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**The Soundscape of the Cape: Mary Oliver's Ecocentric
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The Soundscape of the Cape: Mary Oliver's Ecocentric Mysticism

by singing I mean, in this instance,
not just the work of the little mouth-cave,
but of every enfoldment of the body—
a singing that has no words
(Oliver, "The Snow Cricket," *Why I Wake Early*)

1. An Ecocentric Mysticism

The critical response to Mary Oliver's poetry seems to have managed to highlight its main features quite easily since the very beginning. A look at Oliver's page on the Poetry Foundation website may suffice to glean some early and notable opinions by her poet colleagues, which concurrently point to the identification of two prominent characteristics: the poet's ecocentric and mystical attitudes toward nature. As the Poetry Foundation page quotes, in the *Women's Review of Books*, Maxine Kumin described Oliver as an "indefatigable guide to the natural world, particularly to its lesser-known aspects," and as a poet who "stands quite comfortably on the margins of things, on the line between earth and sky, the thin membrane that separates human from what we loosely call animal" ("Mary Oliver"). In a review of *Dream Work* (1986), Alicia Ostriker praised her for being as "visionary as [Ralph Waldo] Emerson," and for being "among the few American poets who can describe and transmit ecstasy, while retaining a practical awareness of the world as one of predators and prey" ("Mary Oliver"). Finally, Bruce Bennett, in his review of *American Primitive* (1983) for the *New York Times Book Review*, noted that Oliver "insists on the primacy of the physical" ("Mary Oliver"). The same page reports one of the earliest scholarly commentaries, Janet McNew's in *Contemporary Literature* (1989), which defined "Oliver's visionary goal" as "constructing a subjectivity that does not depend on separation from a world of objects. Instead, she respectfully confers subjecthood on nature, thereby modeling a kind of identity that does not depend on opposition for definition... At its most

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3 intense, her poetry aims to peer beneath the constructions of culture and
4 reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness to celebrate the
5 primitive, mystical visions” (“Mary Oliver”). Almost all the features of Oliver’s
6 poetry these comments foreground – the detailed and accurate observation
7 and descriptions of nature, the willingness to explore the boundaries
8 between the human and the nonhuman, the faithful adherence to the
9 physical appearance of things – would make Oliver a classic ecopoet, except
10 for the visionary penchant of her representations, which colors them with a
11 mystical hue.
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19 Laird E. Christensen has tried to unite the two drives at the root of
20 Oliver’s poetry by qualifying her mysticism as “pragmatic,” which is another
21 way of saying that it does belong, and rightly so, to ecopoetry, with its
22 emphasis on our relation to the actual, material earth. He defines Oliver’s
23 “ecological pantheism” with the help of Ben Howard, who had already so
24 called the poet’s “numinous intersections of the self and the natural world,
25 those meetings in the woods and by the ponds, which engender a sense of
26 reverence and awe” (qtd. in Christensen 139). According to Christensen,
27 Oliver’s mysticism is “pragmatic” because it is founded not only on a passive
28 perception of things – in which the poet won’t lose the materiality of her
29 object – but also on an active perception, with which her poems inspire the
30 reader, who will be moved to enter an ecocentric relation to his or her
31 environment, and thus assume responsibility toward it, that is, an ethical
32 attitude (139, 149). How can language, with all its limitations, be the
33 expression of an equal relation to the things we perceive, instead of being,
34 traditionally, the tool with which we reduce them to objects, and often the
35 objects of our manipulation? As an answer, Christensen gives us Oliver’s
36 view of language as “an arrangement of words in which an experience or an
37 insight [waits] to be felt through, and I mean in an individual and personal
38 way” (139). The definition sounds very close to the specific and concrete
39 language ecopoets claim for themselves, which is at the same time
40 ecocentric and original, given the supposed genesis of lyric poetry from
41 singing and chanting, and – even earlier – in the combination of word
42 sequences with the physical utterance of rhythmical and tonal sounds,
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3 meant to express our most primeval emotions and feelings (“Lyric” 713,
4 715). A language that is able to keep close to nature, and to the nature of all
5 beings, should actually be as little permeated with culture (at least of a
6 certain culture, which is conceived as opposed to nature), as little
7 anthropomorphic – that is, as little codified and abstract, or logical – as
8 possible (Scigaj 1999; Fisher-Wirth and Street 2013; Bate 2000).
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14 Traditionally, though, empiricism and idealism – the two American
15 reactions to Darwinism – have been considered opposite views, as Guy
16 Rotella brilliantly made out in his introduction to his 1991 study of four
17 modern ecopoets (32). In a valuable reconstruction of the tradition of nature
18 thinking from the Puritans to Emily Dickinson, he reveals how Emerson’s
19 symbolism was revolutionary, in definitively substituting tropes for types,
20 but also how the sage of Concord developed, with age and experience, into a
21 “more chastened, rationalistic, and melioristic” thinker “than the intuitive
22 perceiver of God in or beyond nature” (29). Moreover, Emily Dickinson
23 quickly put Emerson’s lesson of self-reliance to an even more radical use, by
24 trusting “her own eyes and reason,” and opting for a more rigorous
25 empiricism (33-34). This kind of empiricism is not far from the ecocentric
26 stance of contemporary ecopoetry, and very close to Walt Whitman’s
27 “inverted mystical experience,” as James Miller aptly described the poet’s
28 representation of an ecstatic way to knowledge in “Song of Myself,” where
29 that experience is achieved through the senses (instead of through their
30 denial) and by an unchecked immersion in nature (1955).
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45 2. Soundscapes

