# “The Chance to Love Everything”:
## Mary Oliver’s Poetry of Affect

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*Abstract*

Known as a poet of nature, Mary Oliver’s poetic oeuvre grows out of the literary foundations of Romanticism both in its relative linguistic simplicity and in its sense of wonder at life in all its natural forms and manifestations. The Romantics acknowledged nature’s profound significance for human well-being and viewed nature as a transcendental phenomenon that links humans to God. The notion that nature is divine as it contains all life, and all of it equally worthy, resonates deeply in Oliver’s verses. The paper will focus on selected poems from her 2008 collection *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* to show that Oliver’s poetry deals with ecological crisis in a singular way. An expression of her view of nature as magnificent, her poetry can stir an emotional response that pushes the reader toward a greater sense of appreciation of and the need for protecting nature. Rather than adopting a typically dystopian approach to twenty-first-century eco-fiction, which hopes to mobilize readers by instilling a sense of fear through its representation of endangered nature, illnesses, and ecological crises, Oliver speaks of nature with awe and love. Relying on the tenets of affect theory, the paper proposes that by representing the beauty and wonder of life, by making her readers see and love what surrounds them, Oliver invites her audience to act positively as appreciation discourages destruction. In a radical change of perspective, people should strive toward what Iris Murdoch terms *unselfing*, and abandon unsustainable anthropocentric views and policies to become a caring human kind, willing to take “the chance to love everything.”

*Keywords*

Affect; Anthropocene; Love; Mary Oliver; Nature; *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures*.


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Love is the extremely difficult realisation that
something other than oneself is real.
Iris Murdoch

You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason
you are here on earth.
Louise Erdrich

Fear has long been acknowledged by scholars, scientists, and writers as the strongest emotion, an apparatus for survival, that effectively determines human behavior by turning people into both defensive and violent beings, informing moral judgements and even aesthetic production via, as Howard Phillips Lovecraft suggests, the "weirdly horrible tale" (1). For many, the anthropogenic effects on nature and life represent a major source of fear because humanity depends on nature for survival. The realization that the effects of human activity have ended up being both a source of (technological) progress and a potential cause of humanity's demise creates a schism in the human understanding of themselves, their role in the world, and the chances for survival of both the human and many other species.[1] It is because of this rupture in the belief about (technological, human) progress that the imaginings of the natural world in the wake of industrialism have increasingly become dystopian in their representations of endangered nature, illnesses, and ecological crises, instilling a sense of fear in the readers,[2] with the aim of raising awareness of imminent danger. Timothy Morton refers to this as dark ecology, "ecological awareness, dark-depressing" (5). Fear and depression, however, have a debilitating effect as they create a sense of hopelessness, which is neither constructive nor sustainable. So, Morton urges: "Do not be afraid" (5). This is the path taken by Mary Oliver, "a visionary poet of nature" firmly rooted in the tradition of English Romanticism (McNew 59), and American Transcendentalism.

Instead of representing a bleak ecological reality or imagining a dystopian future, Mary Oliver subscribes to the Romantic aesthetic, which highlights the beauty and necessity of love for the world as the cure for contemporary eco-maladies. Although Oliver acknowledges the power of fear, "I imagined the red eyes, / the broad tongue, the enormous lap. / Would it be friendly too? / Fear defeated me" ("The Chance to Love Everything" lines 18-21), she refuses to let it prevail: "And yet, / not in faith and not in madness / but with the courage I thought / my dream deserved, / I stepped outside" (lines 21-25). Her dream to love everything provides her with the courageousness needed to face the unknown and feared Other, which she even tries to embrace as it escapes (lines 31-35). This type of "love for no reason—unconditional love" marked by sadness, longing, and anxiety (Morton 152) illustrates how *ecognosis* – ecological awareness – is enveloped in a

dreamlike-veil that enshrouds the ever-circulating politics of coexistence (Morton 5-7). Eco-awareness arises from an affective response, from a sense of "wonderment," which is "the basic phenomenological chemical of philosophy" (Morton 31),[3] and Oliver's poetry is steeped in affect: it originates in the poet's affective perception and produces an affective response.

Yet, among the various readings of Oliver's poetry, including ecocritical, ecofeminist, feminist, and theological (see Graham 1994; Davis 2009; Riley 2009; Zona 2011), as well as those elaborating on her Romantic influences (McNew 1989; Burton-Christie 1996; Johnson 2005), the notion of affect, which seems to be central to her verses, remains relatively unexplored. To affect and be affected – as per Benedict Spinoza's *affectus*, the means by which the mind is able to affirm the existence of its body (158) – refers to "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (Deleuze and Guattari xvi). Affect is kinetic by nature: it can mean "physical action in the world, but can equally mean an idea, a change of mood, a reorientation, or a totally imperceptible shift in body-world relations that has yet (or ever) to manifest" (Truran 28). Oliver's poetry *moves* the reader by making them see and feel non-human life as wondrous and therefore also precious. She pays "attention to bodies, worlds, and the forces that move and motivate them into relation and existence" (Truran 26) and explores the ways of being in the world by representing different embodiments of life and their mutual – friendly, compassionate – interactions. Her verses immerse the reader into the minutiae of the natural world so profoundly, not least because she has the remarkable "ability to sustain a voice of joy, of true ecstatic fervor" (Davis 605), that they become physically, sensationally, affected as they are warmed by feelings of love, amazement, and compassion for all living beings, even those that they typically perceive as abject, like whelks, snakes, and toads, or dangerous, like coyotes and bears.

