to their blue sleep,

but the words are in place—
and the fish leaps, and leaps again
from the black plush of the poem,
that breathless space. (WP 18-19)

The image of the fish rising, shining for a moment under the stars, and then falling away evokes the beauty of "the natural world," where all living things are holy. We are invited to recollect the deeply sensuous awareness of divine presence permeating all things that Voegelin calls the primary experience of the cosmos. Inside each of us is an inner hermitage "full of light" where we may gaze once again, in reverent concentration, on the loveliness of living things that we love. The breath-taking moment captured in the poem is over now, yet the exquisitely placed words form a "breathless space" in which "the fish leaps, and leaps again." In reading and re-reading the poem we can imaginatively reenact the immediate experiences of the fish leaping and shining, awareness of the mystery of the Whole, and dazzled, breathless wonder.

For decades Mary Oliver has started each day by taking a solitary walk that begins before dawn. "I walk in the world," she has written, "to love it." (LL 40) In her back pocket is a notebook in which she records phrases and ideas that leap to mind as she looks and listens with love. Each jotting is intended to help her to return later to "the moment and place of the entry," "the felt experience," "the instant." (BP 46) At some point she returns home, reviews her notes, and makes herself available to inspiration.

> In the act of writing the poem, I am obedient, and submissive. Insofar as one can, I put aside ego and vanity, and even intention. I listen. What I hear is almost a voice, almost a language. It is a second ocean, rising, singing into one's ear, or deep inside the ears, whispering in the recesses where one is less oneself than one is part of some single indivisible community…. One learns the craft, and then casts off. One hopes for gifts. One hopes for direction. It is both physical, and spooky. It is intimate, and inapprehensible. (WH 98)

Oliver's fourteenth collection, *Why I Wake Early*, includes a poem in which the speaker recounts a walk along the seashore.

"Bone"

Understand, I am always trying to figure out
what the soul is,
and where hidden,
and what shape—

and so, last week,
when I found on the beach
the ear bone
of a pilot whale that may have died

hundreds of years ago, I thought
maybe I was close
to discovering something—
for the ear bone

2.

is the portion that lasts longest
in any of us, man or whale; shaped
like a squat spoon
with a pink scoop where

once, in the lively swimmer's head,
it joined its two sisters
in the house of hearing,
it was only

two inches long—
and I thought: the soul
might be like this—
so hard, so necessary—

3.

yet almost nothing.
Beside me
the gray sea
was opening and shutting its wave-doors,

unfolding over and over
its time-ridiculing roar;
I looked but I couldn't see anything
through its dark-knit glare;

yet don't we all know, the golden sand
is there at the bottom,
though our eyes have never seen it,
nor can our hands ever catch it

4.

lest we would sift it down
into fractions, and facts—
certainties—
and what the soul is, also

I believe I will never quite know.
Though I play at the edges of knowing,
truly I know
our part is not knowing,

but looking, and touching, and loving,
which is the way I walked on,
softly,
through the pale-pink morning light.
(WIWE, 4-6)

The poem opens in the imperative mood, as the speaker bids us to attend to her ceaseless inquiry into the nature of the soul. The first twenty-five lines, forming one long sentence, vibrate with the restlessness of her search. Encountering the ear bone of a whale on the beach, she wonders if the soul is like the bone. A whale emits high-pitched calls, which echo off objects and return to the whale through the water, which has similar density to its body. For the whale to hear, something must vibrate less, and the dense ear bone—the hardest of all bone in nature—vibrates much less than the rest of its body. The ear bone resonates with the echoes of the whale's calls, and the surrounding tissues use the bone's vibrations to locate and identify surrounding objects. Thus, the ear bone is crucial to a whale orienting itself and to all aspects of its life.[4] The speaker's questioning, the analogy implies, is like the searching call by which a whale seeks to orient itself in the depths of the sea. And perhaps the soul is the part of man, "so hard, so necessary—yet almost nothing," with which man can hear the echoing response to the call of his questioning and thereby orient himself in the world. The restlessness of the speaker's inquiry may encompass excited anticipation of receiving an answer.