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49 One way to better understand Oliver’s ecocentric mysticism may be to listen
50 to her soundscapes, which convey the kind of attention she has been
51 lending to her own perception of the environment she loves and has wanted
52 to inhabit for decades. Through her soundscapes, Oliver leads a discourse
53 on how both human and non human beings occupy physical space, and
54 particularly, on what sounds – or silences – they make in order to
55 communicate with one another. In other words, soundscapes are very often
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3 the mode in which Oliver considers language and especially its hypothetical
4 status as a marker of species differentiation.
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7 Oliver's soundscapes may be gathered throughout her poetry, which
8 is, however, more visual, and singularly replenished with silence, as
9 becomes verse that is trying to recount a mystical search. I chose to focus
10 on a single book, *Owls and Other Fantasies* (2003), because I thought that,
11 being a collection of poems, prose poems and essays about birds, it would
12 lend itself – better than any other – to an analysis of soundscapes: birds, at
13 least, are supposed to sing. I was also tempted by *Dog Songs* (2013) – which
14 centers, too, on a subtle phenomenology of human-nonhuman
15 conversations – but found *Owls*, indeed, richer and more varied in the
16 representation of utterances and voices.¹
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24 Paradoxically, though, *Owls* is also resonating with silence, whose
25 quality – its being both physical and metaphorical of the space for
26 concentration that is required in contemplation – directly points to Henry
27 David Thoreau, whom Oliver knows very well. In fact, the re-edition of
28 *Thoreau on Birds: Notes on New England Birds from the Journals of Henry*
29 *David Thoreau* suggests him as her direct antecedent. The volume, edited by
30 Francis H. Allen, illustrated by the heir of John James Audubon, Louis
31 Agassiz Fuertes, and introduced by John Hay for the Beacon Press in 1993,
32 is an anthology of observations on birds drawn from Thoreau's journals,
33 *Thoreau's Bird-lore*, which was published by Houghton Mifflin in Boston in
34 1910, and has been out of print since then.
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44 The similarities between the two books are remarkable. Not only what
45 we would nowadays call the “concept” of a collection of one's own (in Oliver's
46 case) pronouncements on birds, but also, in the first place, the shared
47 passion for owls (“I rejoice, that there are owls,” exclaims Thoreau in
48 exultation, adding that “This sound [their hooting] faintly suggests the
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54 ¹ *Dog Songs* is a reflection on what it is to be human – and what it is not, or what it should
55 be – conducted through a series of “dialogues” in which Oliver makes dogs talk, interprets
56 their talk, translates dogs' “expressive sounds” into human meanings, defines dogs'
57 behaviors as forms of expressions and likens their traces in the snow to “words,” talks to
58 dogs who understand her. These conversations are the fruit of a very attentive observation
59 of dogs, and of the effort to “think as a dog,” which means that, in Oliver's usual, self-
60 reflective thoughtfulness, they are also an attempt to imagine an equal biosemiotic
community.