The stimulation of senses is, according to Scott Slovic, at the core of eco-literature as it transforms ecological awareness from an abstract to an embodied concept more likely to motivate action: "Writers in general – and I find this particularly true of so-called environmental writers – serve as extensions of our own nerve endings. They feel for us, they exhort us to feel more intensely, more fully, and they demonstrate the process of sensation in a way that we can then enact more consciously" (62). Oliver's descriptions of touching, but also smelling, hearing, and seeing of nature can (and are supposed to) affect a change in the reader, and in the world: "The poem lies there and it waits for somebody for whom it may be momentous. It needs the right person for its set of words, for what it is saying. And it can change lives. Art can change lives" (Oliver qtd. in Ratiner 61).

To illustrate that Oliver responds to the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene by opening the reader's eye to beauty and heart to feeling, this essay focus-

es on her collection *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* (2008), containing both previously published and new poems, which can potentially change the reader's view of the environment and their participation in it. As Alex Houen suggests, affective experience is manifold, influenced by multiple things at the same time, and inclusive of both the real and the imaginary experience (2), so even though one reads about Oliver's experiences of the natural world, one can imagine them as their own. Affect (affective reading) defies specific socio-temporal limitations and shows that contextual framework need not be the only epistemological tool in reading literature; even readers unfamiliar with historical, political, and social contexts of a literary text react to it. They experience the text on an aesthetic, affective, and moral level, and are changed in the process. For instance, in her discussion of the "politico-sentimental aesthetic" ("Poor Eliza" 637), Lauren Berlant argues that sentimental literature may have political effects in that it supports the national identification and unification by means of identifying "yourself with someone else's stress, pain, or humiliated identity. The possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same remains the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic" (648). While Oliver's poetry is distinctly personal, frequently even confessional, and therefore outside of the ostensibly political, the possibility of change through affect is contained in it too. As Hua Hsu explains, the nonlinguistic "affective charge" – moods, feelings, and atmosphere – fashions human life just as much as narratives and reasoning do. The poems in this collection are rooted in affect and express the poetic subject's awe at her various encounters with non-human beings. Through her focus on representations of nature as godly, of friendship, and of death, she establishes an affective (and holistic) poetic world in which the relationships and identities of all living beings interact to form the dynamic beauty of the Earth's ecosystem.

"The Gesture," in which the poetic speaker, always Oliver herself,[4] rescues a young walking stick insect by removing it from her dog's ear and putting it on a tree, illustrates how simple it is to make a change. It correlates to Morton's musings in "Beginning after the End," the prologue to his *Dark Ecology*: "This future is unthinkable. Yet here we are, thinking it. Coexisting, we are thinking future coexistence. Predicting it and more: keeping the unpredictable one open" (1). The act of saving the tiny insect, "scarcely sprung / from the pod of the nest" (Oliver, lines 3-4), by returning it to nature takes on a momentous, life-saving importance:

> I could not imagine it could live
> in the brisk world, or where it would live, or how. But
> I took it
> outside and held it up to the red oak. (lines 7-10)

By this small gesture, the poet takes an imaginative leap of faith into the future in which she can offset the negative effects of the insect's chance entrapment in the

dog's ear hair. Even though it is nobody's fault, there is room to remedy a potentially deadly situation. It is up to the poetic subject to make a choice about the insect's life or death, which empowers the reader to believe they could make the same kind of gesture when the occasion arises. The poet's act becomes a gesture as it is invested by profound meaning, but the poem suggests that the insect is also the one who gestured by accepting help, by embracing life:

> . . . it lifted its forward-most
> pair of arms
> with what in anything worth thinking about would have seemed
> a graceful and glad gesture; it caught
> onto the bark, it hung on; it rested; it began to climb. (lines 11-15)

Both the poet and the insect are "thinking future coexistence." The implied sense of fearful awe at witnessing the fragility and resilience of life, the softness of the contours separating life and death, and the shockingly small effort needed from an individual to sustain (another's) life moves the reader profoundly, "[b]ecause it is real, yet beyond concept. Because it is weird. Art is thought from the future [...] If we want thought different from the present, then thought must veer toward art" (Morton 1). Oliver imagines a positive future for the insect and acts compassionately, which in turn creates that positive future as well as affirms the connection between the insect and herself. At the same time, the reader's affective response to the poem helps implicate them into the network of coexistence, showcasing their own responsibility toward everyone in that network.

