

Agency Beyond Human: Mary Oliver's Vibrant World

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Mary Oliver's poetry presents nature not as backdrop or resource but as a field of already-active forces through which agency is manifested. Previous ecocritical readings have emphasised Oliver's ethical attention to the non-human world and her Romantic inheritance. This article examines instead how the formal properties of Oliver's poetry like its line breaks, rhythmic pacing, anaphoric structures, and shifts in grammatical scale enact the redistribution of agency before it can be named by philosophical reflection. Rather than applying posthumanist and new materialist frameworks to Oliver's poems as an explanatory overlay, this study places poetry and theory in dialogue with each other. Through close formal readings of selected poems, the article traces a progressive arc from animal vitality through vegetal temporality and elemental materiality to the ethics of attention. Drawing on Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter, Rosi Braidotti's *zoë*, and Karen Barad's intra-action, the article argues that Oliver's poetry makes the felt experience of distributed agency available to a reader before that experience is abstracted into concept.

Keywords: Mary Oliver, Agency, Attention, Intra-action, Vibrant Matter, *Zoë*

Introduction

Mary Oliver's poetry calls for attention before it calls for anything else. Through colloquial, unhurried lines, her poems ask the reader to slow down and notice, whether it's the flight of migratory birds, the blooming of flowers or the way a grasshopper eats from an open hand. The critical tradition has largely received them as invitations to humility and ethical attention. Yet, such readings risk underestimating what Oliver's poetry does at a more fundamental level. Her poems do not simply describe a world that precedes them; they construct an encounter with a world that is already thinking and acting long before the human observer arrives.

This dimension of Oliver's work has not been sufficiently examined by existing ecocritical scholarship. Vicki Graham characterises Oliver as a poet of "becoming-other," whose intimate encounters with the non-human world progressively dissolve the boundaries of the self (Graham, 1994). Janet McNew reads this dissolution through a Romantic inheritance, an orientation of humility before the living natural world (McNew, 1989). Donna Mendelson interprets Oliver's attention to animals through an ecofeminist framework of relational care (Zona, 2011). These are generative readings, but they locate the primary action of the poems in the human speaker's ethical or spiritual development. The non-human world serves in each case as the

context or catalyst for human transformation, leaving the question of agency itself unexamined.

This article proposes a different analysis. Along with cultivating ethical attentiveness in the reader, Oliver's poems formally re-distribute the grounds of action, making agency something experienced as flowing through bodies, materials, and temporal rhythms rather than originating in any single subject. Through anaphora, enjambment, compressed metaphor, and calibrated shifts in grammatical scale, Oliver's poems give the reader a felt experience of distributed agency. The theoretical frameworks of posthumanism and new materialism provide a vocabulary for naming what is enacted by Oliver's poetry.

The present analysis proceeds from animal life and the redistribution of action, through vegetal temporality and elemental materiality, to the ethics of attention. This arc reflects a formal deepening in which each mode of agency, whether mobile, rooted, elemental, or attentive, requires different poetic means to be made perceptible.

Theoretical Framework: Toward a More-than-Human Poetics

The method employed in this article is theoretical close reading, which differs from the two better-known approaches of applying theory to literature as interpretive framework, and treating literature as illustration of philosophical argument. Theoretical close reading refuses the priority of either term. It attends to the poem as a formal event, tracking line breaks, rhythmic modulations, changes in diction, and shifts in the grammatical relationship between speaker and world, while simultaneously holding theoretical concepts as lenses that can be sharpened, redirected, and sometimes corrected by what the poem does. This distinction matters because posthumanist and new materialist theory has itself recognised the inadequacy of purely propositional modes of knowing. Karen Barad's account of intra-action in which entities do not pre-exist their relations but are constituted through them, implies a mode of knowing that is itself relational and performative (Barad, 2007).

Jane Bennett's vibrant matter is explicitly concerned with what she calls "thing-power": the force of material entities that makes itself felt before it can be named (Bennett, 2010). According to Rosi Braidotti, *zoë* — the generative, impersonal force of life — is not an object of contemplation but a condition that must be inhabited and felt before it can be described (Braidotti, 2013). Oliver's poetry precisely functions as an instrument to cultivate this practice of prior attention.