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3 infinite roominess of nature, that there is a world in which owls live,” pp.
4 202-03); the impulse to identify with birds through a sustained observation
5 of them (“When I behold that dull yellowish-green [the eye of the green
6 heron], I wonder if my own soul is not a bright, invisible green. I would fain
7 lay my eye side by side and learn with it,” pp. 88-89); and especially the
8 perception of the sounds they make. The piercing sound of the nighthawk’s
9 flight reaches Thoreau as a reflection against the sky roof and is returned –
10 as in a sort of resonance – to the earth (p. xiv). The wood thrush’s song
11 moves him to the point of becoming, as Hay rightly remarks, his favorite
12 symbol for that wildness that he was the first writer to champion in
13 American literature: “a nature which I cannot put my foot through... A New
14 Hampshire everlasting and unfallen” (p. 431) – in other words the symbol of
15 New World nature.
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18 Thoreau is not the only harbinger, though, of an eco-poetical tradition
19 that began to surface in nineteenth-century experiences of the sublime in
20 nature. As I indicated, Whitman can be evoked as a better – and less
21 transcendental² – example of a mystical impulse to identify with the other
22 that lives in nature on an even ground, because for both him and Oliver the
23 process of self-identification goes through the senses. Oxen express in their
24 eyes more than all the print he’s read in his life, wings have purposes, and
25 the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of him (“Song of Myself”,
26 section 13). He thinks he could turn, and live with animals (section 32).
27 Whitman’s poetry abounds with birds’ songs and their symbolism – think
28 particularly of the mockingbird of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” or
29 of the hermit thrush of the Lincoln elegy. Birds’ song moves Whitman to a
30 direct, empathetic knowledge. He compares its eloquence to that of the
31 human voice. This precludes the hypothesis that Oliver may have casually
32 chosen to represent the same kind of knowledge, and the same kind of
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55 ² Although Thoreau went through a radical transformation in his attitude toward nature,
56 which is particularly evidenced in his ascension to Mount Katahdin, he did show signs of
57 reflecting his master’s transcendentalism, and the anthropocentrism it was based on: “”but
58 this bird never fails to speak to me of an ether purer than that I breathe, of immortal
59 beauty and vigor. He deepens the significance of all things seen in the light of his strain. He
60 sings to make men take higher and truer views of things. He sings to amend their
institutions” (*Thoreau on Birds*, 429)

