

“Bride of Amazement”:  
A Buddhist Perspective on  
Mary Oliver’s Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis undertakes a Buddhist reading of Mary Oliver's oeuvre. It seeks to fill a palpable lacuna in extant criticism of her work, which tends to adopt Romantic, Feminist, Ecocritical, and Christian viewpoints. Thus far, no criticism has offered a sustained reading of her work from a specifically Buddhist stance.

The thesis is structured in five chapters. The introductory chapter is followed by a literature review. The next three chapters are devoted to the Buddhist themes of Mindfulness, Interconnection, and Impermanence respectively. Each chapter opens with detailed consideration of its respective theme before moving on to the analysis and amplification of poems pertinent to it. In addition, the main Buddhist theme of each chapter is subdivided into its component sub-themes or corollaries.

The main methodological approach to Oliver's poetry comprises *explication de texte* as this makes provision for detailed readings of the texts themselves. Furthermore, this approach has been adopted because it allows for in-depth exploration of Oliver's literary devices, three notable examples of which are anaphora, *adéquation*, and *correspondence*. In the course of the discussion, reference is also made to the influence of Imagism and, more specifically, the Japanese haiku tradition insofar as they impact on her poetry. This discussion is intended to give some indication of Oliver's place within the American poetic tradition.

The predominant subject-matter of her corpus is an all-encompassing view of the natural world with its birth-life-decay-death cycle. She does not flinch from addressing the harsh and violent aspects of nature as well as its exuberance and beauty. Her unifying topos is being the bride of amazement as witness to the natural world. For her readers, this witnessing translates into an inner, potentially transformative process, ultimately integrating mind and heart.

The thesis concludes with a list of references and a glossary of the Buddhist terms.

## **KEYWORDS**

Mary Oliver, American poetry, nature, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Feminism, Ecocriticism, Buddhism, Zen, Mindfulness, Interconnection, Impermanence.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

Where other authors are quoted, their original spellings have been retained. There has been no attempt to standardise words ending in –ise or ize and –sation or –zation, for example. The same holds true for other American and British spellings.

All Pāli and Sanskrit terms are italicised as are English terms/words that may pose a reading obstruction because of their unusual spelling such as *suchness*, *thisness*, *as-it-isness* and so on. In addition to being italicised because of its spelling, the term *Nowness* is capitalised because it is employed in this way by its author. Major Buddhist terms and themes are capitalised; for example, No-self, Mindfulness, and Interconnection, amongst others.

Quite frequently, materials drawn from the World Wide Web present significant pagination problems. One of these lies in the absence of correlation between the original journal numbering and formatting and the numbering and formatting of the downloaded document. Consequently, a number of references throughout the thesis bear the abbreviation “n.p.” to indicate “no page number”. This should not be confused with other academic uses of “n.p.” to mean “no publisher”.

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## PROLOGUE

*I read my books with diligence, and mounting skill,  
and gathering certainty. I read the way a person might swim,  
to save his or her life. I wrote that way too.*

Oliver (*Blue Pastures*:65)

Mary Oliver was born in 1935 in Cleveland, Ohio. Playing truant from school provided her the opportunity to become familiar with the two main passions of her life: nature and poetry. It was especially Walt Whitman's poetry that spoke to her in a life-changing way, and he became her only "friend" at the time:

When the high school I went to experienced a crisis of delinquent student behavior, my response was to start out for school every morning but to turn most mornings into the woods instead, with a knapsack of books. Always Whitman's was among them. My truancy was extreme, and my parents were warned that I might not graduate. For whatever reason, they let me continue to go my own way. It was an odd blessing, but a blessing all the same. Down by the creek, or in the wide pastures I could still find on the other side of the deep woods, I spent my time with my friend: my brother, my uncle, my best teacher (*Blue Pastures*:14).

Coming from difficult circumstances herself, for Oliver, as a child and teenager, nature and poetry became the avenues of "vanishing" from such circumstances:

Adults can change their circumstances; children cannot. Children are powerless, and in difficult situations they are the victims of every sorrow and mischance and rage around them [...] Whatever can take a child beyond such circumstances, therefore, is an alleviation and a blessing.

I quickly found for myself two such blessings – the natural world, and the world of writing: literature. These were the gates through which I vanished from a difficult place (*Blue Pastures*:63-64).

In 1953, she visited Steepletop, the residence of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and returned later to live there on a more permanent basis as an assistant to Norma Millay, Edna's sister. After Oliver returned to Ohio, she attended Ohio State University for a year, and then Vassar College after receiving a bursary to study there. Although she did not finish a degree, she made it her life's task to hone her writing skills and talents instead. In 1962, she travelled to London and worked

at the Mobile Theatre Ltd., writing plays for the Unicorn Theatre for Children. She published her first volume, *No Voyage and Other Poems*, in England in 1963.

Oliver's first academic post included a Mather Visiting Professorship at Case Western Reserve University in 1980. In 1986, she became the poet-in-residence at Bucknell University. At the beginning of 1991, she was appointed the Margaret Banister Writer in Residence at Sweet Briar College, Virginia. She has also been appointed to the Catherine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College, Vermont (1996). Other institutions where she has taught include Ohio State University in Columbus and the University of Cincinnati. However, Provincetown, Massachusetts, remains the most influential setting behind most of her poetry and essays:

I first came to Provincetown in what is, supposedly, the best of seasons - summer, everything glittering, the streets crowded, the vacationers cheerful. There is a saying here: You stay a little while and get sand in your shoes, and you can't leave. When this happened to me, more than 25 years ago, summer was already leaning into a spectacular New England fall (Oliver 1991:n.p.).

Oliver is a prolific poet and has won several awards and prizes over the last few decades. The title poem of *No Voyage* won the first prize from the Poetry Society of America in 1963. Other prizes include the Shelley Memorial Award (1970), the Ohioana Book Award (1973), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1980). In 1984, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *American Primitive* (1983). In 1990, she received the L.L. Winship / PEN New England Award for *House of Light*. Subsequently, she won a National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems Volume One* (1992), and, in 1998, was awarded the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry. In addition, she has received honorary doctorates from the following institutions: The Art Institute of Boston (1998); Dartmouth College (2007), and Tufts University (2008).

As Oliver's first two volumes are not part of the scope of the study (for reasons explained in Chapter 1), I shall now provide a brief overview of her oeuvre, starting with *Twelve Moons*.

*Twelve Moons* (1979) is the first volume in which Oliver's very distinctive voice is present, free of the more formalistic style of her earlier poetry. This volume has a noticeable emphasis on the animal kingdoms of the natural world which are, most times, inaccessible to humans. Yet, with this volume, Oliver foregrounds the human longing to become one with these kingdoms, suggesting that, even at an unconscious level, humans need this interconnection which allows them to return to their primal selves.

With *American Primitive* (1983), there is a conscious shift:

*American Primitive* is about joy, certainly. And I hope there is a progression from *Twelve Moons*, the earlier book. In *Twelve Moons* there was not much ego; there was no separation between observer and surrounding world. *American Primitive* I wanted to be a listing of many perceptual joys. But joy that doesn't end in pleasure. Rather, pleasure that leads to a sense of humility, and a sense of praise, and a sense of mystery, and a sense of wonder (Oliver in Weinreb 1991:143).

In addition, Riley remarks on Oliver's intense questioning and observation in *American Primitive*:

Oliver continues the tradition of inserting questions that rest just beneath the surface of the poem: What role does nature play in humans' lives? Do humans control nature? Or does nature control humans? Resting in the primitive American landscapes of seascapes, salt estuaries, and the pines of Cape Cod, the collection also explores human needs and desires (2008:274).

An important aspect of Oliver's poetry – the epiphanous experience – is uncovered by Riley (2008:274) when she says: "Following the cycle of the seasons from autumn to summer, the collection reasserts Oliver's belief that epiphanies – new understandings of the self and how to live fully – might happen at any time in any place".

According to Riley (2008:275), *Dream Work* (1986), Oliver's seventh collection, contains a vital thematic shift from *American Primitive*: "Oliver enacts yet another significant shift from poems thematically concerned with the connection of humans to the natural world to poems thematically concerned with how humans often actively prevent such connections from occurring".

Oliver (in Weinreb 1991:143) asserts that this volume pays more attention to the human aspect than perhaps its predecessors: "*Dream Work* is a more social book, a more worldly book. In *Twelve Moons* there was a landscape without a person; in *American Primitive* there was one figure; and in *Dream Work* many figures appear".

Riley (2008:275) supports Oliver's assertion that more human themes emerge in *Dream Work* than before, especially emphasising the disconnection between nature and humans:

Poems cover a range of human failures to understand their connection to the nonhuman world – including the Holocaust, father-daughter incest, and the losses connected to humans' lack of understanding [...] even though the collection turns to human concerns such as history and violence, Oliver's foundational concerns with ending humans' unnatural separation from nature remain firm.

*House of Light* (1990) particularly celebrates the cycles of birth, life, and death which are all subject to Impermanence. Moreover, Oliver examines “the inner mind in relation and response to outer experiences” (Riley 2008:276). The ongoing theme of “how to love this world” is especially evident in this volume, laying the foundation for other volumes in which this theme is highlighted.

Allen (1999:847) echoes this increasing emphasis on Impermanence in Oliver's poetry with *New and Selected Poems, Volume One* (1992):

Most of the poems bear the unique stamp of an O. poem: the solitary speaker bringing her uneasy, questioning spirit to the woods or fields in search of understanding, instruction, even solace [...] These poems have their strength, however, in the theme of imagined death, which is the final wedding of natural and human for the poet. Death recurs in the thirty new poems in various manifestations.

Impermanence also entails more in-depth questioning of the self, how to live in this world, and how to love it:

Readers will also find Oliver turning more and more to analyzing the self and asking questions about identity: Who are we? How do we know? How do we experience the world? And how do our experiences teach us about who we are? More important, how does one learn to live so that when passing from this world, one does so without regrets? (Riley 2008:277).

*A Poetry Handbook* (1994) deals with metrical poetry, drawing its examples from poets as diverse as Robert Frost and Bashō. Moreover, Oliver does not only write about the mechanics of metrical poetry, but expresses her life philosophy on various matters, such as the role of the poet and the importance of the mind, expressing a wide range of human emotions:

A mind that is lively and inquiring, compassionate, curious, angry, full of music, full of feeling, is a mind full of possible poetry. Poetry is a life-cherishing force. And it requires a vision – a *faith*, to use an old-fashioned term. Yes, indeed. For poems are not words,

after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. Yes, indeed (*Poetry Handbook*:122).

*White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems* (1994)

brings Oliver into new poetic ground as she includes prose poems for the first time in her published work. Even so, her concerns remain steadily focused on questions of living, dying, loving, and losing, all mediated by and through experiences with the natural world (Riley 2008:278).

*Blue Pastures* (1995) includes fifteen essays and the first two parts of *Sand Dabs*, aphoristic observations on a range of topics which are presented loosely as a poem. The essays vary between penetrating reflections on nature (For example, “At Herring Cove”, and “Owls”) and the art of imagination and writing (in essays such as “Of Power and Time”, and “My Friend Walt Whitman”).

But it is especially in an essay, “The Poet’s Voice” (97) that she recapitulates the extent to which Whitman’s poetry has changed her life, and how it taught her to write and observe things with amazement:

The first poems that I found – I mean, found by myself, on the page, and read by myself, in amazement and delight – were poems of Whitman. For this, I will never be less than deeply grateful. Here was language that was rich and choice; here was prodigious energy; here was cadence; here was the total investment of attention in a thousand directions. I understood immediately that certain things – attention, great energy, total concentration, tenderness, risk, beauty – were elements of poetry.

*West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems* (1997) is the second volume to include prose poems, and continues the *Sand Dab* aphoristic poem in its third part. Barresi (1999:544) remarks on Oliver’s innate talent for spotting and articulating Impermanence from a fresh vantage point, as seen especially in the imagery of “Pilot Snake”:

Oliver’s talent reveals itself in the matrix of her quiet, confident tone and startling verbs, in this case the ants ‘dipping and slashing’ with the ‘tiny / knives of their mouths.’ It is not that we have never thought of death in these ways before, but that Oliver gets at ideas so cleanly and elegantly, we cannot help but be awed anew.

*Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (1998) is a second handbook in which Oliver discusses prosodic verse and her underlying philosophy of poetry. On the last page, in the final part which she aptly calls “Envoi”, she encapsulates the contribution of poets to society and, therefore to individual lives, over the ages:

Poets have, in freedom and in prison, in health and misery, with listeners and without listeners, spent their lives examining and glorifying life, meditation, thoughtfulness, devoutness, and human love. They have done so wildly, serenely, rhetorically, lyrically, without hope of answer or reward. They have done this grudgingly, willingly, patiently, and in the steams of impatience. They have done it for all and any of the gods of life, and the record of their doing so belongs to each one of us. Including you.

*Winter Hours* (1999) is a collection of nine essays, prose poems and poems, and parts four to six of the *Sand Dab* poem:

A combination of prose poems, sand-dab poems, and essays, the collection enters new ground. Oliver introduces a new strand of thought in her work as she examines the process of human aging, a process mimicked by the collection itself as it follows the cycle of the seasons from summer to spring (Riley 2008:279).

In this volume, Oliver again emphasises her inextricable link with nature:

I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. But not me. For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple. Under the trees, along the pale slopes of sand, I walk in an ascendant relationship to rapture, and with words I celebrate this rapture. I see, and dote upon, the manifest (98-99).

*The Leaf and the Cloud: A Poem* (2000) is a long poem with seven sections in which Impermanence is especially foregrounded:

For Oliver, the world itself is perhaps ‘the real poem’; it captures the connections of all living things. ‘Gravel’ asserts that animate and inanimate alike exist in connection. At the root of this connection is the inevitable fact that all things return to dust and gravel. As the speaker explains, if people immerse themselves in the natural world during their lives, they will realize that their mortality will return them to the soil, to the stars, to the waters; thus, the speaker asks: ‘*how could I be afraid?*’ (Riley 2008:280).

The dust jacket of *What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems* (2002) extols the volume: “These forty poems – of observing, of searching, of pausing, of astonishment, of giving thanks – embrace in every sense the natural world, its unrepeatable moments and its ceaseless cycles”. It is especially through sensate joy that Oliver “entices readers to enter into nature, to find ways into which nature can lead humans to bring in the world on the ‘five rivers’ of senses, so that humans can revel in ‘sensual inundation’” (Riley 2008:280).

*Owls and Other Fantasies: Poems and Essays* (2003) is a mélange of poems already published and some new ones that appeared in various periodicals, all with an interconnective bird theme. In addition, many of the poems in this volume have an underlying theme of Impermanence and the “how to love this world” topos.

*Blue Iris: Poems and Essays* (2004) continues the combination of essays and poems as vessels for Oliver’s ability for mindful observation as especially noticeable in a poem like “Upstream” of which the last line reads: “Attention is the beginning of devotion”. “Rice”, and “Beans” are exemplars of mindful eating which continues the Mindfulness theme in Oliver’s work.

*Long Life: Essays and Other Writings* (2004) contains seventeen essays, and ten poems. Oliver also includes parts seven to nine of her *Sand Dab* poem in this volume. A continuous theme throughout this collection is paying mindful attention to the world that surrounds us especially when we have to engage in the ordinary tasks of everyday life: “The one thing he [Emerson] is adamant about is that we *should* look – we *must* look – for that is the liquor of life, that brooding upon issues, the attention to thought even as we weed the garden or milk the cow” (46). As in so many other instances, Oliver confronts readers with various life-changing questions for them to ponder: “what does it mean, say the words, that the earth is so beautiful? And what shall I do about it? What is the gift that I should bring to the world? What is the life that I should live?” (9).

*New and Selected Poems, Volume Two* (2004) contains forty-two newly written poems, resuming Oliver’s preoccupation with the natural world and its sentient beings. Two of the poems contained in this collection have Percy, one of her most beloved dogs, as their subject. She would continue to write another fourteen poems about him, the last appearing as the Afterword in *Swan*.

*Why I Wake Early* (2004) continues a major topos in Oliver’s work: finding the extraordinary in ordinary, everyday life’s moments. This topos is especially evident in her poem called “Mindful” (58-59), lines 19-25:

Nor am I talking  
 about the exceptional,  
  
 the fearful, the dreadful,  
 the very extravagant –  
 but of the ordinary,  
 the common, the very drab,  
  
 the daily presentations.

*Wild Geese: Selected Poems* (2006) is the first Oliver work to be published in Britain since her first volume in 1963. As the sub-title suggests, it contains a choice of previously published pieces.

*Thirst* (2006) is a volume that deals specifically with the death of Oliver's partner, Molly Malone Cook, who died in 2005. Its pervasive theme of Impermanence can be summarised by "The Uses of Sorrow":

Someone I loved once gave me  
 a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand  
 that this, too, was a gift.

In *Our World*, with photographs by Molly Malone Cook (2007), Oliver explains that, although she always had the ability to notice things, it was Molly who had taught her to really see:

Watching M. when she was taking photographs, and watching her in the darkroom, and no less watching the intensity and openness with which she dealt with friends, and strangers too, taught me what real attention is about. Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness – an empathy – was necessary if the attention was to matter. Such openness and empathy M. had in abundance, and gave away freely (71).

With *Red Bird* (2008), and *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures: Poems and Essays* (2008), Oliver turns her focus away from the grief in *Thirst* to the world's beauty and horror again, which again serve to emphasise that she is not a traditional nature poet:

The most compelling pieces in *Truro Bear* are those wherein the poet acknowledges the dark, inscrutable qualities of the creatures she meets. These provide a corrective to the domesticated view of the natural world prevalent in other poems and bear witness to nature's power and mystery, qualities bound up with our own mortality and ineffable destiny (O'Donnell 2008:39).

It is also in *The Truro Bear* that Oliver offers the reader a substantial sequence of the first thirteen poems of Percy as subject.

Yet again, *Evidence* (2009) encompasses Oliver's approachable style: "Never afraid to shed the pretense of academic poetry, never shy of letting the power of an image lie in unadorned language, Oliver is a skilled guide to the rarest and most exquisite insights of the natural world" (dust jacket).

Oliver employs an excerpt from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* as epitaph to *Swan* (2010), her twentieth volume of poetry:

Everyone *once*, *once* only. Just *once* and no more.  
And so we also *once*. Never again. But this having been  
*once*, although only *once*, to have been of the earth,  
seems irrevocable.

It is also in this volume that readers take their leave of Percy with the fourteenth to sixteenth poems of the Percy sequence.

This excerpt dovetails with "More Evidence" (49), which summarises Oliver's emphasis on the Interconnection of all sentient beings with the natural world:

Just as truly as the earth is ours, we belong  
to it. The tissue of our minds is made of it,  
and the soles of our feet, as fully as the  
tiger's claw, the branch of the whitebark pine,  
the voices of the birds, the dog-tooth violet  
and the tooth of the dog.

These volumes make up Mary Oliver's body of work to date. In all her writings, she has been the *bride of amazement* in her devoted relationship with the natural world, joyful in the knowledge that "my irrepressible heart begs me to hurry on / into the next exquisite moment" (*Evidence* 2009:48).

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*They felt that there was a lot of Eastern feeling in my work, and wanted to know why, whether I was interested in the Eastern religions. And I said I was interested, and I knew some things about it, but that I was not a scholar. But I have been reading about Buddhism, I was reading about that meditative way of living. I think sometimes my poems have a sort of Eastern circularity – the sense of seeing something, the epiphany, and making something of it which is news for oneself (Oliver in Ratiner 2002:55).*

In this study, I argue for a Buddhist reading of Mary Oliver's poetry. My main impetus for taking this approach is twofold: First, Oliver's corpus has been largely overlooked by the literary community, which is rather strange, given that it is such a substantial one, and one that won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. Secondly, so far, no dedicated study has been carried out that examines the interface between Oliver's poetry and Buddhism, despite the number of Buddhist themes contained in her work. Although these themes may not be apparent to the reader who has never come into contact with Buddhism, it does not mean that the Buddhist reader or a reader with a fair understanding of Buddhism will fail to see the Buddhist implications of her oeuvre.

Nature has always been the focal point in Oliver's writing. However, her first volume, *No Voyage and Other Poems* (1963), and second volume, *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems* (1972) have a more miscellaneous feel. These two volumes will not be included in this study because they differ significantly from her later work in both form and content. Oliver herself underscores this when asked in an interview with Swanson (1990:6) whether it was fair to view this work as formalist: "It's fair to call it formalist, and it's also fair, once again, to call it derivative [...] [the books] show the merit of admiring fine, American traditionalists, if you will: I was not concerned at that time about being 'original'. I was still learning how to write a poem". Some of the poems in subsequent chapbooks, *The Night Traveler* (1978), and *Sleeping in the Forest* (1978) were included in *Dream Work* (1979), the first volume dealt with in this study. Consequently, these chapbooks will not be included in the research either.

From *Dream Work* onwards, Oliver devotes her entire oeuvre to the natural world as subject matter. Consequently, I will focus on nature in Oliver's work as illuminated and informed by the Buddhist approach. Such an approach not only allows for an appreciation of Oliver's poems by foregrounding their subject-matter, but also fills one of the major lacunae in critical writing devoted to her corpus. In addition, this approach elucidates her ongoing amazement at the manifold diversity of the natural world – her literary *raison d'être*. Given that Oliver's amazement

with nature derives from her daily and direct experience of it, a Buddhist perspective is particularly incisive since it, too, is experiential and, in so being, dissolves the boundaries between philosophy, mysticism, and religion that are usually familiar to Western readers. The Buddhist principles and themes employed in this research are not drawn from an exclusive Buddhist tradition, because, like Christianity, Buddhism comprises a considerable diversity of traditions and schools. In fact, in *Blue Jean Buddha* (2001:197), Sumi Loundon suggests that “it is helpful to think not of ‘Buddhism’ but ‘Buddhisms’”. Having said that, Zen Buddhism does feature significantly, although not exclusively, in the research, because of its vital link to finding enlightenment in ordinary things and everyday tasks, a theme that predominates in Oliver’s writing.

Another distinction crucial to the study that I want to make is between Buddhist themes and principles in Oliver’s work and viewing Oliver as a Buddhist poet *per se*. This is a vital distinction, because Oliver’s poetry does not contain an overt Buddhist code as is the case with Buddhist poets such as Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, amongst others. In this regard, I take a similar approach to that expressed by Milstead in her thesis entitled *The Zen of Modern Poetry: Reading Eliot, Stevens, and Williams in a Zen Context* (1998):

By reading the poems of Eliot, Stevens, and Williams in a Zen context, I do not argue that these poets were Zen Buddhists, nor that they used Zen Buddhist texts as source material. I argue that as they engaged philosophical and artistic questions [...] they used Zen concepts to make their points (1998:9).

My line of argument also dovetails with Milstead’s on the following point: “This study argues that using Zen Buddhism as a framework for understanding the poems will illuminate much of the Eastern thought embedded in them” (1998:5). In addition, my aim in using Buddhism as a framework for Oliver’s poetry is analogous to Milstead’s: “This study does not attempt to present a comprehensive view of Zen. Its purpose is to use Zen to elucidate poems of Eliot, Stevens, and Williams, not to instruct students of Zen” (1998:6). For this reason, I will not take a strict scholarly approach to Buddhism in quoting extensive passages from the sutras. Instead, I will draw mainly from commentary and insights of modern Buddhist teachers and writers interpreting major Buddhist thematic materials. This study serves to highlight the interface between Oliver’s poetry and certain major Buddhist themes, without drawing on Buddhist hermeneutics, which is a radically different approach. Thus, this research should not be viewed as being rooted in a Religious Studies-approach to its subject. Rather, its approach is essentially literary, making use of contemporary interpretations of Buddhism that dovetail with Oliver’s poems and not vice versa.

Through a careful reading of Oliver's poetry, I identified several recurrent Buddhist themes manifest throughout her work. Although most of these themes have been noted in various critical essays and reviews, they were not articulated from a Buddhist stance. However, they do concur uncannily with my choice of Buddhist themes embedded in Oliver's poetry.

The first major Buddhist theme identified in Oliver's poetry is Mindfulness which plays a significant role in her articulation of her amazement with the natural world. Oliver invites and encourages readers to look at and listen more carefully to their surroundings in order to change their own lives. The most important function of Mindfulness requires Buddhist practitioners to focus their minds on the here-and-now so that they can be truly present and not get bogged down in thoughts about the past or the future or in the unproductive storylines that the mind tends to create.

Over the years, Oliver's critics and reviewers have remarked upon the presence of Mindfulness which is synonymous with intense observation and paying attention to one's everyday surroundings. For example, Swanson (1990:1) says: "She calls upon us as readers to be in her poetry, to 'look!' and to 'listen!' with all our might". Oliver herself expresses Mindful Awareness by quoting Flaubert: "Flaubert says something wonderful: 'Talent is long patience, and originality an effort of will and of intense observation'. I lived for years with that, trying for intense observation, believing in it. Well, I still do!" (Oliver in Swanson 1990:7).

Riley (2008:276-277) links the notion of Mindfulness to *House of Light* (1990):

Similar to Oliver's previous work, *House of Light* also examines the act of observing the world closely. Only through careful observation, suggests Oliver, do humans learn anything [...] In poem after poem, readers find Oliver's message: to love this world is to pay attention to it and to value one's life every day.

Prothero (2008:45) underscores Oliver's focused attention: "But paying attention is also Oliver's way of being in the world. It is what she does. She looks. She listens. She attends". Russell (1997:21) echoes the idea of paying profound attention in Oliver's poetry: "Any random sampling of poems will illustrate Oliver's distinctive attention to change and movement in the natural world".

The second major Buddhist theme evident in Oliver's work is Interconnection or the Interdependence of all phenomena. The Jewelled Net of Indra is the very apt metaphor utilised in many schools of Buddhism to explain the phenomenon of Interconnection: "In the heavenly abode of the great god Indra is a wondrous net that has a light-reflecting jewel at each of the

infinite intersections of its threads. Each jewel exists only as a reflection of all the others, and hence has no self-nature” (Jones 2003:16).

Some critics have noted the notion of Interdependence in Oliver’s poetry, as is evident from Riley’s (2008:277) following observation: “Many of her poems in this collection focus upon the idea of interdependence”. Riley (279) continues in this vein when writing about *Winter Hours* (1999): “Oliver has an integral belief in the interdependence of nature and culture, for there ‘exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else’: these connections reveal that ‘our dignity and our chances are one’”.

Returning to the metaphor of Indra’s Net: the fact that each light-reflecting jewel in the net is interdependent to form a holistic picture (very similar to the constituents of a mandala) and that no jewel has self-nature, brings us to the next important linking theme: Emptiness or No-self. Milstead (1998:26) articulates the following argument about Emptiness (again, it should be noted that, although the tenet of Emptiness is vital to Zen Buddhism, it is not exclusive to it; Emptiness also forms a significant part in most other branches and traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and practice):

The concept of Emptiness, or *Mu*, is particularly important to Zen Buddhists. Although Emptiness is sometimes called ‘nothingness’, Zen Emptiness is not the same as the Western concept of ‘nothingness’. ‘Nothingness’ or ‘nothing’ in the Western dualistic manner of thinking is the opposite of ‘something’ and is therefore something itself. Zen does not recognize dualistic oppositions because such relational attitudes are merely ideas, products of the discriminating mind.

What Milstead is postulating about Emptiness also reveals another Buddhist theme manifest in Oliver’s poetry: non-dualistic thought. This is a vital point in her work because it links so closely with Interdependence. One cannot see the world as an interdependent whole and still regard everything in dualistic or bifurcated categories. The following quotation explains how Buddhism differs from the traditional Western viewpoint that holds separation or dualism as its central focus:

The Zen idea of the world really differs widely from traditional Western notions, and that difference has implications for poetry and art in general. The Buddhist idea of what the world is like is similar to that of the Vedantic or Hindu tradition. The Vedantic story of creation says that the world began when Brahman, the only existing entity, divided itself into the things of the earth – people, animals, trees, rivers. Although the things of the earth appear to be separate, they are all Brahman, and the spiritual goal is to recognize the oneness that has always existed. In contrast, the Judeo-Christian story of creation

says that God created the things of the world as separate entities, and the spiritual goal is to bridge the gap of separation to become one with God. Buddhists begin with an assumption of a world characterized by wholeness rather than separateness (Milstead 1998:26).

This separateness or alienation is brought about mainly by the ego-self, another vital Buddhist notion that is commented upon throughout the thesis. By its very nature, this ego-self is divisive and alienates the mind from seeing the true nature of reality. Milstead (1998:30) explains the ego-self most incisively from a Zen Buddhist perspective, a perspective which is no less applicable to many other Buddhist schools and traditions:

Zen reveals the self as illusion through the attainment of Emptiness. When the mind releases all abstractions, it no longer thinks dualistically, and there is no longer any separation between subject and object [...] This ego-self is not, according to Zen Buddhism, the true self, but merely an idea about the self. Zen Buddhists believe that the true self is pure consciousness. Traditional Western thought says that the self is an entity that has certain experiences. In Zen thinking, there is no entity to 'have' experience; the self *is* experience.

Ratiner (2002:40) makes a pertinent point about Oliver's relationship to self (or lack thereof) in her poetry: "Her poetry is also an extended investigation into the nature of the self. But in her vision, the self is a much more open and encompassing concept than the succinct identities to which we affix our names". Alford (1988:288) echoes this sentiment:

Oliver's poetry, then, reminds modern man that accepting the dire consequences of mortal existence through a heightened sensual perception takes time and patience. It does not come easily like an automatic reflex but rather develops through a slow, painful transformation of self to selflessness.

Alford's remark about humankind's "mortal existence" is closely interwoven with the next Buddhist theme in Oliver's poetry: Impermanence or transience. Unlike many traditional nature poets, Oliver's poems distil the relationship between death and beauty in the natural world; the cycles of birth, life, decay, and death assume a spiral form in the sense that they combine both the circular and linear concepts of time simultaneously, moving round and forward at the same time. This means that new life is always possible through death. Impermanence is one of the most fundamentally important themes of Buddhist philosophy. Buddhist practitioners believe that the deep-seated denial of Impermanence in our lives is the cause of our suffering (*dukkha*). Because we cling to possessions and others, our fundamental attachment to everything belies

the universal truth of Impermanence: that all things and people will cease to be at some stage. Therefore, nothing is ever in a fixed state, but always permeable and in flux.

One of the ways of getting closer to an understanding of what Impermanence entails is through sitting practice or meditation during which the Buddhist practitioner becomes conscious of the different thoughts, feelings, and sensations arising. The more experienced practitioner will start to realise that the pre-conceptual way of *viewing* the world and ourselves starts to fall away, making space for a view that encompasses a more holistic understanding of the universe and ourselves. This is called “Right View”, which forms part of The Noble Eightfold Path and is closely related to the Fourth Noble Truth. McEntyre (1994:8) observes this in Oliver’s work: “We may only choose rightly if we see rightly. And to see rightly is to see subtly”. Right View will not be discussed in detail because it is not the intention of this study to explicate The Noble Eightfold Path.

However, Impermanence constitutes a vital notion in Oliver’s poetry and is noted and discussed by critics of her work more than any of the other Buddhist themes. Poulin (1985:651) remarks: “The acceptance of hard truths of mortal existence is at the heart and boundaries of Mary Oliver’s poems”. Riley (2008:274) makes the following observations about *American Primitive* (1983):

the collection reveals a growing discussion of the inevitability of loss and death, a further realization that nature because it is fragile, is full of loss. Nature’s losses are then connected to the losses that humans inevitably face during their lifetime.

Janzen (2004:11) articulates the great mystery of death in Oliver’s poems: “She explores and celebrates the mystery of our deaths. With her precise imagery, Oliver transposes the chaos of death’s threat into a world of symmetry and amazement”. Prothero (2008:46) also commits to the view that Oliver’s work is imbued with Impermanence: “If Oliver is a poet of mindful attention, she attends particularly mindfully to death. In fact, she attends to death with a clarity equal to any writer I know. Her poetry seems as exquisitely calibrated as Buddhism itself to the hard realities of loss, which she calls ‘the great lesson’”. In addition, Ratiner (2005:58) emphasises the idea that death is not the end of the cycle; it may even sometimes comprise an epiphanous experience: “When we think of death, or when we’re close to death, is when life is the brightest. That’s what gives the brightness”.

How is the Buddhist reader to unearth these Buddhist themes in Oliver’s work? One of the vital clues is found in Oliver’s *Winter Hours* (1999:24): “I want it [the poem] to be rich with ‘pictures of the world’”. What Oliver proposes here links with the guiding principles of Imagism, which comprises “a poetry which, abandoning conventional poetic materials and versification, is free to

choose any subject and create its own rhythms, is expressed in common speech, and presents an image that is hard, clear and concentrated" (Abrams 1988:83). These specific principles are linked historically to the major and commonly accepted oriental influences on American poetry. Furthermore, these guidelines mirror Oliver's personal train of thought regarding her own poetry:

Whenever I teach I begin with the sounds that are available to us, the difference between the mute sounds and softer sounds, for example [...] There's not much there [punctuation in her work]. Only when it is necessary. I aim for energy, an explosion of energy if possible. People want to be awakened and roused and quickened. A lot of poems tend to slow us down. I would rather wake us up (Oliver in Weinreb 1991:145).

Moreover, the Imagist notion of free verse dovetails with Oliver's insight into Walt Whitman's poetry, which, in turn, has influenced her own poems: "His style is made up of many elements but is not complex" (*Winter Hours*:69).

Evident from what Oliver is saying in the Weinreb interview is that her poetry is a tool for awakening, which is the bedrock of Buddhism (Buddha means "the Awakened One"). However, in order to awaken readers, Oliver employs specific literary and linguistic devices throughout her poems; a number of these link with Imagist notions. Two examples are Oliver's employment of *vers libre* / free verse and the more sparing use of punctuation as opposed to the more traditional metrical poetry (such as the Romantic tradition) which employs established rhyme schemes and punctuation. Barresi (1999:544) echoes Oliver's statement about punctuation (as well as the earlier discussion about Impermanence): "Oliver's urgency, marked by rushing, unpunctuated clauses, makes these poems come alive, even as they return again and again to the subject of approaching death".

Abrams (1988:83) goes on to define Imagism as follows:

The typical Imagist poem is written in free verse, and undertakes to render as precisely and tersely as possible, and without comment or generalization, the writer's response to a visual object or scene; often the impression is rendered by means of metaphor, or by juxtaposing a description of one object with that of a second or diverse object.

When isolating each component of this definition, it becomes clear that Oliver's poetry has a penchant for Imagist strategies. The first constituent – "written in free verse" – is evident from *Twelve Moons* (1979) onwards. However, it needs to be emphasised that Oliver has tight control of her free verse, as Dobyns (1992:12) observes:

Much contemporary free verse strikes one as lazy. Ms. Oliver's lines and line breaks completely control the rhythm and pacing. She forces us to read her poems as she meant them to be read. Perhaps only James Wright controlled the free verse line as well as she does.

Dobyns' observation is supported by Oliver's own assertion that she designs her poetry by employing certain devices as specific guidelines for the reader:

Such devices involve the listeners and draw them in. Of course this is all just so that you can soften them up and say what you really want to say. This sounds very programmatic, doesn't it? And yet, it's true. I remember those 'listeners' when I write. So all that old stuff – the various mechanics – still fascinates me thoroughly. How enjambed lines 'feel' to the listener, as compared with end-stopped lines (Oliver in Swanson 1990:7).

Although *vers libre* "has no regular meter or line length and depends on natural speech rhythms" (Cuddon 1999:331), it still requires structuring, although of a different kind. Oliver makes the following remarks about free verse:

The free verse poem is by no means exempted from the necessity of having a design, though one must go about it in rather different ways, since there is no external pattern to be followed. This subject [...] will involve such matters as repetition of line, repetition of syntax, patterns of stress, a sense of inevitability, setting up a felt pattern of expectation and meeting that expectation, a repetition of enjambment and so on (*A Poetry Handbook*:66).

Abram's second Imagist constituent – "to render as precisely and tersely as possible, and without comment or generalization, the writer's response to a visual object or scene" – is evident in a comment from the *Chicago Tribune* on the dust jacket of *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings* (2004): "a desire to find the exact, economical, shining phrase; a wish to witness, and a wish to share". This sense of economy and terseness is underscored by Hosmer's observation of a Zen element in Oliver's poetry: "Oliver achieves a rare, Zen-like clarity and economy; it can be no accident that so many of her poems bring traditions of Asian calligraphy and painting to mind" (1994:n.p.). Furthermore, Milstead's dovetailing of Zen art and Emptiness (1998:37) reinforces Hosmer's argument:

The spare nature of Zen art is related to the Zen concept of considering Emptiness as relational to form. In Chinese landscape paintings, for instance [...] the blank space is considered 'part of the painting and not just unpainted background'. This approach to art, the idea of not having to fill in everything with 'things' echoes the Zen idea of emptying the mind of abstractions and perceiving the world in its suchness. Thus, to Zen, unlike traditional Western approaches, life and art are part of an interdependent and interlocking whole.

There is a definitive link between Imagism and Oriental elements, as Ezra Pound, its main founder, turned to the Japanese haiku as a major influence in articulating the direction of Imagist poetry. T.E. Hulme, the leader of "The Poets' Club" (1908), a forerunner of Imagism, formulated the new vision of poetry at the time (Miner 1966:98), a vision which was:

a rejection of Romantic and Victorian traditions, and stressed a compactness and precision of imagery that became characteristic of Imagism. He also urged the group to eliminate excess verbiage, to use 'the hard, definite, personal word,' and to avoid metaphoric use of imagery (Record 1981:58-59).

The last part of Hulme's assertion – "to avoid metaphoric use of imagery" seems to be in direct conflict with the third constituent of the Abrams' Imagist definition: "often the impression is rendered by means of metaphor". However, these two apparently contradictory assertions are interlinked in the context of Oliver's poetry by means of two poetic devices Sherman Paul mentions which he borrowed from the French essayist, Francis Ponge: *correspondence* and *adéquation*: "The term [*adéquation*] is Francis Ponge's for a literary equivalence that respects the thing and lets it stand forth. *Adéquation* is not to be confused with *correspondence*: It is not a symbolic mode but an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself" (1992:19). It is important to note that *adéquation* is susceptible to vague and even impressionistic use. In this research, however, the term is presumed to be close to, if not synonymous with, the concept of diagrammatic iconicity.

On the other hand, *correspondence* links to Abrams' assertion and *adéquation* underscores Hulme's postulation. Burton-Christie, who, in turn, borrows these terms from Sherman Paul, contextualises them within Oliver's work as well as pointing out by means of example how these function in the work of Emerson and Thoreau:

*Correspondence* refers to the search for symbolic meaning, the process of making imaginative connections between the ever-shifting and fathomless worlds of self and nature. In the tradition of American nature writing, Thoreau stands out as one of the

most vivid examples of a person given to *adequation*: he ‘respected particular things and was sceptical of the sovereign-idealist-symbol-making mind’. Emerson, on the other hand, gave lucid expression to the process of *correspondence*; he wished ‘to take symbolic possession of things’ and focused on ‘the epiphanic moment when a fact flowered into a truth’ (1996:79).

Burton-Christie (1996:86) goes on to explain how these two notions dovetail in Oliver’s work:

To pay attention means, for Oliver, to relinquish, to let go – of the need to symbolize, of the need to impose meaning on everything we see. It means learning to let the natural world *be* in its unassimilated otherness. Yet she also encourages us to reflect symbolically on the world of mystery evoked by our encounter with the natural world. She asks: what does it feel like, what does it *mean* to dwell in that mystery? Adequation and correspondence, letting be and imaginatively appropriating – both are necessary if we are to live deeply and see clearly.

More specifically, *adéquation* is pertinent to Oliver’s literary *modus operandi* (as well as to that of Imagism), because she refrains from obscuring her message to the reader by using a more colloquial tone and concrete images. This is supported by various critics, such as Russell (1997:21): “The colloquial tone Oliver adopts both toward her literary predecessors and the creatures of the natural world does not detract from her reverence for them”. Allen (1999:847) echoes this, characterising Oliver’s poetry as having “The stylistic hallmarks of conversational tone, plain diction, and momentous endings”.

Milstead’s assertion about Stevens’ work being without literary obfuscations holds equally true of Oliver’s work:

According to Aitken, what makes Stevens’ work interesting to those who know something about Zen is Stevens’ propensity for writing poems that have ‘no intellectual overlay to obscure things as they are’. This absence of intellectual overlay is essential to the Zen concept of Emptiness, which in Buddhism is the ultimate reality [...] To realize emptiness is to allow the mind to release all abstractions or ideas and recognize the interlocking interdependence, or dependent co-origination, of all things (1998:107-108).

The fact that there is no “intellectual overlay” is also noted by Thurston (1999:30): “Her subject is always clear; the reader always knows what the poem is ‘about’ [...] The poems are available to the reader as the external world which has inspired them”. Thurston’s assertion links with Ponge’s notion of *adéquation*:

*Adéquation* is part of Ponge's attempt to achieve more intimate coincidence between language and what it denotes, and in the absence of traditional poetic forms it provides the necessary contours for the prose poem [...] The text will behave according to the *particularité* of each object and will have as much concrete reality in the textual world as the real object has in the natural world (Jordan 1994:40).

McNew's (1989:n.p.) view of Oliver's employment of literary devices fuses with what Ponge is saying about the denotative power of language:

Oliver gives primary emphasis not to the symbolic order of poetic language but to the more literal power of poetry to invoke inarticulate, intuitive experience itself. The frequent imperatives of her poems – all her urgings to 'look!' or 'listen!' – insist on moving outside art, into the lives of trees, damselflies, owls and ponds.

McNew's quotation leads us to another central literary device Oliver uses in her poetry: anaphora, a technique that is much in evidence in Walt Whitman's poetry. In *Blue Pastures*, Oliver offers an essay on "My Friend Walt Whitman" in which she calls him "the brother I did not have" (1995:13). Through this acknowledgement, she links her work overtly to the American free verse tradition.

Sometimes, Oliver uses just the imperative – "look!" or "listen!" – in order to catch the reader's attention. In other instances, she makes use of what I term the "anaphoric imperative". What this means is that Oliver not only utilises an imperative but reinforces it by repeating it in the poem. An apt example of the anaphoric imperative is found in "Her Grave, Again" (*What Do We Know*:49):

Look, here is the head, the horn beak, the waffle of the tongue,

Look, here is the narrow chute of the throat, color of sunrise

[...]

Do you see it!

Another type of anaphora Oliver uses frequently is anaphoric repetition which does not include the imperative, but comprises any word or phrase she wants to repeat to gain the reader's awareness: "One" (*Why I Wake Early*:66) utilises the phrase "how many" to underscore the interconnectedness of all things; in "When Death Comes" (*Wild Geese*:73), the assertion – "when death comes" – is repeated to invoke the reader's curiosity about which image of death

Oliver will be using next. In addition, Oliver employs anaphoric questioning, confronting readers head-on and waking them up to experiencing life in a different way. “Gratitude” (*What Do We Know*:49) employs this anaphoric technique:

*What did you notice?*

*What did you hear?*

*What did you admire?*

The last constituent of Abrams’ definition of Imagism – “juxtaposing a description of one object with that of a second or diverse object” – relates to Oliver’s use of juxtaposition and interruptive clauses and phrases: “I prefer poems with a narrative – or better yet, two or three stories. I like to switch from rhetoric to a sudden vernacular phrase, or a heavily lyric passage, or throw out a question” (Oliver in Swanson 1990:7). Bonds (1992:13) reiterates Oliver’s assertion:

In poems such as ‘Singapore’ and ‘Bowling to the Empress’ Oliver employs an interruptive, interrogatory style that disrupts poetic convention and notions of propriety – especially those drawn from the romantic literary tradition – which she can neither entirely embrace nor reject. Her poems show a lightfootedness – a verbal energy and stylistic flexibility – that insists on her right to move back and forth between modes of discourse, categories of perception and orders of experience.

Russell (1997:21) observes this constant modulation in Oliver’s poetry: “Any random sampling of poems will illustrate Oliver’s distinctive attention to change and movement in the natural world”. The change and movement of her poems are reflected in another poetic strategy: enjambed lines. Russell (22) also remarks on this strategy: “Her habitual choice of enjambed lines over end stops reflects her poised alertness. Rhymes are hidden and mostly internal, with sound patterns that guide the reader’s eye and mind”.

Enjambments in Oliver’s poetry serve particular functions such as highlighting formal aspects of a poem. This is evident in “The Sea” (*American Primitive*:69) in which Oliver makes extensive use of indentations. The enjambments augment these indentations which, in turn, serve to reinforce the merging of the speaker with her natural surroundings. In “Clapp’s Pond” (*American Primitive*:21-22), enjambed lines serve as a physical flow for reinforcing readers’ visual experience when reading the poem, guiding them towards the sense of vanishing that is a central theme: everything flows together. In “Rain” (*Wild Geese, Part 7: The Forest*:69), enjambments underpin the continuous action – the “jellying forward” – of the snake through the increasingly treacherous parts of the forest milieu.

These enjambments are interlinked with Oliver's use of sound patterns – especially the interweaving of mutes and liquids – which all lead up to a certain energetic quality in her work:

I'm terribly conscious of form, down to the line breaks, the word choices, the sounds within a word, but I try desperately to have them sound as though they just happened – that they are not artefacts but outbursts. You have to cut away in order to do that. What sounds self-conscious has to go. What is excessive has to go. Though I am excessive on purpose in certain mechanical ways, for emphasis and for thrust and for sheer sensual delight. Playing with sound (Oliver in Weinreb 1991:144).

A linguistic device that is often foregrounded in Oliver's poetry is writing in the present tense:

I like to write in the present tense, for example [...] when you use the present tense, the poem may be felt on a more intense level by the reader. The poems I want to write are poems that don't give news to the reader of myself, but give news to the reader of the reader (Oliver in Weinreb 1991:142).

Writing in the present tense links with the Buddhist notion of Mindfulness which is only possible in the present moment. Riley (2008:275) remarks on Oliver's ability to anchor readers in the present by making them aware of the world that surrounds them and, consequently, of their own lives:

This collection [*American Primitive*:1983] returns to a theme that has run throughout Oliver's work – the belief that the unknowable enables humans to pay attention and to look carefully at the world around them. These actions enable humans to live presently and fully. The unknowable, the breadth of nature and living that is beyond human comprehension, provides people [with] the ability to let go of boundaries, to release themselves from stasis.

This release from readers' "stasis" ties in with what Oliver has said earlier: "People want to be awakened and roused and quickened. A lot of poems tend to slow us down. I would rather wake us up" (Oliver in Weinreb 1991:145). A compelling example Oliver provides of being woken up is a poem in *Dream Work* (1986): "The last poem written for the book is about a young boy in Jakarta and the possibility of escaping from one's own sensibility, how 'once in a while you can step out of your own life and become someone else'. That's my new wish" (Oliver in Weinreb 1991:143).

Another technique Oliver employs to jolt readers from their stasis is what Burton-Christie (1996:84) calls “mode of personal address”: “This technique serves to sharpen the work of correspondence, compelling the reader to reckon in a very personal way with the cost of really noticing the natural world”.