The theoretical architecture employed in this article rests on three interconnected concepts that together constitute a robust account of distributed agency. Barad's intra-action acts as the ontological foundation. To ask "Who is the agent?" is already to ask the wrong question since agency is located in the relational event or in the intra-action itself. Bennett's vibrant matter provides the material dimension by attributing agency to things that acts upon and reshapes the humans who encounter them (Bennett, 2010). Braidotti's *zoë* embodies the impersonal, generative force of life that exceeds and outlasts individual organisms, circulating through biological, vegetal, and elemental matter alike (Braidotti, 2013).

Animal Life and the Redistribution of Action

In Oliver's animal poems, agency is not foregrounded in the human speaker but in the more than human bodies through instinct movement and ecological exchange, widening the field of action beyond the human frame. The lyric form provides a structural anchor in the speaking voice, but Oliver's formal choices such as anaphora, enjambment, compressed imagery, and the deliberate pacing of revelation consistently redirect the reader's attention away from that voice. Agency is felt as a fluid, distributed phenomenon before it is understood as such.

3.1 *Wild Geese*: Belonging in Motion

"Wild Geese" opens with what sounds like absolution: "You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees" (Oliver, 1986, p. 14). The anaphora creates a rhythm of refusal that aurally enacts its meaning: the loosening of

self-imposed moral weight. By the time Oliver shifts to the imperative of “You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves”, agency has already migrated from the domain of moral will to the domain of bodily responsiveness. The nature of action has thus changed from punishing self control to bare vitality.

What follows is the formally critical passage. The long enjambed lines describing “the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain” moving “over the prairies and the deep trees, / the mountains and the rivers” bring the reader into a field of motion that vastly exceeds any individual speaker. The syntax enacts what it describes: the line breaks force the reader’s eye and breath across the page in lateral arcs that mime the movement of weather and migration. Agency is disseminated across that movement. The “you” addressed in the poem becomes one presence among many — the wild geese, the rain, the pebbles — all participants in the same ongoing circulation of vitality. In contrast to McNew’s Romantic reading, which frames the poem as the speaker rising toward communion with nature (McNew, 1989), Oliver’s formal choices suggest something closer in that the speaker is already part of the same atmospheric and migratory field.

3.2 *The Kingfisher*: Predation and Form

Critics such as Macdonald (2011) have argued that Oliver aestheticises predation by treating the violence of killing as a spiritual experience, thereby suppressing what happens to the prey. This is a legitimate pressure on Oliver’s work, but it misses something important about what the poem formally achieves.

The image of the kingfisher carrying a fish in the line, “a blue flower in its beak...a silver leaf being held up” (Oliver, 1994, p. 18), is not a domestication of violence. The metaphor holds two incompatible registers simultaneously: the aesthetic and the lethal, the momentary beauty of the fish’s iridescence and the fact of its capture. Oliver’s formal choices make both visible at once. The compressed, rapid lines enact the speed of the dive. The reader’s perception is simultaneously accelerated and slowed, made to

attend to an event that in actuality would be over before it could be registered.

The poem’s formal construction presents predation as an ecological intra-action in Barad’s sense — an event through which the boundaries between the kingfisher, the fish, and the wider living system are established and transformed at once (Barad, 2007). The “silver leaf” retains its materiality even as it is transformed into a symbol. The iridescent appearance of the fish is an effect of its biological composition, not a projection of the observer’s feeling. This is illuminated by Bennett’s framework: the material particularity of the moment carries an agency that is not reducible to the intentions of predator or observer (Bennett, 2010). Beauty and violence are held in a single ecological event, and the poem’s formal precision is what makes it possible to hold them together.

Plant Time and Distributed Life

In Oliver’s plant poems, agential motion is not immediately perceptible. It accumulates through temporal repetition and duration, and is finally recognised rather than witnessed. Plant lives are temporally organised differently from animal lives, defined by unfolding in time rather than movement through space, by responsiveness to environment rather than self-propelled locomotion. It is a distinction that Barad’s account of intra-action helps to illuminate because it refuses to measure agency against a single normative model of action (Barad, 2007). Oliver’s plant poems embody this distinction through formal choices that slow the pace of reading, distribute attention across multiple presences, and refuse the climactic structure of the lyric encounter.