The aspect of change through feeling, that is, being moved, is particularly pronounced in Oliver's poems, whether one reads them from the point of view of ecological or moral crisis. On the one hand, Oliver describes nature as the divine source of life and wonder, a precious fountain of beauty to be drunk from and filled with a sense of love and admiration. She highlights the potential for redemption and represents what is salvageable, what is worth saving, rather than what is (being) destroyed. The reader is immersed in the aesthetic of the beautiful and wondrous in which "[l]ove is the emancipating vehicle" (Berlant, "Poor Eliza" 660) that may contribute to a "construction of a revolutionary transformation of world and personal history. The text wants to make vital, sensual experience out of the linkage between the person and the world" (661). In particular, the effect of Oliver's poems about the beauty of nature and those about the detrimental effect of human influence, enable "the utopian and the practical to meet intimately" (Berlant, "Poor Eliza" 648). On the other hand, her poems seamlessly couple affect with judgement, and serve as a reminder that, as Iris Murdoch remarks, "[a]rt and morals are [...] one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something

other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality" ("The Sublime and the Good" 51). Oliver does not "moralize" or attempt to be didactic in any way; rather, her poetry carries the affect's micropolitical potential to, as Brian Massumi understands it, change the individual (a body) within any given culture, rather than cause a major disruption within the culture's discourse (1). In Morton's terms, the peripeteia of the eco-noir narrative is the moment when the narrator (human) realizes that they are the tragic criminal – it is the moment of ecological awareness (9). It is also a view of responsibility as guilt. In Oliver's case, the peripeteia occurs when the reader realizes that they are the potential hero, so responsibility is taken to mean potential, the opportunity to do good.

That the moment of individual enlightenment through the awareness of one's implication in the world and one's responsibility for and in it is also a moment of empowerment can be seen in "Porcupine":

> I think, what love does to us
> is a Gordian knot,
> it's that complicated.
>
> I hug the dogs
> and their good luck,
> and put on their leashes. (lines 22–27)

The entanglement into the web of love sometimes implies a willingness to be tied by our loved one's "leash" rather than a form of detached freedom. To *coexist* means to be implicated in the totality of life: "I'm a person. I'm also part of an entity that is now *a geophysical force on a planetary scale*" (Morton 9). Every "entity" partakes in *multiplicity*, which is our ontological reality. In it "each element ceaselessly varies and alters its distance in relation to the others" (Deleuze and Guattari 30) but is never detached. The poetry of multiplicity, of coexistence is necessarily also a poetry of affect, which exhibits embodied interconnectedness: "To 'affect and be affected' means that our capacity is changed in some way by the impact of an encounter with something: a body, an object, an idea, or an emotion" (Truran 28). Oliver's understanding of animals and all forms of life as fellow-creatures and friends, who, although they are her silent interlocutors, partake in life as her equals,[5] echoes her Romantic influences who, frequently in the form of autoreferential poems, called for personal and social transformation and emancipation either through revolution or contact with the divinity and sublimity of nature.

Because Romantic poetry traces "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" (Wordsworth, Preface 235-36), the identity of the

Romantic poet is frequently merged with the lyrical speaker, and poetry takes on a confessional, subjective tone, like in the case of Oliver. Her poetry is and wants to be unmediated; simple and direct language and the motifs of nature are combined[6] to form poetic images expressing the inherent beauty of the ordinary, as well as the poet's affective reaction to it. The pronounced autoreferentiality of Romantic poetry imbues it with a sense of love for oneself and for the Other (the desired object), correlating it, according to Morton, to the mechanics of consumerism, which flickers "between autoaffection and heteroaffection" (122). Thanks to the linguistic accessibility of Oliver's poetry, the reader feels invited to explore the nature of these reciprocal affects. They feel addressed by the poet thanks to the implied apostrophe that can be sensed in her verses. Through this, albeit implicit, "phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible" (Berlant, Cruel Optimism 26), Oliver subtly summons the reader to partake in the shared experience, acknowledging the mutual connection. For instance, in "Toad" she talks to the immovable animal, "About this cup / we call a life," from her five-feet-tall perspective and wonders "how it seemed / to him, down there, intimate with the dust" (lines 6-7, 13-14).

Through poetic constructions of the world in which everyone and everything plays a part in the grand scheme of things, Oliver's poems also exhibit a Romantic reverence for nature "both as a physical space in which humans live and as a metaphysical category – a source of the divine, of inspiration, and of artistic creation [...][making] a connection between the realm of nature and that of the spirit" (Matek 30).[7] Percy B. Shelley, Oliver's "beloved poet" ("Percy (One)" line 1), for example, muses about the human mind, acknowledging its "unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" ("Mont Blanc" lines 39-40). The focus here is less on the metaphysical and more on the connectedness as it enables ecognosis. The mysteriousness and magic of things (and nature) stands, according to object-oriented ontology, as a consequence of indirect causality, which is "aesthetic" and as such corresponds well with eco-politics that demands "the reenchantment of the world" (Morton 16-17). Shelley is positively entranced with the sublime Mont Blanc, just as Oliver is with the "Beauty of fox, lemur, panther, / aardvark, thunder-worm, condor, // the quagga, the puffer, the kudu, / and this: the opossum" ("The Opossum" lines 1-4). Everything, great or small, contributes to the unity of things, which is a view that challenges the anthropocentric understanding of the world. Similar notions can also be found in American Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