It goes without saying that Oliver’s technique differs radically from that of the Romantic poets because her poetry is devoid of tedious philosophical discussion and traditional verse forms which are generally favoured by the Romantic tradition. On the dust jacket of *The Leaf and the Cloud* (2000), the *Chicago Tribune* underscores this view: “Oliver might be accused of an untransformed and reactionary romanticism. One would think that poems about self, nature, death, and ecstasy had run their course in English. Think again”.

However, there is a stream of extant criticism that places her within the Romantic tradition, criticism based on the simplistic notion that her main subject matter is the natural world. Graham (1994:n.p.) remarks on this train of thought in Feminist criticism of Oliver: “Oliver’s celebration of dissolution into the natural world troubles some critics: her poems flirt dangerously with romantic assumptions about the close association of women with nature that many theorists claim put the woman writer at risk”. However, Graham’s counter-argument to this uninformed assertion is that “for Oliver, immersion in nature is not death, language is not destroyed and the writer is not silenced. To merge with the nonhuman is to acknowledge the self’s mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity” (1994:n.p.).

Graham acknowledges that Oliver’s work is underappreciated by Feminist critics: “But few feminists have wholeheartedly appreciated Oliver’s work, and though some critics have read her poems as revolutionary reconstructions of the female subject, others remain sceptical ‘that identification with nature can empower women’” (1994:n.p.). McNew (1989:n.p.) asks a similar question from a Romantic vantage point: “Why, might we ask, is so much important contemporary criticism in the romantic tradition unable to appreciate the kind of nature poetry that Mary Oliver writes?” Other critics who share the notion that there is a definite lacuna in existing literary criticism of Oliver’s oeuvre are Burton-Christie (1996:79); Alford (1988:283); Johnson (2005:78); Warman (1990:n.p.), and Mann (2009:ix). Given Oliver’s critical reputation and substantial corpus – more than twenty volumes of poetry as well as essays and two handbooks on metrical poetry – it remains surprising how relatively limited the critical attention to her work remains.

The extant critical response to her poetry has been restricted largely to a number of articles in journals over the years (when the fact that she has been publishing since 1963 is taken into account, the number of critical responses is narrowed down even more dramatically); a number

of relatively short reviews of her volumes and essays, and about five doctoral theses (in four of which Oliver's poetry constitutes only a chapter and is therefore not the exclusive research subject). In addition, there are chapters in collections such as *Imagining the Earth* (Elder 1996), *Imagining Wild America* (Knott 2002), *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (Bryson 2002), as well as a monograph, *God of Dirt: Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God* (Mann 2004).

Returning to the idea that Oliver is regarded by some critics as a recycled Romantic poet, McNew (1989:n.p.) explains in no uncertain terms why this viewpoint is fallacious: "Her poetry is neither a replication of romantic accomplishment nor is it, to use Bloom's term, a 'belated' modern version of visionary romanticism". Critics who view Oliver's work as belonging mainly within the Romantic tradition are Pettingell (1999) and Johnson (2005), who regards Oliver as having more specifically Emersonian elements in her poetry. O'Donnell (2008) and Riley (2008) make certain links between Oliver's poetry and Transcendentalism, although they do not regard her as being a Romantic poet *per se*.

There is a definite hiatus in Feminist criticism concerning Oliver's work and one of the possible reasons contributing to this is because she has asserted on many occasions that she does not view herself as part of that tradition (Olander 1994:2-3; Ratiner 2002:55). Unfortunately, most of the Feminist critics who do deal with Oliver's corpus have a tendency towards distorting the message of her poetry to suit their own agendas, something Oliver finds invidious: "many younger female critics, especially those who work with feminist precepts – they critique me from a feminist point of view, and I don't always have a lot of patience with it" (Oliver in Olander 1994:2). Critics viewing Oliver as part of the Feminist tradition include Pettingell (1999), Thurston (1999), and Olander (1994). In contrast, critics like Hosmer (1994) and Selman (1993) disagree with this viewpoint.

Ecocriticism offers another reading of Oliver's poetry, primarily because her main vantage point is that of the natural world. Riggs (2008), for example, views Oliver as a deep ecologist while Bryson (1999) categorises her as being part of the newly-emerged Ecopoetry movement. Similarly, Christensen (1999) places Oliver's work within the ambit of Ecocriticism whereas Manousos (1980) proposes a Pantheistic perspective. Elder (1996) probes deeper into the idea of ecological presence in Oliver's poetry than either Christensen or Bryson by viewing her poetry as incorporating a definite theme of transience. However, Oliver herself states that she is not an eco-poet:

Persons environmentally inclined have suggested that I am one of them. I don't argue with them, but it's not quite a fit. My work doesn't document any of the sane and learned arguments for saving, healing, and protecting the earth for our existence. What I write

begins and ends with the act of noticing and cherishing, and it neither begins nor ends with the human world. Maybe I would be an environmentalist if I thought about it. But I don't (*Winter Hours*:99).

Oliver's oeuvre has also been viewed from a Christian perspective. Although Prothero (2008) is one of the very few critics who explicitly links Buddhist themes to her work, he concedes to having no interest in

converting Oliver into a Buddhist against her will. She is, as far as I can determine, a Christian, and far more likely to refer to her poems as 'alleluias' than 'meditations.' Her most recent work, moreover, particularly poems crafted since the death of her life partner, Molly Malone Cook, in 2005, evokes an array of explicitly Christian themes, not least God, the soul, loaves and fishes, and resurrection (45).

Davis (2009) regards Oliver as being part of the mystical Christian tradition, although he also contends that her poems may well be "a fusion of Transcendental, Buddhist, and Christian" (606). Mann's (2004) main approach to Oliver's corpus is, likewise, predominantly Christian, although he does not necessarily view her as a Christian poet.

It would seem that Oliver's non-ideological stance (or, at least, her refusal to take public political or ideological positions) has created difficulties for many critics, to such an extent that her work has not been probed sufficiently; many of the writings about her work remain superficial or vague because critics do not know what exactly to make of her poetry. Johnson (2005:78) remarks on the fact that there are many misreadings of her work by critics:

In a cursory, otherwise unremarkable summary, Fred Moramarco and William Sullivan call Mary Oliver's poetry 'deceptively clear'. A casual reader's assumption that they meant to say 'deceptively simple' breaks down in the face of several theoretically informed misreadings of Oliver as an environmentalist or feminist or post-post-modernist.

As a result, we are left with a clear-cut lacuna in the critical reception of Oliver's corpus: a Buddhist reading of her work. Several critics allude to Buddhist themes although they put these in another context. One of the reasons Buddhism is an apt framework for interpreting Oliver's poetry is evident from what she said about a visit to Japan in 1984 during which she came into contact with some Japanese academics who had been exposed to her poetry:

They felt that there was a lot of Eastern feeling in my work, and wanted to know why, whether I was interested in the Eastern religions. And I said I was interested, and I knew some things about it, but that I was not a scholar. But I have been reading about Buddhism, I was reading about that meditative way of living. I think sometimes my poems have a sort of Eastern circularity – the sense of seeing something, the epiphany, and making something of it which is news for oneself (Oliver in Ratiner 2002:55).

In this quotation, Oliver states unambiguously that she is interested in not only Eastern religions but also, more specifically, in Buddhism. However, she adds that she is not a Buddhist scholar, which concurs with my assertion that Oliver makes use of Buddhist themes in her work but is not a Buddhist poet *per se*. The meditative element she mentions is present throughout her work; some critics such as Ratiner (2002) and Riley (2008) have identified this element in her work (although they do not specify it as Buddhist or Eastern *per se*).

Ratiner (2002:40) regards both *The Leaf and the Cloud* (2000) and *What Do We Know* (2002) as “a meditation on the ineluctable losses of the mortal, and a consideration of what may yet endure”. In addition, Ratiner (45) trenchantly describes Oliver’s method of meditative writing in which Mindful Awareness and being present in the here-and-now are vital aspects:

One of the consistencies I felt throughout poems involved something like a three-step process, a natural progression into the experience. The first stage involved seeing, a careful scrutiny of the subject. But that seeing evolved into a deeper focus, a heightened awareness. Suddenly we become present to the moment. It’s almost like a meditation.

Moreover, the last part of the excerpt in which Oliver speaks about “Eastern circularity – the sense of seeing something, the epiphany, and making something of it which is news for oneself” links not only with meditation but also with the Zen notion of *kenshō*, a sudden breakthrough or epiphany one experiences during meditation. These epiphanous moments are described very aptly by Riley (2008:280):

In *What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems* Oliver asserts that human beings need to learn to be grateful for the brief moments of clarity they might experience. These moments of transcendence, even if individuals do not fully ‘get’ what has happened, create the imponderable and beautiful for Oliver. The unknowable itself can be a valuable way of experiencing life.

What Riley describes as a moment of transcendence tallies with what Paul defines as *kenshō*: “*Kensho*, which means ‘the vision of the self’ or ‘the essence’, arises from a sudden, profound inner perception that strikes at the very root of our existence” (Paul 2000:30).

Oliver’s description of Eastern circularity’s three components – “the sense of seeing something, the epiphany, and making something of it which is news for oneself” dovetails with Paul’s (2000:35) assertion about a moment of enlightenment:

However, with enlightenment comes a pure awareness rarely experienced. It is as if all our faculties become tuned to a higher key. Transformed at a deep level, we see everything around us with clarity and understanding. The world takes on a different intensity.

Oliver describes the “epiphany” or *kenshō* in an essay called “The Perfect Days” (*Long Life*:33-34):

I experienced a sudden impact, a *seizure* of happiness. It was not the drowning sort of happiness, rather the floating sort. I made no struggle toward it; it was given. Time seemed to vanish. Urgency vanished. Any important difference between myself and all other things vanished. I knew that I belonged to the world, and felt comfortably my own containment in the totality. I did not feel that I understood any mystery, not at all; rather that I could be happy and feel blessed within the perplexity.

In addition, Oliver articulates the link between Mindfulness and epiphany which Ratiner (2002:45) calls “the ineffable moment of transcendence that’s at the core of so much of your writing”:

It’s like an epiphany. I see something and look at it and look at it. I see myself going closer and closer just to see it better. As though to see its meaning out of its physical form. And then I take something emblematic from it, and then it transcends the actual.

In pursuing her refusal to adopt political or ideological stances, Oliver makes the point that Eastern meditative traditions seem far less preoccupied with social causes and are more focused on starting with oneself:

Yet the Eastern meditative religions seem to me rather self-enclosed and not socially aware. They don’t busy themselves about the social ills of the world at all, as Christianity does, which is very different and very busy and very worldly, compared to the Eastern

religions ... I do think nature is the text of the meditative process. And it has served me all my life ... Well, when you use nature as a text, it tells you something about the nature of yourself in relation to the world. It's a one-on-one. It's intimate. There is no place in that scenario for the ills of the world. And in that way, it's entirely satisfactory and it transcends and it's radiant and it does all these wonderful things (Oliver in Ratiner 2002:55).

This does not mean that Buddhism is not socially aware at all (For example, Buddhism in Western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, has a strong social focus in contrast to the more traditional approach of Eastern Buddhist countries, which reinforces the idea that social engagement plays a vital role in Western society. In essence, Buddhism does not have a “missionary” focus whereas Christianity dedicates itself to it).

However, Buddhism's principal preoccupation is with changing oneself (especially confronting the ego-self), starting with the mind. The change must be unearthed within the individual, which requires inner work. Furthermore, Buddhism suggests that it is futile seeking to modify external circumstances in order to find happiness as these are merely symptomatic of unhappiness and suffering that surround the individual, but do not constitute the root cause. The idea of starting with oneself culminates in “Swan”: “And have you changed your life?” (*Swan*:15). Changing one's life may be greatly enhanced through contact with the natural world as Oliver has asserted; being in nature can also be a meditative experience: “when you use nature as a text, it tells you something about the nature of yourself in relation to the world. It's a one-on-one”. Riley (2008:273) reinforces this: “Many of the poems of this volume (*Twelve Moons*) suggest that an individual's immersion in nature, diving into it to experience that world more fully, leads to a greater understanding of one's self”.

A little earlier in the same interview, Oliver explains that her preoccupation with nature – rather than with social or familial ties – has been active in her since childhood:

I grew up in a small town in Ohio – at that time it was a small town. It was a pastoral setting rather than a rural or a wilderness setting. It was pastoral; it was nice. I don't know why I felt such an affinity with the natural world except that it was available to me, that's the first thing. It was right there. And for whatever reasons, I felt those first important connections, those first experiences being made with the natural world rather than with the social world. I think the first way you do it, the first way you take meaning from the physicality of the world, from your environment, probably never leaves you. It sets a pattern, in a way (Ratiner 2002:52).

What Oliver is suggesting about her intimate relationship with nature relates to the fact that, although nature is almost always foregrounded in her poetry and other writing, she is far from a traditional nature poet, as Barresi (1999:543-544) observes:

nature poets have too often adopted the smug posture of tuned-in gurus, ready to translate every broken twig into a platitude of eco-spirituality. Oliver sidesteps this problem of ego in *West Wind* [...] This change – away from the self-satisfied imagery common to nature poetry toward a more open-ended poetry of unanswered irony – revitalizes her work.

Dobyns (1992:12) explains that Oliver is not a nature poet because she has a well-rounded, inclusive view about the various aspects of nature – death, decay, predatory instincts – and not just the beauty of it:

Although Ms. Oliver's poems are mostly set in the natural world, it would be wrong to call her a nature poet. Nature for her is neither pretty nor nice. Beauty is to be found there, but it is a beauty containing the knowledge that life is mostly a matter of dying. The reason why the only true question is 'how to love the world' is that the world is intrinsically unlovable, and one's temptation is to set down one's own mortal burden and sink at last into the softness.

Oliver concurs with the idea that the term "nature poet" is not the most effective term to describe writing about nature as it brings to mind a narrow scope of what the poet might be writing about:

In this country, if one speaks of another poet as a nature poet, it seems narrowing. Certainly I love and honor nature for its own sake. I also understand it as emblematic. But I really don't see it as separate from our own lives. For example, how could you understand metaphors without understanding the world? How could you understand 'It is the east and Juliet is the sun' without having your own firsthand experience of this light descending and vanishing and coming back? (Oliver in Ratiner 2002:41).

Oliver's relationship with nature is therefore emblematic, to be extrapolated to the reader's own life:

I live to wake up and get out of doors. I think that's where my house is, outside there somewhere. So I go out everyday and wonder what I will see. And then when I see something, that's the business, observing it and getting it down in some kind of language so that it can *rehappen* for the reader. I worry about it later. What does it mean? What

emblem of our inner lives have I found here in some simple thing in the world? (Oliver in Ratiner 2002:45).

Therefore, the bedrock of Oliver's poetry relies on her ongoing capacity for amazement with the natural world. As stated before, the lacuna found in critical writing of her work suggests an Eastern perspective, especially a Buddhist one, as there are a host of Buddhist themes embedded within her poetry. Although Imagism provides an explanation of some of her techniques as well as the fact that her style is executed in a clear, unambiguous manner, it does not provide a framework for analysing her poetry in order to unearth implicit Buddhist themes and sub-themes; for that Imagism as a literary period was too brief and too period-bound. It is important to understand that Oliver is not an Imagist poet, although some of her ideas and execution of *vers libre* link with some key Imagist tenets.

But how then is the Buddhist reader to uncover Buddhist themes in her poetry? For any methodology to serve the purposes of this thesis, it would have to (a) allow for a comprehensive exploration of meaning and implications of the various Buddhist themes and sub-themes relevant to this research, and (b) facilitate analysis and amplification of the Oliver texts employed in the various chapters. Therefore, the most efficacious approach to fulfil the requirements of the research is *explication de texte*. This method allows for detailed analysis of Oliver's work, whether dealing with a microcosm (short poems) or portions of a macrocosm (especially evident in volumes such as *The Leaf and the Cloud* (2000) which contains a long poem in several large sections).

The Latin origin of the term, "explicare", contains the method's core function: "to unfold, to fold out or make clear the meaning" ("Steps for Close Reading or Explication de Texte": n.p.). Implicit in this approach is the notion that a text encompasses layers of meaning which, in turn, require analysis and amplification. Most of the time, observations are interpreted through the process of inductive reasoning. In other words, while Oliver's poems remain the principal focus of the research, it is through explicating her texts that generalisations vis-à-vis the relevant Buddhist themes may be inferred. The following definition of *explication de texte* clarifies the range and depth of its textual approach: it is "an approach to literary criticism involving close examination, analysis, and exposition of the text of a work, and concentrating on language, style, content, and the interrelationships of the parts to the whole in regard to meaning and symbolism" (*Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* 1997:87). The fact that *explication de texte* aims for close examination of a text ties in with Oliver's own close observation of the world which she then relates in her poetry.

Moreover, *explication de texte* allows implicit Buddhist themes in Oliver's poetry to be rendered explicit. I will identify and explain each Buddhist theme in an introductory manner at the beginning of each chapter to provide the reader with a context for each. Important here is that the aim of introducing the various Buddhist themes is not to provide the reader with a hermeneutic interpretation of Buddhist scripts but to provide explanations and contextualisations of the terms. After the introduction, the various poems that have been selected for each chapter will be discussed, explicated, and analysed within the Buddhist framework the various themes provide. In these explications, the specific poetic / linguistic devices Oliver uses to express not only her poetry, but also the Buddhist material underlying them, will be explored. Having selected the various Buddhist principles that are evident to the Buddhist reader, elucidating them in detail is crucial to an understanding of their meaning and implications for the non-Buddhist reader. It is this elucidation that comprises the substance of the thesis.

The thesis itself is divided into five chapters. After the present introductory chapter, Chapter 2 is concerned with providing the reader with an overview of certain facets of the American poetic tradition as a contextualisation for Oliver's work. These facets include Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Imagism, Zen and the Japanese haiku. A discussion of the extant criticism dealing with her work is then provided; this criticism can be grouped mainly into the Romantic/Transcendentalist tradition, Feminist discourse, the Ecocritical approach, and a Christian reading. Miscellaneous criticism is also included but in a separate discussion. The hiatus in the extant criticism of her work, the Buddhist approach, is also examined as are terms used by a large number of critics touching on the main Buddhist themes identified in Oliver's poetry. The chapter is rounded off with a discussion of two articles which are examples of uninformed readings of her work, steeped in contradiction and superficial observations.

Chapter 3 deals with the Buddhist theme of Mindfulness in Oliver's work. This theme is divided further into three corollaries: (a) Beginner's Mind, (b) Mindful Awareness, and (c) *Nowness*. The aim of the introductory part to this chapter is to draw the attention to the fact that Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist philosophy, although it is not always presented as such in much of the contemporary self-help literature. It becomes a corrupted form of Mindfulness, aimed specifically at the popular/mass market. Chapter 3 is also concerned with providing an explanatory foundation for the term *mind*, which is the main tenet of Buddhism. Two terms, *adéquation* and *correspondence* are introduced to provide the reader with examples of Oliver's main literary devices embedded in her poetry. The topos of amazement is also discussed in detail in this chapter, thus laying the foundation of its further discussion in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the second main Buddhist theme, Interconnection or Interdependence, which has three related aspects: (1) the Mutual and Interpenetration Principle,

(2) Dependent Origination or Dependent Co-Arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), and (3) Emptiness (*mu* or *sunyata*) or No-self (*anātman*). Together with Interconnection, these three Buddhist notions are closely tied to the symbol of Indra’s Jeweled Net. It becomes clear by the end of the chapter that these aspects are viewed from different angles, depending on the particular Buddhist tradition. In some traditions, these aspects are viewed as separate but, at the same time, related to one another while other traditions perceive them as interchangeable terms. Other Buddhist notions that are linked to the analysis and amplification of Oliver’s poetry in the Interconnection context are *dharma-dhātu* (cosmos), *ji ji muge* (mutual interpenetration of all things), the Middle Way, Buddha-nature, *tathāgatagarbha* or “Buddha womb”, *suchness*, *nothing-ness*, Dōgen’s *Genjo-koan*, Thich Nhat Hahn’s notion of “interbeing”, and Universal Mind. Chapter 5 centres on Impermanence or the transience of existence. Closely related to Impermanence is the notion of attachment, a trait which Buddhists believe to be at the centre of human suffering. Attachment is the cause of *dukkha* (suffering) according to the Second Noble Truth, a constituent part of the Four Noble Truths. For the Buddhist practitioner, non-attachment is of the essence and can be obtained only when the mind has penetrated through the all-encompassing ego (also called ego-mind). A foundation in Buddhist practice is meditation, which focuses the mind, providing it with insights regarding the ego’s habitual tendencies as well as its clinging to things that the mind perceives erroneously as being permanent. Once the mind understands and accepts that all phenomena are impermanent, the practitioner has broken the vicious cycle of *dukkha*. Another consequence of such a breakthrough is that the practitioner begins to see the dualistic ways of the ego-mind, which separates everything into either-or thinking or binary oppositions. Chapter 5 also deals with prevalent Oliver themes such as “Loving this world” or “how to live in this world”, and regeneration through the birth-life-decay-death cycle. Other Buddhist notions that tie in with Impermanence are *kenshō* (a Zen term which means a sudden flash of enlightenment), fearlessness, spiritual warriorship, egolessness (terms from the Shambhala tradition), and Wild Mind or Zen Mind. The chapter also continues the discussion launched in earlier chapters of anaphora, a literary device prevalent in much of Oliver’s poetry.

The conclusion, which rounds off the thesis, is followed by a List of References, and a Glossary of Buddhist Terms.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **EXTANT CRITICISM OF MARY OLIVER'S POETRY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

At present, the critical approaches to Mary Oliver's oeuvre may be divided broadly into the following traditions and groups: the Romantic literary tradition; Transcendentalism; the Eco-critical perspective; Feminist/female literary discourse, and Christian approaches. From these predominant critical readings, a marked lacuna becomes evident. What all these traditions have in common is that they are based principally on Western philosophy and religion. What is lacking here, therefore, is an Eastern reading of Mary Oliver's poems. 'Eastern' in this context refers to a reading based on Oriental assumptions and frameworks. The Oriental tradition that dovetails best with Oliver's poetry is Buddhism, a philosophical and spiritual tradition that has its roots in India but which subsequently spread to Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and Tibet. However, a Buddhist reading does not aim to negate the critical traditions mentioned earlier but rather to serve as a complementary and extended reading.

#### **ROMANTICISM AND TRANSCENDENTALISM**

In order to understand the framework from which Romantic literary criticism operates, it is imperative to look briefly at Romanticism as a literary period. Peck and Coyle (1985:5) make the crucial distinction between Romantic thought and that of preceding literature: Romantic writers moved away from the concept of God being the ordering principle and instead turned to nature to find that pattern of order. At the same time, the concept of order became internalised, as seen in the writing of Wordsworth, through emphasis on the imagination. This philosophical shift was a product of the late eighteenth century which centralised the idea that humankind had become disparate from the natural world. According to Peck and Coyle (64), this disparity becomes most apparent during the Napoleonic Wars, and is especially noteworthy in 1798, with of the responses of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

A critical point when considering Romanticism as a literary period is that English Romantic poetry started emerging around 1798, and continued in various forms in England until 1870, although authors such as Peck and Coyle regard this period as exerting an influence to this day on contemporary thinking modes and literature (1985:67). However, critics inclined toward labelling Mary Oliver's poetry as part of the Romantic tradition do not always distinguish between English Romanticism and the American Romantic period, which was centred in

Transcendentalism. Some literary historians (Ruland and Bradbury 1992:105) view Emerson's *Nature* (1836) as the starting point of this American "Naissance". The same authors refer to F.O. Matthiessen, who called this period a "Renaissance". However, according to Ruland and Bradbury, this term is not completely correct as "this was not a rebirth but a new beginning, as Emerson insisted" (105). Although Transcendentalism is in turn rooted in English Romanticism, the two periods are not identical, although both have a strong inclination toward the natural world. In order to distinguish between the two "strains", I will be referring to Romantics and Romanticism when the English period is involved and Transcendentalists and Transcendentalism when talking about the American counterpart.

As already mentioned, Romantic poets gravitated towards the natural world because they reacted against the prevailing rationalism of the eighteenth century; they emphasised the notion of individuality. Holman (1972:464) echoes this notion: the first half of the Romantic period can be viewed as the Age of the Romantic Triumph which is a "philosophical Romanticism based in the value in the individual". Individualism was taken to an extreme in literary criticism, which culminated in an "expressive theory of literature", which meant that the critics focused on the individual author's ideas and expressions (Peck and Coyle:150). At the same time, this type of expressive criticism could be extremely restrictive; the individual author's *ideas* were considered as being paramount in relation to the text itself.

The Romantics not only used nature as a foreground for expressing individuality but also made extensive use of "external nature", which amounted to using "objects" from the natural world such as scenery and animal life. Romantic poets used this idea of external nature in various ways: by expressing "childlike delight" with it; by extrapolating nature to human "action or emotion"; by meditating on nature's infinity; by interpreting nature with "imaginative sympathy", and by utilising nature as a symbol for the human spirit (Holman 1972:342). Other traits characterising Romanticism include "sensibility; primitivism, [...] sympathetic interest in the past, especially the medieval; mysticism" (466). The preferred style of the Romantic poet was the lyric in its myriad forms, including the love, reflective, and nature lyric (466).

Although Romanticism, as a literary period, seems problematic to define, as seen from its many and sometimes disparate aspects, Holman (468) posits that there is a coagulative force underlying the period:

The term designates a literary and philosophical theory which tends to see the individual at the very center of all life and all experience, and it places him, therefore, at the center of art, making literature most valuable as an expression of his unique feelings and particular attitudes and valuing its accuracy in portraying his experiences, however

fragmentary and incomplete, more than it values its adherence to completeness, unity, or the demands of genre.

This crystallising factor – regarding the individual as being the centre of everything – is inherently the attribute that the modern Ecocritical movement rejects and labels as anthropomorphism. However, the Romantics would not necessarily see nature in human terms, but would emphasise their subjective response to it. Furthermore, the key difference between Romanticism and Buddhism – taking Holman at face value – is that the former does not place such a strong emphasis on being in the present moment but rather on constructive, creative mental acts, which might relate to the past, present, and future: “It places a high premium upon the creative function of imagination, seeing art as a formulation of intuitive imaginative perceptions that tend to speak a nobler truth than that of fact, logic, or the here and now” (468). This inherent difference is echoed by Selden and Widdowson (1993:149) who assert that the Romantic poets were interested in “privileged moments”, or “spots of time” (150) linked to past experience which they felt they could recapture (as Wordsworth attempted to do in his poetry); the Transcendentalists were interested in celebrated figures linked to past experience which could not be emulated in the present. Thus, though both ‘schools’ shared an interest in the past, it was from different points of view.

According to Ruland and Bradbury (1992:104), Transcendentalism continues to have a powerful influence on contemporary American literature, making it the remaining “heartland for all discussion of American literature”. The Transcendentalist movement, therefore, warrants a brief outline as part of Mary Oliver’s American literary heritage.

Transcendentalism, or American Romanticism, was a relatively brief movement, according to the combined views of various scholars; it existed in the period between 1815 and 1865 (Ruland and Bradbury 1992:105; Bowers 1973:10).

The fact that there are differences between Transcendentalism and Romanticism can be ascribed to the former having its roots in Puritanism, which was later transformed by Unitarianism:

What essentially guided its thinking was its dissent from Unitarianism and the Lockean and Newtonian world view that had persisted so powerfully into the American nineteenth century, its celebration of individualism, self and consciousness and its reassertion of an idealistic Neoplatonism that, paradoxically, drew it back again toward Edwards and the Puritan tradition. Its thinking was fed by the spirit of Romanticism as it had developed through organicist philosophers like Kant and Swedenborg, Coleridge and Carlyle, who

asserted the power of the imagination, the soul as spirit illuminated by the divine (Ruland and Bradbury 1992:117-118).

Some literary historians regard Ralph Waldo Emerson as the driving force behind the Transcendentalist movement, especially taking into account that he broke all formal ties with the Unitarian church of which he was a minister, announcing his scepticism about the Lord's Supper, pledging himself to a "personal, noninstitutional form of faith" (Ruland and Bradbury 1992:118). However, there are other views: some feel that the term "Transcendentalism" should not be used for this literary period nor should Emerson be regarded as the *de facto* father of such a movement, because there was not enough of a unifying element to brand the movement as "Transcendentalist". Morse's articulation of what constitutes Transcendentalism concurs with its disparity of ideas: "What is most characteristic of American Transcendentalism, what marks it as a bundle of attitudes rather than a system of ideas is the indignant rejection of any kind of restraint" (1989:119). In the same vein, Cunliffe (1967:86) contends that Transcendentalism is "an imprecise term, and hard to pin on to any of the major figures of the time". He goes on to say that the literary figures of the time were "prepared to agree, as Emerson observed, on very little" (87).

Nevertheless, Cunliffe does ascribe the disparate elements of this period to Emerson, who, introduced "contradiction" into the prevailing system of the time; the "notion of polarity seduced him". Ruland and Bradbury (1992:124) refer to the same notion in Emerson's writing, in which "his disdain for coherent, systematic argument" becomes apparent. In contrast to the contradictory element in Emerson's writing, it was in effect Henry David Thoreau's writing which some critics regard as promulgating a centralising concern in Transcendentalism, which is the natural world: "Nature's innate rhythms gave shape to his writing, and allowed it to flow by like the seasons, instead of coagulating around a series of 'thoughts'" (Cunliffe:101). Holman (1972:536), in addition, posits that, despite the group's overriding differences or schisms, they did share a conviction that "within the nature of man there was something which transcended human experience – an intuitive and personal revelation". Both Holman (537) and Barbour (1973:2) regard epistemology as another binding factor in Transcendentalism.

But perhaps the unifying agent of Transcendentalism was the American wilderness, primarily because the United States, unlike Europe, was relatively new territory and did not have the extensive architectural tradition countries like England had already had for centuries. Moreover, it did not possess distinctively "American" sculptures or paintings, and, according to Morse (1989:3), "it had no acknowledged writers, philosophers or composers. There was no distinct American language". Therefore, the "grandeur of the American landscape" became the symbol of American literature during this period. Emerson himself asserts this: "We have yet had no

genius in America"; and "Yet, America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination" ("The Poet" 1842, quoted in Atkinson 2000:304). Walt Whitman echoes this sentiment in his poem called "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (1856): "These states are the amplest poem" (Blodgett and Bradley 1965:347-348), and, in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he says: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (709), specifically pointing to the wilderness: "The land and sea, the animals fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests mountains and rivers are not small themes" (714). It must be stressed, however, that for Whitman:

The natural world does not play as significant a part in his philosophy as it had done in the work of most of the Romantic and Transcendentalist poets, and he draws no lessons from nature other than a willingness to absorb all its delights. He does not find it necessary to moralise a scene or situation to the same extent as poets like Whittier and Longfellow did (Ullyatt 1973:128).

To a large extent, this experience of being close to nature in the American sense is continued through American poets like Mary Oliver, James Wright, Wendell Berry and many others. Knott's *Imagining Wild America* (2002) deals principally with this idea of wildness and wilderness in American poetry.

Rooted in the Transcendentalist movement, the notion of an American literary tradition that relies on American wildness and its wilderness is evident mainly through the Ecocritical and Eco-poetic movements of recent decades. The Deep Ecology movement is discussed in detail in Fox's *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (1990) and Sessions' *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1995). However, the Deep Ecology movement's primary preoccupations are philosophy and ethics while Ecocriticism and Eco-poetry deal specifically with the notion of nature in literature, as can be seen in Bryson's *Eco-poetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002); Elder's *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (1996); and Swann's *Poetry Comes Up Where It Can* (2002).

A spiritual philosophy that, especially nowadays, has become even more ecologically aware than before is Buddhism, as can be seen in publications such as Badiner's *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology* (1990); Batchelor and Brown's *Buddhism and Ecology* (1992); Tucker and Williams's *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (1997); Akuppa's *Touching the Earth: A Buddhist Guide to Saving the Planet* (2002); James's *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (2004); Cooper and James's *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment* (2005); and Kaza's *Mindfully Green: A Personal and Spiritual Guide to Whole Earth Thinking* (2008).

Some authors observe a Buddhist link with the Transcendentalist movement, especially through Emerson. Although Hinduism had an impact on Emerson's writing, Lyoo (1995:167) suggests that it was in fact Buddhism that exerted a greater influence on him. Lyoo further asserts that Emerson's stress on daily life is analogous to Zen Buddhism's notion of meditation through everyday activities (168). Bowers (1973:15) regards this Oriental influence (both through Hinduism and Buddhism) as "leavening" American literature in its entirety at the time. Ames (1962) surveys American philosophical thought in the Zen context, including a chapter on Emerson called "Emerson: American Bodhisattva", and another on Thoreau, within the Taoist context; Taoism is one of the root influences on Zen. Morris (1994:4) is in agreement with Ames's bringing together of Zen and Transcendentalist writers, although he also recognises that this link may not be as clear to the "casual observer" at first glance.

Although authors like Morris are not set on proving that someone like Emerson was a Zen writer, his Transcendentalist sentiments brought him close to "Taoist and Zen masters in feeling that wisdom should bring emancipation from abstraction and return to immediacy", even though Emerson himself would not necessarily have seen the matter in these terms (Morris 1994:4). Morris's rationale behind linking Zen and Transcendentalism is that both concentrate on the concept of experience; he quotes Thomas Merton who argues that the "chief characteristic of Zen is that it rejects all these systematic elaborations in order to get back, as far as possible, to the pure unarticulated and unexplained ground of direct experience" (Morris:6-7). In a similar vein, Lynch (1989) discusses the relationship between Asia and the Transcendentalists as well as affinities between Zen and some Emersonian concepts. Other studies conducted about this subject are Ando's *Zen and American Transcendentalism* (1970); Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (1932); Hakutani's article "Emerson, Whitman, and Zen Buddhism" (1990); and Versluis's *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (1993).

## **IMAGISM, HAIKU AND ZEN AS PART OF THE AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION**

### **Background to Imagism**

An important link Kern (1996) makes is between Emerson's thought and modernist interest in Chinese; he feels that Emerson's thought may well have instigated a "quest in American literature for a new form of poetic speech, a quest continuous in many ways not only with a movement like imagism but with the modernist interest in Chinese as a potential model for such speech" (39). Because of the limited scope of this chapter, I will not investigate the range of Emerson's remarks about language. However, the most important Emersonian assertion about language that is worth mentioning here is in the context of nature, a theme that certainly links

Romanticism and Transcendentalism with Oriental language strategies in poetic forms, such as the haiku, as well as the adapted versions of the haiku seen in the Imagist period.

Emerson formulated the following about language, placing it strategically at the commencement of the fourth eponymous section in the essay, *Nature* (1836):

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit (Emerson in Atkinson 2000:13).

Kern provides a succinct explication of this tripartition, pointing out that Emerson's main rationale behind it is that nature is "the vehicle of thought" (Emerson 1836 in Atkinson 2000:13). This means that the natural world provides "us with a medium, not only of words but of things, that gives us access to spirit or truth" (Kern 1996:40).

As Kern has asserted, Emerson (and, by implication, other Transcendentalists) was the instigator of a new poetic form, through his theories on language.

In part, Imagism's notion of "word-pictures" or images can be traced back to Emerson, although the Imagist movement was still more than fifty years in the future when Emerson wrote the following in "The Poet" (Emerson in Atkinson 2000): "Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language", and, "'Things more excellent than every image', says Jamblichus, 'are expressed through images'" (292). Furthermore, Emerson was interested in the Orient "like all of the transcendentalists – more in India than in China, to be sure, and more in spiritual and philosophical ideas than in linguistics" (Kern 1996:10).

Walt Whitman's poetry reflected the change Emerson instigated: "Emerson is not only a founder but an unavoidable presence in American poetry and poetics, a figure who touches almost all of our poets either directly or by way of his chief heirs, Whitman and Dickinson" (Kern 1996:10). It is also through Whitman that an Asian influence was beginning to assert itself on American literature:

Perhaps no one provided the change in manner, form, and subject matter of nineteenth-century American poetry more radically than Walt Whitman [...] While only one of his poems is completely Japanese in subject, many treat it and its people along with other subjects. His constant theme that he is brother and transcendently part of all men leads him to beckon all of Asia as well as Europe and America (Miner 1966:19).

Ulyatt (1973) suggests that Whitman, in fact, used pre-imagist poetic devices in his 1888 poem, "The Dismantled Ship" (Blodgett and Bradley:534), which was a forerunner of Imagism: "Whitman's depiction of a scene without a moral and without moralising tended to create word-pictures close in technique to the work of twentieth-century Imagists" (128).

Many of Whitman's poetic techniques paved the way for the *vers libre* notion of the Imagists. Whitman distanced himself from established trends in poetry of the nineteenth century, openly criticising the English tradition; unlike his contemporaries (such as Whittier and Longfellow), he was not cautious about articulating the notion of an indigenous American poetic tradition. Whitman believed in the potential of an American language that reflected the distinctive American spirit, and began to disassociate himself from the English idiom by instead creating a vocabulary that was steeped in American Patriotism. His "willingness to make use of all aspects of the American experience as subjects fit for poetry helped liberate poetry from its nineteenth-century gentility and refinement" (Ulyatt 1973:141). Whitman achieved this disaffiliation by employing "long lines and sprawling stanzas" that freed "poetry from the sometimes inhibiting strictures of regular verse-forms" (141). It is important to note that Whitman's poetry reflected the American experience, not European Romantic ideals, and to that extent, his ideas are "still the underlying basis for much American thinking (141). Moreover, it was Emerson, himself a groundbreaking figure in a distinct American form of Romanticism, who appreciated "the true value of Whitman's work when it first appeared" (143).

However, it would not be Whitman's "sprawling stanzas" that the Imagists would employ but rather the opposite of Whitman's rather effulgent word canvases; Imagism would cut back on such a canvas in order to produce something more on the lines of a pictorial thumbnail. Thus, the Imagists looked to the Orient's tightly-structured poetry, written in the form of haiku.

Ernest Fenollosa was instrumental in bringing the preoccupation with Oriental poetry to the fore. He drafted an essay as early as 1904, entitled "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry", which was edited by Ezra Pound in 1919, approximately eight years after Fenollosa's death. Although Fenollosa was not, strictly speaking, part of the Imagist group, his essay "left behind him a poetic domain for other writers to explore and develop" (Miner 1966:23). The main group of poets who employed Fenollosa's domain were the Imagists, especially Ezra Pound, who concluded that Fenollosa "was a forerunner without knowing it" (Kern:115). Kern regards this manuscript as an important "stimulus to Pound's own evolving ideas, not only about the 'image' as a form of poetic speech but also about the use of what he was to call the 'ideogrammic method' as the foundation for a new kind of poetic structure" (115). On the one hand, "ideogrammic *method*" (my italics) encompassed "other texts, other voices, other

perspectives within one's own" (191) and was concerned with the overall structure of cantos and long poems. On the other hand, "ideogrammic *writing*" (my italics) involved

verse structure and grammar in the line and the passage, and insofar as it incorporates the conciseness and concreteness of imagism and adheres to the transitive force or dynamics of a style reflecting natural process, such writing constitutes English-as-Chinese in a form that may be found throughout *The Cantos* (216).

However, Fenollosa's essay remains controversial because of his "apparently less than perfect understanding of the nature of Chinese characters" (Kern 1996:115). Other critics of Fenollosa are Liu (1962:3), who asserts that Fenollosa's text is "seriously misleading" in its study of Chinese poetry, and Kennedy (1964:444), who regards Fenollosa's methodology as "a small mass of confusion".

Nevertheless, the following assertion by Fenollosa about the subject-verb-object structure of the English language can be viewed as an "early instance of a modernist slogan" (Kern:290): "The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation" (Pound 1936:12). Fenollosa continues this thought later in his essay: "The prehistoric poets who created language discovered the whole harmonious framework of nature" (32). This assertion seems to be the basis for later modernist slogans such as Pound's "Go in fear of abstractions", William Carlos Williams's "No ideas but in things", and Wallace Stevens' "Not ideas about the thing but the thing itself" (Kern 1996:290).

Fenollosa's assertion is especially evident in F.S. Flint's formulation in 1913 of Imagism's first two principles:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing'
2. Use absolutely no word which does not contribute to presentation (Record 1981:59).

This formulation was preceded by those expressed in "The Poets' Club" in 1908, which consisted of a group of young poets and artists whose leader, T.E. Hulme (Miner 1966:98), called for

a rejection of Romantic and Victorian traditions, and stressed a compactness and precision of imagery that became characteristic of Imagism. He also urged the group to eliminate excess verbiage, to use 'the hard, definite, personal word,' and to avoid metaphoric use of imagery (Record 1981:58-59).

Miner (1966) qualifies Hulme's break with Romanticism as not only a split with the English Romantics but also with the Victorian and Georgian literary historical epochs, which meant revisiting Classicism: "The poetry he advocated was to have what he regarded as classical qualities: 'dryness' or lack of sentimentality, compactness and economy, accuracy of specification, and imagist technique" (99). The following aphorisms devised by Hulme, illustrate the core thinking of Imagism (Miner 1966:99):

'Always use the hard, definite, personal word';

'The great aim is accurate, precise, and definite description'; and

'Visual images can only be transferred by the new bowl of metaphor. Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essences of an intuitive language'.

In many ways, Hulme's aphorisms mirror Fenollosa when he says: "The more concretely and vividly we express the interactions of things the better the poetry" (Pound 1936:28). Pound amplifies this argument (in Eliot 1954:12):

As to Twentieth century poetry, and the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so, it will, I think, move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr Hewlett calls 'nearer to the bone'. It will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretative power (of course, poetic force does always rest there); I mean it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.

According to Record (1981:60), it was Pound who first employed the expression *Imagistes*; Pratt asserts (1992): "Since the proper naming of Imagism did not occur until 1912, it can be said with greater accuracy that *between* 1909 and 1912 Imagism was born" (ix). Record quotes T.S. Eliot (1981) saying that the "*point de repère* usually and conventionally taken as the starting point of modern poetry is the group denominated 'imagists' in London about 1910" (58).

According to Pratt (1992:4), there were, in fact, three movements contained within the aegis of Imagism; the first, called "the School of Images", was an Anglo-American group of poets led by T.E. Hulme. This group published a few poems between 1909 and 1912, but its members did not call themselves Imagists. The second group was composed of English, Irish, and American poets, called *Des Imagistes*, who were published in Pound's 1914 anthology. Lastly, there were the *Amygists* – nicknamed by Pound himself – Anglo-American poets who were published in Amy Lowell's three anthologies – *Some Imagist Poets* – in 1915, 1916, and 1917.

Pratt goes on to say that, by looking at Imagism's "practical results", it is safe to assume that it was Pound indeed who was the "chief instigator". In the main, Pound's idea of Imagist poetry was moulded by "three main foreign models" which comprised "the classical Greek lyric, the Japanese *haiku*, and the *vers libre* of the French Symbolists" (79-80). However, Record (1981) finds it ironic that "Imagism, being the first inspiration for the *vers libre* movement in American poetry, used as one of its primary sources a form of poetry that stressed above all else the significance and discipline of form" (75). Kern (1996) calls this notion of poetry that Emerson called the "meter-making argument" as being fulfilled first in the "imagist and *vers-libre* movements of early modernism and then again in the projective and open-form poetry of the 1960s" (10).

The subject of *vers libre* was substantial at the time of Imagism because "of the great controversy" surrounding the "nature as well as the desirability of free forms" (Miner 1966:104-105). However, Pound himself started to criticise *vers libre*:

Indeed *vers libre* has become as prolix and verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it. It has brought faults of its own. The actual language and phrasing is often as bad as that of our elders without even the excuse that the words are shovelled in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-sound (Pound in Eliot 1954:3).

This specific criticism also meant that Pound was constantly evolving as both theorist and poet, and that he embraced new developments:

the poet, in dealing with his own time, must also see to it that language does not petrify on his hands. He must prepare for new advances along the lines of true metaphor, that is interpretative metaphor, or image opposed to untrue, or ornamental metaphor (Pound 1936:3).

In *Poetry* in 1913, Pound put together a definition of "Image" that stemmed from this amalgam of influences, articulating it as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time [...] It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation" (Pound in Eliot 1954:4). According to Miner (1966), this definition "comes a year after the poetic expression of his experience in the *Metro* through a form borrowed from the *haiku*" (125).

Moreover, Pound proposed a list of "Don'ts" for Imagist poets when using language: "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something [...] Go in fear of abstractions" (5), something that Fenollosa also came to appreciate during his studies of Chinese poetry: "We

can not (*sic*) exhibit the wealth of nature by mere summation, by the piling of sentences. Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within” (Pound 1936:28).

It is precisely the notion of concreteness and brevity that made the Japanese haiku appealing to the Imagist group, especially to Pound. Miner (1966) is of the opinion that with the list of Imagist “Don’ts”, Pound actually had the haiku in mind when he formulated those: “Concision, separation of imagery from abstract statement (as in the ‘form of super-position?’), and an emphasis upon natural images are what these paragraphs stress. These are also outstanding characteristics of Japanese poetry” (123). A few years later, in 1918, Pound asserts a similar theory about natural imagery, in *Pavannes and Divisions*:

I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man uses ‘symbols’ he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance a hawk is a hawk (Eliot 1954:9).

Miner (1966) observes that there is a definite link between Pound’s declaration of the natural object, and a poem by Hulme called “Autumn”, which seemed to be representative of the Japanese

concern with the objects of nature as the subject of the poem; the venturing out at night to look at the moon and stars – the subject of countless Japanese poems; and above all, the reliance on images to bear the meaning of the poem without any explanation or additional comment. It would be too much to say that the poem is modelled upon Japanese poetry and so an example of the intimations the group made of haiku, but it seems safe enough to assume that the poem shows an awareness of Japanese poetry which is new to English writers (102-103).

The Imagists seem to be in concert with the spirit of the time; even before their time, there had been a gradual emergence of Western translators and scholars of Oriental texts, especially classical ones. This all played a part in an emerging Western consciousness regarding the East; the “startling confrontation with Japan in World War Two forced the West to recognize the Japanese as a formidable world power” (Record 1981:87).

However, it is ironic that, although the Imagist group had been responsible for introducing the classical haiku to English-speaking poets and readers, the same group was responsible for its “rapid disappearance as a distinct influence on the poetry that followed. Rather, its effects were

assimilated into ‘mainstream’ modern British and American poetry” (Record 1981:58). One of the reasons Record (1981) provides for the haiku’s lack of lasting success within Imagism is the “failure of Imagism to produce a body of work worthy of its theorizing” (58). However, the haiku remained a substantial influence, albeit in an evolved form, on poets like Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams (Record:2). Similarly, Imagism has contributed significantly to twentieth-century literature, especially that of American poets. Pratt (1992:13) summarises the effects of Imagism most succinctly:

We may therefore believe that Imagism is permanent, just as Wallace Stevens maintained, because 1) it produced classic short poems that are complete in themselves, 2) it made possible a new kind of longer poem, an aggregate of short images like mosaic, 3) it prepared the way for the stream-of-consciousness narrative method in fiction, and 4) finally, through its theory as well as its practice, it gave us a new model of poetic style, a verbal image in free verse: the poetry of the instant enduring through time.

### **The haiku and Zen**

The Japanese haiku, of great consequence in the development of Imagist poetry and the English form of the haiku, cannot be examined separately from its Zen Buddhist context. In his magisterial four volume-study of the haiku, R.H. Blyth writes: “a *haiku* is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things” (1981:270).