4.1 *The Lilies Break Open over the Dark Water*: Blooming as Event

The poem opens not with beauty but with decomposition: “that mud-hive, that gas-sponge, / that reeking / leaf-yard.” The descriptors are tactile and unpleasant — rot, gas, decay. Life circulates through mud and decomposing leaves, through what she calls the “broth of life.” Agency is distributed across this ecological ground before

any flower appears. The poem's key turn arrives when the speaker catches herself "trying to attach them to an idea", that characteristically human impulse to make nature signify on human terms. Oliver's response is simply to record what the lilies are doing: "they are simply doing / what every year they do." This is not a rejection of meaning but a reassignment of its source. The lilies act from within their own temporal logic — the annual return, the seasonal responsiveness to light and water. Barad's intra-action is relevant here: the blooming is not a property of the lilies considered in isolation but an effect of the ongoing entanglement between plant, water, light, temperature, and soil (Barad, 2007). The formal features of the poem like the short, irregular lines, the cumulative phrase structures and the absence of a single dramatic moment slow the reader's pace to something closer to vegetal time. One does not encounter the lilies as event; one accompanies them through a process.

4.2 *Trilliums*: Networks and Return

"Trilliums" distributes attention not through a single plant or blooming event but through a mass of plants acting in concert. The poem does not build toward a climactic image. It accumulates short phrases until the reader's attention can rest on no single trillium for long, creating a choral rather than a spectacular effect. Agency here is collective, seasonal, and rhythmically insistent: the snow, the cracking seed, the squelching mud, the howling creek return "year after / difficult year" in a steady pattern that the speaker cannot control or interpret but can only register.

The speaker's position is significant: she listens to "earth talk" and "energy arguments," recognising meaning and movement that exceed her capacity to contain. The language suggests a mode of intra-action in Barad's sense: the trilliums, the soil, the returning seasons, and the attending speaker are not separate entities exchanging information but participants in a relational event through which each is constituted (Barad, 2007). It also resonates with Simard's (2021) research on mycorrhizal networks through which trees and plants exchange resources: the trilliums' apparent

coordination is not incidental to their vitality but expressive of it. Oliver's formal choice to distribute attention across a mass of plants rather than focusing on any individual organism is the poetic equivalent of Simard's scientific insight: the assemblage, not the individual, is the unit of agency.

Bennett's vibrant matter is present throughout: "energy argues," seeds crack, hillsides grow. Matter behaves as an active, self-organising agent rather than a passive recipient of human action. The speaker's vegetal becoming—entering "through the tender buds," the "backbone / and thin white shoulders" unfolding into plant-like posture—resonates with Braidotti's *zoë*. Human identity does not dissolve into nature here; it is temporarily reorganised by the same generative force that drives the trilliums' return. The speaker assumes a different temporal register not through spiritual aspiration but through participation in the *zoë* that structures vegetal life. Where "The Lilies Break Open over the Dark Water" is concerned with emergence, "Trilliums" is concerned with return. Both poems demonstrate that vegetal agency is fundamentally characterised by recurrence and duration, and that Oliver's formal choices allow the reader to experience this temporality as bodily rhythm before understanding it as a concept.

Elemental Force and Material Dissolution

If the plant poems loosen the distinction between dramatic action and persistent vitality, the elemental poems dissolve it further. Water, soil, stone, and air are not conventionally classified as alive, yet in Oliver's elemental poems the distinction between organism and element becomes progressively unstable. The human body does not stand apart from these forces; it is constituted through ongoing exchange with them.

5.1 *Sleeping in the Forest*: Becoming Earth

"Sleeping in the Forest" stages one of Oliver's most striking gestures: the body yields to the earth rather than resting upon it. The opening personification — "I thought the earth / remembered me, she / took me back so tenderly"

(Oliver, 1979, p. 3) — might appear to be a familiar Romantic trope, but Oliver's subsequent formal choices resist sentimentality. The earth is described through tactile particularity: "dark skirts," "pockets / full of lichens and seeds." These are not projections of human feeling onto nature. They are descriptions of the forest floor as a living assemblage of organisms that receives the speaker's body into its material composition.

The poem's pacing performs the dissolution it describes. There is no dramatic shift, no moment of crisis or resolution; the self simply softens into the ground through the quiet accumulation of sensory detail. This is Barad's intra-action at its most literal: the human body and the earth are not pre-existing entities that subsequently come into contact but are constituted through the ongoing relational event of their entanglement (Barad, 2007). The speaker's transformation into "a stone / on the river bed" is not metaphor but enactment of this constitutive process—the body joining a continuum that extends from living organisms to geological formations, the boundary between self and ground dissolving not as spiritual experience but as material intra-action.