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3 common language, in the only poem in the book whose title directly
4 mentions bird singing: “Such Singing in the Wild Branches” (8-9). No need
5 to say that the singer is a thrush.
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8 The poem is the representation of a sudden epiphany, whose model
9 may be traced back to Saul’s conversion, a Biblical type favored by Puritan
10 revivalists such as Jonathan Edwards and by a line of predecessors who
11 were also banished for their outdoing Calvinist orthodoxy itself. Oliver seems
12 to be familiar with the literature of the American Renaissance, so that in the
13 poem we may find evidence of the presence of at least Emerson, Whitman
14 and Thoreau. To begin with, it is spring, the season of physical and spiritual
15 awakening with which the symbolic temporality of *Walden* culminates.
16 Secondly, the speaker is on a quest, because she says she *finally* hears the
17 bird (my emphasis). The suddenness of revelation is conveyed in the rapid
18 succession of a progression of events: her emptying her mind, then starting
19 to listen, and then being filled with gladness at the hearing – and moreover
20 the understanding – of the bird’s song, or rather, his words. What the poet
21 understands, in fact, is what the bird is “saying,” which makes her feel
22 unanchored from her own identity, lose gravity, and become the other
23 natural elements, birds and trees. Earthly time halts, while other features
24 that recur in mystic literature are reported, such as the sense of emptying
25 oneself of any worldly thought (as in Meister Eckhart’s *Abgeschiedenheit*, or
26 “detachment” from earthly things), the ascending movement of
27 contemplation, the white light of blinding vision (reminiscent of many,
28 uncanny uses of the same color trope in American literature, such as Poe’s,
29 Dickinson’s, and Melville’s), and finally the feeling of union with everything,
30 which is a good substitute, as in Whitman, for a feeling of union with the life
31 principle, and which is here symbolized by the singing.
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50 The thrush could be a mockingbird, as in Whitman’s vocational poem
51 (the theme being perhaps a further coincidence), or it could be a wood
52 thrush, like Thoreau’s favorite trope for the wildness of American wilderness.
53 The music it makes is described as perfect – almost an allusion to the
54 ancient *musica universalis*, the harmony produced by the movement of
55 celestial bodies – and as such it reflects heaven’s perfection. Like Thoreau’s,
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3 it resonates everywhere: in all things and ultimately in the observer, who
4 here finally becomes a listener, who – like Whitman – takes part in the entire
5 reality. A possible reference to Emerson repeats his attribution of the power
6 of intuition (his faculty of *reason*) to wise men, who claim, as he did, the
7 “fatal” quality of revelation, which changes a man’s consciousness forever (9;
8 Emerson, “Nature” and “Self-Reliance”). As in most writings by Emerson,
9 Thoreau and Whitman, the poem has a pragmatic value and closes with a
10 direct and hortatory address to the reader, meant to encourage and urge
11 him or her on the same path, because it is spring, and it is morning (a
12 Thoreauvian morning, the time and symbol of spiritual awakening), there
13 are trees nearby, and the listener needs comfort and will have to move his or
14 her first steps, because – as in the end of the “Song” – the singing is fading
15 away.
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28 3. Language

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31 The speaker of “Such Singing in the Wild Branches” says she is beginning to
32 understand the thrush’s song, that “all of his brothers,/ and also the trees
33 around them” are singing, and that she finally finds herself to be singing too
34 (9). This is the metaphor at the heart of the book, which is an exploration of
35 the boundary between the human and the nonhuman led through a
36 reflection on language. What is, after all, the code that is supposed to
37 separate us from other animal species? What if we considered it from *their*
38 point of view? Would it carry the same discriminant power? In second
39 position in the collection – after the wild geese of the famous homonymous
40 poem have established its ecocentric perspective, by announcing, with their
41 harsh and exciting call, the reader’s place “in the family of things” – a poem
42 about the Dipper explicitly posits the issue of language. The ontological
43 question follows another one, which Oliver had already put in another
44 memorable poem, “Some Questions You Might Ask,” where she openly
45 posited the issue of the soul, by wondering whether it’s only humans who
46 are supposed to own it, and on what grounds, given that animals show
47 evidence of having at least as intense feelings (*House of Light* 1). Her
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3 previous, and recurrent, probing of the human-animal divide testifies to a
4 concern that pervades her production, and could be further investigated.
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6 It is highly significant that, notwithstanding her mystical inspiration,
7 and visual propensity, Oliver represents the sudden unfolding of sense – the
8 epiphanic moment itself – with the perception of a sound, that is, with the
9 activation of the sense of hearing. In “The Dipper,” too, the narrative opens
10 with a classical “Once I saw”. She sees a small bird, and soon recognizes the
11 dipper in it from his behavior, which is ducking his head in and out of water
12 to feed on larvae, small fish, or their eggs. The crowning event in the
13 recognition, though, is his “starting up/ the clear, strong pipe of his voice,”
14 as the metaphor goes. There follows a whole dissertation on the dipper’s
15 language and its potential and limitations for functioning as an instrument
16 of communication with humans:
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31 there being no words to transcribe, I had to
32 bend forward, as it were,
33 into his frame of mind, catching
34 everything I could in the tone,
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39 cadence, sweetness, and briskness
40 of his affirmative report.