Miner (1966) stresses Zen Buddhism’s historical bifunctionality: first, it has a secular function in “its influence upon Japanese aesthetic modes”; and second, it has a religious function, which, Miner feels, is frequently overlooked in the West: “it is as much a religion as other forms of Buddhism” (xxiv). However, Alan Watts, a seminal figure in bringing Zen to the West, especially America, holds an entirely different view:

Zen Buddhism is a way and a view of life which does not belong to any of the formal categories of modern Western thought. It is not a religion or a philosophy; it is not a psychology or a type of science. It is an example of what is known in India and China as a “way of liberation”, and is similar in this respect to Taoism, Vedanta, and Yoga (Watts, 1962:23).

In addition, Miner ascribes a transcendentalist quality to Zen, which is not to be confused with Transcendentalism as a literary movement. This type of transcendentalism is “a species of

irrational insight or intuition which is felt not only to be desirable in itself but also to be superior to more prosaic or logical processes” (xxiv). Watts explains this “irrational insight” regarding the mundane and sacred, which are usually separated in Western society, as being one and the same. He quotes Hui-neng in the *Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* as being illustrative of this Zen angle of thought:

If somebody asks you a question about matters sacred, always answer in terms of the profane. If they ask you about ultimate reality, answer in terms of everyday life. If they ask you about everyday life, answer in terms of ultimate reality (2000:29).

Miner credits the popularisation of what he calls “semi-official Zen teachings” to D.T. Suzuki, who based them on the “modern teachings” of the Rinzai sect of Zen, and Alan Watts, “who has given psychoanalytical and existential infusions to the doctrines of Suzuki” (xxiv-xxv). Other Zen figures who have been decisive in disseminating Zen to the West are Masao Abe with *Zen and Western Thought* (1985); Shunryo Suzuki (*Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*:1970) as well as various texts by Robert Aitken, amongst many others.

As can be seen from the last quotation by Watts, Zen undoubtedly challenges “conventional modes of thinking and conventional language” (Milstead 1998). Milstead quotes Ogata who says that Zen is said to be “outside the scriptures”, with “no dependence upon words and letters”, rendering language inadequate as an instructional medium” (14). In this regard, Zen is on par with the haiku, which, according to Record (1981), is a

‘wordless poem,’ and therefore non-literary, [that] has been held by many prominent North American poets since the term was coined by Alan Watts and developed by Eric Amann in his book, *The Wordless Poem*. This argument is based on the opinion that haiku is not poetry, but is instead a device for the expression of Zen insight and ‘nothingness’ (3).

Miner (1966) finds it ironic that the “avowedly least doctrinaire of Buddhist sects” has engendered a doctrine for “a group of Western poets” although “that is but the Occidental equivalent of the paradox familiar to Japanese that the Zen Buddhists should renounce scriptures and yet write so voluminously” (xxvi-xxvii).

Record (1981:9) avers that the haiku actually distinguishes itself from most types of poetry in that its subject matter is rarely human through its avoidance of directly articulating “human thought or feeling”. Yet, the haiku form has survived for more than three centuries since it assumes that objects have “intrinsic interest and value” as a result of the human ability of

expression through poetry, which is universal. Moreover, the haiku is a form of art which “expresses the poet’s heightened awareness of the moment through the use of ‘natural,’ sensory images”. The haiku thus involves the “direct, ‘objective’ presentation of images and the avoidance of intellectual, subjective commentary” (11), criteria that link it with Zen’s anti-intellectualising properties. Another association with Zen is the haiku’s sense of immediacy and *Nowness*, which, according to Record (11), creates “an atmosphere of timelessness, inherent in the moment of the poet’s perception and transmitted to the reader”.

In addition, Record links the haiku not only with the Zen tradition but also with Transcendentalism in that both traditions share the notion of Interconnection:

the spirit that underlies haiku has an ancient but increasingly more vital message to convey, however subtle its method. The mutual dependence of all life forms on the planet, and the awareness of their ‘oneness’ are the central assumptions of the haiku poet, who does not seek to write *about* nature *per se*, but realizes that he is inextricably part of it. It is in this respect that haiku and Zen coalesce, just as haiku reflects the underlying spirit of Taoism or for that matter shares the vision of ‘oneness’ with nature implied in the writings of the American Transcendentalists (5-6).

It is both the haiku and Zen Buddhism’s intimate yet un sentimental identification with the natural world that inspired later poets, such as Gary Snyder, to experiment with in his poetry. Snyder himself declares that he had been greatly influenced by poets such as Pound: “Ezra Pound introduced me to Chinese poetry, and I began to study classical Chinese. When it came to writing out of my own experience, most of the modernism didn’t fit it, except for the steer toward Chinese and Japanese” (Kern 1996:221). Snyder’s own experience of being a monk in a Rinzai Zen monastery in Japan prepared and inspired him to incorporate Zen Buddhist themes in his poetry. Although initially part of the Beat Generation in the 1950s, Snyder’s poetry has evolved into having a strong ecological consciousness which links with his Buddhist sensibilities.

Undoubtedly, it has been primarily through literature that Buddhism has been disseminated to the West, as Zigmond (2009) asserts in a review of Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff’s *Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009): “Yet from Transcendentalist writers like Emerson in the 1800s to the poets and novelists of the Beat Generation in the 1950s, literature has played a special role in transmitting Buddhism to America” (98). Ironically, it was poetry and fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, and not Buddhist scriptural texts or sutras, that sparked interest in the dharma, although one cannot overlook non-fiction such as *Zen Mind Beginner’s Mind* (1970) and D.T. Suzuki’s essays on Zen Buddhism. However, Zigmond is of the opinion that most dharma students in America were not exposed to such dharma texts first but rather to novels

such as Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*. Zigmond stresses that, without this "literary amplification", Buddhism in the United States would not be as we know it today, with some type of dharma centre or Buddhist retreat in most of the states.

*Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* is a collection of academic essays that investigate the convoluted "interplay of Buddhism" and writing in the United States (Zigmond 2009:99). The essays explore poets such as Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Whalen. One of the essay writers, Yuemin He, for example, contends that American literary Buddhism "'is not an unconditioned transmission; it is also to some degree a construction'" (99). According to Zigmond, a recurrent theme of the book is the correlation between writing practice and Buddhist practice: "meditation and poetry are ways of being honest with ourselves" (99). Yet, it would seem that poetry is not produced during formal meditation or sitting practice but rather "from a state of mind which develops from meditation" (99).

Zigmond touches on an issue that is central to the argument of this thesis, that poets are able to "embody and transmit Buddhist practice, rather than result from it" (99). The question arises of what exactly constitutes "Buddhist" writing or a "Buddhist" poet: "Is this a biographical question, one having to do with conversion experience or self-description?" (99). Zigmond (100) asks the pertinent question whether one should not rather examine literature in a behavioural manner, and enquire whether a work in question produces mindfulness.

The question whether a poet should be a Buddhist practitioner before any Buddhist elements appear in his or her work is addressed in theses such as Milstead's *The Zen of Modern Poetry: Reading Eliot, Stevens, and Williams in a Zen Context* (1998). Milstead (9) argues that, through a Zen Buddhist reading of these poets, she is neither implying that they were Zen Buddhists nor that they necessarily consulted Zen Buddhist texts as source material. Her line of reasoning is that they employ Zen concepts in their philosophical and artistic questions, especially when it comes to reality and the self. Therefore, she elucidates their poems by employing a Zen framework.

Lyyo (1995:78) has a similar argument: "Zen followers find Zen in Upanishadic seers, Lao-tzu, Confucius, Socrates, Moses, Jesus, St. Paul, Meister Eckhart, Shakespeare, Cervantes, St. Augustine, Spinoza, Goethe, Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson, William Blake, and Walt Whitman, to name only a few".

Li's *Traveling Over the Modern Waste Land: A Buddhist Reading of Death and Enlightenment in T.S. Eliot's Poetry* (1997) asserts that, although Eliot was conscious of Asian influences, especially Indian ones, he was not a Buddhist *per se*. In *A Buddhist Reading of T.S. Eliot's Four*

Quartets, McLeod (1990) argues in a similar vein: even if Eliot was a Christian, as asserted by some critics, there is a likelihood that he was also aware of Buddhism's contribution to philosophy.

Similarly, Morris looks at Zen elements in Emerson's work in *Beyond Religion: Transcendentalism and Zen Answers for Today* (1994) and quotes Ames (1962), who called Emerson an "American Bodhisattva". Lynch (1989) sees affinities between Emerson, the haiku, and Zen. Other authors who link Zen and Transcendentalism are Christy (1932); Ando (1970); Hakutani (1990), who links Emerson, Whitman, and Zen; and Versluis (1993). Swift (1999) does a Buddhist reading of Emily Dickinson, and Tanaka (2007) traces "Buddhist influences, sometimes explicit and sometimes implied" in poetry of Dickinson, Williams, and Stevens.

The poet who seems to be most represented in extant criticism on American Buddhism is Gary Snyder, as Bartlett (2000) observes: "He is by far the most accomplished writer to develop expertise in Buddhism and integrate its perspective into his poetics" (7). The reason for this accomplishment is that Snyder incorporates both Western and Asian influences into his writing very successfully. However, despite all the various Asian influences on aesthetic, linguistic, and spiritual levels, "his verse and essays are written within the American tradition" (1). Keeping both Asian and American literary traditions in mind, Elder's observation (2002) about Snyder links Oliver with the same traditions, something that most critics ignore, perhaps in part because it requires looking at the macrocosm that constitutes American poetry, which invariably includes the undeniable influences of Imagism and the haiku:

In part because of Snyder's inspiration, the conversation between poetry and the earth has also included, for me, a journey out of the Western tradition – toward the lineage of Basho. The 1990 publication of Mary Oliver's *House of Light* was an exciting new flinging-open of doors; it helped me both to understand the relationship between American and Japanese poetry more fully and to reground my reading in New England (x).

In addition, in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (1996), Elder explains his intimations in the analogies between Oliver's poetry and the haiku tradition. First, he links the Thoreauvian prose genre of nature and contemporary American poetry with the haiku genre. For him, Oliver "pursues the deepest significance of the seasons" like the haiku poet, Bashō. She also adds "the broad contours of nature" through "pointed particulars" (219). Furthermore, Elder confesses that, through Oliver, he came to know more about Bashō since his name appears in the epigraph to *A Poetry Handbook* (1994).

Keeping Elder's observations in mind, one wonders why most critics do not trace Buddhist influences in Oliver's poetry. Bartlett (2000) might provide one of the possible reasons in his examination of Gary Snyder's poetry: most critics simply do not have adequate enough Buddhist knowledge: "Conversely, some critics only lightly touch on Buddhism in Snyder's work because they take seriously their lack of credentials to do so" (248-249). Another reason for operating exclusively within literary theories based in the Western tradition is that critics are "reluctant to admit that Buddhism can become thoroughly American [...] This position fails to acknowledge the growth of Buddhism in America, a growth that has definitely challenged notions of 'Western' and 'Eastern'". Furthermore, critics have the tendency to focus on theories they themselves are familiar with, thinking "they have the right to determine critical approaches based on their expertise and experience, rather than on the interests and concerns of the writer" (253).

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that, as seen from the numerous studies undertaken about Buddhism and Western writers, Oliver is not an overt Buddhist practitioner as in Snyder's case. Nevertheless, her work, as will be seen from the manner in which critics describe it, speaks of inherent Buddhist themes.

### **HIATUS IN EXTANT CRITICISM OF OLIVER**

Despite being a Pulitzer-prizewinning poet with an oeuvre that includes more than twenty poetry volumes alone, Mary Oliver's poetry has not been given the critical and scholarly attention it deserves. Upon reading the extant criticism dealing with her work, it becomes evident that there are two literary traditions that have mainly created this lacuna in literary criticism: (1) The Romantic literary tradition, and (2) Feminist discourse. Other traditions such as the Christian and the Ecopoetic have also contributed to the lacuna, although not to the same degree. I shall discuss the issues surrounding the Romantic tradition first as it constitutes the largest area of extant criticism linked to Oliver's work. Feminism also constitutes a broad discussion ground regarding the lack of serious literary criticism, and will be discussed subsequently. Many times, the two traditions overlap, and as far as possible, will be discussed in this manner. In similar fashion, Romanticism/Transcendentalism and Ecocriticism overlap.

McNew (1989) is one of many critics who has drawn attention to the fact that Oliver is under-represented in literary criticism, a view Burton-Christie (1996:79) shares. Alford (1988:283) also remarks on this lacuna in existing literary criticism where Oliver's poetry is concerned, which is ironic, since she is widely-respected by the literary community: "The message and craft of her poetry are valued by peers and critics alike despite her unfortunate neglect as potential critical

review". Alford (283) provides a possible reason for this critical neglect: "she lacks the representative qualities associated with contemporary aesthetic values". Johnson (2005:78) addresses the various readings of Oliver's poetry, which amount to "several theoretically informed misreadings of Oliver as an environmentalist or feminist or post-post-modernist."

Warman (1990:n.p.) attests to the limited critical material that exists on Oliver's oeuvre because of her chosen subject matter, which is nature, and her form, the lyric: "they [nature lyrics] contain subject matter often devalued in our culture. She has been disregarded in most serious critical studies of contemporary poetry, even in studies of contemporary poetry by women". She continues: "Numerous book reviews dismiss her as a 'nature poet'; settle for superficial comparisons to Keats, Frost, and Roethke" (1). A valid point Warman makes is that, at the time she was undertaking her study, the MLA Bibliography only had three listings of Oliver's poetry as opposed to sixty-seven for Adrienne Rich, and nineteen for Diane Wakoski (103). Part of Warman's rationale underpinning her study is to make a case for the substantiality of Oliver's poetry that makes it warrant further critical studies.

Mann (2004) also contends that Oliver's work has not received enough scholarly attention, especially from religious scholars, a view Burton-Christie shares (1996:79). Mann speculates about this lacuna in the religious scholarly community: although Oliver is not a "religious poet", she does refer, albeit "infrequently", "explicitly to God, and sometimes the resulting picture is not flattering" (*xii*). In his chapter on Oliver, Christensen also points out the lack of substantial critical evaluation of Oliver's corpus: "Of the poets considered in this study, Mary Oliver has received the least attention from critics" (1999:219); the two other poets he mentions are Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder.

### **EXTANT CRITICISM WITHIN THE ROMANTIC LITERARY TRADITION**

In her article – "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry" – McNew (1989:n.p.) discusses various difficulties critics have when analysing Oliver's poetry within the ambit of the Romantic literary tradition: "Why, we might ask, is so much important contemporary criticism in the romantic tradition unable to appreciate the kind of nature poetry that Mary Oliver writes?".

McNew (1989:n.p.) partly answers her own question by stating, "Her [Oliver's] poetry is neither a replication of romantic accomplishment nor is it, to use Bloom's term, a 'belated' modern version of visionary romanticism". She goes on to say: "I suspect that her tones and dramatic situations are not of the sort to attract critics trained in the romantic tradition, for M.H. Abrams has argued, 'great romantic poems were written in the later mood of revolutionary disillusionment or despair'".

Another of the reasons McNew (1989:n.p.) provides as to why Oliver's poetry is not a replication of the Romantic period are the stylistic and formal aspects of her poetry: "Short lines emphasize the lyrical simplicity in this celebration of joy to be achieved in physical and imaginative unity with nature, but her spare form contains a world of mythic assumptions very different from those of her famous romantic precursors".

Bonds also points out certain difficulties that critics working within the Romantic tradition have with Oliver's poetry in the sense that they do not "demonstrate the complexity of the poet's relationship to the language of romantic nature poetry" (1992:2). According to Bonds, Oliver's poems revise the myths inherent in the Romantic tradition. Unlike McNew, Bonds does not focus exclusively on the English Romantic tradition but also includes the American Romantic tradition which, in essence, constitutes Transcendentalism. In this sense, Bonds recognises the American literary tradition that crystallised into later traditions, something of which Oliver is inevitably a part as an American writer writing about the American landscape and wilderness.

For Bonds, Emerson represents the quintessence of Transcendentalism. In this regard, Bonds mentions the terms, "attentiveness" (1992:6); "sensitive attention" (1992:7), and "spontaneous moments of transformation: they arise from efforts of attention" (1992:11) which resemble Buddhist mindfulness, although she links these observations with Emerson. Furthermore, Bonds (1992:7) looks at "Morning Poem" about which she says: "The world is created, in 'Morning Poem', not in the Beginning [as in the Judeo-Christian tradition] but 'Every morning'" which can be read as Beginner's Mind acting as a *tabula rasa* of the mind in every moment. The manner in which Bond describes Emersonian concepts brings to mind Buddhist interconnections when describing them as having an "intuited sense of connectedness with nature, of the interpenetration of the natural and the human" (1992:4).

In his PhD thesis entitled *Journeys into the Border Country: The Making of Nature and Home in the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers and Mary Oliver*, Glaser (1993) emphasises the idea of Interconnection – although viewed from the angle of Ecological Feminism and Romanticism. The impetus of Glaser's study is that both Jeffers and Oliver are poets within the late Romantic era who "represent the interconnections between the body, imagination, language and nature" (1993:n.p.). Furthermore, Glaser explicates their "gender representations of nature, the interplay of domestic and natural spaces, and their images and tropes of communion with or transcendence of nature" (1993:n.p.). In addition, Glaser takes the position that both poets have revised the "romantic ideology of attraction towards and alienation from nature". Glaser's study thus takes the stance that Oliver operates as an Ecological Feminist who depicts images of a "'feminized' nature, of 'naturalized' domestic spaces" (1993 n.p.). According to Glaser, where Jeffers' inclination is to view nature from a Romantic perspective, which means that he seeks to

transcend it, Oliver's disposition counterbalances the typical Romantic view, striving instead to "remain rooted in the cycles of creation". In essence, this means that Oliver embraces the impermanence of nature instead of trying to transcend it.

Pettingell (1999) is another critic who recognises a Romantic element in Oliver's poetry that is specifically linked to nature: "Oliver evokes Romanticism's identification with nature, even to the obliteration of human individuality. In past volumes she strove to blend into her subject – to become, as Emerson phrased it, a 'transparent eyeball' observing what is" (21). However, Oliver herself contends that it is not the writer of the poem who should become the 'eye': "I had never had any other notion than that the *eye/I* of the poem should be not the writer of the poem but the reader of the poem" (Oliver in Olander 1994:3).

Even more than Pettingell and Bonds, Johnson (2005) regards Oliver's work as being deeply influenced by Emersonian thought, to the extent that he calls his article "'Keep Looking': Mary Oliver's Emersonian Project". The gist of his argument is that Oliver is an unappreciated Romanticist and Transcendentalist. He goes on to quote Cull, who regards Oliver as having "Post-Romantic investments" (Johnson 2005:80). Johnson asserts that, although Oliver finds inspiration in Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley, it is Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau who "provide her real roots in New England Romanticism" (80). According to Johnson (2005:81), didacticism is one of the Transcendentalist features that figures in her poetry. Didacticism, however, is exactly what Oliver tries to avoid in her poetry. Oliver states quite clearly in *Wild Geese* (63): "I want a poem to ask something and, at its best moments, I want the question to remain unanswered. I want it to be clear that answering the question is the reader's part in the implicit author-reader pact". She rounds off this argument against didacticism by referring to her own poetry:

The poem in which the reader does not feel himself or herself a participant is a lecture, listened to from an uncomfortable chair, in a stuffy room, inside a building. My poems have all been written – if not finished at least started – somewhere out-of-doors: in the fields, on the shore, under the sky. They are not lectures (*Wild Geese*:64).

What Johnson regards as Emersonian, when he quotes Oliver in *Winter Hours* (1999), is analogous to Buddhist interconnectedness, specifically Thich Nhat Hahn's notion of "interbeing" (1991): "No poem is about one of us, or some of us, but it is about all of us" (Oliver in Johnson 2005:83). Furthermore, when quoting Oliver in *What Do We Know* (2002), his references to transience bring to mind Buddhist impermanence: "Change rules the universe, doesn't it?" and "Worship impermanence" (Oliver in Johnson 2005:84). Mann (2004: 19, 24, 25, 43) also perceives Impermanence as a main theme to Oliver's poetry while Prothero (2008) links the

Buddhist notion of Impermanence and Non-attachment with Romanticism: “In some of her writing, Oliver seems to take up the Romantic position that to embrace death is to befriend both truth and beauty” (46).

In addition, what Johnson (2005) views as “Oliver’s romanticism”, is consistent with Mindfulness: “In two separate interviews, Oliver calls attention to Flaubert’s demand for ‘intense observation’” and that a writer’s duty starts with “the powers of observing” (2005:85).

Another Buddhist idea – *Nowness* or being in the here-and-now – may be linked to Johnson’s argument for Transcendentalism: “Oliver’s celebration of presence, both in place and time, contradicts her critics’ charges of otherworldliness, unreality, quaintness” (2005:93). Steinman articulates Oliver’s proclivity for leading the reader’s attention into the present by discarding the past, by observing that a volume like *Dream Work* (1986) is especially apt because “it seems to take no notice of any past or history” (1987:428). In addition, Steinman describes *American Primitive* as containing “unself-conscious celebrations of the present and the natural world” (1987:428). Following a similar train of thought, Upton (1991:42) remarks: “she [Oliver] challenges her readers with what amounts to a fierce attention to the moment”.

Like Johnson, O’Donnell (2008) draws parallels between Oliver’s poetry and Transcendentalism in a review of *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* (2008): “Oliver’s poems hearken back to her 19<sup>th</sup>-century mentors – particularly Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman – in their attentiveness to the natural world and what it teaches us about ourselves” (38).

Riley, too, shares the views of Pettingell, Bonds, Johnson, and O’ Donnell about Oliver writing in the Transcendentalist mode: “Like the transcendentalists before her, Oliver believes that the natural world instructs people in how to live, how to see, and how to experience their lives fully”. Riley goes on to place Oliver in the canon of nature poets because of “a continual affirmation of nature as a place of mystery and spirituality that holds the power to teach humans how to value one’s life and one’s place” (271).

Thurston (1999:32) maintains that Oliver is a nature poet but not in the Romantic or Transcendentalist sense but rather more analogously to Gerard Manley Hopkins. Similarly, Davis (2009) mentions the Romantic/Transcendentalist link as well as Gerard Manley Hopkins; he regards Oliver as being, “like so many of the poets she calls upon and is descended from – Whitman and Blake and Hopkins and Shelley and Keats, all unabashed lovers of the spirit” (605).

However, Dobyns disagrees that Oliver is a nature poet: “Although Ms. Oliver’s poems are mostly set in the natural world, it would be wrong to call her a nature poet. Nature for her is neither pretty nor nice. Beauty is to be found there, but there is a beauty containing the knowledge that life is mostly a matter of dying” (1992:12).

## **FEMINIST RECEPTION**

Another literary community that does not pay sufficient attention to Oliver’s work is that which takes a Feminist stance, because Oliver does not set out to incorporate specific gender-related issues in her work.

Apart from taking the Romantic tradition into consideration, McNew’s (1989) discussion of Oliver’s poems also draws heavily upon Feminist psychological theorists. Unfortunately, contradictions exist within her assertions made in connection with Feminism/femininity. On the one hand, McNew (1989:n.p.) rightly states that “Nowhere in her poetry is Oliver a programmatic feminist”, a fact that is corroborated by Oliver herself in interviews such as this one with Olander (1994:2):

I’ve tried very hard in my writing not to speak from a specific gender. I’ve done that on purpose. There are perhaps four or five poems in which the speaker is defined as a woman – and no more than that – which is amazing. And yet, many younger female critics, especially those who work with feminist precepts – they critique me from a feminist point of view, and I don’t always have a lot of patience with it.

On the other hand, McNew (1989:n.p.) contradicts her first statement by adding “nevertheless, her dreams of reunion with female creatures and with maternal nature receive the validation in feminist terms that male developmental theories and literary criticism built on them would deny”.

Olander (1994:2-3) mentions McNew’s views on Feminism in Oliver’s poetry specifically: “McNew addresses that issue, too – that feminists have criticized you for not being a more overt feminist, and she goes on to say that your poems are fundamentally feminist in their outlook, in the connections with nature”. Oliver’s response to McNew’s observations (Olander 1994:3) is, “but very few female critics can resist defining a work except by what they find to be its feminist point of view. You know, you put a bunch of moons in your poem, and it’s a feminine cycle, whether you, the writer, meant for it to attach to gender or not”.

Regrettably, even Olander's (1994:3) own slant on genderised writing matches some of the very same female critics Oliver was referring to: "You definitely have a lot of female imagery in your poems. 'Sleeping in the forest' seems characteristic to me in the female embodiment of the earth". Oliver's (Olander 1994:3) response to this train of thought remains the same; she does not view herself as a Feminist poet using specific feminine emblems: "But I must go back and say: What makes you think that the earth is a feminist emblem? A single feminine image doesn't make it so". However, in a review of *Winter Hours* (1999), Pettingell regards Oliver as a distinct part of the feminine tradition: "The poetry [...] of Mary Oliver is lyrical and distinctively feminine, though not self-consciously so" (1999:20).

Thurston (1999) regards Oliver's work in similar contradictory fashion, talking about Oliver's "genderless voice", yet being of a specific feminine "sensibility" (Thurston 1999:32). In addition, Thurston refers to a certain "softness" in Oliver's poetry, a vague term which is supposed to imply a feminine sensibility.

Graham (1994:352-353) goes on to explain why the Feminist literary community does not welcome Oliver's poetic themes: "But few feminists have wholeheartedly appreciated Oliver's work, and though some critics have read her poems as revolutionary reconstructions of the female subject, other remain sceptical 'that identification with nature can empower women'".

Yaros (2008) is one of the Feminist critics who does view female poets' identification with the natural world as a positive undertaking because this identification becomes a leaven for autobiographical information in their work. Yaros draws parallels between the nineteenth-century poetry of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman – "under the influence of Romanticism" – and female poets such as Dickinson, Bishop, Plath, and Oliver who "all use nature as subject matter in a variety of ways, and a common link between these poets is the use of nature as metaphor in relation to self" (2008:1). Furthermore, through a close reading of some of their poems, Yaros presupposes that these poets "share a common treatment of nature as metaphor that parallels biographical details about their lives. In addition, each poet portrays a distinctive desire to merge fully with nature in a way impossible to achieve while physically alive" (2).

Although the second part of this presumption – to merge with nature – may prove to be true to some extent, the rationale behind the first part – biographical details – seems mainly to be a conjectural reading where Oliver's poetry is concerned. Especially evident in interviews is Oliver's unambiguous opinion about poets of the confessional school who reveal too much autobiographical information in their poetry, an opinion she has maintained consistently for decades: "we went through a whole period of confessional poets. And I think a lot of people – certainly Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton – got therapy mixed up with the work they were doing,

and that's a shame" (Shriver 2011:4). Similarly, Oliver asserts in an interview with Ratiner (2002:55):

At the time I was growing up, literature was involved with so-called confessional poets. And I was not interested in that. I did not think that specific and personal perspective functioned well for the reader at all. The women's movement – I did not join that either. I applaud it, and I may even be part of it. I don't see it working very well in poetry. I see very good poets defeating their own poems with polemic.

While being interviewed by Olander (1994:3), Oliver stressed:

[...] the traditions of Plath and Lowell and Sexton et cetera, I don't find nourishing work. I find it technically brilliant and about as impressive as a hurricane, but it certainly doesn't bring me much information about myself, and I'm not so sure how reliable it is about the self that's speaking".

Another critic, Selman, remarks: "Oliver's poems are not, strictly speaking, personal" (1993:81).

In the light of the overwhelming documented evidence of Oliver's specific intention to avoid autobiographical details in her poetry, Yaros's statement that there is always an undeniable link between the autobiographical details of a poet and the poem is unfounded in Oliver's particular case: "a reader can reference each poet's biographical information in an effort to unravel particular styles and stances. Whether or not the authors intended for their personal lives to line the poems like shelf paper, connections between the personal and poetic undeniably exist" (Yaros 2008:2). Likewise, Kumin (1993) speculates about possible influences on Oliver's poems, specifically by the confessional poet, Anne Sexton.

Contrary to Yaros and Kumin, Oliver argues that the role of the poet is to expand the reader's life, not clutter it up with autobiographical details: "it's that I believe very much and always have that readers want poems that will bring them news of their lives, not news of the poet's life" (Olander 1994:3); and "Poets who have no material but their own lives don't hold my interest long, no matter how good they may be. I want poetry to help clarify and enlarge my life, not just tell me, in whatever exquisite detail, about the poet's life" (Swanson 1990:7). In addition, Oliver feels that the impetus of the poet is to do a "vanishing act" from the poem: "I believe it is invasive of the work when you know too much about the writer, and almost everything is too much. I am trying in my poems to vanish and have the reader be the experiencer. I do not want to be there" (7). Rienstra's (2005:n.p.) view of Oliver's poetry supports Oliver's own assertions:

“Oliver has been compared to the Romantic poets, but thankfully her encounters with nature are not so tiresomely self-referential”.

Contrary to Rienstra, Russell (1997) deems autobiographical details seminal to a poet’s work, especially when they pertain to gender preferences. Russell operates within the frame of Lesbian criticism and regards Oliver’s thanking Molly Malone Cook, her partner for forty years, publicly for the first time at the awards ceremony of the National Book Awards, as the proverbial *coming out of the closet*. Russell’s reason for assuming this remains wholly speculative: “Perhaps spurred on by ‘out and proud’ winner Paul Monette and nominee Dorothy Allison, according to an unnamed *Lambda Book Report* staffer” (1997:21). In a similar fashion to McNew, Russell contradicts herself (although she takes a specific Lesbian stance whereas McNew argues for a more general Feminist view) when she asserts, quite correctly, that readers who search “eagerly on the basis of this new information for lesbian content in Oliver’s work may come away disappointed” (21).

However, Russell undercuts this argument in the next sentence: “and yet, her personal aesthetic clearly aligns her with a lesbian literary tradition”. In a third contradictory statement, Russell says: “Her deeply held belief in the eternal ebb and flow of the universe may in fact contribute to Oliver’s stubborn refusal to align herself with any socio-political position” (21).

Russell’s argument claiming that Oliver’s poetry belongs to the Lesbian canon is founded on the extraordinary evidence that her poetry books can occasionally be found in the Lesbian and Gay section of some bookshops (22); a situation over which authors have no control:

Oliver’s insistence on not characterizing her own work as ‘lesbian’, whatever that might mean, seems a bit perverse when her books can be found right there on the shelves of gay and lesbian bookstores along with those of literary peers, Elizabeth Bishop (outed after her death) and Mary Swanson (out during her later years but ambivalent about the label).

Comparable to Russell’s overriding Lesbian view of Oliver’s work, is Riggs’s (2008) recommendation for future studies of Oliver’s poetry, but with an additional ecological link: “In Oliver’s poetry, in particular, a queer analysis of the sexual innuendos of her ecological landscapes and human-nature interplay is worth pursuing” (246).

Although Hosmer (1994) draws parallels between Oliver’s work and that of Elizabeth Bishop, he regards “neither one political or feminist or confessional” (638), a view which differs radically from that of Riggs, Russell, and Yaros. However, Hosmer is not the only critic who does not

regard Bishop and Oliver as operating from within a Feminist framework; Selman (1993) also argues: "Like Bishop, Oliver doesn't go in much for politics, poetic or public. You won't see poems by either of them in women-only anthologies (1993:81)". That Oliver's poetry does not feature in gender-specific anthologies is not because the Feminist/Lesbian literary community is disinclined to include her work but because Oliver herself is not well-disposed toward such inclusion: "Insofar as I have control and knowledge of such things, I don't allow any of my work to be published in a women's anthology" (Weinreb 1991:150).

According to Graham, a reading of Oliver's work which offers an alternative to the Romantic identification of women and nature, may be necessary to elucidate her poetry in that particular context. Essentially, such a reading involves the rationale that Oliver literally merges with or becomes the natural bodies in her poetry (352). One of Graham's main theories to support this claim is Walter Benjamin's "mimetic faculty" in which nature is the creator of similarity. According to this theory, Oliver is "miming the real into being" (353). Graham goes on to explain what this amounts to by linking her assertion to theories by Benjamin, Taussig, and Frazer, which include contagious and imitative magic as well as sympathetic magic employed by healers and seers. According to Graham (354), Oliver longs to escape the body because the spirit longs for escape. Once the body/mind split is overcome, Oliver becomes one with another through "direct, sensuous contact".

In the light of these assertions, Graham (1994:352) defends Oliver's poetry from the earlier statement that Oliver puts female writers at risk through identification with nature, by saying: "for Oliver, immersion in nature is not death: language is not destroyed and the writer is not silenced". For Manousos – who also views Oliver as being part of the Romantic tradition – this immersion has a qualification: the end of the self through reconciling "the worlds of humans and animals, adults and children, even though such a reconciliation means the extinction of self-consciousness" (113). In Buddhist terms, this extinction would be understood as eradicating the ego.

As evident in Manousos's synopsis of Oliver's poetry, Kumin (1993) – in a similar fashion – connects Oliver's poetry with that of the Transcendentalists. Kumin articulates this immersion in nature as being a specific liminal element of Oliver's poems: "She 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" (1993:19).

In a manner similar to Graham, Manousos, and Kumin, Riley (2008:271) regards merging with nature as one of Oliver's greatest thematic preoccupations of her oeuvre: "Throughout her work, Oliver explains how one can merge with nature, experience the natural world and its wonders,

and in doing so discover how to live fully". Riley describes this "merging" as integral connection in the poem, "White Flowers", in *New and Selected Poems Volume One* (1992): "the speaker recognizes her integral connection to the earth upon which she lies" (277), a realisation that helps her learn to love this world. The concept of "merging" also appears in Davis's appraisal of Oliver's poetry, a notion he calls "the fluidity of borders": "The deepest form of rapture in Oliver's poetry is discovered in noting and freely moving forward into a bodily or material communion with others" (2009:615).

Kitchen (1993) is one of the few critics who notices a disparity between Oliver's earlier poems in which nature and speaker are divided and her later poems in which the speaker merges with the natural world. Kitchen recognises an organic evolution in Oliver's poetry: "The sharpened edge to Oliver's earlier work has been blunted in the intervening years. Her later poems began to celebrate through a kind of enraptured description; anything natural was a source of wonder" (146). Thus, for Kitchen, the concept of merging is a predominating factor in Oliver's poems: "Everywhere she exhibits an impulse toward fusion, toward discovering a place where the speaker can lay down her human burden and, quite literally, become one with the natural order" (147). In this sense, Kitchen's view is analogous to that of Graham (1994): "Becoming the body of another". Kitchen reinforces this stance by comparing Oliver's inclination to merge with nature in her poetry to Robert Frost's recognising the "impenetrability of nature" (150).

Warman (1990:n.p.) deems Feminist criticism as the most apt when examining Oliver's poems, particularly in the case of "feminist critics who see the feminine impulse as connective and fluid". These critics include feminists within the French tradition, who view language of a feminine nature as pre-symbolic articulation. However, to Warman's credit, she does concede that the Feminist perspective does not enable an all-encompassing reading of Oliver's poetry.

As already discussed, Oliver's alliances do not lie within the specific realm of the Feminist, feminine, or Lesbian critics who commune with nature; she would rather engage in intuitive and largely genderless celebration of it. For this reason, Bonds (1992:5) rightly points out that Oliver's poetry cannot be grouped with that of Mary Daly and Susan Griffin – female writers who are celebrated within Feminist circles – whose main gist is that females are closer to nature than males because of an inherent female essence.

## **ECOCRITICISM**

Since Oliver's main poetic subject is the natural world, a considerable amount of Oliver criticism deals with the various branches of Ecocriticism.

Some readings of Oliver's work include both Feminist and Ecological theory, as is the case with Riggs's thesis, entitled *"Earth and Human Together Form a Unique Being": Contemporary American Women's Ecological Poetry* (2008). These two theories are subdivided further: Ecological theory centres specifically on the Deep Ecology movement while Feminist theory branches out into Eco-Feminist discourse. Riggs's central focus is "cultural loci" (iv), which she seeks to prove as having no distancing effect from the natural world on the authors in question.

Riggs contends that Mary Oliver's resistance to being called an Ecologist is, in fact, an example of her being a Deep Ecologist instead of a Shallow Ecologist. The reason Riggs provides for this distinction is Oliver's stance against anthropomorphism, which is a component of Shallow Ecology whose agenda "focuses on preserving nature based on utilitarian value to humans" (71). Deep Ecology, on the other hand, proposes a human / nature duality: "She resists hierarchical divisions: there are no animate or inanimate entities, for everything is imbued with vitality and spirit" (71).

Bryson (1999:n.p.) sets out to discuss Oliver's poetry within the ambit of Ecocriticism and with, what was at the time, a "new and emerging area of poetics": Ecopoetry. What this framework offers specifically is a disjunctive to the "civilization-wilderness dichotomy recent theorists have found so problematic, one that allows us to discuss human/non-human interaction without reinforcing the nature-culture separation".

Unlike Riggs, who views Oliver's poetry as devoid of anthropomorphic elements, Bryson follows a two-pronged approach in reading Mary Oliver, by looking at her "poetics of the body" and her employment of the "pathetic fallacy" (1999:125). Bryson discusses the former – "poetics of the body" – within the framework of the phenomenological philosopher, David Abram. Bryson explains this "prong" as follows: "The first prong of Oliver's response to the modern rift between human and non-human nature, therefore, is an attempt at bodily identification with the members of the intersubjective world". According to Bryson, Oliver does this through her attempts at reconnecting "through her flesh, as a result of her recognition of a biological and bodily kinship with non-human nature" (135).

The second "prong" – the "pathetic fallacy" – Bryson uses interchangeably with personification, which he defines as "the tendency of poets to imbue the natural world with human feeling" (142). Kitchen (1993:11) also discusses the "pathetic fallacy" in relation to Oliver's writing. She considers Oliver's *New and Selected Poems Volume One* (1992) as infused with what is essentially a "Romantic impulse" which, according to Kitchen, is "at war with her earlier vision of separation" (148). The reason behind this assertion is that Oliver seems to assign positive

attributes to nature and to view everything non-natural as negative, therefore creating, according to Kitchen, a “pathetic fallacy” for the reader.

These contentious assertions by both Bryson and Kitchen prove to be anomalous to the views of Mann (2004), Oppenheimer (1993), McNew (1989), McEntyre (1994), Riley (2008), Hammond (2008), Tillinghast (1994), and De Mott (1979), all of whom come to the conclusion that Oliver does not anthropomorphise nature but rather writes about the Interconnection of all beings. For example, in his monograph – *God of Dirt* (2004) – Mann points out that “When Oliver talks about animals and trees and rocks as the conversational family of which she is a part, she is not talking about mere personification” (17), because “For Oliver, the goal is not to make animals human, but, by imaginative attention, to intuit what it might be like to be an animal” (18). Oppenheimer (1993) also views Oliver’s vision of nature as void of the “pathetic fallacy”: “Mary Oliver’s poetry regards nature with a pioneer’s wary eye. Not for her enthusiasm, which often looks like hysteria these days, of the nature-can-do-no-wrong school of thought” (11). McNew (1989:n.p.), too, asserts: “for her, nothing exists as an unconscious object” (5), through her recognition that “everything has consciousness and even language of some sort”.

McEntyre (1994:6) views Oliver’s poetry as encompassing both contemplative and attentive elements which she links to a quotation by the Dalai Lama, who “calls on his followers to recognize life and holiness in ‘all sentient beings’” (9). Here, McEntyre uses the opportunity to mention how this statement offers a rather different perspective from that of the restrictive Judaeo-Christian tradition: “This stretches us beyond the boundaries of Judaeo-Christian anthropomorphism into an epistemology of observation and identification with those creatures that seem to us so wholly other – dogs, skunks, bears, whales, ferns, redwoods”.

Riley (2008:274) shares this viewpoint in her remarks on the poem, “Humpbacks”, in *American Primitive* (1983):

The poem opens with a recognition of the human desire to be at the center of all things, the human belief of the universe circling around human activities. Juxtaposed against this belief of humans at the center of the world are the mysterious forces of the earth that surround and support the human world.

The conclusion Riley draws from “Humpbacks” is that humans are not the exclusive centre of the cosmos, a realisation that gives way to the understanding of the Interconnection of all things: “As Oliver adeptly removes humans from the center, the poem moves forward to illustrate the coexistence of both humans and nonhumans” (274). Hammond (2008:11), a

Unitarian Universalist minister, clearly embraces the viewpoint that Oliver has abandoned any sense of anthropomorphism:

What is it about Mary Oliver's poetry that speaks to us as Unitarian Universalists? [...] Could it be that she is offering a corrective to our Judaeo-Christian myth of being created to have dominion over the world? That instead we are to be in partnership, dare I say as co-equals, in living on this planet.

A critic who has noted the same lack of anthropomorphising in Oliver's work is Tillinghast, in his review of *White Pine* (1994): "nature is not, in the jargon of the day anthropomorphized in the world of *White Pine*. Its otherness is acknowledged" (1995:289). In similar vein, De Mott writes: "she has set out a persona and voice which avoids indulgent or anthropomorphic excesses" (1979:186).

Essentially, what Bryson (1999) purports, through the "pathetic fallacy" prong of his approach, is that Oliver is an irrational poet who distorts reality for the reader. In addition, he reproduces a lengthy quotation by George P. Landow, of which the first part reads: "The problem with poetry which employs this emotional distortion is that it is too restricted: it perceives everything from a single point of view", which is akin to distorting "exterior reality", and "it represents truthful depictions of only an interior state" (143). Bryson goes on to say that the "fact" that she uses the "pathetic fallacy" is less important than *the manner* in which she uses it. He quotes examples from her poems in which he claims she is doing it quite consciously by using

ethically rhetorical gestures acknowledging that the poet is appropriating nature for her own ends; in these gestures Oliver emphasizes her awareness of the danger of assuming that we can actually understand, much less communicate, the consciousness of animals and other forms of wildlife (145).

Perhaps the most convincing argument which counteracts the "pathetic fallacy" notion, is put forward by Watts's (1995:45-46) Zen perspective:

This was a nineteenth-century idea that asserted that it is false and illegitimate to project human feelings onto the world [...] If that were true, it would be better to ban poetry from the world. But actually the moon does look around with delight when the poet does, because the same world that manifests itself as the moon also manifests itself as the poet. They go together. A world where there is a moon implies a world where there is a poet. A world where there is a poet implies a world where there is a moon. So, through the agency of the poet, the moon can in fact be said to look around with delight [...] We

should not take seriously the silly idea of the pathetic fallacy, which says that outside our skins everything is inhuman [...] All the world is human, and it depends not only on the existence of humanity in general but also on every individual in particular.

The main point Watts is debating here is the fact that, from a Zen Buddhist perspective, there is an inherent argumentative flaw underlying the pathetic fallacy: philosophers who articulated and continue to articulate this notion, do not take a holistic view into account. This implies that they proffer a traditional Judeo-Christian perspective in which dualistic thought prevails: nothing therefore is interconnected, but always separated out. In terms of Oliver's specific view in terms of nature / humans, a pathetic fallacy does not exist as the natural world extends to everything and everyone. One of Buddhism's major tenets is Interconnection, and not separation and alienation. The Buddhist reader would therefore not view Oliver's work as dealing with mere personification but that nature simply *is*. Chapter 4 deals with Interconnection and its related principles in detailed analysis.

In a chapter, entitled "Both sides of the Beautiful Water" (2005), Bryson communicates what he has, for the most part, asserted before: Oliver's "poetics of bodily identification" (83) and the use of the "pathetic fallacy". He states that Oliver is not a poet whose work is steeped in polemic nor "apparently energized by any overt environmental or political fervor". However, despite this qualified disclaimer, he argues, a few sentences later, that her poetry "proceeds from a conscious and purposeful environmental awareness" (76).

Bryson also claims that, throughout her poetry, Oliver "asserts her own preoccupation with the future, and with philosophical questions concerning meaning and purpose, [which] prevents her from fully experiencing the world around her, unlike other natural beings" (79). Although this is certainly true of the poem "One or Two Things" (*Dream Work* 1986:50-51), most of Oliver's poetry is centred in the *now*, a technique she employs to speak more directly to the reader. Oliver herself expresses an affinity with writing in the present: "The poem is an artefact; it's a made thing. It's an act born out of reflection, and therefore the simple historic past is suitable. But when you use the present tense, the poem may be felt on a more intense level by the reader" (Oliver in Weinreb 1991:142).

Bryson draws mainly on the same philosophers as he did in 1999, especially Husserl and Abram, both of whom are associated with phenomenological psychology. It is through the explanation of phenomenology that Bryson actually unearths the Buddhist elements in Oliver's poetry, although he does so implicitly. Like both Husserl and Abram, Bryson asserts that phenomenology "would turn toward 'the things themselves', toward the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy"; that, furthermore, phenomenology does not seek to explain

the world, but to “describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience” (82). This explanation certainly dovetails with Buddhism’s Right Effort, because “we set ourselves to notice what comes up as it comes up” (Brazier 2001:159). The essence of Right Effort is to establish mindfulness, which means observing everything that arises in the mind: “The practitioner notices what comes out of the storehouse of the mind as it emerges into consciousness. This is the awareness of feelings in the midst of feelings: the practice of meditation” (160).

Therefore, Bryson calls phenomenology “a science of *experience*”. According to Krüger (1995:6-7), one of Buddhism’s distinguishing characteristics that sets it apart from most faiths and religions, is its experiential basis: Buddhism is “non-dogmatic” and “practical”. It is, therefore, a “religion” not of “beliefs” but is rather experiential in proffering liberation from suffering, and a “changed experience of the world and existence”.

Bryson focuses mainly on bodily identification in Oliver’s work and not identification with the self, for “Oliver largely avoids overemphasizing the self” (82). There is a parallel notion in Buddhism, the No-self. After the Buddha reached enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*), he had become the vanguard of *anattā* which means “no-soul”, “no-self” or “no-substance”, the doctrine that denies the existence of a discrete personality that is constant or stable (Armstrong, 2000:112). This means, in essence, that the Buddha has overcome the habituated ego which is a great cause for human suffering; like the Buddha, everyone has the inherent potential to become an *anattā*.

Bryson also sets out to explain “intersubjectivity”, which is “inhabited by *multiple* subjectivities; the phenomenal field is no longer the isolate haunt of a solitary ego, but a collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as by oneself” (83). The Buddhist equivalent of this “collective landscape” encompasses the Interdependence or Interpenetration of all phenomena; nothing is solid or self-contained. Consequently, the Buddhist tradition is very much aware of present ecological concerns because it regards nature as a sentient being as much as it does people and animals. Therefore, it concentrates on a “practical attitude of benevolence and compassion towards all beings” (Krüger 1995:7).

Bryson’s accentuation of Oliver’s use of personification in most of her poetry seems to miss the rationale behind it; an essential part of this so-called “pathetic fallacy” is what Bryson calls Oliver’s acknowledgement of “her essential ignorance when it comes to understanding the nonhuman world” (93). However, it is debatable whether one of Oliver’s main poetic objectives is to illustrate her ignorance of the natural world by employing the “pathetic fallacy.” In an interview with Ratiner, (2002) she elucidates succinctly what function she feels poetry should embody: “The poem lies there and it waits for the 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” (61).