In "Nature" (1836), Emerson espouses unity between nature, God, and humans by suggesting that "Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us" (28), and the well-known metaphor of the transparent eyeball corresponds to

the notion of artistic genius championed by the European Romantics:[8] "Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space-all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (Emerson 6). The artist is able to view nature as transcendental and yet not formless – the forms of the godly are traceable through the forms of nature: "The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world" (Emerson 19). Similarly, finding traces of the divine in the visible, Oliver speaks of "a hundred white-sided dolphins [...] each one, as God himself" lifting her "into the world's / unspeakable kindness [...] into the moon-eye of God [...] with everything / that ever was, or ever will be" ("One Hundred White-sided Dolphins" lines 13, 15, 36-37, 41, 42-44). The poetic subject's complete immersion into the imagined reality of being a dolphin results in her temporary *vanishing*: "It is my sixty-third summer on earth / and, for a moment, I have almost vanished / into the body of the dolphin" (lines 38-40). As she merges with the dolphin, she becomes one with "everything," with the universe (lines 41-44), she vanishes and becomes *transparent*. By the momentary obliteration of the poetic subject, the poem acknowledges that, as Morton explains, things exist even outside of the epistemological screen onto which the human subject projects their discursive correlations (14); the dolphin exists even if the narrator temporarily does not. This unsettles the anthropocentric envisioning of life marked by materialist desires that place everything into the coordinate system of utility,[9] and so the true *nature* of life escapes it. Yet, consumerism and ecognosis are somehow interrelated, as Morton argues, because "there reside within consumerism some chemicals that are vital for catalyzing ecological awareness" (121). The two are interrelated, and so ecognosis must embrace its spectre, consumerism (125), which is why the two often coexist in eco-discourse.

For example, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) highlights the beauty of simple life rid of materialist desires, echoing Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us," where Wordsworth laments the fact that humans are detached from nature and consumed by desires of the material goods: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; – / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (lines 2-4). For the Romantics, the humans' detachment from nature as well as rapid industrialization and urbanization represented an extreme form of crisis since the detachment from nature equalled a detachment from God, and, by the same logic, the destruction of nature a blasphemy. Oliver *feels* the same way, yet she abstains from preaching about pollution or materialism, inviting change and empathy in readers simply by describing what she sees, like in her prose poem "At Herring Cove," where the debris – natural, like animal skulls, and artificial, like a "set of car keys" (Oliver 20) – determines the cove's timeless character just as much as it represents an instance of a pol-

luted beach. Observing a dead moth and contemplating on its life, she "[thinks] of Thoreau's description" ("At Herring Cove" 20) of one from the Concord woods, and ponders about nature's unending cycles and life's transformations; the moth was once a "green worm. Then it flew [...] And now it is the bright trash of the past, its emptiness perfect, and terrible" ("At Herring Cove" 20). By imagining the moth's life – its impulses and significations – in a temporal and literary continuum, Oliver both acknowledges her literary roots and highlights the sublimity and profundity of natural life without any need for proselytization.

Thoreau, like Wordsworth, openly argues that people are unnecessarily anxious when it comes to material things, since "primitive and frontier life" (10) is advantageous for humans. Contrary to that, "[m]ost of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts, of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (Thoreau 13). Still, humanity cannot resist the call of the material dispatched by capitalism. Evoking Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, which elucidates how individuals accept ideology through social interactions, thus becoming its subjects (167-68), Berlant defines this condition as *cruel optimism*. People feel compelled "to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call 'the good life,'" although it is a "bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 27). It is a condition of dependency on a system that destroys both nature and life as it turns both into commodities: "shocking wealth changes the terms of the meaning of life, of the reproduction of life, and of exchange itself" (40). So, the crucial development must be a radical change of perspective, in which people will abdicate from their position of supreme rulers and exploiters of nature, transforming themselves into a caring human kind that appreciates life over material wealth.

In *The Particulars of Rapture* (2003), Charles Altieri suggests that an aesthetics of the affects may help in expounding on the fact that there are "profoundly incommensurable perspectives on values" necessary for the realization of "various aspects of our human potential," even if philosophy or theory lack apparatuses to deal with them (5). Indeed, it seems that rationalist thought, which, in its attempt to educate and enlighten humans, gave birth to science, utilitarianism, and capitalism, dulled humanity's ability for compassion and humility. It also contributed to the construction of an artificial and unhealthy hierarchy according to which reason precedes emotion, causing a disbalance in scientific and political discourse as well as in values, which ultimately results in destructive and exaggerated eruptions of collectively suppressed emotions. The need to suppress natural affect was channelled toward commodification and consumption, wherein buying and owning function as a substitute for feeling. The process of industrial production relies on the merciless exploitation of natural resources and is followed by the accumulation of waste, both of which pollute and destroy nature. Like Word-

sworth, Emerson, and Thoreau, Oliver rejects commodified existence, and invites a return to a life of affect and a life in nature, but her expression is subtler and she approaches the same subject from a different angle. Consumerism as the spectre of ecology is accepted and implied, but rarely vocalized because it is unsettling, so she opts for feeling that expresses the "correlationism" of consumerism in terms of correlation of feeling. If one feels for what surrounds them, they will be compelled to question the materiality of the surroundings and wonder about its essence:

> When thinking becomes ecological, the beings it encounters cannot be established in advance as living or nonliving, sentient or nonsentient, real or epiphenomenal. What we encounter instead are spectral beings whose ontological status is uncertain precisely to the extent that we know them in detail as never before. And our experience of these spectral beings is itself spectral. (Morton 126)

Although she may occasionally hint at the issues of pollution and consumption, like in "At Herring Cove," Oliver typically provides the reader with loving and compassionate depictions of life in its many forms. She invites an affective (*I love, I feel*) rather than a rational (*I need to own to survive*) response to contemporary life, offering the reader "a chance to love everything." She counteracts the materiality of things, which in a market economy always has a monetary value, with their spectrality embodied in the emotions they carry. The schism within the modern individual, as Jürgen Habermas sees it, is caused precisely by the split between the public, bourgeois identity of a person determined by the market and their private identity rooted in emotion. Everyone is the same in terms of their economic success, but the point of distinction is the ability to be a part of a loving group, a group of people who choose to be with one another (30-50). The affective side of the modern individual caught up in the compulsion and pleasure of consumption is the redeeming one; ultimately, "ecological awareness is deeply about pleasure" (Morton 129), which is spectral, unlike exploitation, which is material and monetary.