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42 Though not by words, it was
43 a more than satisfactory way to the
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47 bridge of understanding. (2)
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50 The dipper’s singing is language that, simply, humans cannot understand if
51 they expect the bird to be using words, and for his code to be organized and
52 function as their own. Everything depends on the perspective in which we
53 consider “language” – which can be ours, or the animals’, in case we should
54 want to ponder things equally – and on the conception of language we
55 entertain. Even more, perhaps, depends on our ethical attitude: whether we
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3 desire, and mean, to try to understand the other, in which case – the poem
4 says – it is possible to exert our empathetic faculty to interpret the
5 suprasegmental traits of his language – the pitch of his intonational
6 contours, or his “tone” – in order to intuit his message. Oliver is still using,
7 here, the metaphor of language we humans know very well, but she is
8 extending its meaning to include the cadence of the dipper, his sweetness,
9 the briskness of his affirmative stance. These don’t come through words, she
10 concludes, but through a “more than satisfactory way,” leading us to “the
11 bridge of understanding” we can throw across to reach the nonhuman in the
12 hope of comprehending him (or her). As ecopoets soon discovered, even in
13 the Romantic age of Emerson, pathetic fallacy is unavoidable, because we
14 are human and have human words to talk about what we care about. What
15 makes the difference is the consciousness, and especially the intention
16 behind its use. In the same way as Dickinson was consciously, and
17 ironically, projecting intentions on her bobolinks, robins or bees, Oliver –
18 her heir in this – personifies her birds (and bears, at least, and dogs) not to
19 make them like humans, but to let humans enter the animals’
20 consciousness, in an effort of imagination that is humbly respectful of their
21 autonomy, and obviously ironic, or even self-ironic.³

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37 In this poem, then, bird singing is figured as a shared code in which
38 the human may exert the main effort to move toward the nonhuman instead
39 of trying to dominate it, projecting his or her signifieds. It is worthy, though,
40 to note that in the closing of the poem Oliver assigns to sound a further
41 cognitive value. In the last three stanzas, the speaker affirms: “And still I
42 hear him—,” after having revealed that the episode she’s been narrating
43 happened more than fifty years before. Thus, the soundscape of that day left
44 on her mind such a strong impression that it remains alive in her memory,
45 and present, as if it were an active perception, carrying along the image of
46 the dipper, and all the feelings and emotions the bird expressed and
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³ In his *The West Side of Any Mountain*, J. Scott Bryson attributes to Oliver “two distinct versions of the pathetic fallacy, one that personifies self-reflectively, and one that does so with no hint of apology for speaking for an other” (91). Although the degree of obtrusiveness in Oliver’s speakers comments on their own discourse may vary, a certain measure of self-reflexivity seems to me to be always implied.

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3 communicated to his listener. Since then, this has been living “simply,/ in
4 the joy of the body as full and clear/ as falling water”: she has acquired the
5 ability to enjoy and rejoice in the world in the same way as a dipper – and it
6 is a marvel to realize how Oliver is able to see the world, and describe it, as
7 if in a kind of reversed pathetic fallacy, in which phenomena are described
8 in nonhuman (i.e., non-anthropomorphic and non-anthropocentric) terms,
9 as “full of leaves and feathers” (3).

16 17 4. Non-verbal language

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21 A later poem, a little curter and less luminous, stages a language that is still
22 more primeval, more distant from the human, and for this reason perhaps
23 more capable of expressing the inmost core of our strongest emotions, our
24 most elemental needs, those whose biological or psychological nature
25 becomes confused in their urgency. Invoking Walter Benjamin’s “mimetic
26 faculty,” Vicki Graham has described Oliver’s enactment of her sense of the
27 relation between human and nonhuman as a process of “becoming
28 something else,” or entering – through an ecstatic identification that is
29 achieved by yielding to a sensuous contact – the body of another. Or, rather,
30 other bodies, since the move needs to be temporary and repeatable in order
31 for the self not to be annihilated and become incapable of identification
32 (355-56). This process, which is so strongly remindful, again, of Whitman’s
33 own strategy in the “Song,” involves an imagined, mimetic stepping outside
34 of (human) language and self-consciousness, which are in fact maintained
35 in order for the writer to remain what she is: a human signifying to other
36 humans.