Christensen’s Ecocritical stance has a very different slant from Bryson’s two-pronged approach. In his thesis entitled *Spirit Astir in the World: Sacred Poetry in the Age of Ecology* (1999, n.p.), Christensen sets out to do close readings of Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, and Mary Oliver in order to illustrate a “cohesive cosmological narrative, grounded in contemporary theories of ecological interrelations and energy exchange”. More specifically, Christensen examines Oliver’s “poetics of presence, which teaches readers to imagine their inclusion in an interdependent pantheistic whole” (n.p.), which certainly, to the Buddhist reader, has overtones of Interconnectedness and Interdependence. Manousos (1980) also proposes a pantheistic view when he asserts that Oliver’s vision of the natural world is both “celebratory and religious in the deepest sense”. Nature is a “living temple” in which “the poet can discover the joy and terror, the sustaining truths and feelings that conventional religion and modern society seem unable to provide” (114). He calls her poems “hymns to the natural forces within and without us” (114).

Christensen asserts that the greatest influence on Oliver’s oeuvre has been the Transcendentalist movement, evidenced in her prose writings about Emerson. However, whether Oliver’s poetry itself, not her writing *about* Emerson, is an indication of an Emersonian influence remains debatable. Christensen also mentions John Elder tracing “her line of descent even further back, past the Transcendentalist writers to the Puritan cleric, Jonathan Edwards” (222). Since Transcendentalism has its origins in New England, Puritanism will always be an inevitable part of this literary epoch.

In addition to the Transcendentalist influence, Christensen refers to the “notable frequency” of Christian references in Oliver’s work but concedes to the likelihood of a Buddhist presence underlying her poetry. However, Christensen feels that there is not enough evidence to pinpoint a specific religious disposition present in her writing.

Where Buddhism is concerned, Christensen sometimes seems to confuse some terminology – which he traces exclusively to Buddhism – with pre-Buddhist ideas. An example of this is the term *ahimsa* or non-violence or harmlessness. Although *ahimsa* certainly is not ignored within Buddhist philosophy, Christensen ignores its Sanskrit origins – *ahimsā* – which dates back to the *Upaniṣads* (*Upanishads*), which are also known as the *Vedānta* (“the end of the *Veda*”), considered by scholars to be the basis of the Hindu religion. The primary religion it is ascribed to is, in fact, Jainism, a sixth-century religion, based on extreme asceticism that was founded by the Māhāvīra (The Great Hero). Jainism arose as a protest against the Vedic ethos of ritual

animal sacrifice because the Jains extend their “moral teaching not only to all human beings but to all life” (Parrinder 1957:42). *Ahimsa* is a term especially associated with Mahatma Gandhi, who, in essence, was a Hindu, but who was greatly influenced by the aesthetic practices of Jainism.

Another Buddhist term Christensen is using simplistically is Non-attachment: “Oliver reveals no interest in the Buddhist practice of letting go of desires” (225). This assertion is simplistic in the sense that “letting go of desires” is more of a Judaeo-Christian notion than a Buddhist one. If Christensen meant “letting go of the ego”, a key Buddhist element, he certainly does not mention this. As he focuses primarily on Gary Snyder, an explicitly Buddhist poet, even if the thesis centres on ecology, his lack of understanding of Buddhism is regrettable. Therefore, when Christensen says – “As Oliver’s poetry attempts to replace the old and dangerous myth of independent human existence with a tale of ecological inclusion, hers is a poetry that invokes the presence of our primary ecological communities while enacting our participation in them” (225) – he fails to mention that, in essence, he is talking about two interrelated Buddhist notions that lie at the heart of its philosophy: the Interdependence of all things and Dependent Co-arising, that are discussed in Chapter 4.

These two Buddhist notions again appear in Christensen’s article – “The Pragmatic Mysticism of Mary Oliver”: “Ecology discourages the belief that any organism exists independent of its ecosystem” (2002:135). Interconnectedness is especially emphasised – albeit through “ecologically informed eyes” – when Christensen looks at the underlying message of Oliver’s poetry by saying that she teaches readers to “embrace our participation in the community of all life” (136).

Elder (1996) probes deeper into the idea of ecological presence in Oliver’s poetry than either Christensen or Bryson because he regards her poems as not only observing nature in “an ecologically informed way” but also launches the idea that the “ecology of her poems presents her own emotions and ideas” (221). This means that she has an understanding of the transience of life or “recycling of life”, as Elder calls it, but, at the same time, Oliver “registers this reality” on both psychological and emotional levels (221).

Elder calls Oliver a poet with “visionary attentiveness” (*x*), and “sustained practice of attentiveness” (223) who stresses “wildness in a Thoreauvian sense” rather than in the wilderness sense (217). He goes on to say that Oliver’s poems, especially those in *House of Light* (1990), are manifestations of a “dual impulse, at once to acknowledge the intricate, dynamic realities of nonhuman life and to convey the intense meaning of those realities” (218).

Furthermore, Elder regards Oliver as having an affinity with Thoreau. Likewise, Knott (2002:167) links Oliver to Thoreau, although he focuses primarily on Oliver's attraction to nineteenth-century America in *American Primitive* (1983). However, Knott finds that Oliver's "visions of early America register a more acute sense of loss than one finds in Thoreau".

Elder makes the observation that Oliver's later proclivity to draw the reader into being present has been criticised because of its apparent lack of her earlier "solicitude for heritage and custom" (Barber 1993:237, quoted in Elder:224). It is also Barber who says of this trend in her later work: "the setting is drastically foreshortened, the present tense predominates, the reader is hurtled precipitously into the here and now" (Barber 1993:233, quoted in Elder). Knott's (2002:163) appraisal of Oliver's poetry supports Barber's claim that she evokes the wildness of nineteenth-century America only up to and including *American Primitive*, the volume which "offers Oliver's most compelling evocations of the lost worlds of nineteenth-century America". However, he also remarks upon the same volume's capacity of celebrating "a joyous, sensuous pleasure based upon empathy with wild nature, a contemporary American primitivism" (163). Although it would initially seem a negative comment on Oliver's poetry in the context of historical reference and tradition, when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, Barber's objection and Knott's, to a lesser degree, is utterly positive. Although not seen from a Buddhist context, Elder does appreciate *Nowness* and Interconnectedness in Oliver's poetry when he asserts: "What the shaman, or the poet, shows us is the immediate reality of connectedness, or kinship" (226).

Although O'Donnell recognises the Transcendentalist element in Oliver's poems, she ultimately regards the Ecocritical strain as being the underlying constituent of Oliver's oeuvre: "The strain most evident in the poems is that of environmentalism, a sub-genre deeply embedded in American literary tradition" (2008:38).

### THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Although Prothero (2008) works predominantly with Buddhist elements in Oliver's poetry, he concedes to having no interest in

converting Oliver into a Buddhist against her will. She is, as far as I can determine, a Christian, and far more likely to refer to her poems as 'alleluias' than 'meditations.' Her most recent work, moreover, particularly poems crafted since the death of her life partner, Molly Malone Cook, in 2005, evokes an array of explicitly Christian themes, not least God, the soul, loaves and fishes, and resurrection (45).

Davis (2009) also looks at how Oliver uses poetry as a means of exploring faith and describes her poems as “a fusion of Transcendental, Buddhist, and Christian” (606). He regards Oliver as having a mystic vision when she says, in the poem, “Poppies” (*Blue Iris*): “and that happiness / / when it’s done right, / is a kind of holiness” (605). Unlike Prothero’s predominantly Buddhist reading, Davis employs what seems to be a mystical Christian one: “Oliver is American poetry’s contemporary mystic”. In support of this assertion, Davis contends that Oliver does not operate within a traditional theology: “Clearly, the poet has no interest in a systematic or orthodox theology founded upon the footing stones of reason”. To support his argument, Davis quotes Wirzba: “a mystic is someone who is particularly open and attentive to the presence of God in this life and world. What the ‘presence of God’ means, or who the God is that we surrender ourselves to, is, of course, not something we can determine beforehand” (607).

In the light of the Wirzba’s quotation, it is not always clear who the “God” is that Davis refers to throughout the article when he talks about Oliver’s poems: “God” according to a mystical multiplicity of meanings, “God” in the predominantly Christian-oriented sense, or “God” embodied by the natural world or cosmos? The fact that Davis’s preeminent theme – the incarnation of God as embodied in Oliver’s poems – is supported by McFague’s assertion that the poems are predominantly theological, would flip the metaphorical coin in favour of a more Christian-flavoured perspective. Nevertheless, Davis’s discussion of Oliver’s poems never becomes dogmatic; he says that Oliver sidesteps “any theological debate about the orthodoxy of such an assertion [McFague’s] or the negotiated differences between pantheism and pan-en-theism” (608).

However, there is a tendency on Davis’s part to overemphasise the relationship between humans and God or the body of God in nature. In addition, Davis claims that Oliver has been consistently referring to Christ in her more recent work, although he starts off by saying that she has not been associated with this position for many years: “in the past fifteen years [she] has more consistently and willingly made use of [divine nomenclature], including particular reference to Christ” (608). Davis exaggerates, however; such references can be traced almost exclusively to *Thirst*, the volume in which she mourns the death of Molly.

Despite these assertions, Davis recognises that Mindfulness strongly figures within Oliver’s poetry: “Oliver’s ‘mindfulness’ has less to do with the ‘why’ of existence and more to do with the ‘how’ of all things” (608); and, “The poet quietly and gracefully prods the reader toward an attentiveness” (615). Although Davis does not explicitly employ the terms, “Interconnectedness” or “Interdependence”, he certainly describes these states in connection with Oliver’s work: “The poet argues for, even campaigns for, a recognition of the connection between our bodies and all other forms of physical life, as well as a firm belief that there is no ‘spiritual’ element outside of

the physical element, that the two must collapse into one sphere” (610); and after he quotes her in “Upstream” (*Blue Iris*) – “Do you think there is anything not attached by its unbreakable cord to everything else?” – he says:

This cord connects us to what the poet perceives as the unity of all things: flesh and spirit, animal and human, plant and stone. And she longs for the obedience to this idea, obedience to the understanding that we cannot fully exist without every other thing in the world and that every other thing in the world is precious, sacred, animate in ways beyond our ken (Davis 2009:611).

Another Buddhist theme prevalent in Oliver’s poetry that Davis recognises is being present in the moment: “Oliver’s poetry continually attempts to thrust the reader into a present moment where the uniqueness of that moment may lead to a surrender to wonder” (613).

Davis returns to the rationale of his article which he articulates as “incarnational poetics” which he connects with “the fluidity of borders, especially the borders between bodies” which “accentuates Oliver’s distinctive incarnational poetics” (615). Bryson (2005) echoes the notion of “fluidity of borders” by arguing that, through an “act of imaginative reunification, Oliver uses her poetry to insert her body into the body of the world” (86).

Although Davis uses a Christian vocabulary throughout his discussion of Oliver’s poetry, he is not asserting that she is a Christian writer *per se* but that, for the Christian critical reader, there are certain Christian elements that exist within her writing:

Oliver has made no proclamation of a turn toward Christ and writes of no radical conversion experience. Moreover, as one examines her work from 1963 to 2008, while it is evident that the poet becomes more comfortable with what might be characterized as ‘Christian language,’ her own ‘theology’ is far from doctrinaire or orthodox. What we are privileged to witness is a slow progression, a trying on of concepts and language from the Christian tradition, but never a denial, refusal, or abandonment of past thought (619).

Despite being a reader in the Christian tradition, Davis does concede to other influences apparent in her poetry such as Transcendentalist and Buddhist: “In her poetry and prose, Emerson still remains. The Buddhist’s call to empty oneself of the self still remains” (619). It is unfortunate, then, that Davis recognises only the one aspect of Buddhism – Emptiness/No-self – given the other Buddhist themes that he actually talks about in the very same article: Interconnectedness, attention/Mindfulness, and being present in the moment.

Mann's (2004) main rationale is to address what he calls a lacuna in the connecting nature of poets, like Mary Oliver, with "religious and mythological traditions in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient sources" (2004:x). He goes on to say that, although she is not a religious poet, she often uses "traditionally religious language. She speaks of 'souls' and 'spirits.' She talks of prayer, holiness, and nature's 'temple.' Her images remind us of priestly blessing, baptism, and sacramental food" (xiii).

Riggs (2008) is also cognisant of a Christian influence prevalent in Oliver's work, especially in *Thirst*: "Oliver's references to the 'Holy spirit' and 'Christ' present a more forthright, specifically Christian spirituality than her many earlier poems alluding to God and/or to spiritual issues" (98). However, Knott (2002:186) asserts that Oliver "balks at the notion of a Christian heaven" after death, but sees herself rather as becoming part "of the natural world she knows", as in "Gravel" from *The Leaf and the Cloud* (44, Section 8, lines 1-4):

Listen, I don't think we're going to rise  
in gauze and halos.  
Maybe as grass, and slowly.  
Maybe as the long-leaved, beautiful grass.

As part of this argument, Knott quotes Oliver in *Winter Hours* (1999:102): "What I mean by spirituality is not theology, but attitude", of which amazement is an integral part. Mann (2004:25) conveys an almost identical view toward attitude and amazement in Oliver's work: "Only after looking at both the darkness and the light in Oliver's poems can we adequately appreciate a final aspect of her attitude: amazement". Going a step further than Knott, Mann expands on the topos of amazement with another motif, admiration, culminating in attention, which, in turn, leads to gratitude (26). According to Knott, Oliver is more likely to "subvert the language of Christianity than to adapt to it" by substituting "paying attention for prayer" and through rejecting "notions of sin and penance" (2002:196).

### **BUDDHIST ELEMENTS**

Prothero (2008) may be the only critic who not merely mentions, but actually expands on the idea of Oliver's poetry in a Buddhist framework. He feels that the main Buddhist theme her work has a penchant for is Impermanence, which he describes as "an awareness of the transiency of things" (44). He goes on to say:

I wanted to ask her what she knows about Buddhism, and what she thinks of it, whether her poetic practice of attention – of looking and listening – is a kind of mindfulness, whether her attention to nature is informed by No-Self, and whether her ability to reckon with loss is rooted in an understanding of Impermanence (44-45).

However, Prothero rightly states that, although Oliver has produced poems such as “The Buddha’s Last Instruction” which has an explicit Buddhist theme, she is not a Buddhist poet *per se* but may have some Buddhist sensibilities. Although she has certain references in her poetry to what the Christian reader will regard as Christian themes, her viewpoints are not Christian in the traditional sense of the word: “she greets many of the standard preoccupations of Christian theology with a shrug (the afterlife, she writes, is a ‘foolish question’)” (45). In addition, there are also explicit references to Buddha in her work:

[...] her work is salt-and-peppered with references to Buddhism. An owl – one of her favourite subjects – is a ‘Buddha with wings’; turtles demonstrate ‘Buddha-like patience’; and a toad sitting implacable and immovable by the side of the path ‘might have been a Buddha’ (45).

Moreover, Prothero views Oliver as a mindful poet in the Buddhist sense – “mindfulness seems to be Oliver’s *métier*” – by paying mindful attention equally to life and death: “Her poetry seems as exquisitely calibrated as Buddhism itself to the hard realities of loss, which she calls ‘the great lesson’” (44).

Thurston (1999) argues for parallels between the poetry of Thomas Merton (a Trappist monk with a profound interest in Zen Buddhism) and Oliver. Merton was particularly influenced by the writings of D.T. Suzuki, who was a seminal figure in disseminating Zen in the West. Thurston is also one of the very few critics who recognises qualities such as non-duality in Oliver’s poems: “But Oliver’s relationship to the natural world goes beyond that of a subject looking at an object. Like many of Merton’s Zen poems, Oliver does not worry overmuch about subject/object dualism” (30). She observes Buddhist themes, such as Interconnectedness, in both Merton and Oliver’s poetry instead of construing therein a merging with nature as a female preoccupation which prejudices female writers: “Sometimes the speaker of the poem enters into the natural world and its processes, becomes one with them. She would, I think, agree with Merton “that we are first of all *part of nature*” (30).

A little later, Thurston (31) quotes Douglas Burton-Christie (1996), who talks about the element in Oliver’s poetry that is “akin to Duns Scotus’s insistence on *haeccitas*, the ‘thisness’ of reality, what Hopkins called ‘inscape’, the sense that, even in the humblest objects, an entire universe

burgeons forth". "Thisness" can be viewed as a synonym for the Zen Buddhist notion of the *suchness* of phenomena. Milstead (1998:29) provides the following explanation for *suchness*: "When Emptiness is realized, the Zen concept of suchness is also uncovered. To perceive an object as empty is to see it in its suchness".

Hosmer (1994) is another of the small number of critics who find Buddhist or Zen Buddhist elements in her work: "Oliver achieves a rare, Zen-like clarity and economy; it can be no accident that so many of her poems bring traditions of Asian calligraphy and painting to mind (640)". Russell (1997), too, finds Buddhism, coupled with pantheism, when reading Oliver's work: "Her poems are both accessible and spiritually uplifting in a Buddhist or pantheistic vein" (22). Unfortunately, Russell does not pursue this train of thought much further because her focus is mainly on the perceived gender issues of Oliver's life and work as well as those of her audience.

Although not a focus in her thesis, Riggs (2008) refers to "an Eastern flavour" in Oliver's earlier work that she links with Oliver's visit to Japan in 1984. Riggs quotes Ratiner questioning Oliver about a possible adoption of Buddhism to which Oliver retorted: "I had been reading about Buddhism, I was reading about the meditative way of living. I think sometimes my poems have a sort of Eastern circularity ... I do think nature is the text of the meditative process" (Ratiner in Riggs:98).

## **BUDDHIST THEMES**

It is Riley (2008) who consistently emphasises the following themes throughout her overview of Oliver's work: (1) paying attention; (2) living in the present, which includes "powerful moments of transcendence" (280) or epiphanous flashes of consciousness; (3) Interconnection; and (4) Impermanence, together with Non-attachment. Other critics, reviewers, and interviewers have found comparable themes, which will be discussed in a summative manner. It is important to understand that most critics' focal points reside in literary traditions already discussed, such as Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Feminism, Ecocriticism, and the like, rather than specifically in Buddhism. However, the manner in which they describe the themes is very similar to what one would find in Buddhist literature.

### **1. PAYING ATTENTION**

Oliver's citing Flaubert is key to her understanding of paying attention and observing the world, which are elements of Buddhist mindfulness. In an interview with Swanson, Oliver says: "Flaubert says something wonderful: 'Talent is long patience, and originality an effort of will and of intense observation.' I lived for years with that, trying for intense observation, believing in it. Well, I still do!" (Oliver in Swanson 1990:7). The same quotation from Flaubert appears in Ratiner's interview with Oliver (2002:48). In *A Poetry Handbook* (1994), Oliver restates this particular Flaubert quotation, which she explains as "how well do you look and see things of this world?" (121). When interviewed by Olander (1994:4), Oliver elaborated on the quotation by extrapolating it to the specifics of writing: "I love the line of Flaubert about observing things very intensely, and I think our duty – a somber word – as writers begins not with our own feelings, but with the powers of observing".

Thurston (1999) remarks on how Oliver's attentiveness exerts an influence on the reader: "It is my sense that the attentiveness of the poet to what is *there* also allows her to teach us something of what *might* be there, just below our own level of comprehension" (32). Knott (2002) links this attentiveness to Impermanence and the wilderness in Oliver's "remarkable capacity to 'pay attention' to details that reflect the violence and decay as well as the loveliness of wild nature" (163), and to mastering "paying attention to the natural world and learning to recognize and identify with its wildness" (167). According to Knott, another important trend in Oliver's poetry is the inadequacy of language to describe "vision and rapture", both of which are part of the natural world she observes: "she has shown a more complicated awareness of the ways that self-consciousness and an attachment to language separate us from the life of nature" (176), while overcoming "the gap between our language-bound consciousness and the primal world" (177).

Hammond (2008) argues that Oliver's poetry captures a sense of sacredness through Oliver's alertness to the world, and links this alertness with prayer: "Paying attention is her form of prayer within the realm of God called nature" (5). Rienstra (2005:n.p.) contends that Oliver is "simply doing what she does well: practicing loving attention to the world".

Riley (2008) identifies *American Primitive* (1983) as one of Oliver's volumes that is particularly imbued with the spirit of Mindfulness: in its "belief that the unknowable enables humans to pay attention and look carefully at the world around them". Riley (2008) remarks on Oliver's formalist beginnings, but says that her early volumes already anticipated "the act of paying attention closely" (272). Further, Riley links being attentive to the next theme, being fully present in the here-and-now: "These actions enable humans to live presently and fully" (275).

## 2. BEING IN THE HERE-AND-NOW

One aspect of being fully present in the present is to appreciate the moment; Riley (2008) regards Oliver's *Dream Work* (1986) as a volume that especially emphasises the vacillation between the miraculous and ordinary moments of everyday life: "The miracles of everyday life are what are important, even though life itself may be full of meaning in one moment and completely unremarkable in another" (276). Davis (2009:615) shares this sentiment when he contends that Oliver's poetry is so popular because of its "honest gaze into the face of mystery, most often found in the mundane". Citing Levertov, he asserts that what readers are usually drawn to is "the revelation of the wonderful in the apparently ordinary" (Davis 2009:616). Knott sees this trend of what he calls "finding eternity in the moment" (2002:182) as something that was a feature in Oliver's poetry at the time his book, *Imaging Wild America*, was written.

*American Primitive* (1983) also contains what Riley calls "epiphanies – new understandings of the self and how to live fully" (274). In a vein similar to Riley, Burton-Christie (1996) remarks on Oliver's focus on "the details of the ordinary, the everyday" (79). What Riley calls the "epiphanies" embedded in Oliver's work, Knott (2002) sees as "unexpected moments of intimacy" to which she responds in an attitude of "alertness and receptivity" (180). In Zen Buddhist terms, these "epiphanies" and "moments of intimacy" are likened to the experience of *kenshō*, a sudden moment of enlightenment. Harris (2008) argues that Oliver "uses the lyric voice to explore the significance of her mundane epiphanies and inverts the Romantic expectation of the sublime moment" (9). More specifically, Oliver's "speaker's moments of awareness subvert the lyric tradition of grandiose spiritual epiphanies and personal disclosures" (18).

Similarly, Hammond (2008) draws attention to Oliver's ability to communicate being in the here-and-now in her poems: "Mary Oliver listens to the voice of nature in her being present to it" (6). In order to be fully present, the mind needs silence from its non-stop thinking processes, something that is taught, especially the mystical or contemplative traditions within some religions. Here, Hammond quotes a teacher in the Hindu tradition called Gangaji who essentially teaches quietude of the mind, something that is synchronous with the teachings of Buddhism: "She teaches that quieting the thoughts of our mind enables us to hear the essence of our being and not our thoughts about our being" (6).

### 3. INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Mann (2004) argues that Interconnection of all things, especially between humans and the natural world constitutes a central theme in Oliver's poems: "For Oliver, the voices of nature (things animate *and* inanimate) are manifestations of a *communal* conversation" (16). In addition, he addresses the dichotomous or dualistic relationship of "animate" and "inanimate": "the presumed dichotomy between humans as subjects and everything else as objects disappears" (16); and, Oliver "describes the moment when she is no longer simply an objective observer but a subjective participant" (17). A specific Buddhist link Mann makes in the context of this "intersubjectivity" in Oliver's poems is the Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hahn's analogous phrases, "inter-are" and "interbeing": "'To be' is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to be with every other thing" (Nhat Hahn 1991:95-96).

Interconnection is another theme Riley (2008) returns to when discussing Oliver's work. She remarks: "*Twelve Moons* represents a significant turning point in Oliver's career. What emerges in these poems is a desire for interconnection between human and nonhuman" (273).

McNew (1989:n.p.) also identifies the same theme when she writes: "she [Oliver] is a part of natural vastness that subsumes her human individuality". Very articulately, this assertion sums up the theme of Interconnection of all sentient beings and phenomena as well as Dependent Co-arising or Dependent Origination which form the basis of the notion of Interdependence. Dependent Origination implies that all phenomena are the products of internal causes. This means that "each phenomenon is the cause of a further phenomenon, which in its turn will go on to be a cause of something else, and so on, *ad infinitum*" (Snelling 2000:29). Therefore, Dependent Co-arising or Dependent Origination would reject the idea of an inherent, or independent, existence because it would be a "quality that we project onto persons and phenomena; existence independent of causes and conditions, parts, or the mind labelling a phenomena (*sic*)" (Chodron 2001:152).

Another example of Interconnection or Interdependence is found in "Three poems about honey which depend on imagining the food as a link to wood, bees, and flowers" which McNew links to "magical power" and "visionary knowledge" (1989:n.p.).

### 4. IMPERMANENCE AND NON-ATTACHMENT

One of the main articles that deal with Oliver's link with Impermanence is Burton-Christie's "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver" (1996). Its main impetus is a

meditation on “a *memento mori*” (77) that includes the act of paying attention and living in the moment: “cultivating and preserving the only spiritual awareness that matters – an awareness of life’s endless vitality and beauty”, and “This *memento mori* is really a meditation on the present moment” (78). He also remarks – as quite a number of Oliver critics have in the past – that Oliver’s work has not been given the “sustained attention” it “richly deserves” (79), especially among scholars of the religious community. It is not clear whether Burton-Christie is referring to the religious community as an umbrella term that encompasses most religious traditions or specifically to Christianity.

Buddhist teachers or authors operating within the Buddhist context or quoted in Buddhist magazines such as *Tricycle* and *Shambhala Sun*, especially those in the United States, refer steadily to Oliver’s work, although these extracts are rarely well integrated with what the writers wish to say, whether in an article or dharma talk. Consequently, they can be utilised only as points of reference or academic debate. Examples of Buddhist references to Oliver are in Zenkei Blanche Hartman (2005); Jon Kabat-Zinn (2007); Joseph Goldstein (2009); and Sensei Nancy Majo Baker (2010). Oliver has also featured in dharma talks and informal conversations by my own teachers, Kittisaro and Thanissara (Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah), and Jennifer Woodhull (Shambhala tradition).

Riley (2008) remarks on the realisation of the transience and fragility of all life and, more specifically, on how Oliver conveys this to the reader: “Oliver does not merely discuss loss, she directs readers on how to handle loss – how to understand loss – how to understand that loss, like death, is simply a natural part of living” (275). Riley also finds in Oliver’s poetry “the realization that death is a natural part of life” (272).

Manousos (1980) links the sense of loss with the natural cycles of nature in a reading of *Twelve Moons* (1979): “natural cycles and processes, equating them with what is deepest and most enduring in human experience” (114) and lunar cycles which are said to have an influence on the human psyche. The twelve poems with “moon” in their respective titles are indicative of “a different phase of experience” that mirrors natural and lunar cycles.

Alford (1988) alludes specifically to Impermanence in his apt subtitle, “Modern Renewal through Mortal Acceptance”. This subtitle already alludes to Impermanence (“Mortal”) and Non-attachment (“Acceptance” of this mortality). In a fashion similar to Manousos, Alford focuses in particular on Impermanence by looking at the “natural cycles of birth, decay, and death as flourishing all in life” (1988:283). A contradictory argument within his article is that Oliver sees immortality and mortality as binary oppositions: “To Oliver, the reconciliation of man’s desire for

immortality and his experience of mortality depends on his willingness to recognize them as polarities” (285). However, in the same paragraph, Alford talks about

the very sense of connectedness she celebrates in *Twelve Moons*, a unity existing between the human and natural worlds. Through a personal psychic journey, man must deny and eliminate the self-conscious ‘I’ that seeks immortality and open up his sensual perception to the mortal kinship between the human and the natural.

Ironically, this contradictory argument serves to emphasise the link between Oliver’s thematic preoccupations and Buddhism. In this specific instance, the ego – “the self-conscious ‘I’” which always denies Impermanence – seeks “immortality”, an action that perpetuates the Second Noble Truth in Buddhism. This Truth states that suffering is caused by clinging or being attached to phenomena that are impermanent. Once this Truth is assimilated by the enlightened mind, suffering is ceased.

An apt example illustrating the transcendence of suffering in Oliver’s poetry that Alford quotes, can be found in the poem, “Entering the Kingdom”, and, more particularly, in the line “To learn something of being nothing” (285). This “being nothing” is not a nihilistic reference to self-obliteration but rather evokes the concept or idea of No-self which is overcoming the ego that causes habitual suffering. Another reference suggesting both No-self and Non-attachment is: “The acceptance of the hard truths of mortality also provides a reforming perspective on daily dying – the progressive inward death of one’s self-consciousness” (287). Alford’s choice of words – “Self-consciousness” – illustrates the importance in Buddhism of integrating the ego, which is imperative for accepting Impermanence. A further quotation on the death of the ego is the “transformation of self to selflessness” (288); ‘selflessness’ means the enlightened mind minus the self. Kumin (1993) calls Oliver “an indefatigable guide to the natural world, particularly to its lesser known aspects” as well as being one who is “aware of the precarious balance between life and death” (1993:19).

Thomson (2002) links Impermanence in Oliver’s work expressly with the elegiac tradition, and asserts that her poetry warrants attention because it is not devoted to “a surrogate nature benevolently smiling on the human race nor to an implacable grief that resists healing and succor” (160). He contends that her poems do not avoid concepts like sorrow but that they “recognize in sorrow part of the pattern of the natural world” (160). This pattern, Thomson continues, is nature’s “death-into-life-into-death function” which celebrates the “communal essence of the world” (157). Adopting a different stance, McNew (1989:n.p.) foregrounds the food chain in nature in a brief analysis of Oliver’s “Bone Poem” which “celebrates the eventual

'equity' in relation between raptor and victim that happens when bones decay into leaf and become food for other animals".

O'Donnell regards *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures* (2008) as having a darker thematic preoccupation than previous volumes, emphasising death and subsequent loss of all sentient beings: "Just as the earth and its splendid animals suffer death and loss, so, too, must human beings, the poet included" (2008:39).

Apart from themes that are very much Buddhist in their various descriptions, there are other contexts in which critics explore Oliver's work. According to Riley, the volume subsequent to *Twelve Moons, American Primitive* (1983), is steeped in the pastoral lyrical tradition, which came to a close in the nineteenth century, but which was resurrected in the nature poetry of the twentieth century executed in free verse: "The tradition of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pastoral lyric echoes as Oliver continues the tradition of inserting questions that rest just beneath the surface of the poem: What role does nature play in humans' lives? Do humans control nature?" (274).

In a review of *Red Bird*, O'Donnell (2008:39) also likens Oliver's poetry to the pastoral poetic tradition: "Oliver emulates her predecessors in the practice of American pastoral poetry, most notably Whitman and Frost" (39). Likewise, Selman (1993) categorises Oliver's poetry as being pastoral: "Oliver's passionate medium is almost always the pastoral" (81). Selman goes on to draw comparisons between Oliver and Van Morrison: "she and Van share a connection to a pastoral life that seems far away (to say the least) from our collective urban grasp" (82).

Another context which Graham (1998:360) draws upon is the Native American tradition which fits with the predominant themes of *American Primitive* (1983), but not always with either previous or subsequent volumes. However, Graham does read an important Buddhist theme in Oliver's poetry via the Native American tradition: the Interdependence and the equality of all sentient beings:

Native Americans focus less on the individual than Westerners do; they see the individual as part of a whole which includes not just the community, but the natural world and the cosmic. All life is important; no hierarchies exist to separate humans from or elevate them above the rest of creation.

Fast (1993) proposes a socio-political reading of Oliver's poetry within the context of white colonisation of Native Americans:

Oliver's confrontation with her historically rooted discomfort, and her imaginative *rapprochement* with Indian ways of being in nature, constitute the political grounding of the poems I will discuss here, and contribute to the intensity of many others where politics is not directly evident but where she seeks a holistic relationship to the world (59).

Although *American Primitive* (1983) addresses certain Native American issues, Oliver does not regard herself as operating from within this specific socio-political ethos: "I don't actually recognize within myself a sustained interest, say, in Native American culture" (Weinreb 1991:147).

Azcuy (2003:n.p.) takes a completely different stance from most critics; her study compares Mary Oliver's and Louise Glück's individual self-discovery based on Tolstoy's philosophies: "Youth searches for love and comprehension; Middle-life questions consequence and death; Age finds wisdom, desires spiritual understanding, and searches for God". According to Azcuy, the writing process of both poets illuminates "love, suffering, death, spirit, and hopefulness in landscape that represents self".

No literature review would be complete without bringing attention to two examples of the fierce criticism that the poet has received during her writing career. One such a critic is Barber (1993), who does not find Oliver's poetry august at all and has no scruples in saying so. Throughout his review – which is not without its circumlocutory verbiage – of her *New and Selected Poems, Volume One*, Barber sets out to attenuate Oliver's style, form, and thematic preoccupations.

The most unfortunate feature of Barber's review is that he continuously and unfairly compares Oliver's poetry to other poets' poetry, a futile venture that sets her poetry up for failure from the outset. According to Barber, Oliver "rambles in the wild", and does not have the "meditative rigor of A.R. Ammons's strolls over dunes and shore"; her so-called "extravagant embrace of the natural world wants nothing of Gary Snyder's Buddhistic vigilance and restraint"; to add insult to injury, her "animals are not the allegorical, emblematic beasts of Moore or Bishop" (234-235). The last comparison especially reveals the superficiality of Barber's reading of Oliver's oeuvre: "emblematic figures" are exactly what she links with poetry as she asserts in *Rules for the Dance* (73): "Poetry is rich with objects of the natural world used as images, comparisons, or emblematic figures"; similarly, in *Long Life* (87), Oliver states that she considers the world to be emblematic as well as real. In her interview with Olander (1994:4), Oliver talks about the powers of observation in the genesis of her poems: "I see something, later in the poem it strives to be emblematic, not just an instance"; and in the Swanson interview (1990:6), Oliver affirms and

stresses emblematic usage in her own poetry: “Of course, as I’ve said, I always felt I was using the natural world emblematically”.

Returning to Barber’s first comparative remark – her “rambles in the wild” which do not have the meditative rigour of Ammons’s “strolls over dunes and shore” – is yet another conjecture which, when reading what Oliver writes about her walking, is completely refutable: “Walks work for me. I enter some arena that is neither conscious nor unconscious [...] this is not a walk to arrive; this is a walk that’s part of a process” (Ratiner 2002:42-43).

Barber (236) perceives Oliver’s poetry as becoming “increasingly mechanical”:

Most often composed across jaggedly indented quatrains or in tumbling verse paragraphs abristle with Dickinsonian dashes, their standard contract calls for them to open in riveted observation, shift abruptly as the speaker questions or comments upon the scene, and close, after a more or less uniform page and a half, with a burst of exclamation or a flash of immanence.

It is unfortunate that Barber has not done his homework regarding the specific poetic devices Oliver utilises to draw the reader into her poems: “I prefer poems with a narrative – or better yet, two or three stories. I like to switch from rhetoric to a sudden vernacular phrase, or a heavily lyric passage, or throw out a question. Such devices involve the listeners [and, by implication, also readers] and draw them in” (Swanson 1990:7).

Lastly, it is ironic that the very criticism Barber levels against Oliver’s language which is “increasingly beholden to humdrum adjectival intensifiers” – he himself is culpable of: in just four pages, Barber uses no fewer than ninety adjectives or adjectival phrases.

Another vocal critic of Oliver’s poetry is Voros (1999), who starts her review of *New and Selected Poems, Volume One* (1992) with a blanket statement, which she does not explore further or substantiate: “Mary Oliver exhibits a peculiar lack of genuine engagement with the natural world” (1996:n.p.). Oliver has always had a particular engagement with the natural world, so much so that she has been criticised for writing too much about nature and not enough about humans. An especially telling statement about her natural engagement is in *Winter Hours* (1999:101): “The man who does not know nature, who does not walk under the leaves as under his own roof, is partial and wounded”.

In another sweeping generalisation, Voros insists that “the persona of the poems is always levelling a reproachful gaze and firing bumptious questions at the reader”. This statement is in

direct opposition to what Oliver believes free verse – the form she prefers – should be. In *A Poetry Handbook* (1994), she places particular stress on how the tone of the free verse poem differs from that of the prosodic one: “Now the poet was being called down from the lectern and invited, as it were, into the privacy of each reader’s home. The poet was expected to be more friendly – less ‘teacherly’”; and “Speech entered the poem. The poem was no longer a lecture, it was time spent with a friend. Its music was the music of conversation” (69-70). Later in her review, Voros contradicts her own statement by saying that, instead of being “reproachful”, Oliver’s poems “pose chummy, conspiratorial questions to the reader”. Voros seems unsure whether Oliver’s questions are “chummy [and] conspiratorial” or “bumptious”.

A further criticism steeped in subjectivity that Voros levels at Oliver’s poetry is that “natural elements shimmer and glimmer and blaze and shine”. The poet talks specifically about her intentions when she writes about nature in *Winter Hours* (1999:101): “I don’t mean nature as ornamental, however scalloped and glowing it may be”.

Voros continues in this mode when she purports that Oliver’s “being ‘stalled in happiness’ is troubling, as though we moderns were in the uniquely awkward position of simply having nothing to do with ourselves when out in Nature except walk around, gawk, and exult”. On this subject, Oliver states: “I don’t mean nature as calamity, as vista, as vacation or recreation. I don’t mean landscapes in which we find rest and pleasure – although we do – so much as I mean landscapes in which we are reinforced in our sense of the world as a mystery” (*Winter Hours*:101). Another of Voros’s insouciant observations is that Oliver is urging “not to see the world itself for what it is, but to see through it”. Mann (2004:19) regards Oliver as seeing exactly both sides of the natural world, and, by implication, life: “Just as there is nothing ‘cute’ about the inhabitants of Oliver’s world, so there is no room for sentimentality. In particular, there is no tolerance for seeing only the beauty of nature. In fact, one cannot fully appreciate the beauty unless one also acknowledges the brutality or even the ‘terror’”.

Voros also asserts that Oliver’s poetry speaks of isolating humans from nature: “Doesn’t ecological wholeness depend on interaction and interdependence?” There are too many examples of Interdependence in Oliver’s poetry and essays to quote, but the following paragraph sums up Oliver’s view on this subject (*Winter Hours*:102):

I would say that there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and our chances are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family; and there is no decency or sense in honouring one thing, or a few things, and then closing the list. The pine tree, the leopard, the Platte River, and

ourselves – we are at risk together, or we are on our way to a sustainable world together. We are each other's destiny.

Both Voros and Barber are prescriptive in their criticism of Oliver's poetry, saying, in effect, that her work does not satisfy their own personal yardsticks for competent poetry. Any poet is likely to be deemed a failure if one gathers enough diverse yardsticks against which to measure his or her achievement.

Unlike Barber or Voros, most of Oliver's critics present more balanced views of her poetry, based on their various literary critical angles which include Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Feminism, Lesbian criticism, Ecocriticism, Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Buddhism. In order to contextualise the American literary tradition of which Oliver forms a part, I have provided short overviews of English Romanticism as well as Transcendentalism. Because I am arguing that Oliver has a strong Buddhist element in her work, I have also looked at the impact the Chinese and Japanese haiku exerted on the development of American poetry, especially during the Imagist period (*circa* 1909 to 1918) which later culminated in poetry informed by Zen Buddhism (mainly commencing in the 1950s with the Beat poets).

Furthermore, I have surveyed studies that have compared poets such as Eliot, Williams, and Stevens as having Buddhist and/or Zen Buddhist elements in their poetry. It is important here to note that all the authors agree on the fact that these poets were not self-proclaimed Buddhists, but had been influenced by Eastern philosophies to such an extent that it is possible to find a strong Buddhist current running through their poems. Moreover, other authors have found a strong correlation between Transcendentalism and Zen in the works of Emerson and Whitman.

Noticeable, too, is the fact that most extant criticism, regardless of literary tradition, indicates themes in Oliver's work that are analogous to Buddhist themes such as (1) paying attention; (2) living in the present or here-and-now; (3) Interconnectedness; and (4) Impermanence, coupled with Non-attachment. It is on the first identified theme, paying attention, that Chapter 3 will centre, albeit through the broader Buddhist notion of Mindfulness (*sati*), of which paying attention forms an inextricable part.

**CHAPTER 3\***  
**“THE ONLY CHANCE TO LOVE THIS WORLD”:**  
**MINDFULNESS**

*Let me keep company always with those who say  
 “Look!” and laugh in astonishment,  
 and bow their heads.*

Oliver (*Evidence*:62).

The aim of this chapter is to explore some of the ways in which the Buddhist theme of Mindfulness (*smṛti* in Sanskrit and *sati* in Pāli) is manifest in Oliver’s poems. To this end, I will examine the following three corollaries of Mindfulness: (1) Beginner’s Mind (called *shoshin* in Zen Buddhism), (2) Mindful Awareness, and (3) *Nowness* which constitutes being fully present in the here-and-now. These three corollaries are by no means exhaustive. Mindfulness constitutes a broad theme within Buddhism, and different corollaries may be emphasised by the various Buddhist traditions, schools, and sects. I stress these particular corollaries of Mindfulness because they are especially pertinent to her poetry. Furthermore, I will illustrate how they inform Oliver’s amazement at, and love relationship with, the natural world, which constitute major topoi in her work. Although these corollaries will be discussed under separate headings to facilitate a clearer understanding of how each is revealed in her poems, it needs to be emphasised that they are not mutually exclusive but interrelated constituents of Mindfulness.

Mindfulness has become a term increasingly used by both the scientific community and the self-help publishing industry. A plethora of scientific articles explores the effect of Mindfulness, especially through sitting meditation, postulating outcomes such as a reduction in psychopathologies in research subjects by measuring neurological activity and the likes (Austin, 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 1996; Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society). Although this type of research may be valuable for the advancement of science, it is concerned mostly with *outcomes* rather than with *explaining* and *teaching* Mindfulness. Furthermore, the environment in which subjects are tested is by and large artificial, which is ironic because Mindfulness is usually a practice that constitutes everyday life and activities. On the more popular side, authors such as Eckhard Tolle (2008, 2011) and Deepak Chopra (1989, 2010) do render Mindfulness more accessible to readers but do not always explain its origins explicitly because their target market is mostly Western readers who, in many instances, are from

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religions that do not necessarily condone Eastern influences (although, to Tolle's credit, he does mention some Buddhist elements, albeit not Mindfulness, in *A New Earth*).

In these cases, the original meaning of Mindfulness is somewhat obscured because the emphasis falls rather on other positive psychology concepts. Mindfulness is not always called Mindfulness either. Of course, one could argue that even an obscured understanding of Mindfulness is better than none, constituting a starting point to its understanding. Nonetheless, I undertake to lift the veil of obscurity that exists about Mindfulness by placing it in its Eastern (Buddhist) context.

From a Buddhist perspective, Right Mindfulness constitutes the seventh limb of the Noble Eightfold Path and is therefore one of Buddhism's central practices (For the reader unfamiliar with this Path, consulting Nairn 2002 and Brazier 2001 will be of great assistance). David Brazier (2001:164), founder of Western Pureland Buddhism, aptly summarises Mindfulness when he writes: "To be mindful is to keep in mind". Inherent in the terms *mindfulness* and *to keep in mind* is *mind*, which is the bedrock of Buddhist philosophy and practice. In the *Dhammapada*, which constitutes a central Buddhist scripture, the opening line of Verse 1 explains the central importance of *mind* most succinctly: "Everything proceeds from mind" (The Mother 2004:3). This assertion comprises the underlying notion that Buddhist practice entails the conscious studying and observing of one's mind.

In the Eastern philosophical sense, *mind* is more inclusive than its usage and associations in a traditional Western sense; however, as Hick points out "the fundamental alternative to a set of Western assumptions is not another set of Western assumptions but the genuinely different presuppositions of much Eastern thought. Such an alternative occurs in one of its most powerful and thoroughgoing forms within Buddhism" (Hick in Abe 1985:ix). This is especially true of Zen Buddhism: "Zen has as its basic assumptions a world of wholeness that is obscured with illusion as a result of dualistic thinking" (Milstead 1998:5-6).

Some strands of Eastern thinking (here, the East refers in a broad, generic – some might regard it as a popular simplification – way to India, China, and Japan) do not regard the intellect as *mind's* only component, but rather more holistically. This particular non-dualistic premise is evident in the fact that Mindfulness is not just an intellectual exercise when studying the mind but also entails mindfulness practice that the practitioner *experiences*. At the same time, Mindfulness comprises more than just a spiritual exercise and experience but becomes essential on the level of the practitioner's everyday life: "Practicing mindfulness in Buddhism means to perform consciously all activities, including everyday, automatic activities such as

breathing, walking, etc., and to assume the attitude of ‘pure observation’, through which clear knowledge, i.e., clearly conscious thinking and acting, is attained” (Shambhala 1991:145).

As can be seen from this description, Mindfulness cannot be separated from the word “consciousness”, which comprises a spirit of Mindful Awareness. A further definition of Mindfulness in the Zen context is posited by Alan Watts: “The aim of Zen is to bring about a transformation of consciousness, and to awaken us from the dream world of our endless thoughts so that we can experience life as it is in the present moment” (2000: ix). Important here is that a practitioner cannot experience Mindfulness when focused in the past or future; it is only the present moment that contains the essence of Mindfulness.

Therefore, Mindfulness is a transformative experience because awareness of the moment brings about a conscious awakening of the mind. This waking-up experience is crucial in Buddhism; the root “budh” means to wake up; therefore the word “Buddha” means “Awakened One”. It is important to remember, therefore, that, in the context of Mahayana Buddhism, it is not just the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who underwent a transformation of consciousness that lead to *nirvāṇa* but that everyone has the inherent capacity for waking up.

### 1. BEGINNER’S MIND (*SHOSHIN*)

*Watch, now, how I start the day  
in happiness, in kindness.*

Oliver (*Why I Wake Early*:3)

In order to awaken to the present moment, one has to cultivate Beginner’s Mind, which the Japanese refer to as *shoshin*. Shunryu Suzuki describes Beginner’s Mind as follows:

The innocence of the first inquiry – just asking what you are – is BEGINNER’S MIND. The mind of the beginner is needed throughout Zen practice. It is the open mind, the attitude that includes both doubt and possibility, the ability to see things fresh and new. It is needed in all aspects of life. Beginner’s mind is the practice of Zen mind (1970:13-14).

It is this innocence of Beginner’s Mind that Mary Oliver employs in her poetry but which may be read as naiveté by the uninformed reader (of both Oliver’s poetry and of Beginner’s Mind): “Oliver’s craft is deceptively simple – an emotional intensity that speaks clearly and directly to the reader. More appropriately, James Dickey characterizes it as remarkable, creating richly complex poetry without throwing complexities in the way of the reader” (Alford 1988:283). Beginner’s Mind is further evident in the specific style Oliver utilises to engage readers in her

poems by having a fresh perspective on the world she observes: “Oliver does not rely on an esoteric language or a private set of symbols. Her language is not arcane; her meanings are not hidden” (Thurston 1999:30).

In addition, Oliver believes that the role of contemporary poetry, which naturally includes her own, differs a great deal from stylised, formalised metrical poetry which stresses formal tone and formal structures. According to Oliver, poetry has become more like conversational speech, which, when read, “would feel spontaneous, as true to the moment, as talk in the street, or talk between friends” (*A Poetry Handbook*:70). This particular style dovetails in with the idea of Zen being “an ancient way of teaching, using the simplest language and situations of everyday life. This means the student should teach himself” (Suzuki 1970:14). The language of Buddhism is therefore vital to Oliver’s stance about using undemanding language in order for readers to become participants in the poem. Further, the idea of participation connects with one of Buddhism’s key tenets: “The purpose of studying Buddhism is not to study Buddhism, but to study ourselves” (Suzuki 1970:76).