As Oliver dreams of pastoral idylls, "in the fragrant grass / in the wild domains / of the prairie spring" ("Ghosts" lines 61-63), the reader smells and sees nature's beauty, and is emotionally transported to a state of calm, as if they were at the very meadow the poet describes. In "Toad," Oliver describes talking to a toad "about summer, and about time. The / pleasures of eating, the terrors of the night. About this cup / we call a life. About happiness. And how good it feels, the / heat of the sun between the shoulder blades" ("Toad" lines 5-8). The toad does not react to her presence or her speech, "which didn't necessarily mean he was either afraid or asleep. I felt his energy" (line 10). He is at peace, immovable and

silent, but fully present, which invites a sense of apotheosis and a comparison with Buddha (line 15). In his theological reading of Oliver's poetry, Todd Davis asserts that the Earth is Oliver's "sacred home" (605), but it may also be that the Earth is her – that she is one with the Earth, rather than one inhabiting it. The toad, and the poet in all her poems, meditate on the transcendental beauty of the natural world with which they are one.

The sense of nature as godly and marked by mutuality can also be seen in her poem "The Summer Day." In it, Oliver echoes William Blake's pair of origin poems, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," which question the varied nature of divine and human creation respectively. Whereas God creates a pastoral, idyllic nature and life as represented in "The Lamb," humans create a powerful, yet menacing and destructive world of colonialism and industrialism in "The Tyger" (Blake 8, 42). Blake opposes nature and civilization, giving precedence to the first. Oliver echoes Blake's form of questioning the origin of natural life: "Who made the world? / Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper?" (lines 1-3), and expands it by suggesting that the proper way to revere natural life is for an individual to immerse themselves into it, to become one with it:

> 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. (lines 11-15)

This type of communion with nature is a substitute for prayers, which are a product of human civilization (culture, religion) and as such inferior to feeling and living, which are organic. Oliver expands Blake's ontological inquiries by adding a teleological one:

> 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? (lines 16-19)

Whereas "The Lamb" offers a definite answer to the question of creation by suggesting that God created all life, "The Tyger" does not provide answers to the questions about the origins of civilization, industry and wars; the humans' role in this is implied. Oliver shifts the attention from such questions since the source of life's creation seems to be irrelevant in comparison to life's purpose. There is sense to be made out of the ontological certainty of life: one *is*, but what should one do? The reader is left to contemplate on this, while simultaneously feeling the poetic sub-

ject's exhilaration at finding her purpose in merging with nature as her ultimate good. She is a transparent eyeball, looking at everything the grasshopper does, appreciating the minute, the ordinary as supreme:

> 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. ("The Summer Day" lines 5-10)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that the mind is one with the body because "a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions," evident even in the colloquial language and "the dubious epithet 'touchy-feely,' with its implication that even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact" (17). The looking at and the touching of the grasshopper who eats out of the poet's hand converge into a meditative experience pointing to a realization that existence is both in the mind and in the body of the grasshopper and that of the poet. Their encounter is a communion through which they merge into one. The human is a being in process that transcends its own limits as it contributes to a kind of grand mutuality: the mind affects the body and vice versa, and human existence affects the non-human world, and vice versa.

In the same vein, Lisa Blackman rejects the body's singularity as a closed, independent biological system suggesting that "bodies are open, participating in the flow or passage of affect, characterized more by reciprocity and co-participation than boundary and constraint" (2). In addition to the interaction between all bodies and minds, there is a constant communication with the material and immaterial as "the affective body either is in part immaterial, or is beyond the threshold of 'life itself'" (Timár 199). This, ultimately, is resonant with Murdoch's scrutiny of the establishment of the modern individual on the assumptions of anthropocentric hard science, and her transmaterial view of the individual, which counters the former.

According to Murdoch, the postulation that our existence is determined exclusively by material reality has suppressed the necessity to perceive the human "against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world" ("Against Dryness" 18). Ann Culley explains that, in Murdoch's view, the modern person has lost their moral referents, being "overawed by logical positivism, determinism, behaviorism, and utilitarianism" (335). The notion of life as organized by immutable, common standards and moral principles established by

means of positivist and utilitarian approaches[10] results, as Murdoch argues, in (the literature of) a "lonely self-contained individual" ("Against Dryness" 19). Contrary to that, both Murdoch and Oliver uncover the hidden depths of a transmaterial person who, to paraphrase Whitman, "contains multitudes." Indeed, the mottos framing Oliver's *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* collection – Fabre's "Truth is always veiled in a certain mystery" (369), and "On thy wondrous works I will meditate" (*The Bible*, *Revised Standard Version*, Ps. 145.5) – testify to her rejection of the positivist "dryness," as Murdoch would put it, and affirm Oliver's view of life as mysterious and divine, and of living beings as connected by invisible strands of mutuality.