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49 “The Loon on Oak-Head Pond” is the only poem in *Owls* in which the
50 title runs on in the second line, beginning with the word “cries,” which is
51 repeated three times in an anaphora (33). The term is less anthropomorphic
52 than the usual “singing” or even “speaking,” and, together with the unusual
53 irregular punctuation (periods are not followed by capital letters),
54 establishes an anomalous pace, a sort of formal soundscape which is
55 imitative of the estranging, dramatic, resonant noise loons notoriously emit.
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3 The loon cries for three days, a cry of longing for the north, and blinking its
4 red eye makes the other noises of the death-bringer (as Oliver calls the owl
5 of the title poem after its chief behavioral trait): the noises of plunging and
6 re-emerging with a slapping pickerel. In the second part of the poem, the
7 hypnotic lull of the anaphoric “cries” leaves space to the apostrophe of the
8 speaker to herself, in a sort of self-dialogue of a split personality, in which
9 she looks at herself merging with the loon in an ecstatic moment she has
10 been pursuing by sitting a long time waiting to hear him, “quiet, under the
11 thick pines/ in the silence that follows” (33). The poet inhabits the loon’s
12 same space of twilight, and assumes its cry “as though it were your [i.e.,
13 her] own vanishing song” (33), thus transposing an animal utterance into a
14 subservient human code. What is preserved, in the move, is the wildness of
15 the animal, the materiality of its “voice” finally finding its way into a human
16 soundscape thanks to the poet’s attitude of humble listening. The
17 consonance between the animal’s and the human’s need for wildness
18 testifies Thoreau’s intuition that in “wildness” – rather than in wilderness –
19 “is the preservation of the world” (*Walking*, 1862; 273).

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21 So soundscapes are for Oliver a means to overcome the duality
22 between empiricism and idealism: language is reduced to sound, to what it
23 was before men turned it into a symbolizing faculty, that is, a figurative code,
24 a tool for abstraction. It satisfies the aspiration of many contemporary
25 eco-poets to keep it so close to life as to make it resemble a piece of life
26 transferred into a poem: utterance, physical substance, which validates “the
27 material of nature itself as literal language,” as Diane S. Bonds has
28 poignantly put it (3). Referring to Luce Irigaray’s analysis of mystic language
29 as a suspension of consciousness in “La Mystérique,” she points out how
30 “Oliver’s ‘mystical’ explorations are always firmly located in the materiality of
31 nature” (7).

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33 “While I’m Writing a Poem to Celebrate Summer, the Meadowlark
34 Begins to Sing” is a praise poem. It opens with another apostrophe, this time
35 an invocation to the Lord reminiscent of the Franciscan *Cantico delle*
36 *creature*. Oliver’s discourse on language also sustains the affirmation of her
37 brotherhood with the living beings populating her environment. Here, again,
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3 her anthropomorphizing the meadowlark's song serves an ecocentric
4 intention, which is the expression of her desire to assume the same "voice"
5 as the bird's, with all of its possibilities for eloquent modulation:
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10 how I wish I had a voice
11 like the meadowlark's,
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15 sweet, clear, and reliably
16 slurring all day long (34)
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20 Her subsequent turning this "voice" of the meadowlark into a more proper
21 "whistle" reveals the consciousness with which she is personifying it.
22 Moreover, her use of a neutral pronoun for the bird suggests the keeping of
23 a certain distance. The caution with which she is employing the pathetic
24 fallacy is apparent in the nuanced forms of expression she conceives for the
25 other natural beings in imagining they may concur to the day's praise.
26 Daisies and morning glories are attributed facial expressions – that is,
27 nonverbal language – when they are said to open, every morning, their
28 "ecstatic faces" (34). The meadowlark whistles a breath-praise, a thrill-song,
29 an anthem, a thank you, an alleluia, which elicits the opening of the faint-
30 pink roses "like little soft sighs" (35). The escalation of anthropomorphizing
31 terms is patently intentional, and wants to signify the speaker's
32 participation in nature rather than nature's participation in her pathetic
33 delusion.
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5. Inferred soundscapes