In “When Death Comes” (*Wild Geese*:73), lines 20 to 27 articulate the spirit of Beginner’s Mind:

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don’t want to find myself sighing, and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

First, the topos of amazement is directly stated in line 21, and is linked with the ability of Beginner’s Mind to be that “kind of mind that’s not already made up. The mind that’s just investigating, open to whatever occurs, curious. Seeking, but not with expectation or grasping” (Hartman 2001: n.p.). Furthermore, amazement is reinforced by the metaphor of the “bride married” to it. Significant here is the image of a bride. Supposedly, a bride is on the threshold of her marriage, a newly married woman for whom married life is in the “honeymoon phase”. Therefore, she is essentially a beginner, a novice in the union of marriage. Who is this “bride” wedded to in this poem? Amazement. Therefore, the honeymoon phase for this bride is perpetual – lasting “all my life” – “just as Beginner’s Mind always retains an element of that which is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgements and prejudices” (Hartman

2001:n.p.). Linking here with the bride image is: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few” (Suzuki 1970:21). A bride still perceives the marriage as having many possibilities whereas a married woman of a few years has usually become “an expert”, probably realising that certain marital patterns and interpersonal relationships will not change or materialise.

Oliver takes the idea of marriage a step further in line 22: by linking line 21 with line 22, she in fact weds the female and male aspects of this union, bringing balance to this “marriage” by giving both aspects equal resonance. The bridegroom is married to “the world” and here Oliver fulfils a prevalent theme in her poetry: “how to love this world”. Examples of poems in which this theme predominates are “The Lover of Earth Cannot Help Herself” (*Why I Wake Early*:17) and “To Begin With, the Sweet Grass” in which the last line reads: “Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world” (*Evidence*:39). The pinnacle of this particular theme is reached in “October”: “Look, I want to love this world / as though it’s the last chance I’m ever going to get / to be alive / and know it” (*Blue Iris*:63, Part 6, lines 1-4). Chapter 5 comprises a detailed discussion and explication of “loving this world” as thematic material in Oliver’s poetry.

However, despite Oliver’s explicit love of the world, the possibility exists for the Western reader to identify a certain paradoxical juxtapositioning of images in “bride, married to amazement” since “bride” seems to be a concrete image or metaphor where amazement is more inclined towards abstraction. To the Buddhist reader, these images would not be paradoxical since *abstract* and *concrete* are merely concepts or perceptions held by the individual and which, ultimately, may differ from person to person. Similarly, Oliver has the same propensity toward the interweaving of concrete and abstract images within her poetry, something that has been noted by Burton-Christie. He explains this predilection in terms of *adéquation* and *correspondence*.

The critic, Sherman Paul (who uses the original French spelling for *adéquation*, whereas Burton-Christie anglicises it), who, in turn, borrowed these terms from Francis Ponge, views “adequation as describing carefully, letting things be in their concrete particularity, refraining from the temptation to symbolize. It is a literary equivalent that ‘respects the thing and lets it stand forth ... an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself’” (Burton-Christie 1996:79). *Correspondence*, on the other hand, amounts to “the search for symbolic meaning, the process of making imaginative connections between the ever-shifting and fathomless worlds of self and nature” (1996:79).

Burton-Christie takes the position that Oliver has the ability to utilise both terms seamlessly in her poems: “These two apparently divergent impulses, one antisymbolic, the other symbolic,

ebb back and forth in the poetry of Mary Oliver. Her ability to integrate them without confusing them yields an original vision of spirit and nature” (1996:79). However, Oliver also marries two seemingly abstract ideas, death and amazement in “When Death Comes”, which emphasises the Buddhist undercurrent present in her work: Impermanence (transience) and Beginner’s Mind (amazement), which are two sides of one coin for the Buddhist practitioner. Impermanence is discussed and explicated in depth in Chapter 5.

Moreover, Beginner’s Mind is taken a step further by describing the *suchness* or *thisness* which translates in the particular aspects of the poetic observer’s “life”, in the phrase “something particular and real”. This “realness” is the *suchness* of something that is experienced through its Emptiness, a term that may be misunderstood by the Western reader as nihilistic, akin to non-existence. However, simplistically put, Emptiness is “openness, not negation. An object is Empty in that it has no self-identity beyond the sensory and phenomenal dimension” (Milstead 1998:26). In addition, “When Emptiness is realized, the Zen concept of suchness is also uncovered. To perceive an object as empty is to see it in its suchness” (Milstead 1998:26). In terms of Oliver’s poem, the words “particular” and “real” are imbued with new meaning in terms of Buddhist thought because the *suchness* of life is implicit: “Suchness may also be described as ‘as-it-isness.’ The as-it-isness of the world is Zen reality” (Milstead 1998:29). It is exactly this reality of the poetic observer’s life that is imbued by amazement and which amounts to Mindfulness: “Mindfulness is knowledge or wisdom that pulls the whole mind and heart of the knower toward a connection with the way things are in all their exciting particularity” (Goodenough & Woodruff 2001:586). *Suchness* and Emptiness are looked at in greater detail and depth in Chapter 4.

The last line, “I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world”, resonates strongly with the poet’s view of approaching every moment with Beginner’s Mind. Looking at the preceding lines – “I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, / or full of argument” – has a particular autobiographical element: “This I have always known – that if I did not live my life immersed in the one activity which suits me, and which also, to tell the truth, keeps me utterly happy and intrigued, I would come someday to bitter and mortal regret” (*A Poetry Handbook*:120). This activity is not just writing or being in nature – the two passions of her life, but life itself. This is corroborated by Judith Orloff (2004:208): “I’ve watched my friend, poet Mary Oliver, treat going to the supermarket as a holy rite. Every Cape Cod morning, snowy or warm, she shows up at the A&P just as it opens, ecstatic to get her food for the day. Mary approaches her poetry with the same inspiration” (Orloff 2004:208).

This is the reason why Oliver does not only tell about being mindful but she shows it directly and, moreover, *becomes* Mindfulness: “The mindful person, Buddhism tells us, assumes the

attitude of pure observation, freed from all false views, and apprehends a reality that is not only objective but also becomes subjective. The mindful person really sees” (Goodenough & Woodruff 2001:586).

## 2. AWAKENING THROUGH MINDFUL AWARENESS

*How can we ever stop looking? How can we ever turn away?*

Oliver (*Blue Pastures*:70)

It is with the innocence of first inquiry of Beginner’s Mind that Oliver approaches Mindful Awareness: In the poem, “Sometimes” (*Red Bird*:37, Part 4, lines 2-4), Oliver offers what she calls “Instructions for living a life”. Once again, her conviction is that life is to be lived intensely; we are not here merely to exist or survive (as seen especially in the last stanza of “When Death Comes”). She tells us we must

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*

Once more, Oliver’s accessible style may be misconstrued as functioning on a merely discursive level because these three lines seem like ordinary instructions to the reader. Syntactically, they may indeed be, but, semantically, they rest in intensity. However, Oliver’s use of *adéquation* breaks down the boundaries between the poet/reader that may sometimes exist because of symbols obscuring the essence of a poem, rendering it difficult for the reader to access through the use of *correspondence*. McEntyre claims that “it is the function of poets to restore to us the mystery of the ordinary” (1994:7). As will be shown in the poem, “Morning”, later in this chapter, Oliver is a poet who deals mainly with the ordinary, but it is exactly through Buddhist simplicity that she invites readers to rethink their lives through the practice of Mindfulness.

Oliver herself maintains that the role of the poet is to render “the poem clear and accessible” (1994:77). This view about accessibility and interaction between poet and reader, instead of creating distance through formal poetic devices, echoes Watt’s stance about the haiku: “A good *haiku* is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener’s mind, evoking associations out of the richness of his own memory. It invites the listener to participate instead of leaving him dumb with admiration while the poet shows off” (1962:202).

Oliver's poems are "pebbles" tossed into the minds of her readers so as to engage all their senses. Mann (2004:54) reiterates the connection with the sensual experience in Oliver's poetry: "To recall a key theme – paying attention – one does not simply attend *mentally* to what one sees in nature; rather one must apprehend nature with all the senses".

The three instructions of Mindfulness found in "Sometimes" are reminiscent of Oliver's poem, "The Buddha's Last Instruction" (*House of Light*:4), a poem looked at in detail in Chapter 5. The word "instruction" is crucial to Buddhism because the Buddha *instructed* his followers; he did not *preach* to them or at them. Preaching is something that Oliver believes the poet should not indulge in:

The poem in which the reader does not feel himself or herself a participant is a lecture, listened to from an uncomfortable chair, in a stuffy room, inside a building. My poems have all been written – if not finished at least started – somewhere out-of-doors: in the fields, on the shore, under the sky. They are not lectures (*Wild Geese*:64).

"Instruction" also extends to an invitation to readers to practice Mindfulness.

This is indeed why the Buddha's last instruction was be "a lamp unto yourselves" or as articulated in "The Buddha's last Instruction" (this particular poem is examined in detail in Chapter 5): "Make of yourself a Light', / said the Buddha" (*House of Light*:4, lines 1-2). This instruction advises enquiring individuals not merely to adopt a belief system simply because they are told to do so but to investigate any belief system for themselves to verify its validity of its truthfulness. The Buddha maintained that even his own teachings were (and still are) not above scrutiny. This is manifest in a key Buddhist text called the *Kalama Sutta*, illustrating the Buddha's proclivity for questioning and doubting all phenomena:

Now, look at you Kalamas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: 'this is our teacher' (Batchelor 1990:8-9).

Oliver's instructions may thus be seen as analogous to a Buddhist enquiry into reality, in much the same way as the Buddha had instructed his followers. Although not exclusively, his enquiring mind parallels the scientific endeavour, which means that, in this part of the poem, Oliver starts with the observation process, keeping the metaphorical and symbolic parts for later:

She exercises the restraint of a good scientist observer, letting things be before making them *mean* (my italics). Metaphor must come second or it comes too cheap. Look first before you compare. Watch. Describe. Follow what you see through time. This is how to know. Comparison may serve, but it will not fully reveal what may only be comprehended in honouring the particularity of the unique creation (McEntyre 1994:7).

Prothero reiterates this: “Mindfulness seems to be Oliver’s *métier*, looking and listening her scientific method and contemplative practice” (2008:45). Other Oliver poems in which paying attention is featured explicitly is “Upstream” in which she asserts that “[a]ttention is the beginning of devotion” (*Blue Iris*:56, lines 15-16) as well as in “Yes! No!” (*White Pine*:8): “To pay attention, this is our endless / and proper work”.

Oliver posits that the poet should see things in a “fresh, exciting, and valid way” by scrutinising “the world intensely, or anyway that part of the world he or she has taken for subject” (*A Poetry Handbook*:99). Charlotte Joko Beck articulates the same imperative: “The key is attention, attention, attention” (Beck 1993:n.p.).

Turning to the devices Oliver employs in “Sometimes”, the end-stopping of each line creates a pause, suggesting that readers should stop and contemplate the line’s meaning and implications before going on to the next one as well as the next instruction; the process emphasises Mindful Awareness through close attention. The last line, “Tell about it”, comprises two notions: writing about it, as Oliver has done, or having readers share their newfound Mindfulness with others. In fact, she incorporates these three instructions into her own life on a daily basis, when engaged in her daily walk:

[I] look at things, and listen, and write down words in a small notebook. Later on, a long time later, a gathering of these words may become something I will think worth risking between the boards of another book, so you may know – if, as I hope, this one [*Blue Pastures*] has made you more curious about the wild world than you were previously (*Blue Pastures*:120).

This is how Oliver starts a ripple effect by telling readers explicitly to pay more attention to their surroundings and, to change their lives. Oliver herself asserts that “awareness and thought [are] two powerful agents of change” (Oliver in Swann 2000: *xiv*).

Changing one’s life through Mindful Awareness is the thematic preoccupation of Oliver’s poem, “Swan” (*Swan*:15):

Did you see it, drifting, all night on the black river?  
 Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air,  
 an armful of white blossoms,  
 a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned  
 into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of lilies,  
 biting the air with its black beak?  
 Did you hear it, fluting and whistling  
 a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees,  
     like a waterfall  
 knifing down the black ledges?  
 And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –  
 a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet  
 like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light  
     of the river?  
 And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?  
 And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?  
 And have you changed your life?

First, the poem is a notable example of Oliver's counterbalancing *adéquation* and *correspondence*. Her strategy of asking the reader pertinent questions to make them think about their own lives functions as the more concrete and, therefore, more direct part of the poem. Secondly, she sketches a sensual experience by recruiting the senses: "Did you see", "Did you hear it", "And did you feel it". Thirdly, the swan becomes emblematic of the inner transformation required to change one's life through the poet's use of metaphors that reinforce the sensual experience: "an armful of white blossoms", "a perfect commotion of silk and linen", "a snowbank, a bank of lilies", and "a white cross". Furthermore, Oliver's application of similes captures the swan's beauty: "a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees / like a waterfall", and "its feet / like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light / of the river".

Ultimately, the tactile experience of feeling the swan – "did you feel it?" – at the denotative level is more than a sensory one, becoming, at the connotative level, a moment of awakening. In the Buddhist context, this awakening through Mindfulness brings to bear transformation of the *minds* of readers, linking it directly to Oliver's question in the last line: "And did you change your life?" She enquires whether her readers took this opportunity to liberate themselves from their old patterns of thinking and perception. Readers now have the mindful capacity of awakening not only to the beauty of the swan but also to a fresh way of being, if they so choose. Oliver herself prizes "feeling" above most other outcomes of a poem; when asked in an interview whether there is something missing in the way students read today, she answered: "Well, they

read for content, not for the felt experience which is also in the writing. The question asked today is: What does it mean? Nobody says, ‘How does it feel?’” (Oliver in Swanson 1990:5).

### 3. BEING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT / *NOWNESS*

*What I want to say is  
that the past is the past,  
and the present is what your life is*

Oliver (*Red Bird*:57)

The process of awakening through Mindful Awareness, especially through feeling, is feasible only when one is fully present in the here-and-now: “as long as people seek to awaken to themselves and to their life as it is – to the immediacy of this very moment – the spirit of Zen will appear” (Beck 1989:vii). Chögyam Trungpa refers to this experience of being in the present moment as *Nowness*: “The only answer is *Nowness*. *Now* is the important point. That *now* is a real *now*. If you are unable to experience *now*, then you are corrupted because you are looking for another *now*, which is impossible” (1988:96). What Trungpa contends here is that the past and future may be experienced as real but they are, in truth, no more than misperceptions generated by an unawakened mind. This is precisely what Judith Orloff, who quotes from Oliver’s “When Death Comes” as an epigraph, asserts under a heading, aptly called “Savor the Miracle of Small Moments”: “All we have is the moment” (2004:207).

The notion that the present moment is all that really exists is apparent in Oliver’s poem, “One or Two Things” (*Dream Work*:50-51):

3

The god of dirt  
came up to me many times and said  
so many wise and delectable things, I lay  
on the grass listening  
to his dog voice,  
crow voice,  
frog voice; *now*,  
he said, and *now*,

and never once mentioned *forever*,

4

which has nevertheless always been,  
 like a sharp iron hoof,  
 at the center of my mind.

From the last stanza, it is clear that the poetic observer has been burdened by “*forever*”, the sense that she finds it difficult to be always in the moment. This is foregrounded by the simile, “like a sharp iron hoof”, creating an image of a painful burden, a hoof that keeps on kicking her. This image brings to mind the association with the devil’s cloven hoof, a more sinister delineation, which falls beyond the ambit of this research but which, nonetheless, remains an interesting image with many interpretative possibilities. Inevitably, the most pertinent and persistent question the reader would want answering is why the “forever” constitutes such a burden to the speaker? One of the reasons may be because it is akin to perpetuity, all future time, therefore endless. When viewed from this particular angle, life becomes a mere abstraction. However, the god of dirt – which may refer to the many incarnations of nature: “dog voice”, “crow voice”, and “frog voice” – is drawing her attention to be mindful to the present moment through the repetition of the word “*now*” as well as its italicisation. The repetition of “*now*” may also be construed as an onomatopoeic evocation of the frog’s croak.

Notice the difference between the two stanzas: in the first, the poetic observer is communing with nature – “I lay / on the grass listening” – as opposed to the “*forever*” that is at “the center of my mind”. In the first part, she is mindful, aware of her surroundings, just “listening”, whereas, in the last stanza, her mind seems closed-off, anxious or dangerous like a sharp hoof, preventing her from being mindful to the moment. Suzuki reiterates the importance of being aware of one’s surroundings in the present moment: “When your life is always a part of your surroundings – in other words, when you are called back to yourself, in the present moment – then there is no problem” (1970:82). What becomes problematic is that when one is not doing this, the mind becomes distracted and, most commonly, neurotic.

In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, a typical *roshi* or Zen master is described: “The flow of his consciousness is not the fixed repetitive patterns of our usual self-centered consciousness, but rather arises spontaneously and naturally from the circumstances of the present” (Suzuki 1970:18). The phrase, “center of my mind”, in the last line of Oliver’s poem, may be read as a re-promulgation of Suzuki’s “self-centered consciousness”. This consciousness, the “sharp hoof” (Oliver) of the mind with its “fixed repetitive patterns” (Suzuki), matches the description of the Buddhist notion of the ego-mind. It is the habituated ego-mind that keeps the *mind* from being “mindful” and enjoying the now, perpetuating suffering like a prodding / kicking hoof: “self-estrangement and anxiety are inherent to the structure of the ego-self” (Milstead 1998:31). It is

this ego-mind that keeps the self locked up in abstractions instead of allowing it to live moment to moment: “Ironically, the consciousness of self that makes abstract thinking possible also perpetuates abstract thinking, keeping enlightened beings locked in a spiral of attachment and suffering” (Milstead 1998:33-34).

Looking at the first stanza, the god of dirt becomes emblematic of Buddha nature: “But if you limit your activity to what you can do just now, in this moment, then you can express fully your true nature, which is the universal Buddha nature” (Suzuki 1970:75). Buddha nature also means “‘being Buddha’ or ‘being the boss’. Wherever you go you should be the master of your own surroundings. This means that you should not lose your way. So this is called Buddha because if you exist in this way always, you are Buddha himself” (Suzuki 1970:132). The god of dirt, by implication, is a paradox similar to that of the lotus flower, which is a predominant emblem in Buddhism: in order for it to grow and flourish, it needs mud. Therefore, the god of dirt may allude to the Buddha who is to be found in ordinary, even “dirty” things.

This allusion to the Buddha who is to be found in everyday things is exactly what it entails to be in the moment. Western dualism tends to view the sacred and the profane as mutually exclusive. However, in some Eastern modes of thinking, they are interrelated: “In the Western world we have become accustomed to thinking of spiritual concerns as being distinct from everyday life” (Watts 2000:xv). This disparity between the sacred and the profane is exactly what Oliver undercuts in her poetry by employing *adéquation* and *correspondence*.

In the first nine lines of “Morning” (*Wild Geese*:102, lines 1-8), Oliver is using *adéquation* mainly but, at the same time, her direct images create an intimate picture of everyday life: “Very likely the mood that develops between you and such poems is one of confidence, even intimacy” (*A Poetry Handbook*:77). Therefore, the language, tone, and style affect the mood or atmosphere of the poem, making it readily accessible to the reader. This is done through the meticulous attention to detail: “Attention is the luminous gift of Mary Oliver’s writing, poems with clarity of detail, memorable music, and deft linkage of human insight of the carefully observed world, which she praises and loves with wide open heart and eyes” (Lohmann 1997:16).

Similar “clarity of detail” is given to images in “Morning”:

Salt shining behind its glass cylinder.

Milk in a blue bowl. The yellow linoleum.

The cat stretching her black body from the pillow.

The way she makes her curvaceous response to the small, kind  
gesture.

Then laps the bowl clean.  
 Then wants to go out into the world  
 where she leaps lightly and for no apparent reason across the lawn,  
 then sits, perfectly still, in the grass.

Here, the end-stopped lines call attention to each of the images in the kitchen, creating a pause for contemplation before progressing to the next image. Oliver employs this device specifically, together with other devices, with her reader-listeners in mind. She does this on the grounds of the visible responses her regular live poetry readings create in her audiences: “I do remember those ‘listeners’ when I write. So all that old stuff – the various mechanics – still fascinates me thoroughly. How enjambed lines ‘feel’ to the listener, as compared with end-stopped lines” (Oliver in Swanson 1990:6). Oliver’s assertion of how poetic devices influence the listener (and implied reader) becomes evident in the way she utilises these, especially enjambment, in “Morning”. There are only two examples of enjambed lines in the poem: line 4 in which the cat responds to the milk put out for her, and line 7, in which the change of milieu takes place; the cat makes the transition from the kitchen to the outside world, leaping; the enjambment visually calls to mind the leap from one line to the next without a pause. In both instances, the reader would also pay as much attention to the enjambed lines as they would to the end-stopped ones.

Oliver utilises *seemingly* ordinary objects to be found in most kitchens around the world, but, through careful emphasis, they become universal objects of Mindfulness; most readers will be able to identify with these and therefore rethink their value because they are usually taken for granted. Furthermore, the positioning of each object in the beginning of each new sentence (especially in the first two lines) as well as capitalising the first letter of the first two images – salt and milk – elevates them. Also noteworthy is the use of the ordinary house cat of no exotic breed whose actions are marked by ordinariness: she stretches, she curves her back, laps up the milk in a bowl; she wants to go outside like most cats, then leaps, and sits still. The fact that she is “leaping for no apparent reason” is a very Buddhist concept; just *being* in the moment with no agenda: “To have some deep feeling about Buddhism is not the point; we just do what we should do, like eating supper and going to bed. This is Buddhism” (Suzuki 1970:76).

Other devices Oliver employs to focus the reader on the *Nowness* of their reading experience are *anaphora* (also one of Walt Whitman’s most commonly employed poetic strategies) as well as using the imperative. Examples of the first, *anaphora*, are evident in “Gratitude” (*What Do We Know*:40):

*What did you notice?*  
*What did you hear?*  
*What did you admire?*

*What astonished you?  
 What would you like to see again?  
 [...]
 so the gods shake us from our sleep.*

The way in which these anaphoric questions are presented here belies the fact that each of them serves as a quasi-heading to the poem's various sections. After posing each of these questions, Oliver provides the reader with a series of images serving as answers. For example (lines 24-25):

*What astonished you?*

The swallows making their dip and turn over the water.

An apt illustration of her usage of the imperative may be seen in the opening lines of the fourth section of the poem, "Her Grave, Again" (*What Do We Know*:50, Section 4, lines 11-12, 15):

Look, here is the head, the horn beak, the waffle of the tongue.  
 Look, here is the narrow chute of the throat, color of sunrise.  
 [...]
 Do you see it!

Through the employment of these devices, Oliver invites the reader to be more mindful, not of the past or future but of the present moment; ultimately, readers should rethink their own lives: "the voice speaking in the poem should, or can, imaginatively, become the reader's inner voice" (Oliver in Swanson 1990:4). Therefore, the reader should undertake an inner investigation, right now: "The ground is ourselves; we're here to study ourselves and to get to know ourselves now, not later" (Chödrön 2001:3).

To conclude, Buddhist Mindfulness is essentially an attitude (the willingness to wake up) coupled with a practice (being fully present in the moment and accepting the moment for what it is) and an experience (Beginner's Mind). Mary Oliver's poetry lends itself to Mindfulness; her usage of simple, ordinary language, together with poetic devices such as *adéquation* and *correspondence*, inform all three corollaries of Mindfulness: Beginner's Mind, Mindful Awareness and *Nowness*, which is the ability to be fully present in the here-and-now. It is through these three corollaries that the topos of amazement, and loving this world are articulated. The essence of Oliver's poetry is the feeling it evokes from readers, therefore making it a mindful experience which may be life-changing for them, as for example, in the last stanza of "Invitation" (*Red Bird*:19):

It could mean something.

It could mean everything.

It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:

*You must change your life.*

And this is precisely what Oliver keeps in *mind* when she writes: “When I step onto a stage to read poems, the anticipation and even the hope of the audience is palpable. The people sitting quietly in the chairs – they have come not to rest, but to be awakened” (*At Blackwater Pond*:n.p.).

## CHAPTER 4

### “A THOUSAND UNBREAKABLE LINKS”: INTERCONNECTION

*The basis of life is unity.*

Watts (1995:21)

Chapter 3 examined Buddhist Mindfulness in Oliver’s poetry by looking at three corollaries: (1) Beginner’s Mind, a term especially prevalent in Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, (2) Mindful Awareness, which highlights the act of paying close attention, and (3) *Nowness*, a vital notion linked with being in the present, a term coined by Chögyam Trungpa, the founder of Shambhala International, which is based on Buddhism. Mindfulness is a vital component of the Buddhist path and may even be viewed as the cornerstone of Buddhist practice: without it, no awakening of the mind is possible. In addition, Mindfulness is a practice which forms part of everyday life such as washing dishes, sweeping the floor, or sitting in front of one’s computer. All these activities become potential meditation practices, because, instead of viewing them as dull, as many of us are bound to do, they can actually take on a completely different connotation. As previously stated, Buddhist Mindfulness implies that one has to be fully present, in the here-and-now, in order to experience full awareness so as to awaken the mind. At the same time, a fundamental Buddhist truth, Interconnection, dovetails with the idea of mindfulness in the present moment, about which His Holiness the Dalai Lama (from this point onwards referred to as HH Dalai Lama) says:

[...] if we look at our internal experiences or states of consciousness, the past is no longer there and the future has not come yet: there is only the present. So things become somewhat complicated when we think along these lines. This is the nature of interdependency, the Sanskrit word *pratītya-samutpāda*. (2001:131).

Watts (2000:110) echoes the idea that interrelation begins with mind, and that it can only exist in the present: “your mind is the total system of cosmic interrelationships as they are focused at the point you call ‘here and now.’”

Also significant when Interdependence is considered is that this term features in both Buddhism and Ecology, although sometimes with differing emphases: “Ecology and Buddhism are both about the interdependence of all forms of existence, the former from a scientific viewpoint, the latter in the existential and experiential sense” (Jones 2003:170).

Interconnection, in the Buddhist context, is a term that encompasses certain principles that are regarded as vital to understanding Buddhism as a philosophy. It should be noted that the various Buddhist schools and traditions, such as the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, have significantly differing views on some of these principles. It is also crucial to remember that these principles are highly sophisticated Buddhist philosophical concepts and, as such, the scope and aim of the thesis does not allow for such nuanced discussion: for example, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, which is usually explained in the context of Dependent Origination will be omitted. (The reader who wants a background to the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination will find HH Dalai Lama's (2001:138) discussion invaluable.)

Rather, the goal here would be to discuss the main concepts that are relevant to, and implicit in, Oliver's poetry.

Interconnection has three related aspects, which will be examined in conjunction with selected poems and prose pieces (mainly in essay form) by Mary Oliver as they manifest in these: (1) the Mutual and Interpenetration Principle, (2) Dependent Origination or Dependent Co-Arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), and (3) Emptiness (*mu* or *sunyata*) or No-self (*anātman*). All three of these Buddhist principles are illustrated by and informed through the symbol of Indra's Net, which originates from Vedic cosmology and mythology, taken over in particular, although not exclusively, by the Hua-Yen Buddhist school as a central tenet.

In order to establish a theoretical basis for Interdependence and its various aspects, I will provide a brief overview of each.

### **INDRA'S JEWELED NET**

*Indra's Net symbolizes a cosmos  
in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship  
among all the members of the cosmos.*

Cook (1981:2)

Indra, the Indian god of gods, was said to have an extraordinary net: "In the heavenly abode of the great god Indra is a wondrous net that has a light-reflecting jewel at each of the infinite intersections of its threads. Each jewel exists only as a reflection of all the others, and hence has no self-nature" (Jones 2003:16). The Jewelled Net of Indra had first emerged in the

*Avatamsaka Sutra* (written in India during the third century C.E.) – “which illustrates this unity in diversity” (Akuppa 2002:95). This sutra became the focal point of the Hua-yen (Flower Ornament) Buddhist school in China (third century C.E.): “The Huayen school has been claimed as the intellectual culmination of the Mahayana, with Zen Buddhism as its actualization” (Jones 2003:16). Hua-yen developed a concept called “The Ten Mysterious Gates” which “explores ten subtle perspectives, based on interdependent origination, illustrating the harmonious interrelation and intercommunion of all things” (Cleary 1983:18). It is the Seventh Gate of the Ten Mysterious Gates that is relevant to this discussion because it is called “The Realm of Indra’s Net”. The limited scope of the research prevents further discussion of the Ten Mysterious Gates.

Linking with Indra’s realm is *dharma-dhātu* which means “cosmos” or “universe” (Cook 1981:2). However, it is not the universe in the conventional, Western sense but rather “the Hua-yen universe of identity and interdependence” (2). Cook explains that *dharma-dhātu* “is not at all familiar to Western people” because of the fact that both the Judeo-Christian religion and Greek philosophical tradition explain the universe mainly in terms of a divine plan. Like most Buddhist schools, Hua-yen asserts a “nonteleological” stance which means that “there is no theory of a beginning time, no concept of a creator, no question of the purpose of it all. The universe is taken as a given, a fact which can be explained only in terms of its own inner dynamism” (2). Batchelor echoes the idea that no metaphysical creator exists:

The Buddha taught that all things in the universe come into existence, ‘arise’, as a result of particular conditions. There is no creator God as the first cause, because there is no beginning:

When that exists, this comes to be; on the arising of that, this arises. When that does not exist, this does not come to be; on the cessation of that, this ceases (1992:10).

According to Cook, the teleological stance implies an anthropocentric view, that humankind is the centre of the universe, one of

strict hierarchy, traditionally one in which the creator-god occupies the middle space, and other animals, plants, rocks, etc., occupy the bottom. Even with the steady erosion of religious interest in the West [...] there still exists the tacit assumption that man is the measure of all things, that this is his universe, that somehow the incalculable history of the vast universe is essentially a human history (1981:2).

Hua-yen holds an opposite view: the universe does not comprise hierarchical concepts, but is based instead on the “fundamental theme of interdependence” (Cleary 1983:2). Cleary goes on to say that Buddhism is “axiomatic” which means that “since all people and indeed all creatures share in each other’s existence, there is no true benefit for one group alone that is won at the cost of another” (3).

In order to visualise Interdependence more efficiently, various Buddhist scholars and teachers, including Watts, (who operated mainly within the Zen Buddhist sphere) employ the image or symbol of Indra’s Jewelled Net:

Imagine a multidimensional spider’s web covered with dewdrops. Every dewdrop contains the reflection of all the other dewdrops, and in each reflected dewdrop are the reflections of all the other dewdrops in that reflection, and so on, ad infinitum. That is the image of the Buddhist conception of the universe.

More specifically, Watts draws attention to the Japanese tradition that calls the idea of the spider’s web “*ji ji muge*. *Ji* means a thing, event, or happening. *Muge* means ‘no separation.’ So, between happening and happening there is no separation: *ji ji muge*” (1995:28).

In effect, what Watts is suggesting is that:

everything that exists implies everything else, and that all those other things, collectively, in their totality – which we call the universe – in turn imply each individual object and event. That is the meaning of Indra’s Net [...] There is no such thing as a single, solitary event (1995:45).

*Ji ji muge*, according to Watts (1995:43) is “the highest doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism. It is the idea of the mutual interpenetration of all things, or the mutual interdependence of all things. Its symbol is Indra’s net, the principle of which is elaborated in the *Avatamsaka sutra*”.

Similarly, Fields (1996:52) suggests that Japanese Buddhists call “*ji ji-mu-ge* the principle of universal interpenetration”.

## MUTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE AND INTERPENETRATION

*Characteristics and functions of all things freely interpenetrate  
as seen in the image of the net of Indra.*

Cook (1981:53)

Mutual Interdependence is a key aspect of Interconnection (also called Interconnectedness). Watts postulates the following about Interdependence: “in Buddhism it is taught that everything in this universe depends on everything else. This is called the Doctrine of Mutual Interdependence” (1995:27-28).

HH Dalai Lama postulates two levels of Interdependence: (1) a conventional level, and (2) a deeper level. He explains that Interdependence, a Buddhist principle, is frequently referred to as “interdependent origination”. The superficial or conventional level comprises the “interdependent nature or relationship between cause and effect”. However, on a deeper level, grasping this principle is more “pervasive”, encompassing “the entire spectrum of reality”. He goes on to say that the principle of Interdependent Origination, in relation to cause and effect, involves the notion that “nothing can come about without the corresponding causes and conditions; everything comes into being as a result of an aggregation of causes and conditions” (2001:131).

Thompson (2000:98) echoes the two levels of Interdependent Origination which he terms as (1) conventional truth (*samvrti satya*), and (2) absolute truth (*paramarthika satya*). He illustrates these two levels by explaining them through the view of the self:

In ordinary speech, we refer to ourselves, and we know what we mean by that [...] At a deeper level, however, I know that there is nothing about that book that makes it ‘mine’, and that I am just a temporary collection of ever-changing atoms, thoughts and emotions and habits.

From a Chinese Buddhist perspective, the principle of Interdependent Origination is referred to as the principle of “mutual interpenetration and interfusion of all phenomena”. Uisang, a Korean monk, described this principle in the following lines of verse (Batchelor 1992:11):

Since Dharma-nature is round and interpenetrating, it is without any  
Sign of duality  
All dharmas (phenomena) are unmoving and originally calm [...]  
In one is all, in many is one.  
One is identical to all, many is identical to one.

Smith (2006:134) explains *dharmas* as “the psychological-cum-experiential particles which make up both the world and our perception of it”. The manner in which Uisang describes *dharmas* – “In one is all, in many is one. / One is identical to all, many is identical to one” – is reminiscent of Indra’s Net in which all the jewels reflect, yet *are* one another at the same time.

The Interpenetration philosophy had exerted a substantial influence over the Zen Buddhist tradition, which embraced a less abstract expression of it, as seen through the observations of ordinary life, especially the natural world, made by Japanese Zen master Dōgen, or Dōgen-zenji:

There are myriads of forms and hundreds of grasses throughout the entire earth, and yet each grass and each form itself is the entire earth [...] There is a world of living things in a blade of grass (Batchelor 1992:11).

The idea of the Mutual Interpenetration and Interdependence of all *dharmas* is further elucidated by Thich Nhat Hahn (1988:90), who, like Dōgen-zenji, prefers to take examples from everyday life, and especially the natural world, as can be seen in the following example:

When we look at a chair, we see the wood, but we fail to observe the tree, the forest, the carpenter, or our own mind. When we meditate on it, we can see the entire universe in all its interwoven and interdependent relations in the chair. The presence of the wood reveals the presence of the tree. The presence of the leaf reveals the presence of the sun [...] The chair is not separate. It exists only in its interdependent relations with everything else in the universe. It *is* because all other things *are*. If it is *not*, then all others are *not* either.

Akuppa (2002:93) echoes the notion of interweaving that exists between all phenomena, also using wood as an example:

The Buddha taught that all things are part of interdependent networks of causes and effects. When he looked at a tree, he wouldn’t just have thought ‘here’s a tree’, or even ‘here’s a beautiful tree’ [...] He would have seen the tree as the product of conditions – the seed of another tree, the rain, the sunlight, the nutrients in the soil around the roots [...] So ‘tree’ is just a label that we attach to an arbitrarily defined part of a much bigger process. It is not a separate or permanent feature of reality.

## **PRATITYA-SAMUTPĀDA: DEPENDENT ORIGATION / DEPENDENT CO-ARISING**

*Whatever exists, is maintained in that existence  
by innumerable causes and conditions.*

Thompson (2000:34)

Another facet that links with Mutual Interdependence and Interpenetration is Dependent Origination or Dependent Co-arising. Dependent Origination is actually synonymous with HH Dalai Lama's postulation about "Interdependent Origination", because the main principle dealt with in this context is causality. Called *praṭītya-samutpāda* (Sanskrit) or *paṭicca-samuppāda* (Pāli), Dependent Origination is one of the key principles in understanding the Nature of Reality in Buddhist terms: "*Praṭītya-samutpāda* is basically concerned with "causation", particularly in the form variously named dependent origination, conditioned co-production, or interdependent existence" (Cook 1981:34).

In a similar vein, Krüger (1991:188) explains that *praṭītya-samutpāda* is mainly used as a technical term for the Buddhist teaching "that all things in the world are causally interdependent, and that the most basic truth about reality (including human personality as a psychophysical unit) is that it is causally constructed". *Praṭītya-samutpāda* is therefore a manifestation of Interconnection because "Our world is only one of an endless number of worlds in a vast universe of unfathomable dimensions of time and space, all interlinked in a great causal network" (1991:103), which again brings to mind the symbolic Net of Indra.

Keown (2003:221) adds another dimension to *praṭītya-samutpāda* that amounts to the "ontological status of phenomena", meaning that the principle teaches

that all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions and lack intrinsic being. The doctrine is expressed in its simplest form in the phrase 'idaṃ sati ayaṃ bhavati' (Skt., when this exists, that arises).

Snelling (2000:29) explains the notion of 'arising' very succinctly:

All phenomena in the Universe are produced within the cosmos by internal causes. This is to say, each phenomenon is the cause of a further phenomenon, which, in its turn, will go on to be a cause of something else, and so on, ad infinitum.

Similarly, HH Dalai Lama (2000:157) elucidates 'dependent' and 'arising', both of which ultimately culminate in the principle of Emptiness: "Emptiness means the absence of

independent existence or self-existence. ‘Dependent’ because it is dependent on others and is not of absolute nature. ‘Arising’ means something that has happened due to other factors”.

Thompson (2000:34) describes *pratītya-samutpāda* as being “conditioned co-production” which means ‘stepping up together’”, expressing “a fundamental interconnectedness of all things. Whatever happens, happens as a result of causes and conditions. In its simplest form it says: ‘This being so, that arises. This ceasing, that ceases’”. Essential here is that *pratītya-samutpāda* signifies the Middle Way between two extreme viewpoints on the philosophical continuum:

A key feature of Buddhist wisdom is to find the middle way between the perceived errors of eternalism and nihilism. In other words, to hold that some things in this life are unchangeable and of permanent value, or to hold that nothing is of any significance or value. Each of these are seen as a *micchaditthi* (wrong view). Wisdom comes with seeing all things as interconnected and having a reality and value that arises in spite of their temporary nature (Thompson 2000:98).

### **EMPTINESS (*MU, SUNYATA*)**

*Doctrinally, the heart of Buddhism lies in the notion of no-self or emptiness.*

*This intuition has extremely important implications  
for the Buddhist view of reality, of knowledge and a good life.*

Krüger (1991:6)

There is an equally strong link between *pratītya-samutpāda* and the notion of Emptiness (*sunyata*) as the link between *pratītya-samutpāda* and Mutual Interdependence. In fact, some Buddhist schools, Buddhist teachers and authors use *pratītya-samutpāda* and Emptiness as interchangeable terms. Milstead (1998:34) interweaves these two terms: “All things are interlocking and interdependent parts of the whole, and in reality it is all empty. To judge things as good or evil, useful or irrelevant shows attachment that perpetuates suffering by causing one to desire things that are not real and that one cannot attain”.

Emptiness, *śūnyatā* (Sanskrit), and *suññattā* (Pāli), also called Nothingness or *no-thing-ness*, is a concept that is principally, but not exclusively, related to Mahāyāna Buddhism. One of the Mahāyāna schools is Zen, which calls *sunyata* “*Mu*” or “Non-being”, although Milstead explains that Non-being in the Buddhist context is not the same concept as the nihilistic Western view of such a term might entail:

The concept of Emptiness, or *Mu*, is particularly important to Zen Buddhists. Although Emptiness is sometimes called 'nothingness', Zen Emptiness is not the same as the Western concept of 'nothingness'. 'Nothingness' or 'nothing' in the Western dualistic manner of thinking is the opposite of 'something' and is therefore itself. Zen does not recognize dualistic oppositions because such relational attitudes are merely ideas, products of the discriminating mind (1998:26).

According to Keown (2003:283), *sunyata* has multifarious nuances in the different schools of the Mahāyāna: "according to the Madhyamaka, it is equivalent to Dependent Origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), while for the Yogācāra it is the direct realization of the non-existence of a perceiving subject and perceived objects, said to be the natural state of the mind". Cook remarks on the fact that the writings of the Third Patriarch of the Hua-yen Buddhist school, Fa-tsang, demonstrate an understanding of "the Indian Buddhist concept of Emptiness as being synonymous with the teaching of interdependent origination, *pratītyasamutpāda*" (1981:103). Therefore, Fa-tsang was in agreement with the Indian Buddhist philosopher, Nāgārjuna's assertion: "It is declared that interdependent origination is emptiness" (103).

In similar fashion, Snelling (2000:49) draws parallels between *sunyata* and *pratītya-samutpāda*, based on Nagarjuna's postulation:

In Nagarjuna's view, the importance of the latter is that it points up the dependence or relativity of all things in the conventional world. They are like parts of a cathedral, all helping to maintain and support each other, so if one is taken away the whole structure will collapse. Seeing dependence and relativity in this way is to see Shunyata and be thereby liberated. This liberation depends, then, upon a change of perception and knowledge, nothing more.

HH Dalai Lama also focuses on what Nagarjuna has to say about Emptiness and Dependent Origination; that the actual significance of *sunyata* can mainly be derived from understanding the principle of *pratītya-samutpāda*: "He [Nagarjuna] states that because phenomena are dependent originations, because phenomena come about as a result of interdependent relationships between causes and conditions, they are empty. They are empty of inherent and independent status" (2001:156).

Batchelor (1992:10) extends the notion that Nagarjuna had a key role in the development of the *shunya* principle. In addition, she explains that the assertion that all things are empty

is not to deny that they exist; it is simply to deny that they are self-existing. For Nagarjuna, the most convincing reason that things are empty of self-existence is that they are dependent upon external conditions to cause them to exist: 'Because there is nothing which is not dependently arisen, there is nothing which is not empty'.

The “things” that are empty of existence are explained by Cleary as follows:

When Buddhist teaching says that things are empty or do not exist as such, what is often meant by ‘things’ or ‘phenomena’ in such statements is things *as they are conceived of* – the point is then that a name or definition does not encompass or capture a thing, either in its essence or in the totality of possibilities of its conditional existence (1983:20).

What Batchelor asserts is similar to the Middle Way of Buddhism – that it postulates neither eternalism nor nihilism.

However, Jones (2003:13) finds that the term “emptiness” is rather misleading in its translation of *sunyata* because of its nihilistic implication. Therefore, he explains the original Sanskrit word: “*shunyata* also carries the meaning of swollen or pregnant – and it is indeed pregnant with the potentiality of liberative, energizing creativity. It points the way out of the oppressive prison that the self-protecting ego supposes to be reality”.

It is this very “swollenness”, implicit in Emptiness that is inferred in “Buddha Nature”, the latter which is described as

the true self, because it is not an abstraction, exists as Emptiness. Another term for the true self is ‘Buddha-nature’. Just as Enlightenment cannot be achieved by seeking it, the true self or Buddha-nature cannot be found by seeking it. As soon as we think of it, it is objectified and is not the true self (Milstead 1998:49).

However, Buddhist scholars, such as Stephen Batchelor, have unearthed another origin of Buddha nature which is *tathāgatagarbha* or “Buddha womb”. Cook (1981:35) calls it the “womb of Buddhahood”, in which the “swollen” quality of Emptiness resides. According to Batchelor (2006:n.p.), the expression “Buddha nature” was adopted by modern society though it has no exact equivalent in Sanskrit or Pāli. The person behind the English-language construction of this term is the Japanese scholar, D.T. Suzuki, who mistranslated the Chinese – *Bo Sho* – and the Japanese – *Fo Shing* – into “Buddha nature”. Therefore, “Buddha nature”, in essence, is Emptiness because of its pregnant quality which denies its nihilistic interpretative qualities. It also means that Emptiness is pregnant with possibilities, not devoid of all possibility: “The

Buddhists describe the ultimate reality of the world as *shunyata*, which is often translated as ‘emptiness’ or ‘the void,’ or even ‘the plenum void,’ meaning it is void, but full of all possibilities” (Watts 1995:31).

Cook (1981:36) treats the two terms in an even more nuanced way; he believes that *sunyata* and *tathāgatagarbha* are “alternate expressions for the same reality”. The reason for this is that when the term *śūnyatā* is employed, “we are within the realm of the epistemological and ontological”. On the other hand, when *tathāgatagarbha* is used, “we are concerned with this same reality but now with reference to soteriology”. However, Loy (1996:89) warns against mere metaphysical interpretations of *sunyata*; Buddhism is primarily concerned with the individual, testing every assertion against his / her own experience and being dogmatic: “The corresponding danger with *śūnyatā* is that it will itself become re-appropriated into a privileged metaphysical category, so Nāgārjuna was careful to warn that *śūnyatā* was a heuristic, not a cognitive notion”.

The heuristic notion of *sunyata* becomes more concrete when the *suchness* (tathatā) of something is uncovered. In Chapter 3 of this research, *suchness* is described as “as-it-isness” (Milstead 1998:29). *Suchness* is usually uncovered when *sunyata* has been realised, which means that

to perceive an object as empty is to see it in its suchness. An empty tree is just a particular tree, free of all ideas, including ideas of ‘treeness’, purpose, or quality, but at the same time it is also seen in an interdependent relationship with its immediate surroundings. Any tree that is not present at this particular moment is not a tree, but an idea of a tree [...] It is merely this particular tree at this particular moment (Milstead 1998:29).

This particular explanation brings to mind Akuppa’s earlier explanation (2002:93) of the Interconnection that exists within a tree: “So ‘tree’ is just a label that we attach to an arbitrarily defined part of a much bigger process. It is not a separate or permanent feature of reality”. Therefore, the *suchness* of a tree is not our conventional presupposition of what a tree is like, but rather of its essence.

## ANĀTMAN OR ANATTĀ

*On recognising the unreality of the individual mind,  
the doctrine of Universal Mind  
(which is sometimes called the Dharma of all minds)  
becomes apparent.*

McLeod (1990:68)

The notion of *anātman* (Sanskrit) or *anattā* (Pāli) is very similar to *sunyata*, but is predominantly used within the context of Theravada Buddhism. In order to understand the concept of *anātman*, one has to take into account its Indian heritage first, which resides in *ātman*, or the eternal soul.

According to Krüger (1991:94), *anattā* (*anātman*) is “the focal doctrine of Buddhism, distinguishing it from virtually every other religious system. Religions usually postulate an eternal substance on which one can fall back when the experience of transience becomes intolerable”. As noted before, Buddhism does not postulate eternalism, although some forms of Buddhism have incorporated metaphysical ideas of the cultures assimilated as it spread from country to country. However, in order to appreciate *anātman*, one has to look at *ātman* which is the Brahmanic “teaching of that time [Pre-Buddhist, leading up to the time of the Buddha] to the effect that every person has an absolute and everlasting self (*ātman*) which persists through various lives” (Krüger 1991:94). This everlasting soul or *Brahman* (*Universal Soul*, not to be confused with *Universal Mind*), is the “substance” that would be reincarnated countless times until *mokṣa* or liberation from the *samsāric* existence is gained. Keown describes *ātman* as “an independent, unchanging, and eternal identity at the core of individuals and entities” (2003:24).