The speaker hears the "time-ridiculing roar" of the sea's waves breaking beside her but cannot see through their "dark-knit glare." Yet, she says, "don't we all know, the golden sand /

[4] Zhexi Luo, "How Whales Hear," http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/1997/julaug/feat4.htm; and http://nigel-kayak.blogspot.com/.

is there at the bottom," though we can never see or touch it. We can enter the surf, swim out, and dive deeply beneath the waves to see and touch patches of sand, but the bottom of the ocean as a whole is beyond our grasp and vision, is perceptually limitless. The three lines that begin section four, starting with the lovely "lest," convey the wisdom that the intangibility of the ocean floor, like the vastness of nature, is a mystery that instructs us in the limits of our senses and discursive reason. By appreciating and accepting those limits, we may simply trust in the timeless divine ground that transcends the "time-ridiculing roar" of the world, the ground that we noetically sense is there yet cannot know with our senses or discursive reason, the ground from whose depth the images of a poem emerge. The speaker's questioning comes to rest in the beautiful symbol of a "play at the edges of knowing" of the partner in being who "truly … know[s] / our part is not knowing." The playful practice of knowing unknowing is manifest in the loving openness with which the speaker walks on "softly" through the world, "looking, and touching, and loving." The steadily increasing "morning light" of the last line hints at the growth in luminosity achieved through the questioning that has come to rest in open, loving trust in the cosmos and its transcendent, divine ground.

The last section of Oliver's ninth collection, *West Wind*, consists of a single long poem, perhaps her finest, that beckons us to follow her along the mystic way she has trod. The speaker invites us to walk in the world as she does; to become one with the mystery of life and death that we find there; and to live in expectant openness to the possibility of union with the divine that, although beyond time and movement, is vividly present in the world.

"Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches"

Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches
of other lives—
tried to imagine what the crisp fringes, full of honey,
hanging
from the branches of the young locust trees, in early summer,
feel like?

Do you think this world is only an entertainment for you?

Never to enter the sea and notice how the water divides
with perfect courtesy, to let you in!

Never to lie down on the grass, as though you were the grass!
Never to leap to the air as you open your wings over
the dark acorn of your heart!
No wonder we hear, in your mournful voice, the complaint
that something is missing from your life!

Who can open the door who does not reach for the latch?
Who can travel the miles who does not put one foot
in front of the other, all attentive to what presents itself
continually?
Who will behold the inner chamber who has not observed
with admiration, even with rapture, the outer stone?

Well, there is time left—
fields everywhere invite you into them.

And who will care, who will chide you if you wander away
from wherever you are, to look for your soul?

Quickly, then, get up, put on your coat, leave your desk!

To put one's foot into the door of the grass, which is
the mystery, which is death as well as life, and
not be afraid!

To set one's foot in the door of death, and be overcome
with amazement!

To sit down in front of the weeds, and imagine
god the ten-fingered, sailing out of his house of straw,

nodding this way and that way, to the flowers of the
present hour,

to the song falling out of the mockingbird's pink mouth,

to the tiplets of the honeysuckle, that have opened
in the night.

To sit down, like a weed among weeds, and rustle in the wind!

~~

Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?

While the soul, after all, is only a window,
and the opening of the window no more difficult
than the wakening from a little sleep.

~~

Only last week I went out among the thorns and said
to the wild roses:
deny me not,
but suffer my devotion.
Then, all afternoon, I sat among them. Maybe

I even heard a curl or two of music, damp and rouge-red,
hurrying from their stubby buds, from their delicate watery bodies.

~~

For how long will you continue to listen to those dark shouters,
caution and prudence?

Fall in! Fall in!

~~

A woman standing in the weeds.
A small boat flounders in the deep waves, and what's coming next
is coming with its own heave and grace.

~~

Meanwhile, once in a while, I have chanced, among the quick things,
upon the immutable.
What more could one ask?

And I would touch the faces of the daisies,
and I would bow down
to think about it.

That was then, which hasn't ended yet.

Now the sun begins to swing down. Under the peach-light,
I cross the fields and the dunes, I follow the ocean's edge.

I climb, I backtrack.
I float.
I ramble my way home. (WW 61-63)

The early stanzas of the poem resonate with joy and excitement as the speaker urges us to unite, imaginatively and perceptually, with the fruit of the young locust trees, the waves of the sea, the grass, and a bird that takes wing. Without the sensuous experience of a felt communion with all things, we mourn for "something" that we know is there. But we are free! By walking meditatively into the world and seeking to behold and feel the presence of everything we encounter, we may flower into creatures full of admiration, rapture, and amazement at the mystery of life and death. We may imagine and perhaps be transformed into "god the ten-fingered" who lovingly greets each beautiful, mortal thing. The graceful ease of this existential rebirth is symbolized with the double metaphor of the soul as a window and opening the window as requiring no more effort than "wakening from a little sleep." By immersing ourselves in the presences in the world around us, we may arouse ourselves from the dream of alienation from the cosmos, emerging into a wakeful openness of soul.