50 There are other sounds in Oliver's poems that are less prominent than birds'
51 singing. I would call them "implicit sounds": they are the sounds whose
52 occurrence we infer from their consequences. We may find some, for
53 example, in "September," a prose poem that carries on Oliver's discourse on
54 poetic contemplation largely by the means of an audile perception of the
55 environment.
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3 The speaker tells us the story of how she has managed to become part
4 of the environment she loves, in a process of integration that is
5 accomplished in total respect for the other, nonhuman inhabitants. The
6 narrative is articulated in three subsequent episodes, which are, however,
7 all told in the present tense, as if to convey the sense of a permanent
8 accruing consciousness. In the first one, the speaker enters a grove of pines,
9 and we guess she must have made a disturbing noise – of steps, or the
10 rustling or crackling of branches – because, she avows, she startles the
11 nighthawk, one of her favorite birds (and a favorite with Thoreau). In perfect
12 adjustment to its environment, the bird has been camouflaging itself on a
13 branch so as to become almost invisible, and takes silently off and vanishes.
14 The speaker is familiar with the nighthawk’s habits and knows it won’t nest
15 because it stops only a few days, so she is sorry to have disturbed it because
16 she’s assuming it “must be tired of flight” (51).

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18 The next day she returns onto the same scene, but approaches it with
19 care. Her acquired behavior this time doesn’t awake the bird: she backs
20 away and avoids disturbing it by making any noise. The following year,
21 “almost to the day,” she enters the same pinewoods and comes to the same
22 spot remembering the nighthawk just in time, thus revealing her pragmatic
23 knowledge of the environment and its ecosystem – “in time,” she clarifies, “to
24 be cautious and silent” (51). The bird is there, in the same position and
25 posture, as a magic appearance, “in the pinewoods,” the speaker concludes,
26 “that is so pretty and restful, apparently, to both of us” (51). Oliver seems to
27 suggest that in order to equally share our dwelling in nature with
28 nonhuman beings we should inhabit space in a way that is consonant with
29 theirs. In this case, we should enter their soundscape with respect,
30 preserving their silent habitat. Bryson, in the Tuanian terms he applies to
31 contemporary ecopoetry, would say that Oliver, in her desire for relationship,
32 is creating “place” out of her intense consciousness and appreciation of
33 “space” (9, 78).⁴

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⁴ Bryson draws his grid for analyzing the relation of four contemporary ecopoets to the environment from the work of cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, especially his landmark *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Saint Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