Such a totality of connection is seen in most of Oliver's poems that, in addition to promoting the view of nature as an all-encompassing metaphysical phenomenon, contain ideas of friendship and death that further advance the ideas of mutual dependence and the need for appreciation of all life. To illustrate, "The Chance to Love Everything," highlights a sense of connectedness and espouses friendship as the principle of mutual life: "All summer I made friends / with the creatures nearby–" (lines 1-2). To truly live together, people must transcend the limit of self-involvement, or as Murdoch would put it, one must *unself*, and the way to do it is through love and literature. Love entails the "exercise of overcoming one's self" (Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" 52), but literature also stands as a means of overcoming one's self since the reader becomes immersed in imagined lives and experiences various affects as a consequence.[11] Because people have an "indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others," literature and love seem to be intertwined in this "imaginative understanding [...] Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness" (Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" 52). In foregrounding love for the ubiquitous and a sense of non-anthropocentric equality among the living, as well as in alluding to the metaphysical qualities of the physical world, Oliver provides a continuation of the Romantic tradition, which this collection aptly shows.

The collection's eponymous Truro bear whom she wants to see is not a rapacious animal but one "who will not steal the honey, / who will not rifle the knapsack" ("This Is the One" lines 11-12). He is spiritual, "sings to himself / the secret song / no one has ever heard–" (lines 17-19), and "royal" (line 8). This is a bear that could be a friend, an admirable being, if only he understood that he could fill himself with berries (lines 4-5) rather than food he steals or kills for. But her imagining is in no way marked by what Berlant would refer to as impossible or toxic attachment to an object of desire (*Cruel Optimism* 24). The creature she both fears and is drawn to stands for the elusiveness and mystery of nature, and symbolizes beauty, defiance, and freedom: "disdainful and free / as anything on earth / could ever be" ("This Is the One" lines 28-30). Oliver rejects selfish attachment, which would provoke a sense of anxiety, and revels in freedom of

life, liberating and empowering the reader to love unselfishly too. She imagines a world of mutual acceptance in which ontological relations are rhizomatic and fluid, rather than hierarchical. Life is a rhizome, a network that connects "any point to any other point" (Deleuze and Guattari 21), and symbolizes the interconnectedness and mutualism of life, which allows Oliver to view all creatures, big and small, with wonder and appreciation because they all contribute to the fluid totality that we are.

In "One Hundred White-sided Dolphins on a Summer Day," Oliver depicts this vividly by representing subjects immersed in water: dolphins of all ages, "grandmothers and grandfathers" (line 9), swim with the boat and invite unity, even if for a brief moment, with the poetic voice. The freedom to be together and be apart is a mark of true friendship, which includes respect and acceptance, as well as the right to solitude (though not loneliness). The pod of dolphins "galloping in the pitch / of the waves" (lines 3-4), slick, playful, always smiling, always moving, may easily stand for the "ontology of affect [which] means that affect must be understood in its transitions, as movement, as an always unfolding event rather than a thing" (Truran 28). Each dolphin "as God himself" (line 15) extends grace to the poetic speaker by looking "with the moon of his eye / into my heart" (lines 23-24), for which she feels gratitude as she becomes one with the dolphin:

> and, for a moment, I have almost vanished
> into the body of the dolphin,
>
> into the moon-eye of God,
> into the white fan that lies at the bottom of the sea
> with everything
> that ever was, or ever will be (lines 39-44)

The experience of unity with nature is transcendent and majestic. It resembles divine intervention, as the dolphin's look transforms her into it – and into everything. The moment of oneness with nature is rid of hierarchies, and as she briefly senses the absolute, the reader is symbolically transported into the vastness of the ocean and sky, feeling that everything is connected through love, and feeling the love that connects everything. In the act of reading and feeling, the poet's and the poem's multiplicities become connected to the readers, forming an assemblage, a *plateau*, that is, "any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari 22). After a brief communion, the dolphin and poet move on their separate ways, but are never fully separate, since they are joined by the rhizomatic relation inherent to the ontology of being and forever changed by their interaction: "Then, in our little boat, the dolphins suddenly gone, / we

sailed on through the brisk, cheerful day" (lines 47-48). Timár explains how "the immaterial aspect of porous, plural bodies in movement yields a fuller understanding of their life [...] through figures of thriving democratic action: reciprocity and co-participation" (199) in the creation of multiple lived realities. Thus, the relationship of mutuality between the poetic speaker and the dolphin(s) stands as a model or possibility for actual relationships in the reader's life: a warm mutuality that connects them to everything and everyone.

In addition to the representations of the divinity of nature and multiplicity of being that resembles friendship, which confirm the claims of "Oliver's repeated affirmation of the natural world and the processes that sustain life, both human and non-human alike" (Riley 93), Oliver's poems also exhibit a strong inclination toward contemplating death. She approaches this topic from the point of view of mutuality too. Invoking Derrida's "organicist totalisation," which refers to the fact that whatever is created, body or meaning, decomposes, passing "into other forms, other figures [...] circulating anonymously within the great organic body of culture" (Derrida 816), Oliver insists on continuities, or, as Janet McNew puts it, "all-enveloping movement of natural cycles" (71). In "Ghosts," a poem reflecting on the senseless slaughter and extinction of buffalo herds, Oliver ascertains that "*nothing can die*" (line 26) and ends it with a dream of the birth of a calf. McNew ponders on "[t]his vision of a natural immortality" as being symbolic of Oliver's lack of belief in the soul's supernatural afterlife, but nevertheless comforting in the realization that the soul "travels with [the body] in a cycle of change that affects other parts of nature through the agency of a physical transmigration" (72). Although Oliver seems to move away from a Christian interpretation of the afterlife, she does not espouse a rationalist, atheist idea of death as the final end either. As Vicki Graham explains, "for Oliver, immersion in nature is not death: language is not destroyed and the writer is not silenced. To merge with the non-human is to acknowledge the self's mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity" (352).