The meaning of attentive immersion in the world is deepened as the speaker tells of an afternoon she spent "among the thorns" in devotion to "the wild roses" whose "music" she may have heard. This quiet recollection of hours spent in reverent contemplation is followed by the shout of the next stanza, with its excited command that we get in line, its hint that the "something" we have been missing is available to all. The next two lines symbolize the waiting in existential openness of a mystic soul. The image of "[a] woman standing in the weeds" captures the humility and ordinariness of contemplative awareness. The image of a "small boat [that] flounders in the deep waves" conveys a groping to keep one's balance, to remain open to the boundless depth, despite the anxiety that arises as one lets go, again and again, of thoughts, feelings, and images. Persistence in this catharsis involves acceptance that "what's coming next is coming with its own heave and grace," a willingness to suffer whatever shifts in consciousness may emerge from the depth. The speaker continues: "Meanwhile, once in a while, I have chanced, among the quick things, / upon the immutable." Sustained contemplative awareness may flower into moments of perceptual union with changeless, divine reality. We can ask for no

greater gift. Each such experience has an end in time yet partakes of the timeless and, thus, as the speaker says, "hasn't ended yet." In the last stanza, her awareness returns to the time of the world, where the day is nearing its end. She continues her walk, tracing "the ocean's edge," moving along the limits of the world, ascending toward home.

The last poem we will read is from Oliver's eleventh collection, *What Do We Know*. Here Oliver invites us to reverently attend to the song of a lark and to explore how we may respond to the divine call to salvation.

"The Lark"

And I have seen,
at dawn,
the lark
spin out of the long grass

and into the pink air—
its wings,
which are neither wide
nor overstrong,

fluttering—
the pectorals
ploughing and flashing
for nothing but altitude—

and the song
bursting
all the while
from the red throat.

And then he descends,
and is sorry.
His little head hangs
and he pants for breath

for a few moments
among the hoops of the grass,
which are crisp and dry,
where most of his living is done—

and then something summons him again
and up he goes,
his shoulders working,
his whole body almost collapsing and floating

to the edges of the world.
We are reconciled, I think,
to too much.
Better to be a bird, like this one—

an ornament of the eternal.
As he came down once, to the nest of the grass,
"Squander the day, but save the soul,"
I heard him say. (WDWK 38-39)

The first four stanzas bring to mind Shakespeare's Sonnet 19, where the soul that has remembered God's love, "Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymn at heaven's gate." Here the speaker does not mention God or the soul but simply beholds and bears witness to the mystery of the lark's ascent toward the heavens, its wings and pectoral muscles working "for nothing but altitude," its throat "bursting" with song. For Oliver, as she says in an essay, the lark is "the bird that is more than itself, the voice of the universe: vigorous, godly joy" (LL 91).

The lark's joyful ascent is followed by a sorrowful descent, after which he must rest from his toil in the grass of the fields, where he spends most of his life. The shift to the masculine pronoun hints that the bird's wings may be those of our souls and the subject of the poem our spiritual lives. Our wonder at the mystery of the bird's life deepens as "something summons him again" and he immediately takes flight, "his whole body almost collapsing and floating / to the edges of the world." One is reminded of the title of a work of Kierkegaard: "Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing." The repeated ascents and descents of the lark, each ascent resonant with song, symbolize the life of the open soul that responds to God's call by joyfully seeking and praising Him until mortal wings can carry it no farther, forcing it to return to and rest in the everyday world, waiting to hear the divine summons again. The speaker expresses her authoritative preference to be like the lark—"an ornament of the eternal" who squanders his days, by the

standards of the world—perhaps as "a woman standing in the weeds"—in order to cooperate in the salvation of his soul.

This paper has offered a meditative reading of several of Mary Oliver's poems that speak of the soul. My aim has been to illuminate the experiences those poems symbolize and the existential questions they ask. My effort cannot substitute for your own meditative reading and re-reading of the poems. In the last chapter of his study of Plato's erotic dialogues, *Eros,Wisdom, and Silence,* James Rhodes asks what Plato would say if we asked how he wants us to benefit from his dialogues. Plato "would answer," according to Rhodes, "that we should experience their impact wordlessly in our souls…."[5] I believe Mary Oliver would say the same.

[5] Rhodes, James, *Wisdom, Eros, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 540.

List of Abbreviations

Quotations and other references to works of Mary Oliver and Eric Voegelin are cited with the abbreviations listed below.

BP	*Blue Pastures* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1991).
LL	*Long Life* (New York: De Capo Press, 2004).
WDWK	*What Do We Know* (New York: De Capo Press, 2002).
WH	*Winter Hours* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999).
WP	*White Pine* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1991).
WIWE	*Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).
WW	*West Wind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997).
CW 5	*The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 5, *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions, The New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, ed. by Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999).
CW 6	*The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 6, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, ed. by David Walsh (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002).
CW 34	*The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 34, *Autobiographical Reflections, Revised Edition with a Voegelin Glossary and Cumulative Index*, ed., Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006).
IR	*Order and History*, Vol. 1, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1956).
WTP	*Order and History*, Vol. 2, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1957).