The Buddha discarded the idea of an eternal soul or *ātman*, because “the depths of meditation revealed to him that ultimately no substance is to be found” (Krüger 1991:94). Instead, he talked about No-self, which is “the absence of self (*ātman*)”. Keown describes *anātman* as the key Buddhist principle “that both the individual and objects are devoid of any unchanging, eternal, or autonomous substratum” (2003:13).

From a Buddhist perspective, *ātman* is very much like the ego-self that believes itself to be a fixed construct; an “I” or a “self”:

‘I’ is not real in an ultimate sense. It is a ‘name’: a fictional construct that bears no correspondence to what is really the case. Because of this disjunction all kinds of problems ensue. Once our minds have constructed the notion of ‘I’, it becomes our

central reference point. We attach to it and identify with it totally [...] This is, however, a narrow and constricted way of being (Snelling 200:27).

From a Buddhist perspective, “self” does not mean the denial of the individual, but that there is no “mysterious eternal self hidden somewhere inside a person”. Snelling (2000:39) summarises what the Buddha taught about *anātman* – not having preconceived ideas about the self or *ātman* – because “anything you think or say about atman is not atman. Atman is beyond all words and ideas. You cannot grasp it with the thinking mind. But perhaps you can purify and open yourself in order that it can fill you. Then you can be it”.

Furthermore, *anātman* means that anyone who awakens to understand that the ego-self is empty of all preconceived ideas and that a separate self is just an illusion created by the ego can become a Buddha: “The Buddha, the man who woke up, is regarded as one Buddha among a potentiality of myriads of buddhas. Everybody can be a buddha. All people have in themselves the capacity to wake up from the illusion of being simply a separate individual” (Watts 1995:21). This view is a commonplace in the Mahayana tradition, but not the Theravada tradition, where practitioners typically believe there is only one Buddha in any given cosmic cycle.

*Anātman* is thus the same concept as “forgetting the self” in Dōgen’s *Genjo-koan*, which is the term *no-thing-ness* or No-self; by becoming no-thing (as opposed to the ‘nothing’ of nihilistic thought), one becomes one with everything:

This process implies that what we fear as nothingness is not really nothingness, for it is the perspective of a sense-of-self anxious about losing its grip on itself. According to Buddhism, letting go of myself and merging with that no-thing-ness leads to something else: When consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become no-thing, and discover that I am everything – or, more precisely, that I can be anything. Then, when I no longer strive to make myself real through things, I find myself ‘actualized’ by them, says Dōgen (Loy 1996:96).

Therefore, this *no-thing-ness* or No-self is pregnant with possibility, with discovering “that I can be anything”, which is Buddhawomb or *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha nature and the *suchness* of things. Of course, the “I” in Loy’s extract may be extrapolated to include all of us by virtue of the interconnectedness of all things.

**“THE CITIZENRY OF ALL THINGS WITHIN ONE WORLD”**

*there was no vision, or anything extraordinary at all,  
but only a sudden awareness  
of the citizenry of all things within one world:  
leaves, dust, thrushes and finches, men and women.*

Oliver (*Long Life*:34)

*No poem is about one of us, or some of us, but is about all of us. It is part of a long document about the species. Every poem is about my life but also it is about your life, and a hundred thousand lives to come. That one person wrote it is not nearly so important or so interesting as that it pertains to us all (*Blue Pastures*:109).*

Oliver herself has written extensively in some of her essays about the notion of Interconnection, especially within the context of the writer. In the extract above, for example, Oliver echoes the notion of No-self which the writer should take into account when embarking upon the writing journey.

Riley underscores the notion of Interconnection and Interdependence in Oliver’s work:

Oliver discusses her desire to write poetry that illuminates the connections between human and nonhuman worlds, a point she has returned to throughout her career [...] Oliver has an integral belief in the interdependence of nature and culture, for there ‘exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else’; these connections reveal that ‘our dignity and our chances are one’. For Oliver, the pine tree, the leopard, the river, and the human being must recognize their connections if both worlds are to survive (2008:274).

The Interconnectedness between the human and the non-human worlds is exemplified in Oliver’s poem, “Wild Geese” (*Dream Work*:14), which begins with these lines:

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

Palpable in these lines is Oliver’s inversion of traditional Judeo-Christian injunctions such as sin, guilt, and redemption. The first line reads like a new injunction, addressing the reader directly in a short sentence with an end-stop, resulting in a wake-up call of sorts, which is an efficacious

technique. Furthermore, Oliver's employment of mutes (her term for unvoiced consonants) in the first line, in the words "not" and "good", is not coincidental; each muted word becomes isolated, thus creating a pause for the reader to contemplate. According to Oliver, the primary function of a mute is to create "'silences' within a poem [that] are noticeable, truncating as they do, for an instant, the otherwise unbroken string of sound" (*Rules for the Dance*:60-61).

Similarly, the second line contains mutes: "not", and "walkk". Of particular interest here is that both mutes occur within the line, with none at the end of the line, in contrast with the mute found at the end of line 1. Placing mutes within the line creates a mini-caesura which Oliver describes as "a particularly effective device that can break into the established tempo of the line, thereby indicating – almost announcing – an important or revelatory moment" (*A Poetry Handbook*:50). Line three also contains two mini-caesuras, "hundred" and "desert". The enjambment at the end of line two reinforces the painful walk on the knees, stressing its continued physical motion. The anaphoric elements in lines 1 and 2 – "You do not have to" – emphasise the active part the reader should take in rethinking concepts of sin, guilt and repentance. The fact that the word "repenting" in line three occurs after a comma, as well as at the end of the line, conveys to the reader in unambiguous terms that repentance – "being good" – is not the only option in life.

Watts (1995:3-4) reinforces the idea that "being good" features heavily within the Judeo-Christian framework, adding that Buddhism emphasises other traits: "Buddhism, unlike Judaism and Christianity, is not frantically concerned with being good; it is concerned with being wise. It is concerned with being compassionate, which is a little different from being good". Nhat Hahn (1991:118) explains that being compassionate enables the mind to understand the notion of Interdependence: "Real efforts from reconciliation arise when we see with eyes of compassion, and that ability comes when we see clearly the nature of interbeing and interpenetration of all beings".

In a similar fashion to Watts's observation that Buddhism concerns itself with wisdom, Suzuki elaborates on the essence of wisdom in the Buddhist tradition: "By wisdom we do not mean some particular faculty or philosophy. It is the readiness of the mind that is wisdom" (1970:115). This supports the idea of open-mindedness: "You do not have to be good". In addition, the "compassion" Watts is referring to, is underpinned in lines 4, 5 and 6 by virtue of breaking through the isolation of the "you" in the first three lines:

You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
     love what it loves.  
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

In contrast to the first three lines in which mutes are used to gain the reader's attention, here, Oliver's focus shifts to liquid sounds, which create a softer sound-effect: "only", "let", "animal", "your" (line 4); "love" and "loves" (line 5); "Tell", "despair", "yours", "will", and "mine".

According to Oliver, the effect that "liquids" bring about within a poem is equal to "watery sounds; they suggest softness, fluency, motion. If you want to create a scene of softness and ease, the liquids will be appropriate" (*Rules for the Dance*:61).

Because mutes are harsher sounds that divide the line into certain sound units, liquids balance these out, bringing fluidity and movement to a line, and this is exactly what Oliver does, not only in terms of sound effects but also on a denotative level: in the first three lines, she imparts to readers what they do not have to do or believe, effectively waking up the "you" of the poem. However, in the next three lines, she balances this harshness of walking on one's knees in the desert, which creates a very isolated context, with a more intimate, compassionate perspective: the "you" does not have to be alienated, or look for spiritual clemency through self-mortification; the "despair" that is felt can become a shared experience between the "I" and the "you". This is a crucial turning point in the poem, achieved through the strategic placing of "only", because it is here that Oliver utilises the idea of Interconnection, a major tenet of Buddhism.

Reinforcing the idea of Interconnection is the contemporary Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hahn's coined word "interbeing": "To be' is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing" (1991:96). Nhat Hahn (1991:98) goes on to say: "The truth is that everything contains everything else. We cannot just be, we can only inter-be. We are responsible for everything that happens around us". This "responsibility" also lies within alleviating the existential despair of the isolated "you" and "I", therefore creating an "us" rather than separation and isolation.

Jones (2003:14) augments Nhat Hahn's notion of "interbeing" by calling it "at-oneness":

When self (subject) gives up its struggle to sustain its sense of separation from all that is other (object) it opens to an at-oneness, to unity consciousness. In Dogen Zenji's words, from the *Genjokoan*: 'When the self advances, the ten thousand things retreat; when the self retreats, the ten thousand things advance'. He further elaborates:

To study the Way is to study the self;  
 To study the self is to forget the self;  
 To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things;  
 To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barrier between

## Self and others.

Important here is that it is not through self-mortification in order to gain redemption from a divine entity that breaks through the isolation but through understanding one's own mind. The ego-self in "Wild Geese" is exemplified by self-mortification in the desert, a mind-state that is presented in the poem, aptly titled "The Teachers" (*Red Bird*:27-28), in which the real teachers are owls, mockingbirds, wind and water, "for they are what lead me / from the dryness of self / where I labor / with the mind-steps of language" (lines 17-20). These "mind-steps of language" are linked to the ego-mind's continuous preconceived ideas and misgivings. According to Suzuki, one needs to cleanse the mind from these ideas: "When you study Buddhism you should have a general house cleaning of your mind. If you want to understand Buddhism it is necessary to forget about all your preconceived ideas. To begin with, you must give up the idea of substantiality or existence" (1970:111). When one is able to perform this "house-cleansing" of the mind, the "mind-steps of language", the mind quiets down: "And then, like peace after perfect speech, / such stillness" (lines 27-28). In the Western mind, the self is a separate entity that exists independently from everything around it: "Most people still have a deep faith in solid substances and believe that their feelings, ideas, and even their own bodies belong to, or inhere in, some mysterious but seemingly irrefutable substance called a self" (Cook 1981:2).

Akuppa (2002:29) accentuates the fact that this 'self' or ego believes itself to be apart from everything else:

Our problem is that we are living as though disconnected. We think we are disconnected from our neighbours, from people in other countries, from the natural world. But this isn't in accord with reality – it doesn't work. Everything we eat and drink comes from the earth. We depend on others in countless ways even for the most basic necessities of life.

In similar vein, Loy asserts:

The ego-self's attempt to make itself real is a self-reflexive effort to grasp itself, an impossibility that leads to self-paralysis [...] To yield to my groundlessness is to realize that I have always been grounded: not as a sense-of-self, but insofar as I have never been separate from the world, never been other than the world (1996:xv).

This sense of not being separate from the world is emphasised through images of the natural world in lines 7-13 of "Wild Geese":

Meanwhile the world goes on.  
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
 are moving across the landscapes,  
 over the prairies and the deep trees,  
 the mountains and the rivers.  
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
 are heading home again.

The anaphoric repetition of the word “Meanwhile” also foregrounds the fact that the human world is not at the centre of the universe and that, at the same time, the natural world goes on, despite human despair. Also implied is that nature just *is* – there is no despair or isolation. The wild geese in line 12 become the emblem for the “desire to understand one’s self in relation to people and the environment” (Riley 2008:276). This idea connects with Dōgen’s earlier quotation:

To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things;  
 To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barrier between  
 Self and others.

The reason wild geese can ‘forget’ themselves is that they do not have a sense of a separate self to start with; therefore, they do not perceive any barrier between themselves and the rest of the world:

Wild geese, with their migratory patterns, appear to know where they are going and from where they have come. While bird migration is easily explained as a result of weather and the need for food, an instinctual pattern exists, causing wild geese to migrate along similar routes each year. An intuition guides them; cues from the land direct their journey (Riley 2008:276).

In fact, the image of wild geese is often found in Chinese and Japanese literature, because of the geese’s remarkable intuitive ability or inner compass that guides them when migrating. This type of inner ‘knowing’ is also integral to the natural world of which the wild geese are part: “In Chinese their word for nature is *tzu-jan* (in Japanese, *shizen*), which means ‘what is so of itself’ or what we would call ‘spontaneity’. A tree has no separate intention to grow. Water has no intention to flow” (Watts 2002:71-72). Watts (72) also quotes an example of nature’s lack of ego-self:

*When the wild geese fly  
 Over the lake*

*The water does not intend to reflect them  
And the geese have no mind  
To cast their image.*

The fact that water has no “intention” to reflect the wild geese and, that, in turn, the geese, “have no mind” to cast their own image onto the lake, reinforces the fact that it is mainly humans who cannot “forget the self”, as seen in the Dōgen quotation. The “no mind” Watts is referring to is a vital notion in Buddhism which links with Emptiness / *sunyata*: “Actually, emptiness of mind is not even a state of mind, but the original essence of mind [...] ‘Essence of mind’, ‘original mind’, ‘original face’, ‘Buddha nature’, ‘emptiness’ – all these words mean the absolute calmness of your mind” (Suzuki 1970:129). This connects with Oliver’s wild geese that “are heading home again”, an image that is synonymous with Suzuki’s “Essence of mind” or “original mind”. “Heading home” implies that the wild geese are returning to an original state of mind, free of the grasping of the ego-mind. In addition, the suggestion is that “heading home” is a natural state, which nature always retains, unless it is in some way cultivated by humans: “For a plant or stone to be natural is no problem. But for us there is some problem, indeed a big problem. To be natural is something we must work on” (Suzuki 1970:108). What Suzuki refers to here is the fact that the human mind is always grasping at something and finds it nearly impossible to *just be*, being “natural”. Batchelor (1992:10) reiterates this idea by adding that the ego-mind mostly distorts the nature of reality, which is empty of pre-conceptions:

When we understand the nature of ourselves and the world in this way [through understanding Interconnection] we are freed from the instinctive idea that we and other things somehow exist in our right, independently and separately from everything else. One of Buddha’s earliest disciples said:

For the one who truly sees the pure and simple arising of phenomena and the pure and simple continuity of conditioned things, there is no fear. When with wisdom one sees the world as just like grass and wood, not finding any selfishness, one does not grieve with the idea, ‘this is not mine’.

A crucial observation Batchelor is making is that the human mind could indeed grasp the nature of “ourselves” if it understood that (1) all things are interrelated and thus interdependent (“pure and simple arising of phenomena”), and (2) saw these conditioned phenomena in their *suchness* (seeing the “world as just grass and wood”), therefore being *empty*.

Cook (1981:15) links these two crucial notions, Interdependence and Emptiness:

The point to the doctrine of interdependence is that things exist *only* in interdependence, for things do not exist in their own right. In Buddhism, this manner of existence is called 'emptiness'. Buddhism says that things are empty in the sense that they are absolutely lacking in self-essence (*svabhāva*) by virtue of which things would have an independent existence. In reality, their existence derives strictly from interdependence.

When one ultimately understands that all phenomena, such as the self, lack self-essence, one is able to experience the *suchness* or *thusness* of all things or the "coming home" to things:

Buddhist practice is ultimately concerned with a personal re-embedding in time, space, and above all, with others [...] This happens when the self begins to observe that the burden of trying to sustain a separate and invulnerable selfhood is a source of frustration and anguish and has no inherent necessity. Subsequent liberation into a world of *suchness*, of factuality unshadowed by self-need, has been described as coming home (Jones 2003:83).

When looking at lines 14-15 of "Wild Geese", this *suchness* becomes a distinct possibility because

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination.

The word "imagination" is in stark contrast with the isolated "you" in the bleakness of the desert, which could also serve as a mind state, or in the "dryness of self" ("The Teachers"). This mind state is desiccated and shrivelled-up, without possibilities; a typical ego-self. However, with this new mind state ("imagination"), which can be linked to the earlier-mentioned "original mind" or "empty mind" (Suzuki), the world of *suchness* can be experienced: "Paradoxically, the world emptied of self-construction actually has a vivid *suchness*, a *thusness*, a pungent reality, which contrasts with the pale, devitalized world that reflects underlying fear and anxiety" (Jones 2003:13). Significant here is that the despairing and lonely ego-state of the mind is always coupled with inherent fear and anxiety. However, with the "imagination" or original mind, anything is possible, and, as Smith (2006:135) points out, this could prove to be therapeutic for the mind, because novel things are contemplated:

The Mahayanan concept of Emptiness also implied emptiness of thoughts, provoking a new object of contemplation – that is, Emptiness itself – as a form of therapy that was effective both intellectually and emotionally [...] it meant confronting the world and the

sense-objects in their Suchness (*tathata*), 'such as they really are', without adding to them or subtracting anything from them at all.

Seeing things in their *suchness* thus means returning to the No-Mind or empty mind – “such as they really are” – and, in Oliver’s specific context in which the natural world is always foregrounded, it means going back to our “animal nature” which

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – (line 16)

Mann (2004:16) believes that, “in order to overcome our ‘despair’ of the world and our loneliness, we need to regain a sense of our ‘animal’ nature”. This means that it becomes possible to understand the Interdependence of all things, animate and inanimate. This “animal nature” also links with the “soft animal of your body” (line 4) of which Mann (16) says: “Our very perception of the world is rooted in our ‘animal’ nature, in ourselves as bodies, and our inseparable relationship with everything animate and inanimate. In fact, there really is no inanimate world”. This idea that nothing is really “inanimate” is echoed in the poem “At the River Clarion” (*Evidence*:51), in which Oliver talks about the water, stones, and moss as having voices (lines 7-10):

Whenever the water struck the stone it had  
 something to say,  
 and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing  
 under the water.

Because these are not really “inanimate”, they too are interconnected to everything else (lines 11-15):

And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me  
 what they were saying.  
 Said the river: I am part of holiness.  
 And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered  
 the moss beneath the water.

Furthermore, in order to “hear” or perceive these inanimate phenomena in their *suchness* (which means that they are, in fact, animate beings), is to “forget the self” (lines 18-19):

You don’t hear such voices in an hour or a day.  
 You don’t hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears.

Forgetting the self is to forget the “selfhood” that “has stuffed your ears”: “When the water returns to its original oneness with the river, it no longer has any individual feeling to it; it resumes its own nature, and finds composure” (Suzuki 1970:94).

Like the voices of the water, stone, and moss, the wild geese’s call is at the same time a wake-up call; waking up the “selfhood” that is “stuffing your ears”, bringing to mind what Jones (2003:83) has said in his earlier quotation: One can only observe the *suchness* of things when the mind rids itself of the “burden of trying to sustain a separate and invulnerable selfhood”. At the same time, the ‘voices’ of the wild geese also remind the self that it too is a part of a greater community (lines 17-18):

over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

For Mann (2004:16), “the voices of nature (things animate *and* inanimate) are manifestations of a *communal conversation*”. This community is a family in which “one is less oneself than part of a single indivisible community” (*Winter Hours*:98). Mann also quotes other Oliver poems in which the word “family” features:

In fact, in a poem called ‘The Family’ she says, of ‘dark things [i.e. beasts] of the wood’:  
‘They are our brothers. / They are the family / We have run away from’ [*New and Selected Poems, Volume One*:215]. Her identity derives more from her participation in this family than from her individuality. Part of our problem is that ‘we are all / one family / / but we love ourselves / best [*Dream Work*:24].

The idea of the ego-self that separates itself from everything, loving itself “best” is also evident in “Cold Poem” (*American Primitive*:31, lines 12-15):

Maybe what cold is, is the time  
we measure the love we have always had, secretly,  
for our own bones, the hard knife-edged love  
for the warm river of the I, beyond all else.

However, despite the “warm river of the I”, Oliver continues the idea of a brother- and sisterhood in “The Trees” (*Evidence*:68) in which she talks about maples, oaks, and pines (lines 14-15):

it would do us good if we would think about  
these brothers and sisters, quietly and deeply.

Nhat Hahn (1991:118) highlights the same principle of family or a brother- and sisterhood, but notes that, at the same time, most individuals find divisive ways to alienate themselves from one another: “‘In order to fight each other, the chicks born from the same mother hen put colors on their faces’. This is a well-known Vietnamese saying. Putting colors on our own face is to make ourselves a stranger to our own brothers and sisters”. What Nhat Hahn is illustrating about the chicks, is echoed by Oliver “we are all / one family / / but we love ourselves / best” (*Dream Work*:24). The only way to end this disconnection is by recognising that, ultimately, we are all interconnected:

When will the chicks of the same mother hen remove the colors from their faces and recognize each other as brothers and sisters? The only way to end the danger is for each of us to do so, and say to others, ‘I am your brother’. ‘I am your sister’. ‘We are all humankind, and our life is one’ (Nhat Hahn 1991:119).

Moreover, Oliver’s notion of family is also present in the metaphor of Indra’s Net: “the net is valuable as a working ideal for society and its organizations, in which we are brothers and sisters in mutuality” (Jones 2003:17).

The idea of a “family”, “brothers” and “sisters” goes beyond the Judeo-Christian notion that humans are the centre of all creation: “in her poetry human beings do not occupy the exalted status of the ‘image of God’. Instead, we might say that they are ‘soul brothers and sisters’ with all other forms of life, very much a part of what she calls ‘the family of things’” (Mann 2004:xii).

Christensen (2002:136-137) reiterates this idea: “To Mary Oliver humans are no longer merely favoured by a divine power, as our Judeo-Christen heritage suggests; we are inextricable constituents of it”. This suggests the “inter-are” and “interbeing” that Nhat Hahn has coined which, in turn, Mann calls “intersubjectivity”: “Instead, *all* phenomena are subjects and we live in a world of ‘intersubjectivity’” (2004:17). “Intersubjectivity” means that the established Western view of subject-object categorisation or dualistic viewpoint is replaced by the idea that everything is interrelated, therefore disrupting the notion of objectification. The notion of duality will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Similarly, in “Clapp’s Pond” (*American Primitive*:21-22), Oliver describes the moment when she is no longer simply an objective observer but has become a subjective participant (Section 3, lines 1-7):

How sometimes everything

closes up, a painted fan, landscapes and moments  
 flowing together until the sense of distance –  
 say, between Clapp's Pond and me –  
 vanishes, edges slide together  
 like the feathers of a wing, everything  
 touches everything.

The sense of merging in this poem is supported by the enjambments of lines 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 which establish a physical “flow” for the reader’s eye, literally suspending the idea of the reader as ‘subject’ reading the poem as ‘object’. In fact, Oliver herself suspends the alienation between the human self and the natural world when she writes poetry: “when I am doing my job well, I vanish” (*Blue Pastures*:111); and “I vanish completely from the scene [...] I am trying in my poems to vanish and have the reader be the experience. I do not want to be there” (Oliver in Swanson 1990:7). This ‘vanishing’ is reiterated in lines 3-5: “flowing together until the sense of distance – / say, between Clapp’s Pond and me – / vanishes”.

In lines 6-7, the “everything / touches everything” reinforces the notion of Interdependence, bringing to mind the metaphor of Indra’s Net: Batchelor (1992:11) quotes Tu Tu Shun, a sixth-century patriarch of the Hua Yan school:

This imperial net is made of jewels: because the jewels are clear, they reflect each other’s images, appearing in each other’s reflections upon reflections, *ad infinitum*, all appearing at once in one jewel and in each one it is so – ultimately there is no going or coming [...]

If you sit in one jewel, then you are sitting in all jewels in every direction, multiplied over and over. Why? Because in one jewel there are all the jewels.

In fact, “Clapp’s Pond” foregrounds the principle of *pratītya-samutpāda* which denotes that all phenomena or *dharmas* are “mutually dependent and co-arising and co-ceasing’, meaning that everything in the world depends upon something else for its existence” (Milstead 1998:34).

Similarly, the images of the “painted fan, landscapes and moments” which “flow together” bear a striking resemblance to the metaphor of Indra’s Net. Although Oliver does not use the exact metaphor – a net consisting of an infinitesimal number of jewels – her own images amount to the idea of “everything” coming into contact with everything else. In Indra’s net, each jewel is reflected in all the others and vice versa: “in one jewel there are all the jewels”. In Oliver’s poem, she says: “How sometimes everything / closes up”; how there is no sense of distance between subject and object anymore; how “edges slide together / like the feathers of a wing”. Akuppa’s

(2002:95) explanation of the jewelled Net resonates with Oliver's idea of everything flowing together to become a whole, but that, at the same time, each phenomenon retains its own beauty:

We can learn to see this beauty not only in things viewed individually, but also in reality as a whole. As nothing is fixed, it is not ultimately separate from everything else [...] Each jewel perfectly reflects, and is reflected by, every other jewel. Thus each jewel shares in the existence of every other jewel yet does not lose its individual identity.

The metaphor of Indra's Net dovetails with Oliver's theme of a "family of things", of which everyone and everything constitutes a part. In Oliver's view, poetry, history and the natural world are linked inextricably:

I feel as a member of a great family – one that includes the elephant and the wheat stalk as well as the schoolteacher and the industrialist. This is not a mental condition, but a spiritual condition. Poetry is a product of our history, and our history is inseparable from the natural world (*Blue Pastures*:58).

At the same time, this "family" connects with Thich Nhat Hahn's "interbeing" and "inter-are", which Jones (2003:16) links with Indra's Net:

The energy that sustains the net is not generated outside the net or in any one part of the net but is, again, mutually generated through the interbeing of the entire net. Not only is the net infinite, but in each jewel is reflected another infinite interbeing – a mutuality in which entities do and do not have an interdependent existence, are empty and yet exist.

In addition, Jones ties together "interbeing", Indra's Net, Interdependence, as well as *sunyata*. Transforming the ego-self, therefore realising Emptiness, makes it possible to be part of the holistic picture that Oliver proposed earlier: "You don't hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears" (*Evidence*:51). This dovetails with "When my sense-of-self lets go and disappears, I realize my interdependence with all other phenomena in that all-encompassing net" (Loy 1996:107). Therefore, "the interbeing of Indra's net is limitless" (Jones 2003:181).

In "The Turtle" (*Dream Work*:57), this "limitless interbeing" Jones talks about, is present again. Oliver sketches a picture of a female turtle that goes to the beach every year in spring to excavate a nest so that she can lay her eggs, something (lines 13-25) the turtle

was born to do –  
 and then you realize a greater thing –  
 she doesn't consider  
 what she was born to do.  
 She's only filled  
 with an old blind wish.  
 It isn't even hers but came to her  
 in the rain or the soft wind,  
 which is a gate through which her life keeps walking.

She can't see  
 herself apart from the rest of the world  
 or the world from what she must do  
 every spring.

The turtle, emblematic of the natural, non-human world, does not philosophise about or ponder what she should be doing instead: she was “born” to dig a nest in the sand and lay her eggs; she “doesn't consider / what she was born to do”; “She's only filled / with an old blind wish”. Hagen (2003:75) explains this phenomenon in which nature does not *think*, but intuits, in which the turtle is just *being* a turtle, producing eggs: “Nature [...] is unintentional. Nature doesn't try to do anything, produce anything, or accomplish anything. Nevertheless, nature does produce a great deal”. Bryson (2005:80) says “that this preconscious, instinctual ‘old blind wish’ is actually what connects the turtle to her world and her home, and that ‘she can't see / herself apart from the rest of the world’”. He goes on to postulate that “this is the natural ‘perfection’ to which Oliver repeatedly points: the turtle's unconsidered, blind awareness that she is ‘part of the pond she lives in’. Where, in the human world, ‘the connections have broken’, here the turtle is tied to her world ‘by an unbreakable string’ (80).

Cook (1981:29) points to the inability of most humans to be in touch with their “old blind wish”, living their lives in artifice; apart from the natural world. However, Buddhism, especially informed by the Chinese link with Taoism, regards being one with nature as a type of enlightenment:

Closely connected with this love of the natural world and its inhabitants was a tendency in Chinese Buddhism to interpret the Buddhist goal of enlightenment as a return to naturalness. In Taoist terms, this meant ceasing to pick and choose in the artificial, learned manner which has become our nature.

The “blindness” of the turtle’s “old wish” or inherent instinct is reinforced by “she *can’t see* (my italics) / herself apart from the rest of the world / or the world from what she must do / every spring”. The “must do” reiterates this blind instinct of which Hagen says:

As Whitman points out, animals are self-contained. They don’t look at anything outside of *just this*. Each comes fully equipped to be a cat or a cow, a lion or a deer, a bird or a fish. They’re ready and willing to sleep, breed, find food and shelter, and survive. Therein lies their serenity. They don’t act with leaning (*sic*) minds. Without looking outside themselves, they live entirely in the moment (2003:193).

Moreover, animals are “serene” and “live in the moment” because there is no ego-self that keeps them apart from their No-Mind or Empty Mind. This can be seen in “Both Worlds” (*Red Bird*:51-52, lines 19-28):

where the trees say  
     nothing the toad says  
 nothing the dirt  
     says nothing and yet  
     what has always happened  
     keeps happening:

the trees flourish,  
     the toad leaps,  
     and out of the silent dirt  
     the blood-red roses rise.

Line 21 of “The Turtle” is a good example of this state of No-Mind in which the metaphor of the gate foregrounds the turtle’s instinctual “old blind wish”: “It isn’t even hers but came to her / in the rain or the soft wind / which is a gate through which her life keeps walking”. The rain and wind, two natural elements, become the symbolic gate of continuation through which her life “keeps walking”. This is reminiscent of Suzuki’s (1970:111) notion of Emptiness which is also likened to a gate: “We say true existence comes from emptiness and goes back into emptiness. What appears from emptiness is true existence. We have to go through the gate of emptiness”. Furthermore, the “gate of emptiness” in Oliver’s poems is always linked with the interplay of nature and poetry: “I quickly found for myself two such blessings – the natural world, and the world of writing: literature. These were the gates through which I vanished from a difficult place” (*Wild Geese*:12).

Going “through the gate of emptiness” also means that the turtle is undeniably linked to everything around the turtle (lines 30-33:58):

she is a part of the pond she lives in,  
the tall trees are her children,  
the birds that swim above her  
are tied to her by an unbreakable string.

Riley (2008:276) links “the desire for connection and understanding of place” with “The Turtle”, that was established in “Wild Geese”, emphasising the turtle’s natural ability to “sense her place in the chain of nature”. This “chain” links strongly with lines such as “She can’t see / herself apart from the rest of the world”; “she is a part of the pond she lives in”, and the birds “are tied to her by an unbreakable string”. Riley goes on to accentuate Interconnectedness: “The turtle’s journey stresses the value of connection with all living things, with one’s world, as the turtle remains unable to see herself separate from the world or separate from her duties every spring” (276). Furthermore, the poem ostensibly disseminates the extrapolation from turtle to human, suggesting

that humans can learn from the turtle’s understanding of interconnection, especially if humans learn to value intuition over reason. Following one’s instinctual path, contends the poem, leads to a better understanding of one’s place in nature (276).

Not only may readers deduce their “place in nature”, which has resonances of “the family of things”, but also their relationships with other humans:

Learning that lesson leads to a better understanding of one’s relation to other people as well. Over and over again, Oliver’s poems stress the connection and interdependence that people observe in nature offer humans ways to experience their lives fully (Riley:274).

Bryson (2005:84) echoes this: “I and the world around me exist as part of ‘an ongoing reciprocity with the world’”.

This reciprocity, particularly present in the “unbreakable string” in line 33, becomes “one muscle” in “The Sea” (*American Primitive*:69, lines 1-13):

Stroke by  
stroke my  
body remembers that life and cries for

the lost parts of itself –  
 fins, gills  
 opening like flowers into  
 the flesh – my legs  
 want to lock and become  
 one muscle, I swear I know  
 just what the blue-gray scales  
 shingling  
 the rest of me would  
 feel like!

Bryson remarks on the typography of the “The Sea” which “set[s] up visually in the poem’s opening lines, lapping like the ocean surf itself, that narrate the speaker’s desire to return, while swimming in the sea, to a state of natural ‘perfection’” (2005:86). The typography is integral to the interdependence of the “I” with the sea through becoming a fish or a mermaid-like creature – “my legs want to lock and become / one muscle”: “Her poem ‘The Sea’ takes this concept of interconnection as its central theme” (86). The speaker’s body is undergoing some type of metamorphic experience, remembering a primordial existence: “my / body remembers that life and cries for / the lost parts of itself / fins, gills” (lines 3-6).

A prominent Oliver poetic device that features in lines 1-13 of “The Sea” is the employment of enjambments that reinforces the indentations mentioned earlier by Bryson. Only line 4 has a dash after “itself”, to highlight what the “lost” primordial parts entail: “fins, gills” as well as line 13 which ends with an exclamation mark, emphasising the ecstasy the “I” feels at the thought of merging; this echoes what Cook says: “The Hua-yen Buddhist world view leads directly to a new attitude toward the natural which is not only deeply respectful but imbued with a profound gratitude and even ecstatic appreciation” (1981:29).

The ecstatic merging of the “I” with the primordial is certainly not only on a physical level but also illustrates the human mind that overcomes its separation from the rest of the world:

A primary cause of suffering is delusion: our inability, because of a subtly wilful blindness, to see things the way they truly are but instead in a distorted way. The world is in fact a seamless and dynamic unity: a single living organism that is constantly undergoing change. Our minds, however, chop it up into separate, static bits and pieces, which we then try mentally and physically to manipulate (Snelling 2000:27).

Ironically, this “blindness” that Snelling is talking about contrasts with the turtle’s “blindness” in “The Turtle”. The animal’s blindness is not ignorant, because it does not distort the nature of

reality which the self creates by regarding things as “separate, static bits and pieces”. Especially in the Hua-yen Buddhist philosophy, primarily informed through Indra’s Net, “there is a great emphasis on the relatedness of things” which means that the conventional mode of thinking about and experiencing life is “in terms of distinct, separate *entities*”. Buddhism regards phenomena in a relational manner, “primarily in terms of the *relationships* between these same entities” (Cook 1981:8). Krüger (1991:7) reiterates this: “Buddhism stresses the *interdependence of all things* in a universe of unconceivable dimensions. Nothing and nobody is self-contained”. Therefore, the “I” in “The Sea” that is transmogrified into a primordial being, (lines 26-32) journeys back to

become again a flaming body  
of blind feeling  
sleeking along  
in the luminous roughage of the sea’s body,  
vanished  
like victory inside that  
insucking genesis

This “flaming body / of blind feeling” ties in with the turtle’s “old blind wish”; both metaphors refer to the primordial, instinctual Original Mind that, in Mahāyāna Buddhist terms, is “the collective connecting non-entity of Universal (or One) Mind”. Zen terms this as “Wu-hsin or No-Mind” (McLeod 1990:66). She goes on to say that “hsin” implies “inmost heart or deepest mind; soul but without that term’s theological implications. That factor in each human being which is part of All-Mind” (87). The “flaming body” is, therefore, true consciousness: “Traditional Western thought says that the self is an entity that has certain experiences. In Zen thinking, there is no entity to ‘have’ experience; the self *is* experience. Therefore, in Zen terms the self is not something that perceives light; the self *is* light” (Milstead 1998:29).

This No-Mind or One Mind becomes apparent in lines 30-32: “vanished / like victory inside that / insucking genesis. “Vanish” is a concept that Oliver works with regularly as may be seen in “Clapp’s Pond” and from interviews.

Similarly, in “The Sea”, the “I” vanishes into the vast sea to become one with it. The words “insucking genesis” in line 32 highlight the sea’s all-encompassing presence, mimicking the sucking sounds it makes during its ebb. In addition, “genesis” draws on the primordial nature of the ocean, in which everything is flowing, mirroring the primordial nature of the transmogrified “I”. Moreover, the conventional “I” has not vanished altogether, but has rather just merged with the All-mind or Universal Mind, which is the Original Mind – the “insucking genesis” of introspection which is also the “blind feeling” (line 27). Watts (1962:43) elucidates No-Mind as a

state of “un-self-consciousness” [...] a state of wholeness in which the mind functions freely and easily, without the sensation of a second mind or ego standing over it with a club”.

As we saw in Chapter 3, in “One or Two Things”, the ego, that is unable to live in the moment, is likened to “a sharp hoof, / at the center of my mind” (*Dream Work*:51). This “hoof” creates an agonizing burden for the speaker, because the ego-mind keeps on re-living the past and its associated suffering through its neurotic preoccupation with it. Thus, the “hoof” can be likened to the “club” or the “second mind” or ego Watts is referring to. However, just as the god of dirt with its “dog voice / crow voice, frog voice” (50) keeps on reminding the “I” to stay present, the “flaming body / of blind feeling” plays a vital part in the “vanishing” of the separating ego-mind, with a resultant “victory inside”; an “insucking genesis”.

The “one muscle” that stresses the unity of all things recurs in “Pink Moon – The Pond” (*Twelve Moons*:8, lines 33-44):

And that’s when it happens –  
 you see everything  
 through their eyes,  
 their joy, their necessity;  
 you wear their webbed fingers;  
 your throat swells.  
 And that’s when you know  
 you will live whether you will or not,  
 one way or another,  
 because everything is everything else,  
 one long muscle.  
 It’s no more mysterious than that.

In many of Oliver’s poems, such as “The Sea”, there is a merging of the speaker’s body with the natural world. Here, the speaker sees “everything / through their eyes”, and “you wear their webbed fingers; / your throat swells”. A device that Oliver uses to draw the reader in is to write in the second person – the “you”. Oliver has always been quite adamant about the reader becoming the speaker: “Make sure there is nothing in the poem that would keep the reader from becoming the speaker of the poem” (*Wild Geese*:63).

In contrast to “The Sea”, enjambment is sparse in “Pink Moon”, and Oliver employs mostly commas (lines 35, 40, 41, 42), semi-colons (lines 36 and 37), full-stops (lines 38, 43, 44), and a hyphen, positioned at the end of the line (line 33). This use of punctuation slows the tempo of the poem as well as of each line for instants of reflection.

Lines 42 to 43 – “because everything is everything else, / one long muscle” – particularly reflect the principle of “universal interdependence” or Mutual Interpenetration, showing

the entire cosmos as one single nexus of conditions in which everything simultaneously depends on, and is depended on by, everything else. Seen in this light, then, everything affects and is affected by, more or less immediately or remotely, everything else; just as this is true of every system of relationships, so is it true of the totality of existence (Cleary 1983:2).

It is with this network or “nexus” that Oliver seeks to merge with; to “see everything / through their eyes” and to “wear their webbed fingers”. These lines seek Interconnection with the natural world:

As Abram explains, a bodily identification with the nonhuman world offers us the means for the (at least temporary) reconnection that Oliver seeks. According to Abram, much of our perceived isolation results from our inherited worldview grounded in the great chain of being (Bryson 2005:87).

Earlier, in the context of “Wild Geese”, Riley (2008:276) also remarked upon Oliver sensing “her place in the chain of nature”. This metaphor is similar to the idea of Indra’s Net which links with Dōgen’s *Genjo-koan* about “forgetting the self”: “‘Forgetting’ ourselves is how we jewels in Indra’s Net lose our sense of separation and realize that we are the net” (Loy 1996:96). Keeping in mind that “we are the net”, Oliver’s merging with nature is not on a mere physical or anthropomorphic level: “When Oliver talks about animals and trees and rocks as the conversational family of which she is part, she is not talking about mere personification (Mann 2004:17). This means that “for Oliver, the goal is not to make animals human, but by imaginative attention, to intuit what it might be like to be an animal” (Mann 2004:18). This “imaginative attention” which is mindfulness, is a leitmotif in Oliver’s poems, albeit through different poetic strategies, images, and metaphors. However, in “Wild Geese”, she mentions the imagination directly: “the world offers itself to your imagination”.

In order to employ this imaginative attention to merge with the natural world, the notion of *sunyata* becomes a priority: “The empty mind cannot be purchased at the altar of demand; it comes into being when thought is aware of its own activities – not the thinker being aware of his thought” (Krishnamurti 2002:127)(It should be noted that while Krishnamurti was *not* a Buddhist, a good deal of his teachings incorporate his understanding of Buddhist principles). This “thought



and things as separate, self-created and self-sustaining". Again, as seen in "The Sea", the "I" returns to the primordial in "White Flowers" – "roots and the stems and the flowers" – which is reminiscent of Original Mind, No-Mind residing in *no-thing-ness*: "Shunyata indicates, therefore, not the presence of something but rather a resounding lack or void, specifically a lack of inherent existence or 'own nature' (svabhava)" (40).

Emptiness, or lack of self also features in "Entering the Kingdom" (*Twelve Moons*:21) when Oliver says in line 10: "To learn something by being nothing". Alford (1988:285) explains this: "In 'Entering the Kingdom', the narrator expresses her desire to negate the 'I' and become one with nature – 'the dream of my life / Is to lie down by a slow river / And stare at the light in the trees – To learn something by being nothing' [lines 7-11]. Suzuki reiterates the notion of *no-thing-ness*: "Moment after moment, everyone comes out of nothingness. This is the true joy of life" (1970:107). "October" (*Wild Geese*:114, Part 7, lines 9-11) encompasses this *no-thing-ness*, No-self or *anātman*: "so this is the world. I'm not in it. It is beautiful". Another poem, "At the Shore" (*West Wind*:40, lines 19-21), incorporates *no-thing-ness*: "Here is the white and silky trumpet of nothing. / Here is the beautiful Nothing, body of happy, / meaningless fire, wildfire, shaking the heart".

The theme of *no-thing-ness* continues in the poem, "Moles" (*Truro Bear*:35, lines 27-31). Like the turtle, who was born with an "old blind wish", so the moles have been born with "emptiness-of-own-being" (Smith and Novak 2003:62): "'The Turtle' and 'Moles' thus become unlikely exemplars, indefatigable heroes who accomplish constantly what the poet achieves only in her most intense dream visions: they have no self apart from their physical flourishing" (McNew 1989:n.p.). Consequently, moles are

so willing to continue  
generation after generation  
accomplishing nothing  
but their brief physical lives  
as they live and die.

At a superficial level, "accomplishing nothing" may seem nihilistic, but the speaker of the poem goes beyond the conventional view that most animals only live and die in order to perpetuate the next generation (lines 18-26):

Field after field  
you can see the trceries  
of their long  
lonely walks, then

the rains blur  
 even this frail  
 hint of them –  
 so excitable,  
 so plush

Here, the reader is given a vivid depiction of the speaker's excitement – “so excitable, / so plush” – in tracing the moles; usually they are regarded as “pests”, digging up farm lands and gardens. Oliver reverses this conventional view by reintroducing the mole to the reader, primarily by showing how they live and what delight they take from (lines 32-36)

pushing and shoving  
 with their stubborn muzzles against  
 the whole earth,  
 finding it  
 delicious.

In these last lines, Oliver surprises the reader by toppling the rather introverted image of the mole in the beginning lines of the poem: the moles are “blind / as bats, shy / as hares” (lines 6-7), digging continuously under the earth. However, this is just a limited idea, because there is more to the mole than most people could imagine. The mole, finding the earth “delicious”, is a wonderful example of Buddha nature, *suchness*, or *as-it-isness*, of which Suzuki says:

mountains, trees, flowing water, flowers, and plants – everything as it is – is the way Buddha is. It means everything is taking Buddha's activity, each thing in its own way. But the way each thing exists is not to be understood by itself in its own realm of consciousness. What we see or what we hear is just a part, or a limited idea, of what we actually are (1970:131).

The mole thus emblematises human nature as well: there is more to ourselves than just our fixed identities. This is exactly what Ratiner (2002:40) contends about Oliver's poetry, which, according to him, is

an investigation into the nature of the self. But in her vision, the self is a much more open and encompassing concept than the succinct identities to which we affix our names. The 'Mary Oliver' of these poems has rain passing through her, contains swans and gannets, pine groves and waterfalls [...]

Riley (2008:274) affirms that the self in Oliver's poetry is "mutable and multiple. That realization, in turn, teaches readers that humans, like nature, are not fixed with one identity, one knowledge". This "mutable" identity of the self, which is the No-self, again presents itself in "Gravel" (*Leaf and the Cloud*:37, lines 7-8):

let me be not one thing but all things, and wondrously  
scattered; shake me free from my name.

Here, the title of the poem, "gravel", becomes the apt metaphor for the "shaking free" of the fixed ego-self; gravel is a substance which is "scattered" around but not pounded or impacted like soil. One can also be "gravel-blind", which encompasses complete blindness: this phrase brings to mind the "blindness" of the turtle's instinctual wish in "The Turtle" as well as the mole's physical blindness, an evolutionary adaptation for living underground in order to develop its other senses. Both animals are "gravel-blind", the turtle in the sense that she sets out to do what she was meant to do without deviation, and the mole "accomplishing nothing" but finding pleasure in tunnelling in the earth's "sweetest food" (line 16). In their "blindness", they almost ecstatically merge with nature, are interdependent with it; there is no sense of alienation: "let me be not one thing but all things" ("Gravel"). This is true Buddha nature, which is linked to emptiness of the self as well as the Interconnection to all things:

This true self is also called the Buddha-nature, and Zen Buddhists believe that it is part of every sentient being. Further, Zen Buddhists who follow the tradition established by Dogen do not say that every sentient being *has* the Buddha-nature, but that every sentient being *is* the Buddha-nature. Similarly, one does not develop the Buddha-nature or gain the Buddha-nature; one realizes the Buddha-nature that has always been present. The experience of realizing the Buddha-nature enables the enlightened to know the Emptiness and connectedness of all living things and therefore feel compassion for them. The experience also reveals the clutching, ever-hungry ego-self for what it is, an illusion (Milstead 1998:29).

Understanding that the self or *ātman* is an illusion enables the individual to experience Interconnection existentially, not just intellectually, and this experience is what Oliver creates in her poems: by giving the readers the spiritual tools to change their conventional view of themselves:

First, I stood still  
  
and thought of nothing.  
Then I began to listen.

Then I was filled with gladness –  
and that's when it happened,

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

The above poem, “Such Singing in the Wild Branches” (*Wild Geese*:120, lines 8-16) encompasses a meditative experience which empties the mind of all its presuppositions, incurred by the ego-mind. “Thinking of nothing” or No-thought – *wu-nien* – enables the “I” to really “listen”. Furthermore, true listening also means that the mind is freed from its ever-present thought patterns and chattering (what Buddhists call *monkey-mind*). By emptying the mind, it becomes clear that there is a pregnant possibility, a swollenness that is *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddhawomb – “filled with gladness”. In the context of the poem, this meditative experience releases the *ātman*, just “to be”. The comma between “to be”, and the rest of the possibilities of being – “myself, a wing or a tree” – suggests that Oliver emphasises the just *being*. When the individual can just *be*, the principle of what Watts (1995:28) calls *ji ji muge* – “no separation” between a “thing, event, or happening” becomes possible. It implies *pratītya-samutpāda*: everything co-arising. The “I” also understands “what the bird was saying”, referring to the title, “Such Singing in the Wild Branches”. Krishnamurti says the following about meditative emptying of the mind that brings about *anātman*:

Meditation really is a complete emptying of the mind [...] What creates conflict is thought identifying itself with one of its parts which becomes the me, the self and the various divisions in that self. There is no need for the self at any time. There is nothing but the body, and the freedom of the mind can happen only when thought is not breeding the ‘me’ (2002:111).

Lines 23 to 31 reiterate the idea of *ji ji muge* and *pratītya-samutpāda* or that “man recognizes the oneness of all forms of life” (Alford 1988:285):

it became difficult to tell just what it was that was singing –  
it was the thrush for sure, but it seemed

not a single thrush, but himself, and all his brothers,  
and also the trees around them,  
as well as the gliding, long-tailed clouds  
in the perfectly blue sky – all, all of them

were singing.  
 And, of course, yes, so it seemed,  
 so was I.