In another poem, "The Kitten," Oliver repeats both the idea that death is not the end and that everything comes out of and back into the earth. The stillborn kitten is not a source of grief or abjection, but of "amazement" to the poet. She takes it from the "house cat's bed" and buries it in a private ritual celebrating life:

> [I] put it back
> saying, it was real,
> saying, life is infinitely inventive,
> saying, what other amazements
> lie in the dark seed of the earth. (lines 15-19)

The ritualistic "giving back" of the cyclopean kitten and the humble appreciation of both its stillbirth and deformity as life's wonders, instead of making a spectacle

of it by giving the kitten to a museum or calling the newspaper (lines 9-12), illustrate the idea that scientific examination or cultural analysis of life and death is far less important than an affectionate treatment, an affective response in the form of love and wonder. The kitten is a representative of the multiplicity of life, because, although stillborn, it is a part of the earth to which it returns and from which it will sustain new life. Like the massacred buffalos in "Ghosts," the kitten will also serve as "a kind of fertilizer for other plants and animals" (McNew 72), as well as an inspiration for the poem. Oliver ponders on this life born in death with dignity and joy, with awe and respect because she knows it will circulate in other ways, so she "quietly and gracefully prods the reader toward an attentiveness that all things melt into one another at some level of existence or consciousness" (Davis 615). Thus, the giving birth to a stillborn kitten resembles a situation when "our cats bring small, wounded animals into the house" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 153), which is essentially a teaching moment, although people often react with shock and disgust. The poet is not disgusted or caught up in the abjectness of the moment, nor does she feel melancholia, all of which would serve as entrapment in fate; rather, she seems to understand that "within the melancholia is an unconditional sadness. And within the sadness is beauty. And within the beauty is longing. And within the longing is a plasma field of joy" (Morton 119).[12] The kitten teaches the poet how to wonder and appreciate the complexity of life. The poet, the cat, the kitten and earth are one. They exist and are bound by love, so the reaction to every action is seamless and kind. Good teaching "thrives on personality and intimate emotional relation" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 160), which places affect at the centre of all relationships. The feeling one has when they are with another shapes their relationship just as much, if not more, than the words they exchange.

This message comes across quite explicitly in her short poem "I Ask Percy How I Should Live My Life (Ten)." Her pet dog named after Percy B. Shelley provides a short answer that highlights love, sensations, and trust as the foundations of a happy life:

> Love, love, love, says Percy.
> And hurry as fast as you can
> along the shining beach, or the rubble, or the dust.
>
> Then, go to sleep.
> Give up your body heat, your beating heart.
> Then, trust.

Even if the material form disappears as life ends, and even if one does not know what this transsubstantive process is like, one must make the most of the time they have by charging it with love, feeling, with faith that all will be well. The simplicity

of Percy's advice echoes the poetics of Romanticism and Murdoch's view of the individual self. It also aligns with Berlant's argument "for moving away from the discourse of trauma" (*Cruel Optimism* 9) because life goes on despite its incoherence and perilous attacks on it (10). For Berlant, the optimism that helps people go on is cruel, as she imagines the mutual relations in terms of "the circulation of capital, state liberalism, and the heterofamilial, upwardly mobile good-life fantasy" (*Cruel Optimism* 11), but there is also optimism outside capitalism, and that is the brand of optimism promoted by Oliver in which nature is central; it is the "object of optimism" which "promises to guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something" (*Cruel Optimism* 48). Oliver envisions good life as organic and detached from the capitalist framework; good life is rooted in nature and love. Materialist desires make us weak and anxious; they entrap us in the web of exploitative relations, and to be free, we must become more selfless; we must *unself*. Our embodied reality should be fuelled by love and sustained by multiple sensations received from nature. Under these circumstances, when our time comes, we can die peacefully as we can be sure that our atoms will survive in a different material form. Everything that surrounds us consists of what was before, all a unity, a multiplicity. Those focused on consuming and owning "have given [their] hearts away, a sordid boon!" (Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much with Us" line 4). Their energy is wasted on unimportant things when it should be invested into oneness: "The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand as perception. Indeed, neither can be perfect without the other" (Emerson 41).

In conclusion, it can be established that Oliver's poetry captures intimate moments of immersion in and communication with the natural environment *moving* the reader toward the possibility of change as a result of the sensory and emotional experience of nature mediated through her poetry of affect. The reader feels invited, addressed by the poet to mimic her amazement, and to feel a part of the life she describes. The raising of eco-awareness on an individual level may affect a global change through the soft, rippling effects of affective experience. Indeed, as Benjamin Morgan explains, different affective reactions to life contribute to the development of individuality (733), and, by extension, the same affective reactions inform change in a broader sense. The necessity of consumption exists in Oliver's poetry as an invisible entity: there but not there. In rejecting the expression of the abject – "We can't unknow where our toilet waste goes" (Morton 133) – her poems rely on the pleasurable to express correlation. They create a sense of mutuality and awe, awakening the reader's appreciation of nature and all it contains, due to which the reader may sustain "vicarious experience—wondering what it would be like" (Morton 124) to feel as she feels, a form of *unselfing*. Participation in Deleuzian plateaus of multiplicity ensures that everyone and everything is enmeshed in the

network of mutuality. The readers' wholesome feeling of being a part of the magnificent web of relationships that arises from reading Oliver's poems provides a sort of therapeutic effect and gives rise to hopes of endurance: that one would cherish rather than destroy one's home by giving in to irrational fears.