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3 A last poem I will consider, still closer to end of the book, brings this
4 notion to its extreme, by presenting the animal's right as a priority over the
5 human's. It is the only poem in the collection in which the bird is not
6 identified, which is why, when it does appear, its entry is dramatic. The
7 perspective is that of the human subject – correct as ever – but the animal
8 immediately takes up all the space, and the scene:
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15 I looked up and there it was
16 among the green branches of the pitchpines—
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20 thick bird,
21 a ruffle of fire trailing over the shoulders and down the back—
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25 color of copper, iron, bronze—
26 lighting up the dark branches of the pine. (59)
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30 The bird seems to be big, and powerful, and coated with fire. When, by
31 means of “a little sound,” the speaker makes her presence perceptible, it
32 looks at her, then immediately past her, impassive, like a king who has
33 nothing to fear about his kingdom because he has a perfect control over it.
34 Then it rises, “the wings enormous and opulent,” and – the speaker
35 deliberately repeats – “wreathed in fire” (59).
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41 This is not all there is to the poem. Between the first description of the
42 bird's appearance and its development in the wake of the speaker's own,
43 timid, announcement of her presence, there interjects an apparent non
44 sequitur: “What misery to be afraid of death./ What wretchedness, to believe
45 only in what can be proven.” The only meaning that can be made out is the
46 suggestion of a transcendent feeling coming from the speaker's perception of
47 the clash between her own scale and that of the bird's grandeur – in other
48 words a feeling of the sublime, again. The epistemological perspective, and
49 the response to the scene, is again, correctly, human. The physical space
50 represented, though, and the space of the narrative, are taken up by the
51 nonhuman being. The human almost disappears: she is reduced to an
52 onlooker, a witness to the *natura naturans*: life that unfolds itself according
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3 to necessary, unstoppable, behaviors and processes. The poem thus
4 completes a movement of reversal of the importance of the *anthropos* in the
5 representation of nature.
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8 Soundscapes in Mary Oliver's poetry show that she envisions her
9 ecocentric mysticism in terms of relation. The ultimate feeling of union with
10 the whole of nature and the living principle animating things is drawn from
11 her experience of her body's relatedness to the environment, and is enacted
12 through a constant dialogue that exceeds the verbal. Biosemiotics has
13 proved that identity can be founded on a reciprocal acknowledgment of
14 presence between entities in nature that doesn't privilege human language
15 as a code of communication. Relation can be intuited in a preverbal,
16 physical mode. Oliver's soundscapes demonstrate that for the Cape Cod
17 poet "the tension between the verbal and the nonverbal inevitably refers to
18 that between the I and the other" (Binasco § I.2).
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28 A good way of closing my own discourse is to explore the soundscape
29 of the essay that gives the book its title, "Owls," which was selected for the
30 1996 *Best American Essays*. The setting is, again, typically Thoreauvian: the
31 ramble – one of the favorite forms of American nature writing – takes place
32 on a pond, Great Pond in the Provincelands, on the Cape, which gives out
33 the same, tremendous and memorable thundering sounds, in thawing, that
34 Thoreau heard from Walden Pond. The soundscape produced by the great
35 horned owl emerges slowly but inexorably. First comes the rasping of its
36 razor-tipped toes on the tree limbs; then flakes of bark fall through the air
37 and land on the poet's shoulders, while she looks up and listens "to the
38 heavy, crisp, breathy snapping of its hooked beak" (15). With skillful craft,
39 Oliver creates an effect of suspense that increases our most terrible
40 expectations by expressing the need for physical distance between herself
41 and the feared bird, in the same way as Dickinson had expressed her need
42 for some distance between herself and Truth, because – as thunder with
43 children – its immediate revelation could be blinding (poem # 1129): "But
44 the great horned I can't imagine in any such proximity – if one of those
45 should touch me, it would touch to the center of my life, and I must fall" (15).
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60 This is the sublime, again, but in the line of Dickinson's unyieldingly honest

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3 interpretation, which did not delete the empirical fact, but rather was rooted
4 in it. Oliver's sublime is rooted in the wilderness, where humans and beasts
5 are not supposed, by definition, to cohabit:⁵ "They [the great horned owls]
6 are the pure wild hunters of our world," who disseminate the headless
7 bodies of rabbits and blue jays because "they have an insatiable craving for
8 the taste of brains." If they could, she adds, they would eat the world (15).
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14 In the same natural landscape, though, humans can have insights of
15 the paradoxical cohabitation of opposites, as in the most successful mystical
16 quest. The soundscape of "Owls" climaxes with a *coincidentia oppositorum*:
17 the simultaneous, immediate apprehension of the coincidence of life and
18 death in nature. They coincide in two screams, which make the reader
19 perceive terror as a natural part of life, and make him or her understand the
20 law of life of animals as coincident with the law of life of humans. Both the
21 scream of the rabbit and that of the owl are for Oliver sounds – signals – of
22 life that is intent upon itself, thus the only ethical possibility for humans,
23 too, and one that should be embraced. They are expressions of love:
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34 In the night, when the owl is less than exquisitely swift and perfect, the scream
35 of the rabbit is terrible. But the scream of the owl, which is not of pain and
36 hopelessness, and the fear of being plucked out of the world, but of the sheer
37 rollicking glory of the death-bringer, is more terrible still. When I hear it
38 resounding through the woods, and then the five black pellets of its song
39 dropping like stones into the air, I know I am standing at the edge of the
40 mystery, in which terror is naturally and abundantly part of life, part of even the
41 most becalmed, intelligent, sunny life – as, for example, my own. The world
42 where the owl is endlessly hungry and endlessly on the hunt is the world in
43 which I too live. There is only one world. (15-16)
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56 ⁵ I am referring of course to the famous aporia denounced by William Cronon in his "The
57 Trouble with Wilderness": "This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a
58 dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to
59 believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature
60 represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not." (80-81)

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