These lines affirm the idea of Universal Mind because the speaker thought that, at first, it was only the thrushes' "wild singing" she heard but then it became more than just that – "not a single thrush, but himself, and all his brothers"; the clouds, the sky, as well as the "I". Moreover, everything seems to be merging with everything else, not only in an auditory way in which everything is singing, but even the clouds seem to be shaped like birds – "gliding, long-tailed clouds".

The "perfectly blue sky" in line 28 becomes the nexus of activity: everything seems to amalgamate with it – the birds, the trees, and the "I". The dash positioned after "sky" urges the reader to connect the image of a perfectly blue sky with the "all, all of them". Once more, the notion of Emptiness pregnant with possibilities, not devoid of them, comes to mind. Watts reiterates the thought of *sunyata* as being the nature of reality in Buddhist philosophy: "The Buddhists' doctrine is the highest negativism. They characterize the ultimate reality as *sunyata*, which means emptiness; in Japanese this is *ku*, the character used for the sky or the air [...] But the sky is not negative emptiness; it contains all of us" (1995:7-8). In the poem, the sky indeed embraces the "all". This creates an ambience of spaciousness which Watts links with the basic principle of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is found in the *Prajñāparamitā Heart Sutra*: "*Form is emptiness; emptiness is form*" [Watts's italics].

Providing an explication for this line, Watts again employs the idea of the Chinese character for *sunyata* which is sky. In addition, he emphasises that this character also means 'space': "Space is contrasted with the word for form (which also means 'shape' and 'color'), and the character between them means something like 'exactly is' – *space exactly is, or is precisely the same as form*. And when the characters are reversed it says form is precisely emptiness" (2000:80-81). Jones says: "The mutually defining attributes of phenomena are explicitly recognized by the Yogachara school as 'form' – as distinct from (and yet identical with) the 'emptiness' of the interrelationship phenomenon" (2003:13).

In "One" (*Why I Wake Early*:66, lines 12-30), the notion of space, colour and sky – *form and emptiness* – is present:

How many, how many, how many  
 make up a world!  
 And then I think of that old idea: the singular  
 and the eternal.

One cup, in which everything is swirled  
back to the color of the sea and the sky.  
Imagine it!

A shining cup, surely!  
In the moment in which there is no wind  
over your shoulder,  
you stare down into it,  
and there you are,  
your own darling face, your own eyes.  
And then the wind, not thinking of you, just passes by,

touching the ant, the mosquito, the leaf,  
and you know what else!  
How blue is the sea, how blue is the sky,  
how blue and tiny and redeemable everything is, even you,  
even your eyes, even your imagination.

In “One”, the “tension” (Burton-Christie 1996:79) between two literary categories, “*adéquation*” (the antisymbolic dimension), and “*correspondence*” (the symbolic dimension), becomes evident. Burton-Christie (79) explains how *adéquation* figures in Oliver’s poems: “*Adequation*, for Oliver, means refraining from idealizing or symbolizing the natural world, letting it stand forth in all its stark otherness. It means recognizing there may be no meaning there at all, or at least no symbolic meaning suggestive of transcendence”. Lines 12 to 15 are stated plainly to the reader: “How many, how many, how many / make up a world! / And then I think of that old idea: the singular / and the eternal”. The anaphoric repetition of “how many” reinforces the idea of the Interconnectedness of all things. In addition, the “how many” is devoid of symbolised meaning, which aids readers in filling in what “how many” means to them and what they want to include in their idea of this concept. The same idea is reiterated in “Sunrise” (*Wild Geese*:25, lines 27-28): “I am so many! / What is my name?” The notion that the speaker comprises “many” evokes Whitman’s lines from “Leaves of Grass” (Blodgett and Bradley 1965:88):

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

At the same time, the “singular / and the eternal” in Oliver’s “One” constitute parallel embodiments of *adéquation* and *correspondence*. The “singular” and “eternal” (which are contained within “that old idea”) are placed at the end of lines 14 and 15 respectively, thus reinforcing their significance to the reader.

In the next line, Oliver employs *correspondence* that counterbalances lines 12 to 16: instead of merely stating what these two ideas mean, she uses a metaphoric image in which the “singular” (*adéquation*) and the “eternal” (*correspondence*) merge: “One cup in which everything is swirled / back to the color of the sea and the sky”. The metaphor of a cup in which everything is swirled around compares with Watts’s explanation of *sunyata* as well as the *Prajñaparamitā Heart Sutra*’s central line – *form is emptiness and emptiness is form*, which is succinctly stated in the “old” idea of the “singular” (*form*) and the “eternal” (*emptiness*). The fact that the two, together with “everything else” is swirled around in the cup, emphasises that neither on its own is a certain reality, but that both are manifestations of reality. The fact that the “singular” and “eternal” are now swirled “back to the color of the sea and the sky” becomes especially noteworthy as they – in the same manner as singular/eternal and *adéquation/correspondence* are parallelisms – are equivalent to *sunyata*’s Chinese character which constitutes sky, space, and colour. The image of everything that becomes the colour blue, which is the colour of the ocean and the sky, is of great magnitude: the great Void is created through the merging of sea and sky, in which no horizon separates them anymore.

Line 28 reinforces the merging of *emptiness* (sky) and *form* (sea) by mentioning the “blueness” or the *suchness* of each: “How blue is the sea, how blue is the sky”. Furthermore, the last two lines link “everything” and the “you” to the great blue Void, again recalling the principal of *sunyata*. The fact that one’s eyes, the perceivers (and pre-conceivers) of everything and imagination or mind are also “blue and tiny” demonstrate that the “you” and the “ant, the mosquito, the leaf” (line 26) are all interrelated sentient beings. Therefore, Oliver does away with the anthropocentric idea that humankind makes up the exclusive centre of the universe.

Moreover, Oliver reconciles two seemingly separate parts of the “you”: the “tiny” part as well as the “redeemable” or larger component, which imparts the following possibility in meaning: “the moment you see yourself as central to the existence of the universe, you will suddenly see the obverse of this as well: that your particular personality is nothing at all without the existence of everything else and everybody else” (Watts 1995:46). Therefore, the seemingly paradoxical *form is emptiness, emptiness is form* is aptly illustrated by Oliver, who also intermingles *adéquation* and *correspondence* seamlessly. The “shining cup” reveals a mirror image of the “you”, the “singular” or the *ātman*: “you stare down into it, / and there you are, / your own darling face, your own eyes”.

Oliver disrupts this image of the “you”. Watts (46) explains “that your particular personality is nothing at all without the existence of everything else and everybody else”: “And then the wind, not thinking of you, just passes by”. The fact that the wind is not touching the “you” but “the ant,

the mosquito, the leaf” is stressing the fact that the “you” is no more important than these seemingly tiny and unimportant things. Paul reiterates this image, but instead of “a shining cup”, he employs the metaphor of Indra’s Net:

We are all part of an infinite net that attaches each one of us to every living organism and element in the universe. Nothing separates us – we are but a single entity. Everything needs everything else [...] The universe is one, and every flower, leaf, insect, animal, person or planet is part of this infinite unity (2000:156).

In this way, the “old” or conventional idea of singularity of the self is replaced – “the singular” is counterpoised by the “shining cup” of Interconnection and Emptiness, and duality (singular / eternal) disappears:

when we accept this idea of ‘interconnectedness’ eventually all duality disappears. Ultimately, when this extraordinary realization hits home we can begin to see the ‘self’ not with the separateness that has been part of our lifetime’s conditioning but in a totally holistic way that causes us to relate to the universe with care and responsiveness. For how we see the self is how we see the universe (156).

Similarly, Oliver suspends the notion of duality between the self and the universe in “Gravel” (*Leaf and Cloud*:39: Part 3, lines 16-18):

Everything is participate.  
Everything is part of the world

Mann comments on this suspension of duality: “Oliver *relates* with nature in such a way that ‘nature’, as an object ‘out there’ to observe, dissolves, and the poet becomes *participant*, someone who is actively ‘part of’ nature than ‘apart from’ nature: ‘Everything is participate” (2004:*xiv*).

The idea of the “shining cup” and “everything is participate” is extended through the image of a star, and then a wheel in “Starlings in Winter” (*Owls and Other Fantasies*:56-57).

Here, Oliver illustrates the acrobatics of starlings in “the theatre of air” (line 7), creating a dynamic vocabulary that emphasises the continuing action of these birds: “spring” (line 3); “acrobats” (line 5); “swing” (line 8); “dipping and rising” (line 9); “float (line 10); and “rise and spin” (line 21). The starlings, like the wild geese with their intuitive migratory route, the turtle with her “old blind wish” and the moles “accomplishing nothing”, are natural acrobats without any training (lines 16-20):

but you simply can't imagine

how they do it  
with no articulated instruction, no pause,  
only the silent confirmation  
that they are this notable thing.

The starlings are able to perform their astonishing acts because they “inter-are” (lines 10-13):

they float like one stippled star  
that opens,  
becomes for a moment fragmented,  
then closes again.

In order to do their formations – like a stippled star (note the wordplay on “star” which is part of “starlings”) – in the air, the starlings are completely mutually interdependent on one another. The fact that they are only fragmented for a moment before the star closes up again, suggests that they truly embody the principle of *praṭītya-samutpāda*.

In addition, Oliver describes the starlings as being “this notable thing” (line 20), embodied by (lines 21-23):

this wheel of many parts, that can rise and spin  
over and over again,  
full of gorgeous life.

With these lines, Oliver goes beyond just describing the starlings, but in fact refers to the whole of nature which is a multi-dimensional wheel, an image that is used in Buddhism’s “wheel of life” with its different layers and levels which may be represented by the mandala. Oliver herself describes this wheel in an essay:

Nature, the total of all of us, is the wheel that drives our world; those who ride it willingly might yet catch a glimpse of a dazzling, even a spiritual restfulness [...] Humans or tigers, tigers or tiger lilies – note their differences and still how alike they are! [...] We live, I am sure of this, in the same country, in the same household, and our burning comes from the same lamp. We are all wild, valorous, amazing (*Blue Pastures*:92-93).

Riley reiterates the idea of nature’s wheel of which everyone and everything is part:

More and more with these later works, Oliver places herself as a willing traveller in nature's wheel, understanding that human beings are simply a part of the forces that sustain both human and nonhuman worlds. This belief also encourages readers to see themselves as interconnected with nature, a piece of natural world, just as the natural world is a piece of each person (2008:279).

In "Hunter's Moon – Eating the Bear" (*Twelve Moons*:50, lines 12-13), Oliver includes in her images of nature (which for her signifies the whole universe) a "hub" and an "orb", which continue the feeling of roundness or wholeness and eternal movement. This "hub" and "orb" are reminiscent of *dharmadhātu* which means "cosmos" or "universe" (Cook 1981:2):

I will be leaning in like a spoke to the hub –  
the dense orb that is all of us.

Another poem in which Oliver utilises the image of the "hub" is in "May" (*American Primitive*:53) in which she talks about bees and flowers (lines 5-10):

yet theirs  
is the deepest certainty that this existence too –  
this sense of well-being, the flourishing  
of the physical body – rides  
near the hub of the miracle that everything  
is a part of

The notion that everything is a cosmos, and that nothing is a separate entity, is evident in the prose poem, "White Pine" (*White Pine*:55, lines 16-17): "Everything is in it [white pine]. But no single part can be separated from another". Analogous to the white pine is the image of the acorn in "More Evidence" (*Swan*:50, lines 22-23): "Is it not incredible, that in the acorn something / has hidden an entire tree?" This is echoed in Suzuki's postulation about nature and *no-thing-ness*: "Something which comes out of nothingness is naturalness, like a seed or plant coming out of the ground. The seed has no idea of being some particular plant, but has its own form and is in perfect harmony with the ground, with its surroundings. As it grows, in the course of time it expresses its nature" (1970:109).

The idea of *dharmadhātu* or cosmos is also central to "Crossing the Swamp" (*American Primitive*:58, lines 1-4):

Here is the endless  
wet thick

cosmos, the center  
of everything

The interdependence of the “dense orb that is all of us” in “Hunter’s Moon – Eating the Bear” is reflected in Oliver’s dexterous interweaving of *adéquation* and *correspondence*. Upon reading this poem, the reader is almost certainly alerted to a second shorter text interspersed within the larger text. This interwoven text is immediately distinguished by its italicisation and the fact that typographically, each italicised line is indented to the middle of the page. When looking at the two interspersed poems, the larger, non-italicised part may be regarded on a macrocosmic level and the smaller, italicised part, on a microcosmic level. The reason for this distinction is that the larger poem’s diction is more concrete and non-symbolic (*adéquation*): “Oliver gives primary emphasis not to the symbolic order of poetic language but to the more literal power of poetry to invoke inarticulate, intuitive experience itself” (McNew 1989:n.p.). The larger poem sketches the background of killing the bear in almost an animalistic, atavistic ritualised sense in which the speaker physically partakes in eating its meat. The shorter, interspersed part deals with diction that may be regarded as more symbolic, or “poetic” (*correspondence*). The latter creates an ambience of an *anātman* or primordial self, one who has fully merged with the bear, which is emblematic of the “other” or healing capacity of nature. On its own, the smaller text reads (lines 8, 14, 20, 24, 28):

*And I will step out over the fields,*

*my body like a cupped hand*

*holding your vast power, your grace,*

*your breath, your hairiness,*

*in the small sinews of my prayers.*

The “*cupped hand*” simile evokes the “shining cup” in the poem, “One”. The latter is a metaphor for Emptiness and Interconnection in which the whole universe is contained. The body which is likened to a “*cupped hand*” becomes a receptacle for the “*vast power*” and “*grace*”, the “*breath*” and “*hairiness*” of the bear. The phrase “*small sinews of my prayers*” acts on several levels of meaning: in the literal terms of anatomy, a sinew is the strong fibrous tissue that makes up a tendon, but, on a figurative level, “sinews” implies a supporting emotional and spiritual force. “Sinews” is a well-chosen image because it is suited to the diction of the macrocosmic poem: the “pink fat” and the “maroon flesh” (line 19), the idea of the bear being cut open: “I am going to turn the world inside out” (line 5), and “your heart will fall from your body” (line 7). Furthermore,

the anatomical diction is underscored by images of dissection: “blades of fire, / holding a piece of your life on a knife-tip” (lines 10-11). The sinews are the “stringy” parts that hold tendons together, literally binding together the bear’s anatomical parts.

The macrocosmic poem contains the concrete images of killing the bear and actually assimilating it and is therefore an apt example of Oliver’s employment of *adéquation* (lines 15-17):

And I will put you into my mouth, yes.

And I will swallow, yes.

So. You will come to live inside me.

In these lines, the speaker uses a conversational tone to engage with the bear, especially apparent through the end-positioning of the word “yes”; something people tend to include in their speech when they reinforce a point they want to make. Similarly, the speaker addresses the bear directly, three times, in a refrain-type manner, “Good friend” (lines 1, 9, 21). This may epitomise the speaker’s wish of trying to rationalise to the bear why she needs to kill him.

Although the macrocosmic and microcosmic poems may not, on the surface, seem to interweave much, they are interconnected on a denotative level. The first line of the smaller poem – “*And I will step out over the fields*” refers back to the speaker who finds herself stalking the bear where “The shadow of the pines are blue on the field”. The actual killing of the bear is described in liminal terms; all established boundaries are destroyed, which sets the stage for the “I” to merge with the bear: she is “going to turn the world inside out”(line 5), exposing the bear’s inner parts (“muscle, layers of sweet leaves / hidden in the pink fat, the maroon flesh” (lines 18-19); “The rocks around you will melt, / your heart will fall from your body” (lines 6-7). The indented italicised line physically suggests that the speaker has stepped over the threshold by actually taking the bear’s life, but, at the same time, stepping out over the “fields”, overcoming the limen between human and animal, the “I” and the “other”, life and death.

The second italicised line – “*my body like a cupped hand*” – repeats the interconnected image of “I will be leaning in like a spoke to the hub – / the dense orb that is all of us” (lines 12-13). The “*cupped hand*” of the speaker’s body becomes a receptacle for inserting the bear’s muscle, flesh and fat. However, the next line – “*holding your vast power, your grace*” – supersedes the physical eating of the bear: by eating its flesh, the “I” merges with the bear. The “*breath*” and “*hairiness*” (line 24) reinforce this metamorphosis of the “I” into the bear, taking on his qualities. “*Breath*” connects with the life force or *prāna* of the bear, its internal spiritual potency. The “*hairiness*” implies that the speaker is visualising the bear in an atypical manner: usually, only

the meat of an animal is consumed. However, with “*hairiness*”, it is suggested that Oliver is looking at the bear holistically, that even the pelt is included. Usually a bear is skinned, its pelt stripped off and discarded to be sold or used for warmth, but the speaker is not prepared to do this, she wants to consume all the bear’s attributes, including its “*hairiness*”.

Line 28, “*in the small sinews of my prayers*”, echoes the image of the pines in line 25 which “will be twisted and small, their shadows / stretching out, still turning around” (lines 26-27). “Twisted” and “stretching out” link with the function of “sinews” which are usually wiry as well as elongated.

The “heart that will fall from your body” (line 7), is replaced by “some invisible dead-center” (line 29). Presumably, the speaker has killed the bear by removing its heart almost immediately, leaving a space in its chest. On a literal level, removing a heart from a body is to kill it; it cannot survive without a heart. On a denotative level, the bear’s life force or *prāna* is removed. However, the speaker replaces this dead, open space where the heart used to be by “an invisible dead-center” which is ironically not dead but alive, pointing to being at the “very heart” of everything like the earlier images of the hub and the orb:

The purpose of eating the bear is to reach ‘some invisible dead center’, where the bear ‘will come to live inside’ [line 17] the speaker; and insofar as it involves both entering and being entered by the bear, this ritual celebrates the interpenetration and interconnectivity of self and nature (Bonds 1992:10).

This “dead-center” connects with Oliver as observer, inserting “herself into the natural world, getting closer to and becoming more intimately connected with the observed than is humanly possible” as though “she and the bear are interchangeable” (Graham 1994:n.p.).

Similarly, in “The Fish” (*American Primitive*:56, lines 11-17) Oliver sketches Interconnection with nature – the sea in this case – through consuming a fish:

I opened his body and separated  
the flesh from the bones  
and ate him. Now the sea  
is in me: I am the fish, the fish  
glitters in me; we are  
risen, tangled together, certain to fall  
back to the sea.

In contrast to “Hunter’s Moon – Eating the Bear”, “The Fish” unmistakably talks about the suffering death causes and that “nourishing” means that a life has to be taken in order to sustain life as well as “the mystery” of Interconnection (lines 17-20), especially by repeating the word “pain” three times:

Out of pain,  
and pain, and more pain  
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished  
by the mystery.

This “mystery” corresponds with the concept of *sunyata* Oliver creates through an image of a door in “The Gift” (*The Truro Bear*:43, lines 21-24): “Ah yes, there was / that door / that held only the eventual, inevitable / emptiness”.

The notion of “mystery” is continued in the image of the “you” in “Honey at the Table” (*American Primitive*:57) which is filled with the “honey pot over the table”, thereby emblematising the disconnection with nature; the honey is in a pot at the table, a sign of artificiality. But then the speaker follows the trail of the honey that spills over the domestic boundary of the table: “eating honey depends on imagining food as a link to wood, bees, and flowers” (McNew 1989:n.p.). In the process, the honey “thickens, / grows deeper and wilder”, with the domestic “you” mimicking the metamorphosis of the honey into something wild, like a bear (lines 10-15). Graham intimates that the transformation of the speaker into a bear “occurs almost imperceptibly” (1994:n.p.):

deep in the forest you  
shuffle up some tree, you rip the bark,  
  
you float into and swallow the dripping combs,  
bits of tree, crushed bees – a taste  
composed of everything lost, in which everything  
lost is found.

“Deep in the forest”, the honey is not contained in a sterilised pot served in a domestic setting (“table”) anymore, but now contains “dripping combs, / bits of tree, crushed bees”. Like the bear and the fish, the honey has transformative powers, regenerating the self through the vast being of nature. Furthermore, the idea of suffering in “The Fish” – the “pain” from which “we are nourished / by the mystery” is paralleled by the ripping open of the tree to access the honey combs: the “nourishment” becomes the “taste / composed of everything lost, in which everything / lost is found”. Therefore, “nourishment” becomes more than mere physical sustenance: the

speaker merges with nature, returning to a primordial self (as suggested in “The Sea”) which, in Buddhist terms, is becoming a jewel in Indra’s Net. McNew suggests Oliver is turning to “the web of natural connection to find the source, the sustenance, and the end of the human” (1989:n.p.). In fact, Graham proposes the idea that the honey is a metonymic property of the bear: “to taste it is to taste the bear” and that the honey “calls up the bear before mentioning it” (1994:n.p.).

In addition, “Deep in the forest” (line 10) is suggestive of the mind undergoing a process of introspection which is “composed of everything lost, in which everything / lost is found”. This suggests a moving away from the ego-mind to the Original or Universal Mind which is inherently empty and therefore interrelated to everything: “Added to, then, Oliver’s unpatrolled ego boundaries, her conviction that nature is also an articulate and conscious subject distinguishes her poetry from that built on the eventual recognition of nature as a mute and objective Other” (McNew 1989:n.p.).

Poems such as “Hunter’s Moon – Eating the Bear”, “The Fish”, and “Honey at the Table” deal with the immersion of the “I” or the ego-self in the natural world or the *dharma-dhātu*:

What emerges in these poems is a desire for interconnection between human and nonhuman. Many of the poems of this volume [*Twelve Moons*] suggest that an individual’s immersion in nature, diving into it to experience that world more fully, leads to a greater understanding of one’s self. In the poems leading up to *Twelve Moons*, Oliver had been playing with the idea of merging oneself with nature in an interconnection between humans and nature (Riley 2008:273).

The theme of the individual’s interconnection with the greater holistic picture is echoed by Christensen: “This continual reintegration of individual into whole denies any abiding sense of discrete identity” (2002:137). Christensen (137) illustrates his statement by looking at “Bone Poem” (*Twelve Moons*:46, lines 1-6) of which he says that Oliver’s “investment in cultivating a collective identity is especially evident”:

The litter under the tree  
 Where the owl eats – shrapnel  
  
 Of rat bones, gull debris –  
 Sinks into the wet leaves  
 Where time stirs with her slow spoon,  
 Where we become singular

The predominant diction of the poem focuses on creating a feeling of disorder by describing what effectively amounts to the owl's "rubbish heap": "litter", "shrapnel", "bones", and "debris". The vocabulary brings to mind a type of carnage, especially through the word "shrapnel" which is usually associated with landmines, bombs or some type of explosive material. At the same time, this carnage is also the owl's "feast" (line 13), bringing to mind him "feasting" on his prey, not in any evil or murderous manner but through the idea that death is a means to survival, to life itself. Everything on this rubbish dump has been reduced to bones or debris, but the turning point of the poem is in line 4: "Sinks into the wet leaves". This proffers the idea of natural integration of everything dead with the earth, therefore transforming the carnage of the owl into the idea that everything is interconnected naturally: "Oliver's description of the owl's bezoar as 'shrapnel' evokes the explosion of individuality as all beings are reduced again to fuel, either in the belly of an owl or in the simmering meld of minerals patiently stirred by personified time" (Christensen 2002:138). Important here is that "time" has a "slow spoon" (line 5) which can be regarded as a "slow, painful transformation of self to selflessness" (Alford 1988:288).

"Where we become singular" (line 6) reinforces the idea that there is no separate "I": "the sense of self that Buddhism says is unrealistic is that of a very solid, unchanging, independent 'I'. Such a self never has and never will exist. To understand this is to realize emptiness" (Chodron 2001:48). Christensen (2002:138) supports this idea by saying:

The final clause explicitly replaces a limited degree of individuality with a more comprehensive sense of identification, and as the bones begin their 'long fall back into the center' [line 15], Oliver's careful diction reveals how the dissolve of identity quickens as it nears the ultimate denial of hierarchy: 'The seepage, the flowing, [line 16] // The equity' [line 17].

"The long fall back to the center" is reminiscent of the *dharmadhātu* theme in "Crossing the Swamp" (*American Primitive*:58, lines 1-4):

Here is the endless  
 wet thick  
 cosmos, the center  
 of everything

The "wet thick / cosmos" which is "the center of everything" mirrors the bones and debris that are sinking "into the wet leaves" in "Bone Poem". In liminal terms, the debris has lost its own boundaries, becoming fluid, thus merging with the earth – the "center" – through "seepage" and "flowing". The "debris" can be regarded as the ego-self which is slowly integrated with Universal

Mind, therefore emptying itself of all preconceived constructs. Macy describes the ego-self or separate self in terms of its self-created boundaries:

The self is the metaphoric construct of identity and agency, the hypothetical piece of turf on which we construct our strategies for survival, the notion around which we focus our instincts for self-preservation, our needs for self-approval, and the boundaries of our self-interest (1990:53).

Macy (53) goes on to say that

The conventional notion of the self with which we have been raised and which we have been conditioned by mainstream culture is being undermined. What Alan Watts called 'the skin-encapsulated ego' and Gregory Bateson referred to as 'the epistemological error of Occidental civilization' is being unhinged, peeled off. It is being replaced by wider constructs of identity and self-interest – by which you might call the ecological self or eco-self, co-extensive with other beings and the life of our planet.

In terms of "Bone Poem", the owl debris may be viewed as an analogy of the "skin-encapsulated ego" which is slowly transformed into "an eco-self", not an "ego-self". The "wider constructs of identity and self-interest" can be likened to "The long fall back to the center".

In "The Gardens" (*American Primitive*:86-87), Watts's "skin-encapsulated ego" is reinforced (Part 2, lines 1-6):

This skin you wear  
so neatly, in which  
you settle  
so brightly  
on the summer grass, how  
shall I know it?

The skin is the most obvious boundary between the interior and exterior of an individual and a very apt analogy to use for the "I" of the poem who wants to get beyond the boundary of the "you":

To feel oneself as a separate ego, a source of action and awareness entirely separate and independent from the rest of the world, locked inside a bag of skin, is in the view of the East a hallucination [...] The colossal reality, the unitary energy that is the universe,

plays at being many: it manifests itself as all these particulars around us (Watts 1995:20).

The rest of “The Gardens” explores the “unitary energy” Watts describes. As already seen in Oliver’s other poems, the ego-self loses its exclusive “human” boundaries, and begins to take on aspects of nature (lines 20-25):

I begin  
 here and there,  
 finding you,  
 the heart within you,  
 and the animal,  
 and the voice

As seen in “Hunter’s Moon – Eating the Bear”, the heart is at the centre of the organism, symbolising its life force. In “The Gardens”, the “you” is progressively transformed into “the animal”, returning to one’s “animal nature” as Mann (2004:16) has suggested earlier in the chapter. This “animal nature” is illustrated by the metaphors of nature Oliver employs (lines 29-32):

the boughs of your body  
 leading deeper into the trees,  
 over the white fields,  
 the rivers of bone

In the last few lines of “The Gardens”, it becomes evident that the “I” and the “you” are not necessarily mutually exclusive, that finding the “you” is to find the “I”, therefore overcoming the illusion of a separate ego (lines 35-37):

great run toward the interior,  
 the unseen, the unknowable  
 center.

The “unknowable center” may also be seen in terms of the *anātman* or No-self of which Milstead says: “The solution [to separation] is ‘to forget the self and return to what is’” (1998:50). Furthermore, “The Gardens” is suggestive of what Watts is proposing about extending one’s ‘self’: “It would be a bit of a relief for us if we could see the world as an extension of ourselves, and ourselves as an extension of the world” (2000:xvi). Furthermore, this extension between world and “I” may also be regarded as recognising the *suchness* (*tathatā*) and “ultimate reality”

or “ultimate truth” (*dharmadhātu*). Inherent in these concepts is *śūnyavāda* (‘the way of emptiness’), also referred to as “Great emptiness (*mahā-śūnyatā*)” which is abandoning even the concept of Emptiness itself (Keown 2003:283).

Therefore, the “I” in the “The Gardens” has become a *tathāgata*, which translates into a “name for Buddha which means ‘he who has followed the path, who has returned from suchness, or is suchness, thusness, is-ness, emptiness, the fully completed one’” (Suzuki 1970:13).

Thus, the idea of “This skin you wear / so neatly” (lines 1-2) is suspended as the poem progresses: “Beings are thought of as autonomous, isolated within their own skins, each independently by and large from all the rest of the beings (both animate and inanimate)” (Cook 1981:2-3). However, the “I” goes on an extensive search, “trekking” (line 27), looking for the supposedly separate “you”, only to find that they are inseparable:

In short, we find it much easier to think in terms of isolated *beings*, rather than one *Being*. Being is just that, a unity of existence in which numerically separate entities are all interrelated in a profound manner [...] The Hua-yen universe is essentially a universe of identity and total intercausality; what affects one item in the vast inventory of the cosmos affects every other individual therein.

Finally, the reader is drawn to the conclusion that the “skin-encapsulated ego” is integrated with the “unknowable center”:

Someone once made the observation that one’s skin is not necessarily a boundary marking off the self from the not-self but rather that which brings one into contact with the other [...] I am in some sense boundless, my being encompassing the farthest limits of the universe, touching and moving every atom in existence. The same is true of everything else. The interfusion, the sharing of destiny, is as infinite in scope as the reflection in the jewels of Indra’s net [...] It is not just that ‘we are all in it’ together. We all *are* it, rising or falling as one living body (Cook 1981:122).

As Oliver herself observes (*Blue Pastures*:110):

A good portion of our lives is gladly casual, and happily ordinary. This other dark and lustrous place is not casual. It is not ordinary. Neither does it pertain so much to the particularities of our lives as to the commonality of our lives. The voice that speaks from this place is not the voice of a person of such and such an age, such and such a race, such and such a social security number. Jung is talking about this place when he talks about the collective unconscious; Eliot was talking about it when he suggested that

through poems we can escape individual personality. The diver must wear a mask to live; the writer must wear a mask in order to be something, or someone, other than himself. In such a mask, the writer goes down, into the ocean, under its luminous tonnage, and through, and out of the levels of the personal life.

## CHAPTER 5

### “THAT COTTAGE OF DARKNESS”: IMPERMANENCE

*Death is the sole counterpart to life. From the moment we take our first breath,  
death is our only guaranteed experience.*

Tricycle Magazine

*Death isn't just an idea*

Oliver (*House of Light*:24)

Chapter 4 examined the Buddhist theme of Interconnection which is synonymous with three aspects (1) the Mutual and Interpenetration Principle, (2) Dependent Origination or Dependent Co-Arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), and (3) Emptiness (*mu* or *sunyata*) or No-self (*anātman*). All three of these Buddhist principles were shown to be informed by the symbol of Indra's Net.

Chapter 5 seeks to explore the following themes connected with Oliver's poetry which all link to the main Buddhist theme which is Impermanence (*Annica*): *Annica*; Loving this World; Death as a Manifestation of *Annica*; Regeneration through the Birth-Life-Decay-Death Cycle, and Non-attachment and *Dukkha*. In addition to these themes, the notion of non-dualistic (with references to bifurcating and dichotomous thinking) thought will be examined throughout this chapter.

The idea of *sunyata* as discussed in Chapter 4 is central to understanding the concept of Impermanence, as explained by Suzuki (1970:113):

Before we understand the idea of emptiness, everything seems to exist substantially. But after we realize the emptiness of things, everything becomes real – not substantial. When we realize that everything we see is a part of emptiness, we can have no attachment to any existence; we realize that everything is just a tentative form and color [...] When we first hear that everything is a tentative existence, most of us are disappointed; but this disappointment comes from the wrong view of man and nature (Suzuki 1970:113).

What Suzuki is postulating is the idea of Buddhist impermanence, *anityā* (Sanskrit), *anicca* (Pāli) or *mujō* (Japanese), a term that is not particularly compatible with the ego-self's conventional thinking. This type of thinking relies on an inherent dualist structure which, in turn, relies on fear, because it is purely conceptualised:

While it is active [...] the ego acts upon its fears and desires. In defense against its fears and in pursuit of its pleasures, the ego constructs a complex network of abstractions that constitute human culture and include politics, science, and religion. In short, it constitutes the conventional world that people depend upon in their everyday lives (Milstead 1998:33).

It is this world of convention in which every concept and phenomenon is bifurcated, whether it is into a subject-object distinction or a 'for-against' attitude. The most eminent bifurcation is the life-death opposition, principally because the ego fears its own obliteration:

Paramount to the ego-self's fears is the fear of death, which means total annihilation of the ego. Zen Buddhists believe that when the mind is calmed through meditation and the ego is released, there is no longer fear of death because there is no entity to 'have' fear. Zen belief holds that the true self does not 'know' such concepts as death and life. The true self is pure consciousness, and as such it experiences all of the interlocking wholeness of the world. To the true self, death is, if anything, merely a cessation of awareness. Further, because the true self is the Buddha-nature, which is all-encompassing and empty, it is not diminished by the cessation of part of it. In contrast, the ego is caught up in dualities. It does not embrace both life and death as experience. In its abhorrence of death, it clutches at life just as it clutches at other ideas (Milstead 1998:32).

It is this "clutching" at life and attachment to it, together with its loathing of death that brings suffering (*dukkha*), because the ego is rooted in self-alienation which, in turn, feeds on existentialist anxiety which means that it is fundamentally caught up in a self-perpetuating loop that focuses on its own neurotic existence:

Self-estrangement and anxiety are *not* something *accidental* to the ego-self, but inherent to its structure. To be human is to be a problem to oneself, regardless of one's culture, class, sex, nationality, or in the era one lives. To be human means to be an ego-self; to be an ego-self means to be cut off from both one's self and one's world; and to be cut off from one's self and one's world means to be in constant anxiety. This is the human predicament (Abe 1985:6).

Oliver reiterates the suffering this fear of death brings in “I Looked Up” (*White Pine*:54, line 7): “What misery to be afraid of death.”

In order to overcome *dukkha* (suffering, non-satisfactoriness) – the First Noble Truth states “There is suffering in the world” – the clutching, craving, and anxiety-driven ego-self must be faced: “Therefore, the basic anxiety and self-estrangement inherent in human existence can never be overcome unless we first overcome the ego-self and awaken to a true self” (Abe 1985:7).

Impermanence (*anicca*) is one of the characteristics which Buddhists call “The Three Characteristics of Existence” (*tilakkhaṇa*): The remaining two that are interlinked with *anicca* are “Nonsatisfactoriness or Suffering (*dukkha*)” and “Nonsubstance (*anattā*) or No-self (*anātman*)” (Krüger 1991:92-93). From a Zen perspective, Watts (1995:23) calls these the “Three Signs of Being” and sums up the idea that we suffer because we do not understand the implication of Impermanence; the ego-self perpetuates the delusion that there is permanence in the world:

Every manifestation of life is impermanent. Our quest to make things permanent, to straighten everything out and get it fixed, presents us with an impossible and insoluble problem, and therefore we experience *dukkha*, the sense of fundamental pain and frustration that results from trying to make impermanent things permanent.

But what exactly, according to the Buddhist view, is implied when the term Impermanence is used? Keown (2003:15) stresses the aspect of *saṃskāra*:

A fundamental tenet of Buddhism is that all formations (*saṃskāra*) – things that come into being dependent on causes and conditions – are impermanent. Impermanence refers to the arising, passing away, changing, and disappearance of things that have arisen, [...] a process that takes place from moment to moment.

Evident from Keown’s assertion is the fact that Impermanence does not only refer to physical death but also of the transience of all phenomena, in a process which takes place moment by moment. The dynamic flow of things is such that there is never any stasis, only perceived stasis: each moment is different from the next. The same is true of Oliver’s intention with her poems: “I look for them to be ongoing presences within my life, not interludes – not places apart. And I look for them to be vital and informative and affirming – affirming ‘reenactment/experiences’ enlarging my life [...] They need to be poems of passage, not of stasis” (*Blue Pastures*:112). This non-static phenomenon is especially true in sitting practice or

meditation because the Buddhist practitioner becomes aware of different moods arising which usually go unnoticed when the mind is unfocused: "If we maintain a steady attention to our moods and thoughts, our actions and our body sensations, we perceive that they incessantly arise and disappear and are in no way permanent to us" (Smith and Novak 2003:48). Furthermore, right-mindfulness (as discussed in Chapter 3) also brings to the fore the idea of transience as opposed to a fixed state of things:

Through right-mindfulness practice, then, we arrive at a number of insights: We begin to see that: (1) every mental and physical state is in flux; none is solid or enduring; (2) habitual clinging to these impermanent states is at the root of much of life's dukkha, and this very insight weakens the habit (Smith and Novak 2003:48).

An important aspect of *anicca* is that we suffer because we cling or attach ourselves to "these impermanent states". Non-attachment is thus a central tenet of Buddhism, which is linked with No-self or an empty state of mind:

The doctrine is, again, not quite the simple assertion that the world is impermanent, but rather that the more one grasps at the world, the more it changes. Reality in itself is neither permanent nor impermanent; it cannot be categorized. But when one tries to hold on to it, change is everywhere apparent, since, like one's own shadow, the faster one pursues it, the faster it flies (Watts 1962:66-67).

Milstead (1998:7) summarises the essence of Impermanence which includes "non-attachment, non-dualism, and the realization of Emptiness. In addition, all three posit a transitory, non-permanent self that is in keeping with the teachings of Zen".

This brings us to another tenet of Impermanence: Non-dualism. Dualistic thought is characterised by binary opposition which is perpetuated by the conventional musings of the neurotic ego-mind:

When we think 'ego', we solidify it as against its opposite, 'non-ego'. In the same way, 'being' poses 'non-being'; the use of 'I' separates into 'I' and 'all else'. This is the way our bifurcating intellect works. Only in the transcendent state, beyond opposites, is the Infinite realized (MacInnes 2007:139).

Therefore, a true sense of non-dualism is a state in which the Buddhist practitioner abandons the conventional, narrow way of viewing the world through the intellect by abandoning the sense of 'doing' and busying the mind to camouflage painful memories. Instead, the mind is

progressively emptied of dualistic thoughts (good vs. bad), and, in this way, the practitioner gains true freedom from *dukkha*:

The Zen life therefore seeks nothing, not even Enlightenment. It is a life of no purpose, for to have purpose is to be attached, and to be attached is to be locked into dualistic thinking and suffering. In seeking nothing, the life of no purpose paradoxically 'misses nothing', and the 'senses are fully open to receive the world' (Watts in Milstead 1998:34).

If being "fully open to receive the world" exemplifies the Buddhist philosophy of a non-dualistic state of mind, that openness is no less true of Oliver's poetry in its manifestation of the world's transitoriness. It is to this aspect of Oliver's poetry, that the discussion now turns.

Prothero (2008:46) remarks on this significant link between her poems and Impermanence:

If Oliver is a poet of mindful attention, she attends particularly mindfully to death. In fact, she attends to death with a clarity equal to any living writer I know. Her poetry seems as exquisitely calibrated as Buddhism itself to the hard realities of loss, which she calls 'the great lesson'.

In addition to *anicca*, other closely-linked Buddhist tenets are evident when examining her poems: Non-dualism, Non-attachment, and how these link to the cessation of *dukkha*. Continuous themes that link with these Buddhist ones are: how to love this world, fearlessness, and regeneration. The headings to each section are by no means absolute demarcations of themes; they merely summarise the main Buddhist themes inherent in the poems analysed. However, these themes interlink and most poems include more than one theme.

**ANICCA**

*Of course nothing stops the cold,*

*black, curved blade  
from hooking forward –  
of course  
loss is the greatest lesson.*

Oliver (*Wild Geese*:97)

Oliver explicitly introduces *anicca* or Impermanence, the First Characteristic of Being or human existence, in “Now Are the Rough Things Smooth” (*What Do We Know*:44, lines 1-6):

Now are the rough things smooth, and the smooth things stand in flickering slats, facing the slow tarnish of sun-fall. Summer is over, or nearly. And therefore the green is not green anymore but yellow, beige, russet, rust; all the darkneses are beginning to settle in. And therefore why pray to permanence, why not pray to impermanence, to change.

Here, Oliver utilises a vocabulary of change and transience; things that were once “rough” have smoothed out with the passage of time (line 1). At the same time, the “smooth things” are worn out, facing “the slow tarnish of sun-fall” (line 2). Things are transforming because of the changing seasons; summer is slowly turning into autumn, signified by its specific and typical colours: the green of summer is now “yellow, beige, russet, / rust” (lines 3-4). Moreover, “all the darkneses are beginning to settle in” (line 5), an image resonating with “Poppies” (*Wild Geese*: 97-98, lines 7-10):

There isn't a place  
in this world that doesn't  
  
sooner or later drown  
in the indigos of darkness

“Poppies” also reminisces about the Impermanence of all things, emphasising that nothing is immune against immanent change. The word “drown” stresses the inherent saturation of the world; it literally sinks or drowns in “the indigos of darkness”. The image of darkness or death is bolstered by the word “indigos”, linking to a very dark, deep blue. This colour surfaces again in

line 36 of the same poem which reinforces the idea of transience through association of colour as well as by asking readers how they will deal with this immanent fact of life (lines 33-36):

and what are you going to do –  
 what can you do  
 about it –  
 deep, blue night?

In a similar vein, Oliver asks a crucial question in line 5 and 6 of “Now Are the Rough Things Smooth”: “And / therefore why pray to permanence, why not pray to impermanence, to change”. This question is elucidated by its former lines: the fact that, in this poem, if change is accompanied by the colourful changes nature undergoes, why would one want everything to stay the same? Change can also be beautiful, Oliver emphasises, even the “darknesses” that have to “settle in”. Lines 13 to 17 of this poem accentuate Oliver’s constructive relationship with Impermanence:

There are so many things to do in  
 this world, and so many things to be done. Right now  
 I’m glad to be agile and insistent. But, later! Then, I’ll  
 be happy to give up the quick burst, oh darling and  
 important world, and just float away.

Lines 13 and 14 underscore the fact that, although everything is transient like the seasons, one has to embrace life while it lasts. However, when the time comes for the speaker to let go, when she is not “agile and insistent” (line 15) anymore, she will “just float away” (line 17), which implies that she will not cling but release her grip immediately.

The image of “floating away” and not clinging on is also evident in “Storm” (*Twelve Moons*:59-60, lines 18-24): The speaker describes a snow storm, during which animals like deer, foxes, and crows are all outside, without any shelter.

But they

Can bear the wrack of the storm. Patient  
 As stones or leaves or clumps of clay,  
 What saves them is not knowing that they are mortal –

What saves them is thinking that dying  
 Is only floating away into  
 The life of snow.

What strikes Mann (2004:45) in particular about “Storm” is the inherent ambiguous nature of death:

Here death is implied in the deepening cold. To us it is threatening and insulting – spitting in our face – but to animals it is nothing because they do not *know* that they are mortal. For them death is only the entrance into another form of life. As elsewhere, Oliver leaves us pondering what she means. Should we learn the lesson from animals that death is really not the threat it seems? Should we welcome death as a transition to another dimension of reality?

The fact that animals “can bear the wrack of the storm” (line 19) can also be viewed on the plane of life in which crises or “storms” occur. Unlike most humans, animals are infinitely patient, particularly because they do not ponder the fact that they are mortal; and although they certainly fight for survival, this is done without emotional clinging to life. Whitman, one of Oliver’s main influences, postulates a very similar attitude in the following extract from *Song of Myself* (McMichael 1985:936-937):

I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self-contained;  
I stand and look at them long and long.  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition;  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins;  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;  
Not one is dissatisfied – not one is demented with the mania of owning things

According to Buddhism, the root cause of suffering (*dukkha*) is precisely this clinging or attachment to permanence that humans exhibit:

When the Buddha says, ‘The cause of suffering is desire’, the word translated as desire might better be something like ‘craving’, ‘clinging’, or ‘grasping’ [...] ‘It’s all in your mind. There is nothing either good or ill, but thinking makes it so.’ Therefore, if you can control your mind you have nothing else you need to control (Watts 1995:15).

Thus, from the Buddhist standpoint, learning not to grasp or attach oneself to things, or micro-manage life, is central to answering Mann’s question as to what we could learn from “Storm”. By describing the non-dualistic attitude of Buddhism, Osler in effect sums up the attitude of the animals during the snow storm in “Storm”:

Winter is hard and bright. When you try to protect yourself the discomfort can be overwhelming and it will be a long season of resistance and complaint. But if you turn your face to the clarity of it there are moments of great exhilaration. Then you can walk in the cold with all your heart and winter is a great time to sharpen your life (2008:95).

Osler's description of a non-dualistic attitude toward winter, which also serves as a metaphor for Impermanence, is reflected in Oliver's "Snowy Night" (*What Do We Know*:66, lines 34-36):

and I wish great welcome to the snow,  
 whatever its severe and comfortless  
 and beautiful meaning.

The poem, "In Blackwater Woods" (*American Primitive*:82-83, lines 18-27), also retains the pivotal theme of dealing with transience without attachment or dualistic thinking:

Every year  
 everything  
 I have ever learned  
  
 in my lifetime  
 leads back to this: the fires  
 and the black river of loss  
 whose other side  
  
 is salvation,  
 whose meaning  
 none of us will ever know.

In this poem, the idea of non-dualism is firmly rooted: although everything leads back to Impermanence – "the fires / and the black river of loss" (lines 22-23) – these have another side which is "salvation", not simply sorrow and despair. Lines 28 to 36 contain a maxim for the reader on how to deal with loss:

To live in this world  
  
 you must be able  
 to do three things:  
 to love what is mortal;  
 to hold it

against your bones knowing  
 your own life depends on it;  
 and, when the time comes to let it go,  
 to let it go.

Riley (2008:275) points to Oliver's three maxims:

According to the speaker, if humans are to live in this world, they must learn to do three things: love mortality and all that is affected by mortality; hold things tightly even though everything inevitably will pass from this world; and release things, human and nonhuman when the time arrives [...]

To hold what is transient and mortal "against your bones" not only implies holding things "tightly", as Riley rightly describes, but also that one should also experience life, in the very marrow of one's bones. This means opening up your senses to everything, knowing that everything is impermanent in every moment, therefore "Living fully in each moment is a lifelong mastery" (Osler 2009:247). The interrelationship between Mindfulness and Impermanence is therefore unmistakable:

If your eyes are clear you can see what is in front of you, whether it's a flower or a cup or a concertina. Open your eyes, open your ears, open your nose and skin and tongue to the world around you. When you do this, your life can become clear and simple, moment by moment, and you can pay your respects to everything (Osler 2008:85).

Riley (2008:275) looks at the final part of the poem: the "how" and the "when" of releasing things when the time is ripe:

The significant point lies in the final lines, as the speaker quietly instructs readers to know when and how to release things. Once again, Oliver's poetry stresses that loss is a significant part of life: in order to experience life fully, humans must learn while they have the opportunity, to experience fully the world and all the things in it.

Finally, Riley touches on a vital theme in Oliver's poetry that is linked directly with the three maxims dealing with Impermanence, which is, how to live one's life in this transient world by taking nature's example: "Nature, as the majority of Oliver's poems indicate, especially those in *American Primitive*, holds the position as the best instructor on how to live in this world and one's place in it" (275).