Indeed, the experience of the divinity of nature, universal friendship, and the continuity between life and death aids acceptance and empowers the reader to open themselves to love. Thus, affect – rather than reason – establishes itself as the pivotal aspect of Oliver's poetry that enables a fundamental change of both perspective and values. In prompting the reader "to love everything," Oliver's poems establish nature and all life as divine, and foreground love as the prerequisite for (human) survival as appreciation may work toward avoiding destruction. The reader's experience of poetry creates a complex nexus of affect, fiction, and morals where the opposites of reality and fiction, feeling and meaning are spontaneously merged.

## Notes

[1] These concerns affect the way people read and understand literature as evidenced by ecocriticism and the notion of the Anthropocene, which have become central in the writings of academics such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Timothy Clark, Timothy Morton, and Claire Colebrook, to mention just a few.

[2] In addition to Steinbeck's classic *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), consider, for instance, the works of J. G. Ballard, Amitav Ghosh, Ursula K. Le Guin, Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

[3] Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016) is imbued with affect as he elaborates on the concept of ecognosis with the help of affective terms such as the abject, joy, sadness, melancholy, and so on.

[4] Oliver's poetry is known to come from her own experiences: Kristin Hotelling Zona asserts that her poetics relies on "bridging of self and other, poet and world" (126-27), and this is not unlike the Romantics' lyrical poetry, such as Wordsworth's, where the speaker is in fact the author (Matek 30). Other critics, such as McNew, recognize that Oliver "tremble[s] over boundaries between herself and nature" (66), although she claims that she tries to write the speaker in such a way as to make them genderless so that "any reader can enter her work" (Oliver qtd. in Johnson 79). Further highlighting Oliver's autobiographical slant, Doty explains that Oliver "watches herself watch the world" (266), confirming that the experiences in the poems are Oliver's.

[5] The resemblance to Robert Burns's "To a Mouse" (1785) where the poet sees himself as the mouse's "poor, earth-born companion, / An' fellow-mortal!" (lines 11-12), is both hard to miss and not surprising. Namely, poetry's affective turn in the late eighteenth-century and its "willingness and ability to respond to others" (Meyer Spacks 249) is a legacy from which arises Oliver's own poetic sensibility. In "Carrying the Snake to the Garden," Oliver expresses sadness for frightening the snake (lines 19-20) just like Burns does with reference to the mouse.

## Notes

[6] To capture emotions in their purest form, Wordsworth advises focusing on incidents from "low and rustic" life, uncorrupted by the pretences of "social vanity," and directly connected with nature. Wordsworth, like Oliver, advocates for and uses an authentic language "arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings" (Preface 236), unspoiled by the pretence of social convention, "because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated [...] because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (Preface 236).

[7] Ironically, the Romantics' – in particular Wordsworthian – views of nature have come to be considered problematic by some critics for their alleged anthropomorphizing identification of the human and the natural (see Zona 127-28), but most Romantics viewed the contact with nature either as therapeutic (Wordsworth in particular) or inspiring precisely because of its sublimity and its metaphysical, divine qualities – that is, its Otherness, a position currently viewed as acceptable. Gyorgi Voros, for instance, talks about "Nature's integrity as Other" (235). In the context of the Anthropocene, however, it can even be argued that Nature's long-standing role of the Other is far more problematic, given the humans' tendency to control, exploit, and erase, rather than accept, the Other, and that a Romantic sense of appreciation of Nature remains a far healthier approach. The politics of literary and ecological discourse frequently overshadows the affective nature of poetry and the fact that – for most (that is, for non-professional) readers – it is the affective aspect of poetry that actually matters.

[8] Shelley's "Mont Blanc" describes the interaction between the poet's mind and nature, as the view of a magnificent ravine entrances the poet, who becomes a disembodied mind: "Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion, / Thou art the path of that unresting sound– / Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange / To muse on my own separate fantasy" (lines 32-36).

[9] Morton suggests that "you can't look at a duck and see what it's 'for' in some obviously human-flavored way. Ducks aren't for anything. Teleology has evaporated, hierarchies have collapsed; but there are still ducks and humans and Earth, and sentience and lifeforms as opposed to salt crystals" (32).

[10] Perhaps surprisingly, even the Golden Rule – doing unto others as you would be done by (Luke 6:31; Matt. 7:12; Mill 32) – in fact seems to restrict human relationships as its application implies subscribing to the inherent flaw of utilitarian thinking: that what is good for one (or many) is good for everyone. The presumption that people share identical values, desires, and needs negates individual freedom as well as the acceptance of the other.

[11] See: Clare 2022.

[12] Such an evocation of the sublime – the pleasurable coalescing of beauty and pain or fear – is also a Romantic idea most evident in works with a Gothic quality, such as E. A. Poe's.

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