5.2 *The Sea: Site of Material Memory*

"The Sea" extends the logic of material continuity into evolutionary time. The speaker's body carries a memory that is not cognitive but somatic: "my / body / remembers that life and cries for / the lost parts of itself— / fins, gills" (Oliver, 1983, p. 69). The sea activates a material memory that was always already encoded in the body's own composition. This is not nostalgia but the recognition that the human body carries within itself the traces of the non-human evolutionary past from which it emerged.

The poem's imagery of becoming enacts a longing for Baradian intra-action in its desire to dissolve the apparent boundaries between human body and elemental environment by entering more fully into the relational event through which both are constituted (Barad, 2007). The speaker imagines herself "sleeking along / in the luminous roughage of the sea's body". The sea is described as "insucking genesis" and "roaring

flamboyance" (Oliver, 1983, p. 69) — it is not a passive backdrop but an active, generative force that pulls the body toward its own rhythms. This is Bennett's vibrant matter in action. The sea figures as an agentive material presence that acts upon and reconstitutes the human subjects who encounter it (Bennett 2010). The desire to "dive, / and simply / become again" acknowledges a continuity that Braidotti's account of *zoë* makes most precise: the human is always already participating in an impersonal vitality that precedes and exceeds it, an evolutionary entanglement that current biological taxonomy tends to conceal (Braidotti, 2013). The sea as "beginning and / conclusion" presents existence as cyclical — dissolution of self as part of an ongoing ecological process. The speaker's longing for submersion is not a death wish but an attunement to this generative force.

5.3 *Elemental Agency and Ethics*

The elemental poems complete a movement that the animal poems began and the plant poems developed: the progressive redistribution of agency away from the human subject and across a wider field of material forces. This redistribution of agency raises a question that the poems have been building toward: if agency is distributed across the field of living and elemental matter, what form of ethical response is adequate to such a world? The final section of this analysis addresses that question through the poem in which Oliver most directly names her answer.

Attention as Ethical Practice

After animal vitality, vegetal recurrence, and elemental flux, Oliver's poetry turns inward. The movements across the earlier poems find a culmination in "The Summer Day," where attention becomes an ethical practice.

6.1 *The Summer Day: Learning to Pay Attention*

The poem opens by situating the speaker's attention in the most ordinary of ecological scenes: grass, sunlight, a grasshopper eating from an open hand. There is no dramatic event, no moment of crisis or epiphany. There is only the long, patient act of noticing. Oliver's long, unhurried lines slow the pace of reading to

something close to the pace of the grasshopper's own activity; verbs like "stroll," "idle," and "kneel" carry no urgency, suggesting stillness and receptivity rather than purposive action.

The question, "Who made the world?" (Oliver, 1990, p. 60), is asked at the outset and left unanswered, for it does not function as a metaphysical inquiry but as a reorientation of attention. By placing this question at the beginning and then turning immediately to the grasshopper, the poem suggests that the answer to questions of origin and meaning is found not in abstraction but in sustained proximity to particular beings. The grasshopper "is not thinking of anything else"; the speaker, in attending to the grasshopper, is similarly called out of abstraction into presence.

The turn at the poem's centre — "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention" (Oliver, 1990, p. 60) — is Oliver's most precise statement of attention as ethical practice. In the conventional sense, prayer moves from the particular toward the transcendent. Whereas, attention, as Oliver practises it, moves from the particular toward greater particularity. The grasshopper eating from the speaker's hand

is not a vehicle for spiritual meaning; it exists in its own rhythm, its own bodily logic, indifferent to the speaker's need for significance. And it is in that indifference that the speaker finds a more demanding form of responsibility than any moral doctrine could provide. The poem demonstrates that attention is not passive but a practice that reshapes the practitioner by making them accountable to what they notice. Ethics thus appears as sustained attention and responsiveness. Once animals, plants, and objects are recognised as active participants in shared existence, responsibility becomes inseparable from the act of perception itself.

Conclusion

Mary Oliver's poetry performs posthumanist thinking. Agency in these poems is not a stable property of any single entity. It moves through the bodies of geese and fish, accumulates in the seasonal rhythms of lilies and trilliums, and disperses into the material exchanges between the human body and the elemental world. Oliver's poetry offers an orientation toward staying with a world that is already alive, already acting, already entangled, and already calling for attention and response.

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