## LOVING THIS WORLD

*I think this is  
the prettiest world – so long as you don't mind  
a little dying*

Oliver (*House of Light*:18)

Loving this world, while living in it at the same time, is a prominent Oliver topos, which, in essence, links with Milstead's quotation about the two main components of Impermanence: "In advocating non-dualistic thinking and non-attachment, Zen values being 'completely at home in this universe'" (Watts, quoted in Milstead 1998:49). "Being completely at home in this universe" echoes what Oliver reiterates throughout her work: to live in this world, one has to accept the various seemingly contradictory aspects of it. This idea is particularly underscored in an excerpt from Oliver's essay "Owls" (*Blue Pastures*:20):

In the night, when the owl is less than exquisitely swift and perfect, the scream of the rabbit is terrible. But the scream of the owl, which is not of pain and hopelessness and the fear of being plucked out of the world, but of the sheer, rollicking glory of the death-bringer, is more terrible still. When I hear it resounding through the woods, and then the five black pellets of its song dropping like stones into the air, I know I am standing at the edge of the mystery, in which terror is naturally and abundantly part of life [...] The world where the owl is endlessly hungry and endlessly on the hunt is the world in which I live too. There is only one world.

When considering Oliver's description of the owl and the rabbit, it becomes apparent that she merges two seemingly disparate sides of nature: beauty and cruelty. Oliver writes about these disparate sides in *Blue Pastures* (48): "All my life, and it has not come to any more than this: beauty and terror". The owl, which is the "death-bringer", seems cruel by killing the rabbit, whose scream is "terrible". But, from the owl's perspective, it is merely engaged in survival of which terror is an integral part. Oliver ends this piece by asserting: "There is only one world". She echoes this idea in "Spring" (*House of Light*:6, lines 16-17):

There is only one question:

how to love this world.

Similarly, "October" (*Blue Iris*:63, Part 6, lines 1-4) contains the message that loving this world is an urgent enterprise:

Look, I want to love this world  
 as though it's the last chance I'm ever going to get  
 to be alive  
 and know it.

Clearly, the reader is advised to start thinking in terms other than the usual dualistic ones: in order to accept the only world we live in, we must also accept its contradictions. Life and death, emblematised by the owl and rabbit, are coterminous; the one cannot exist without the other.

Christensen (2002:146) echoes the theme of this excerpt:

The closing sentence of this passage recalls Oliver's only question: 'How to love this world'. So how does one love a world such as this? For Oliver the answer involves recognizing that even an owl is acting out of love. The predator and prey are driven by the same force.

However, Christensen's assertion that the owl is "acting out of love" obfuscates Oliver's message about the owl's intentions: it does not act out of innate cruelty or love of the rabbit; it acts simply because it has to survive. For the owl, the bifurcating terms *cruelty* or *love* do not exist. Oliver reiterates this in "The Turtle" (*House of Light*:22, lines 20-21) in which a snapping turtle devours one of the teal hen's chicks: "Nothing's important // except that the great and cruel mystery of the world, of which this is a part, / not be denied".

Loving this world entails incorporating life's dichotomies as evident in "Spring": (*Wild Geese*: 32, lines 24-32):

Whatever else  
  
 my life is  
 with its poems  
 and its music  
 and its glass cities,  
  
 it is also this dazzling darkness  
 coming  
 down the mountain,  
 breathing and tasting

Here, Oliver articulates two antithetic sides of her life: on the one hand, “poems”, “music”, and “glass cities” are man-made concepts, seemingly devoid of any elements from the natural world. On the other hand, she speaks of “dazzling darkness” that comes down “the mountain”, relying on a complete sensual experience, “breathing and tasting”. But, yet again, she marries two dualistic sides, the one steeped in artifice, and the other in instinct.

Buddhism postulates that duality must be conquered in order to realise Emptiness and Ultimate Reality:

Naturally, the reality which is grasped in terms of duality is a conceptualised or objectified reality and cannot be ultimate Reality. This is why duality must be overcome in order to be completely free from conceptualization, objectification, delusion and attachment. Only this way one can awaken to ultimate Reality or true subjectivity (Abe 1985:164-165).

This impression of duality thrives on self-estrangement, anxiety, and fear. Oliver addresses the themes of duality and overcoming fear in “Starfish” (*Wild Geese*:22-23, lines 1-36):

In the sea rocks,  
     in the stone pockets  
         under the tide’s lip,  
             in water dense as blindness

they slid  
     like sponges,  
         like too many thumbs.  
             I knew this, and what I wanted

was to draw my hands back  
     from the water – what I wanted  
         was to be willing  
             to be afraid.

But I stayed there,  
     I crouched on the stone wall  
         while the sea poured its harsh song  
             through the sluices,

while I waited for the gritty lightning,  
     of their touch, while I stared

down through the tide's leaving  
 where sometimes I could see them –

their stubborn flesh  
 lounging on my knuckles.  
 What good does it do  
 to lie all day in the sun

loving what is easy?  
 It never grew easy,  
 but at last I grew peaceful:  
 all summer

my fear diminished  
 as they bloomed through the water  
 like flowers, like flecks  
 of an uncertain dream,

while I lay on the rocks, reaching  
 into the darkness, learning  
 little by little to love  
 our only world.

The typographic form of the stanzas or quatrains is clearly tapered inward from the first line to the fourth line of each stanza. When one regards the poem as a whole, visually, it becomes evident that Oliver has used form to link it to content. Oliver has employed tapering stanzas to reverberate the idea of “sluices” in line 16. The barrier structures that support sluice gates are often angled, and the distances between them that hold the structure, such as a sea wall, are measured out to exact specifications. Extrapolated to the stanzaic form, the same is true: the first line of each stanza is a support or beam that ‘sticks’ out, emphasising certain key ideas. The follow-up lines of each quatrain taper inward steadily, letting through more or fewer words (each stanza differs in this respect).

Therefore, Oliver exploits the white space of the page, making this also a vital part of the poem. The white space between the stanzas becomes the ‘water’ flowing from the sluice gates until it is stopped again or at least controlled by the first line of each stanza. This control balances the idea of stasis and fluidity: the stanzas taper off at an angle which echoes the form of sluice structures; they gather words like pools behind a sluice gate. Furthermore, if one looks at the poem as a whole, the tapering lines of each stanza recede steadily from the margin, before

returning to the next stanza's first line which juts back to the margin, thus creating a type of 'mouth', another visual reminder of the sluice.

The first three lines of stanza 1 reinforce the elusive nature of the starfish, informing the reader of the locations which constitute their hiding places: "rocks" (line 1); "stone pockets" (line 2), and under the "lip" of the tide (line 3). Line 4 progresses logically from these: the human eye cannot perceive these starfish easily because of their habitat (lines 1-3). Besides, nature itself hides them: the water is "dense". This denseness of the water causes "blindness" to the perceiver, on a literal level because of its lack of visibility, but also metaphorically, the speaker of the poem is blinded by her own fear.

In stanza 2, "slid" is enjambed to emphasise the slipperiness as well as slithering nature of the starfish; thus, line 5 mirrors this by "sliding" to line 6. Therefore, turning the line after "slid" serves a visual function: "Turning the line in free verse [...] has much to do with the visual presentation on the page" (*A Poetry Handbook*:54).

Lines 8 to 12 are essential to the theme of the poem: overcoming fear. In line 8, the speaker admits that she knows that the starfish slide away easily, and are basically invisible in the opaque water. She has an overwhelming urge to draw back her hands from this ominous water in which she knows the starfish are lurking. However, the mini-caesura in line 10, marked by the dash, indicates that she wants to overcome this fear: "what I wanted / was to be willing / to be afraid." The full-stop after "afraid" signifies an end-of-line pause which could easily have signalled the end of the poem, an end that would have been quite satisfactory to the reader. Yet, with line 13, Oliver continues: with the word "but" at the beginning of this line, she qualifies the speaker's journey: not only was she willing to be afraid in theory, but actually plucked up the courage to do so. This is an important turning point in the poem, because the "I" decides to stay, and not, as before, to play it safe with the starfish. This turning point can also be called a volta, which signifies a turn in thought in a sonnet, especially after line 8, between the octave and the sestet in the Italian sonnet. Although the volta is therefore usually associated with a sonnet, Oliver's turn of thought with the preposition 'but' can be likened to the volta.

This "staying" after the "but" is emblematic of the speaker's fearlessness; she has decided to stay with the discomfort of the situation as further reinforced by the phrase "crouched on the stone wall" (line 14). "Crouching" is an uncomfortable position to be in, one that cannot be maintained indefinitely. The word "crouch" reveals a hidden ambiguity: it is a posture of sheltering and concealing the body, therefore an apparently guarded posture. However, in this context, its other innate meaning is brought to the fore: a posture of reverence; reminiscent of bowing low. In Buddhism, to bow (or, in Zen: to *gasshō*) to someone or something means to let

go of the ego-self and to remember the Buddha within. This does not mean one is afraid of the person one is bowing to or that one is displaying inferiority.

The fact that the speaker is crouching on a “stone wall” is a further underpinning of her willingness to stay where she is in terms of discomfort, both physical and emotional. Stone is a hard and unyielding surface, uncomfortable to crouch on especially because of the impact on one’s knees. In addition, the sea is also unyielding, pouring “its harsh song / through the sluices” (lines 15-16), therefore extending the discomfort created by the stone wall image.

Lines 17 to 20 indicate the essence of the speaker’s growing more comfortable with uncertainty: she “waits”, a process that is uncertain in itself as she does not know its outcome. Line 20 underpins this waiting process: only “sometimes” she could see them, which is tentative and, no doubt, frustrating. However, she “waits” patiently for their “gritty lightning”, which captures the jolting nature of the starfish impending discomfort of coming into contact with them. This illustrates the speaker’s growing fearlessness. Khyentse (2007:27) describes this type of fearlessness as follows:

Fearlessness is generated when you can appreciate uncertainty, when you have faith in the impossibility of interconnected components remaining static and permanent. You will find yourself, in a very true sense, preparing for the worst while allowing for the best. You become dignified and majestic.

Therefore, the speaker moves beyond the idea of permanence: she is beginning to grasp that even the discomfort and the lurking danger of the starfish are impermanent states, and therefore she is able to overcome her physical and emotional fear. Even though the starfish are now making physical contact with her, something she had dreaded before – “their stubborn flesh / lounging on my knuckles” – she has an epiphany or moment of *kenshō*: “What good does it do / to lie all day in the sun // loving what is easy?” With this question, the “I” has overcome dualistic thinking and its accompanying *dukkha*:

When Gautama the Buddha says ‘existence is (characterized by) suffering’, he does not mean that human life is simply full of suffering without any pleasure at all [...] In daily life we distinguish between pleasure and suffering, seeking for and clinging to pleasure while avoiding and detesting suffering. According to Buddhism, real suffering lies precisely in this very inclination. Pleasure and suffering are in reality inseparable and intertwined – one is never found without the other (Abe 1985:205).

The phrase “lounging on my knuckles” suggests the more relaxed attitude the speaker finds herself in: she has assimilated her fear, therefore “my fear diminished” (line 29). She has thus begun to view the fear-engendering starfish in another way: “they bloomed” like “flowers” or “flecks”. This marks a change in her conventional thought processes:

The world of thinking is that of our ordinary dualistic mind. The world of pure consciousness or awareness is that of Buddha-mind. Phenomena in the world of thinking are constantly being named or labelled by our minds. The world of awareness does not label or name, it only reflects. The world of pure consciousness thus includes the opposites in the world of thinking (Suzuki in Chadwick 1999:311).

This is precisely what the speaker is experiencing: the uncomfortable crouching has been transformed into lying “on the rocks” (line 33), mirroring the “lounging” of the starfish. She is no longer merely crouching or bowing down anymore; she is in a posture that is more reminiscent of prostration. Instead of staring “down the tide’s leaving” (line 19), which suggests a more indirect and safe approach, she is “reaching / into the darkness”, the same darkness she experienced as dense and blinding at the beginning of the poem. Christensen comments on this process of transformation when the speaker asks: “What good does it do / to lie all day in the sun // loving what is easy?” (2002:150):

Oliver’s answer to the only question is to show that we can defeat a way of seeing that leaves us frightened in our separation, we can begin to live more fully. Thus we find the speaker of ‘Starfish’ challenging herself to engage in even those aspects of the earth that repulse her. In the end, as the speaker’s fear begins to fade, Oliver invites us to join her,

reaching  
into the darkness, learning  
little by little to love  
our only world.

Kyentse’s (2007:27) earlier quotation is a crucial link in elucidating these last four lines in which darkness and loving the world are assimilated: “You will find yourself, in a very true sense, preparing for the worst while allowing for the best. You become dignified and majestic”.

The idea of not labelling things into binary oppositions that characterise dualistic thought is also evident in “Gravel” (*The Leaf and the Cloud*:45, Part 10, lines 9-11). Ridding the self of dualistic thought engenders fearlessness and spiritual warriorship:

*dirt, mud, stars, water –  
I know you as if you were myself.*

*How could I be afraid?*

“For Example” (*Swan*:11, lines 20-24) continues the “how to love this world” topos: The speaker saves a wounded gull and puts him in her car. Because it is a wild bird, the gull is unused to any human contact, and does not understand that she is trying to save him; he therefore pecks her until she bleeds:

I love this world, even in its hard places.  
A bird too must love this world,  
    even in its hard places.  
So, even if the effort may come to nothing,  
    you have to do something.

Oliver’s placing of “even in its hard places” at the end-position of line 20 and in an indented line of its own (line 22) reiterates the idea that loving this world entails an attitude of Non-attachment in which we cannot control events:

The Buddha tells us to look life straight in the eye, not to avoid it or to wish it away. When we don’t accept the true nature of our existence here then we find ourselves trying to control this tumbling universe to suit us, to make it predictable and safe, dodging the uncomfortable bits and holding on to the pieces we like. Attachment. And we know from our experience that this clinging is futile, that it only leads to frustration and anxiety. This is the kind of suffering that the Buddha talked about, the kind of unnecessary suffering we need to be saved from. Of course there is also the daily round of pain and disappointment to deal with; and this, too, is part of our spiritual practice (Osler 2008:50).

The “even in its hard places” is especially elucidated by Osler’s assertion that it is futile to make the world “predictable and safe, dodging the uncomfortable bits and holding on to the pieces we like”. Looking “life straight in the eye” and not avoiding or wishing it away becomes imperative, reiterating the idea of cultivating fearlessness. The last two lines of Oliver’s poem, “So, even if the effort may come to nothing, / you have to do something”, truly embody the spirit of Non-attachment and looking life “straight in the eye”, despite its “hard places”.

Loving this world also entails discovering the second Characteristic of Human Existence which is “egolessness” (Chödrön 2003:17) or what Krüger describes as “Nonsubstance (*anattā*) or *anātman* (no-self)” (1991:92-93). Chödrön’s depiction of egolessness captures the fleeting

nature of the self, an attribute that most people avoid thinking about or are simply ignorant of. Therefore, being attached to a fixed idea of the self when there is none, only brings suffering / *dukkha*:

I could observe from my own experience that that nothing is static. My moods are continuously shifting like the weather. I am definitely not in control of what thoughts or emotions are going to arise, nor can I halt their flow. Stillness is followed by movement, movement flows back into stillness (2003:17).

Oliver illustrates this sense of egolessness in “One or Two Things” (*Dream Work*:51, Part 7, lines 1-8):

For years and years I struggled  
just to love my life. And then

the butterfly  
rose, weightless, in the wind.  
'Don't love your life  
too much,' it said,

and vanished  
into the world.

The poem emphasises the speaker's initial position: struggling to love herself and her own life. There is a sense of heavy emotional baggage that the “I” is carrying which is underscored by the “For years and years” in line 1. However, the weightlessness of the butterfly and the ease with which it ‘teaches’ her a lesson about the self is especially palpable through the enjambments after lines 3, 5, and 7. Turning the line at line 2 creates a momentary suspension for the reader – “And then”. The enjambment after “butterfly” is particularly pertinent, illustrating its weightlessness; the lack of emotional baggage the ego carries.

From a Buddhist perspective, lines 5 and 6 are the core teaching of Impermanence: the ego's clinging to itself and everything else causes *dukkha*; its sense of a fixed identity which is isolated from the rest of the world chains it down: “We use our daily activity as a shield against the fundamental ambiguity of our situation, expending tremendous energy trying to ward off impermanence and death” (Chödrön 2003:18). It is this “tremendous energy” that is used in an unskilful way most of the time: instead of letting go, the ego-self clings on. The butterfly metaphor corresponds with Oliver's own assertions in interviews and essays that as a poet, one should “vanish” from the scene: “And certainly this intention – for it is by intention that I vanish –

is different from the intention of poems behind which there exists a strong and definite poet-person" (*Blue Pastures*:111). This is not to be read as a negative assertion. In the same way, "Don't love your life / too much", is meant to enlighten the reader, not to alienate them from themselves, but rather to engender true egolessness or No-self. This is to be found in Oliver's poems: "Like life itself, they [poems] may well contain terror and pain and confusion, but they need to strive on behalf of the lord of life and not the lesser gods of self-interest" (*Blue Pastures*:112).

The sense of Non-attachment and non-possessiveness which is only possible when the ego-self is dropped, is manifest in "October" (*Blue Iris*:63, Part 7, lines 1-10):

Sometimes in late summer I won't touch anything, not  
the flowers, not the blackberries  
brimming in the thickets; I won't drink  
from the pond; I won't name the birds or the trees;  
I won't whisper my own name.

One morning

the fox came down the hill, glittering and confident,  
and didn't see me – and I thought:

so this is the world.  
I'm not in it.  
It is beautiful.

At this juncture, the reader encounters the ultimate act of non-possessiveness. From the outset of the poem, the reader is made conscious of what the "I" is *not* doing; a technique that also demonstrates to the reader what is usually important to the speaker. However, this is not depriving or punishing herself by not indulging in the usually meaningful activities of the wild: what Oliver articulates here is that when one lets go of things close to one's heart, they do not necessarily disappear. The gist is of genuine Non-attachment that brings freedom to the mind. That the "I" "won't touch anything" is significant because the tactile experience in Oliver's poems is of consistent importance. However, the speaker trains herself to refrain from doing what comes naturally to her and, by doing that, she observes the world from a fresh vantage point. This, in turn, helps readers to re-examine their own lives. The fox teaches the same lesson as the butterfly in "One or Two things": loving the self through practising No-self. The fact that the speaker is not even whispering her "own name" is noteworthy, because she is inverting the usual relationship she has with the ego-self. As a result, the process of letting go of the self, prompts a far-reaching, transformative effect:

Tapping into that shaky and tender place has a transformative effect. Being in this place may feel uncertain and edgy, but it's also a big relief. Just to stay there, even for a moment, feels like a genuine act of kindness to ourselves (Chödrön 2003:9).

By seeing ourselves from a non-clinging stance, letting go of the usual attachments to and concepts we have about our sense-of-self, is a "genuine act of kindness to ourselves". This is evident in the poem: the speaker undergoes an epiphany, suddenly understanding the teaching of the "glittering and confident fox". Paradoxically, she can be kind to herself and stay in the place that feels "uncertain and edgy" because she has unfettered herself from the confines of the ego. The "I" that is not "in it" (line 9) is the ego; the world is beautiful because she can view and experience it now beyond the confines of the dualistic mode: "Nonattachment is the epitome, for it cleanses the soul, clarifies the mind, kindles the heart, and wakes the spirit" (MacInnes 2007:45).

A continuation of Non-attachment through the No-self is found in "To Begin with, the Sweet Grass" (*Evidence*:39, Part 7, lines 12-13):

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?  
Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.

Paradoxically, unfettering the "self" brings one closer to the Wild Mind or Original Mind of Zen Buddhism. Osler sums up this process with an insight of Lao Tzu, who supposedly wrote most of the Tao teachings which, in turn, had an impact on Zen: "Just remain in the centre, watching. And then forget that you are there" (2009:244).

Central to the 'how to love this world' topos is egolessness which enables viewing life in a non-attached and non-dualistic way: you must live your life in such a way so as to release your Original Mind or Zen Mind, as Suzuki articulates it throughout *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970). Similar to the Zen mind that Suzuki describes, is "Wild Mind" which Goldberg elucidates as being

outside our normal perception, beyond our constant discursive thoughts, as big as the sky. All we need to do is take one step backward, and we live in that mind, one with everything, not limited to the boundaries of our skin. It is the place where birds, clouds, old memories, horses move through us (2004:174).

This Wild Mind is palpable in "Mornings at Blackwater" (*Red Bird*:57, lines 13-18):

So come to the pond,  
 or the river of your imagination,  
 or the harbour of your longing,

and put your lips to the world.

And live  
 your life.

By addressing the reader directly as “you”, Oliver focuses attention on living outside what Goldberg calls “normal perception”. Oliver’s use of *correspondence* accesses the symbolic world of the poem, urging readers to look at their own lives with wonderment: the “pond” or “river” of the imagination epitomises the clarity and lucidity of viewing Original Mind. “Harbour of your longing” continues the water metaphor. Putting one’s “lips to the world” is reminiscent of drinking water from a pond or river, but Oliver takes this idea further: instead of putting your lips to the pond or river, “you” should put them to “the world”. Oliver’s employment of *correspondence* includes addressing personal matters which

helps to explain why Oliver has taken up the mode of personal address in her recent poems. This technique serves to sharpen the work of correspondence, compelling the reader to reckon in a very personal way with the cost of really noticing the natural world (Burton-Christie 1996:82).

In the last two lines, Oliver breaks away from *correspondence* by employing *adéquation*. She tells the readers to do no more and no less than live their lives.

Similarly, “The Summer Day” (*House of Light*:60, lines 17-19) utilises *adéquation*:

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?

These pivotal lines underscore the essence of Impermanence: (1) that death is a certainty, (2) and that life is transient: “Our lives are too fleeting and unpredictable for words. Each of us is a crossroad, a node of unfathomable currents and connections, causes and effects, flashing in the night sky, gone before you know” (Osler 2008:171).

This is where the bedrock of Oliver’s philosophy – loving this world – intertwines with Impermanence: “What does it mean, say the words, that the earth is so beautiful? And what

shall I do about it? What is the gift that I should bring to the world? What is the life I should live?" (*Long Life*:9). The last line of "The Summer Day" is isolated to stress to the reader that life is not only precious and not to be wasted, but "wild" as well. The word "wild" can be viewed on two levels: first, it echoes the wildness of Original Mind or Zen Mind, unencumbered by habitual tendencies of the ego which makes it neurotic and defensive. Secondly, "wild" also articulates the wildness of the natural world, which is the pivot around which Oliver's poetry revolves. The motif she continually employs is that, if you are separated from the natural world, you are also disconnected from yourself:

It is one of the perils of our so-called civilized age that we do not yet acknowledge enough, or cherish enough, this connection between soul and landscape – between our own best possibilities, and the view from our own windows. We need the world as much as it needs us [...] Without the physical world such hope is: hacked off. Is: dried up (*Long Life*:91).

What Oliver is asserting at this point – that the undeniable link to our 'sanity' is the natural world – is confirmed in Hagen's modification of Thoreau's view of nature: "We can look deeper – to an awareness characterized by Thoreau's famous quote: 'In wildness is the preservation of the world.' [...] So I would modify Thoreau's words and say that in wildness is not only the preservation of the world, but the revelation of the world" (2003:75).

"Peonies" (*Wild Geese*:82) reinforces the idea that we suffer because we do not treasure life; fundamentally, we are delusional about the so-called permanence of things. Oliver pertinently addresses readers, putting them on the spot about this delusion by asking (lines 26-28):

Do you love this world?  
Do you cherish your humble and silky life?  
Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?

Line 28 has an inherent ambiguity: to live in this world one has to accept both life ("green grass") and death ("terror beneath"). Chödrön (2003:18) explains the intersection of life and death that constitutes Ultimate Reality:

We know that all is impermanent; we know that everything wears out. Although we can buy this truth intellectually, emotionally we have a deep-rooted aversion to it. We want permanence; we exact permanence. Our natural tendency is to seek security; we believe we can find it.

Paradoxically, when the peonies are cut to be placed in water in a domestic environment, they are already in the process of dying. At the same time, they also seem at their most vital and beautiful (lines 35-36:83):

to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are  
nothing, forever?

What Oliver expresses here is that every moment is transitory, and therefore, one should treasure everything because it does not last, just as one should treasure the fulgent peonies whose lives are literally cut short:

Once more, Oliver's poetry asserts the human need to learn to live with life and death, joy and fear. Just like the fresh-cut peonies, humans' lives can be 'wild and perfect for a moment, before they are / nothing, forever'. The emerging metaphor of flowers, alive and wild in the field before they are cut and brought inside, urges readers to cherish life while also holding onto the momentary, the fragmentary, and the transient. To love what can easily be lost, to pay attention to beauty and wildness, is what it means to love this world and to love one's life (Riley 2008:277).

In "Snow Geese" (*Why I Wake Early*:34), the speaker undergoes a similar coming to terms with transience precipitated by the snow geese. Lines 1 to 6 deal specifically with the "task" of embracing Impermanence, which does not come naturally to humans:

Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!  
What a task  
to ask

of anything, or anyone,

yet it is ours,  
and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

Impermanence is thus a process of constant change ("by the hours"):

the world (and everything in it) *is not* permanent, *not* self-contained, *not* eternal and *not* substantial; the world (and everything in it) *is* at any given moment a dynamic, complex system; the unfinished, changing aggregate of many interdependent, changing factors (Krüger 1991:103).

Krüger's description of the world's transitoriness – especially “a dynamic, complex system” – is notably evident in the swift visit of the snow geese (lines 10-13):

a flock of snow geese, winging it  
 faster than the ones we usually see,  
 and, being the color of snow, catching the sun  
  
 so they were, in part at least, golden.

Oliver's choice of vocabulary reinforces their transitory visit: “winging it”; “faster”; “catching the sun”. The indentation of line 11 underscores the vivid movement of the snow geese's flight.

The idea of wanting to stop time in order to relish the moment comes to the fore (lines 14-19):

I

held my breath  
 as we do  
 sometimes  
 to stop time  
 when something wonderful  
 has touched us

The enjambments simulate the ‘breathlessness’ that is described in this section; it is an uninterrupted process. At the same time, ‘holding one's breath’ becomes a precursor to a time when one's own breathing will stop permanently.

Then the cherished moment discontinues when the snow geese fly on (lines 28-38):

The geese  
 flew on.  
 I have never  
 seen them again.

Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.  
 Maybe I won't.  
 It doesn't matter.  
 What matters  
 is that, when I saw them,  
 I saw them

as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

In contrast with the ‘breathless moment’ in which Oliver employs enjambments in each line, end-stops are specifically deployed in the last few lines to help the reader reflect on each punctuated or truncated idea. The last two lines are noteworthy, because, not only did the speaker observe the snow geese but “as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly”. The accumulation of adverbs draws attention to the fact that viewing the snow geese was a moment of intense *kenshō*:

One might say that the highest kind of religious or spiritual attainment shows no sign that it is religious or spiritual. As a metaphor for this, there is in Buddhism the idea of the tracks of birds in the sky [...] in other words, there is no sign about the spiritually advanced to indicate that they are self-consciously religious. Nor are they self-conscious about giving the world no sign of their advanced spiritual state (Watts 1995:35).

What Watts is asserting here – that there is “no sign about the spiritually advanced to indicate that they are self-consciously religious” – lends eminence to Oliver’s own perspicacity inherent in her work: peering through the veil. Oliver remains “the bride of amazement” without specific religious affiliations.

Peering through the “veil” reiterates the John Ruskin epigraph to *The Leaf and the Cloud* (2000):

We have seen that when the earth had to be prepared for the habitation of man, a veil, as it were, of intermediate being was spread between him and its darkness, in which were joined, in a subdued measure, the stability and insensibility of the earth, and the passion and perishing of mankind [...] Between the earth and man arose the leaf. Between the heaven and man came the cloud. His life being partly as the falling leaf, and partly as the flying vapour.

Dubuisson (2007:154) describes the epigraph as Ruskin describing “a veil over humanity that serves as a shield from both the certain death of human life on earth and the ‘unendurable glory’ of heaven”. She goes on to say that the epigraph serves as a revelation of the mission of Oliver’s “work as poet”:

For Oliver, poetry is a way to break through Ruskin’s veil to touch both the light of heaven and comforting darkness of death. Although moments of transcendence exist in

*The Leaf and the Cloud*, the majority of the poem is concerned with acceptance of death (2007:154).

The notion that transience of all things is an undeniable truth, as seen in “Snow Geese”, is similarly embodied by “The Pinewoods” in which the speaker has an encounter with deer much in the same way as she had with the snow geese: “everything is so quick and uncertain, / so glancing, so improbable, so real” (lines 35-36).

### DEATH AS A MANIFESTATION OF ANICCA

*What  
we know: that time  
chops at us all like an iron  
hoe, that death  
is a state of paralysis. What  
we long for: joy  
before death*

Oliver (*American Primitive*:49)

The “quick and uncertain” is also explored in “The Black Snake” (*Twelve Moons*:9). However, here, Oliver deals specifically with death, not just the sense of loss as found in “Snow Geese” and “The Pinewoods”. The black snake is a recurrent image of death in Oliver’s poetry. The definite article – “the” – is already indicative that the snake which has been run over by a truck is not just any snake; it is an integral part of the poem’s message to the reader. At first, he is described as lying “looped and useless / as an old bicycle tyre” (lines 5-6). This description suits the physical and emotional distance of the speaker when she encounters the dead snake before she stops her car to pick him up. However, as she becomes physically involved, she starts to view the black snake in a different light (lines 9-11):

He is as cool and gleaming  
as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet  
as a dead brother.

He is not viewed as “useless” anymore; Oliver utilises an image which signifies toughness and strength: “braided whip”. Furthermore, she becomes aware of the oneness or Interconnection of everything; dualistic subject-object bifurcation does not feature here anymore: he is a “dead brother”, evoking the “family of things” theme explored in Chapter 4. Another poem, “Rain, Tree,

Thunder and Lightning” (*West Wind*:31, lines 31-32) explores death, which, in turn, invokes the closeness of a brother: “What do I hope for / from brother death?”

In “The Black Snake”, the speaker’s own dualistic thinking has been transformed when she makes contact with the dead snake. MacInnes describes how dualistic thinking can have an alienating effect on the mind: “When you have ideas of liking or disliking, right or wrong, good or bad, enlightened or deluded, then you lose the mind. In dichotomy, you become apart from the Way” (2007:150).

Shifting the snake from the road to the natural habitat of the forest also brings a meditative mode to the poem, specifically a meditation about Impermanence (lines 12-24):

I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking  
about *death*: its suddenness,  
its terrible weight,  
its certain coming. Yet under

reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones  
have always preferred.  
It is the story of endless good fortune.  
It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.  
It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward  
happily all spring through the green leaves before  
he came to the road.

The driving on after she left the snake in the forest is also an act of Non-attachment: she has to move on. The word “death” is italicised to direct the reader’s focus to it; the placement of the colon strategically builds up the reader’s attention to what is placed and described after it. Death is a sudden event; it carries a heavy load and is an undeniable truth of life which cannot be shirked. These universal truths about Impermanence are reiterated in “The Lamps” (*Twelve Moons*:41, lines 19-22):

But of course the darkness keeps  
Its appointment. Each evening,

An inscrutable presence, it has the final word

Outside every door.

Where Oliver uses darkness to reiterate the presence of death in “The Lamps”, in “The Black Snake”, she invokes Impermanence through the employment of light and fire: “burns a brighter fire” (line 17), and “It is the light at the center of every cell” (line 21). Oliver provides a view of death that goes beyond the normal fear-invoking attitude; the “brighter fire” which the “bones / have always preferred” is an inherent or implicit life force which celebrates each moment as opposed to dreading death: “Contemporary man’s acceptance of his mortality will benefit daily living in productive encounters of love, caring and understanding. It allows him to look beyond the self to view death as in harmony with the recreative processes of nature” (Alford 1988:287).

In line 21 – “It is the light at the center of every cell” – Oliver encapsulates the replenishing forces or processes Alford is talking about. This light comes naturally to all sentient beings; if humans could accept the irrefutable truth of Impermanence, they would not bother changing that which cannot be changed. Instead, they would just live their lives like the black snake: “The acceptance of hard truths of mortality also provides a reforming perspective on daily dying – the progressive inward death of one’s self-consciousness” (Alford 1988:287). From a Buddhist perspective, the “inward death” Alford mentions is the death of the ego-self.

The fact that the snake was “coiling and flowing forward / happily” is a direct lesson for the reader: the snake was not fretting about crossing the road because he was oblivious to the fact that he would cross it at some stage; in the meantime, he was just enjoying life. The “green leaves” in line 24 is a cyclical motif: the black snake was living there before he was killed on the road and is ultimately returned to it: “I leave him under the leaves”. This regenerative cycle is noted by Alford (1988:283): “Oliver celebrates the natural cycles of birth, decay, and death as flourishing in all life”.

Another poem drawing on the snake as a reminder of Impermanence is “Members of the Tribe” (*Dream Work*:32, Part 2, lines 1-10):

I know  
 death is the fascinating snake  
 under the leaves, sliding  
 and sliding; I know  
 the heart loves him too, can’t  
 turn away, can’t

break the spell. Everything

wants to enter the slow thickness,  
aches to be peaceful finally and at any cost.

Wants to be stone.

Here, Oliver resumes certain images that are also found in “The Black Snake”: the “sliding / and sliding” motion of the snake parallels the “coiling and flowing” in “Black Snake”; the latter’s leaf motif is repeated in “under the leaves” in “Members of the Tribe”. There is also a parallel structure underlying the idea that everything in nature wants change by returning to the earth: in “The Black Snake”, Oliver talks about “Yet under / reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones / have always preferred” which is “the light at the center of every cell”. In “Members of the Tribe”, Oliver mentions “Everything / wants to enter the slow thickness, / aches to be peaceful finally and at any cost. // Wants to be stone” (lines 7-10). The stone image has certain resonances with the image of the “bones” in “Black Snake”; an image connected with solidity, almost foundation-like. This image of returning to stone or bone becomes pivotal to Oliver’s “Gravel” (*The Leaf and the Cloud*:37-45).

In order to explicate the stone and bone images found in “The Black Snake” and “Members of the Tribe”, and how they relate to “Gravel”, some contextual background must be elucidated first in order to appreciate the significance of the bones in especially “Gravel”.

The original idea of riprap was employed by the Buddhist poet, Gary Snyder, who published *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* in 1958:

According to Snyder, riprap is ‘a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains’. Snyder uses the image of riprap to describe what he sees as the primary function of poetry. He believes that the poet creates ‘a guide to a path’ for readers, a path that in Snyder’s case involves relocating the place of the human in a world that consists largely of the non-human (Dubuisson 2007:151).

Therefore, the poet as guide to the lost reader becomes an evident theme in the first fourteen lines of Snyder’s “Riprap” (Snyder in Baym 2003:2958):

Lay down these words  
Before your mind like rocks  
                  placed solid, by hands  
In choice of place, set  
Before the body of the mind  
                  in space and time:

Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall  
                   riprap of things:  
 Cobble of milky way,  
                   straying planets,  
 These poems, people,  
                   lost ponies with  
 Dragging saddles –  
                   and rocky sure-foot trails.

Dubuisson (2007:151-152) summarises some of the similarities and differences between Snyder's and Oliver's "Riprap":

*As in Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems, in The Leaf and the Cloud, words / poems function as riprap; these poems promote a human way of life that embraces its natural environment and provide a path for attaining that goal. However, unlike Snyder's 'Riprap', Oliver's 'Riprap' principally deals with helping humans to reconcile inevitable death with fruitful life (Dubuisson 2007:152).*

Ironically, the physical manifestation of riprap – gravel and stones – is found in the long poem "Gravel", but not in Oliver's "Riprap". The same irony is found in her long poem "Sand Dabs", in which sand dabs are never mentioned directly. Therefore, Dubuisson's assertion that Oliver's "Riprap" is a "clear tribute to Snyder's" and that it differs in "subtle ways" from it, is built on a fallacious premise. It is in "Gravel", not "Riprap", where the trail becomes evident.

In the first section of "Gravel" (37, lines 5-8), the bone motif features as an image of Impermanence and Non-attachment:

Death, whoever and whatever you are, tallest king of  
 tall kings, grant me these wishes: unstring my bones;  
 let me be not one thing but all things, and wondrously  
 scattered

The process of unstringing "the bones" is a natural process: the dead become one with the environment so that new life cycles may be generated. The bones are also the last elements of the body to disintegrate, so to have them unstrung and scattered is significant in the process of Non-attachment. Lines 12 to 13 pay particular attention to the concept of transience and uncertainty:

Can you imagine a world without certainty?

The wind rises the wind falls.

Imagining a world without certainty is quite daunting to most people, therefore Oliver makes sure that the reader considers it. “The wind rises the wind falls” aptly simulates this uncertainty, especially through the lack of punctuation between “rises” and “the”: “These lines serve as the thesis for the entire poem. Death should not cause fear because it is the beginning of a new kind of life as part of the natural environment” (Dubuisson 2007:159).

By the time readers move on to lines 14 to 16, they will already have considered the bone motif in the context of Impermanence and regeneration:

The gravels of the world,  
the stones of the world  
are in their proper places

Oliver’s riprap becomes the gravel of the dead that has merged with nature’s stones and dust: “‘Gravel’ asserts that animate and inanimate alike exist in connection. At the root of this connection is the inevitable fact that all things return to dust and gravel” (Riley 2008:280). Riley’s assertion is illustrated in Part 3, lines 16-21 in “Gravel” (39):

Everything is participate.  
Everything is part of the world  
    we can see, taste, touch, hold onto,  
  
and then it is dust.  
Dust at last.  
Dust and gravel.

Oliver’s true riprap is not only inherent in the words she constructs as a ‘safe trail’ for the reader, but builds up progressively as an image throughout the poem: Impermanence does not mean that we cease to exist; death brings regeneration as well:

As in Snyder’s poem, the words of Oliver’s poem form her riprap: however, here the riprap quite literally consists of the bodies of the dead turned to gravel. Oliver suggests that humans should not fear dying because the dead provide a way to understand life. Their bodies, ground to dust and mingled all over the earth, ultimately form the gravel the living will walk upon. In Oliver’s poetry, death equals a positive immersion in the natural environment (Dubuisson 2007:159).

Part 6 (41, lines 1-2) of “Gravel” elucidates the earlier stone image in “Members of the Tribe”; that everything “wants to be stone”:

It is the nature of stone  
to be satisfied.

The suggestion that everything “wants to be stone” lies in the observation that stone is a neutral substance; it does not resist nature’s cycles:

Oliver’s poetry suggests that re-evaluating the place of the human in the larger world should preclude the human fear of mortality. If we humans envision our surroundings as participate [...] if we immerse ourselves in the natural environment before death, total immersion in nature after death cannot cause fear (Dubuisson 2007:159).

### **REGENERATION: BIRTH-LIFE-DECAY-DEATH CYCLE**

*When we die the body breaks open  
like a river;  
the old body goes on, climbing the hill.*

Oliver (*House of Light*:24)

The regeneration theme is also underscored in “The Terns” (*House of Light*:64-65, lines 20-35):

This is a poem  
about death,  
about the heart blanching  
in its fold of shadows  
because it knows  
someday it will be  
the fish and the wave  
and no longer itself –  
it will be those white wings,  
flying in and out  
of the darkness  
but not knowing it –  
this is a poem about loving

the world and everything in it:  
the self, the perpetual muscle,  
the passage in and out

Typographically, the poem is centred on the field of the page. If one drew a central axis through the poem, it would be bifurcated vertically. The word “fold” in line 23 implicitly suggests that, if the page were folded in half, the same bifurcated effect would be possible. This centring or folding process enables the reader to view some juxtapositions resulting from this technique: “the fish” oppose “the wave” (line 26); “flying in” opposes “out” (line 29); “self” versus “muscle” (line 34), and the “passage in” versus “out”. Naturally, Oliver employs this technique not to turn these concepts into binary oppositions, but because she wants the reader to isolate them, ponder them and then reintegrate them as inseparable parts of the life-death cycle.

Conversely, the poem may also be split horizontally: lines 20 to 31 deal principally with death, shadows, and darkness, while the second part, lines 32 to 36, change direction into loving the world, and regeneration through recognising the darkness.

Line 20 to 21 state the ‘thesis’ of the poem: “This is a poem about death”, which prepares the reader to view the poem with an eye on Impermanence and flux. The heart (which by means of the centralised ‘folding’ of the poem is actually split in its middle, just as the heart comprises left and right chambers) is blanched, which links associatively with the pallor death brings as well as the “white wings” in line 28. Moreover, the heart is pale because it is lying in the “fold of shadows”, thus it is not exposed to any light.

The associative links found in the poem serve as structural reinforcements: the heart is in a state of darkness by virtue of living in its shadows; because it is pale, it also links with the white wings and, by virtue of this association, also becomes the wings. The heart thus goes through a transformative process: it starts off being in the dark about the process of death, which is reminiscent of ignorance about Impermanence. The pale heart folded into its own shadows (reminiscent of the black snake’s ‘loop’ discussed earlier) has nuances of the ego-self whose potential has not been extracted yet; it is a prisoner of its own delusions:

Our consciousness is actually chained by the illusion called ‘I’. It is chained because this concept literally ties our consciousness to the prison of duality, the prison of concept and ideas. What most people experience is that their consciousness is chained by that illusion (Thubten 2012:74).

This duality is evident in the typography of the poem, illustrated earlier in the discussion through the juxtaposing of certain concepts and images. However, this duality progressively loses its energetic appeal as the poem progresses: the dash after “itself” in line 27 suggests the heart or ego overcoming its imprisonment. Also of central concern is that, in the first part of the poem, passivity and stasis are the main foci: the heart remains in its own shadows or ignorance which underlines its inability to view death and life as part of the same cycle. From line 28 onwards, major transformation takes place: the wings are “flying in and out” (line 29); moving into the world instead of staying cooped up in the shadows’ fold; the self becomes a moving muscle; a passage evoking a journey that also moves “in and out”.

The white wings, which link to the title – “The Terns” – become the heart or the “perpetual muscle” (line 34) because both are on a journey “in and out”. First, the whiteness of the wings contrasts with the darkness in line 30 as well as the shadows of line 23. However, the wings fly both in and out of the darkness which suggests a dynamic interaction: life and death are not binary oppositions, they are interconnected. Furthermore, if one took the terns as the ‘owners’ of the wings, what Oliver proposes here is that the terns fly in and out of the darkness without “knowing it” (line 31). The terns are fearless because they do not ponder and fear death as humans do; they simply fly in and out without any reservation, just as the black snake simply crosses the road without fearing impending death.

Another significant sub-text emerges when looking at another typographical technique: the indentation of lines 20 and 21; 24 and 25; 29 and 30. When these are grouped together, it reads:

This is a poem  
 about death,  
 because it knows  
 someday it will be  
 flying in and out  
 of the darkness

This sub-text becomes the ‘heart’ of the poem and serves as a summative device: Impermanence is not to be feared because there is a dynamic flow between the cycles of life and death; the one cannot exist without the other:

When he [Buddha] taught impermanence, he went beyond conventional thinking about 'the end', such as the notion that death happens once and then it's over. Death is continuous from the moment of birth, from the moment of creation. Each change is a form of death, and therefore each birth contains the death of something else (Khyentse 2007:23-24).

Consequently, the poem is not only about death, as stated in line 20, but also about life. The perpetual muscle is synecdochic of the heart pumping blood to the body. The adjective, "perpetual", suggests a greater process than just the pumping of the heart; a universal process unfolds because there is an unending cycle that is signified by a throbbing heart: life-death-life-death.

The colon after, "This is a poem about loving / the world and everything in it", creates a tripartite structure for the reader, who, at the same time, will experience a certain sense of tension and ambiguity. The reason is that, at first, it seems as if the poem is about loving the world and everything in it. However, the reader would want to know what constitutes "everything" for Oliver: "the perpetual muscle", "the passage in and out" or the "self"? Of interest here is the fact that Oliver conflates all the images, so creating an incisive ambiguity: is she merely naming the "everything" that constitutes the world or is she proposing that the self is the perpetual muscle and the passage in and out? This is exactly the type of ambiguity Oliver is fond of employing as part of her poetic arsenal to interact with readers so that they may decide for themselves what to take from the poem so as to effect change and amazement in their own lives.

"Bone Poem" (*Twelve Moons*:46, lines 17-20) is another poem that deals with regenerative cycles:

The equity: sooner or later  
In the shimmering leaves

The rat will learn to fly, the owl  
Will be devoured.

Christensen (2002:137) remarks on the transformative processes of nature inherent in Oliver's poetry, especially in "Bone Poem":

Traditional distinctions between mortality and immortality quickly break down in Oliver's poems as the material elements of each are being transformed into the elements of

other bodies. This is the dynamic process that Oliver finds so redemptive; [...] ‘the rat will learn to fly’.

Riley (2008:273) emphasises the reversal of the predator-prey relationship in the natural world that is underscored in this poem:

This loss of life is not to be mourned; the elegiac tones of the previous volumes give way in this one [*Twelve Moons*] to a recognition of the cycle of life and death that creates nature’s renewal and survival. The predator-prey relationships of the natural world ensure the subsistence and sustainability of all creatures in the forest.

The cycle of “renewal and survival” is manifest in “Stanley Kunitz” (*Dream Work*:44, lines 14-25):

But now I know more  
 about the great wheel of growth,  
 and decay, and rebirth,  
 and know my vision for a falsehood.  
 Now I see him coming from the house –  
 I see him on his knees,  
 cutting away the diseased, the superfluous,  
 coaxing the new,  
 knowing that the hour of fulfilment  
 is buried in years of patience –  
 yet willing to labor like that  
 on the mortal wheel.

In the first part of the poem (lines 1-14), Oliver evokes a Merlinesque Kunitz (himself a poet) whose garden is likened to an Eden. However, she comes to the realisation that his flourishing garden is not a manifestation of a magical underpinning, but that it, like everything else, relies on a universal process: “growth”, “decay”, and “rebirth”. Therefore, she concedes that her former “magical” understanding of the Edenic garden had been steeped in delusion up to now: “and know my vision for a falsehood”.

Because Kunitz was a poet, the garden metaphor could also be translated into the writing process in which one has to cut “away the diseased, the superfluous”. This cutting and trimming process refers to the constant drafts and editorial processes a writer or poet has to effect before the end product is ready. “Coaxing the new” includes the birth of new ideas and words, and the fact that writing is a fragile process in which the writer must dig deep to find his or her own

voice. The “hour of fulfilment” which, in the context of writing, refers to writing success, whether it is publishing one’s work or receiving a literary prize or favourable reviews, is something that “is buried in years of patience”. Few writers are an overnight success; many struggle for years to get published or to get recognition of any kind, even after they have published; writing is therefore an extreme discipline where one has to be “yet willing to labor like that / on the mortal wheel”.

The gardening metaphor can also be explicated in terms of The Wheel of Existence (*Bhavachara*) or the *Samsāra-cakra* (The Cycle of Existence and Continuity) found principally in Tibetan Buddhism: “the great wheel of growth, / and decay, and rebirth”. The Wheel is a mandala for the Buddhist practitioner to meditate upon *samsāric* existence. Although Oliver does not mention the six realms of rebirth represented on the Wheel, the impetus behind it corresponds to what she is articulating in “Stanley Kunitz”:

Tibetan Buddhists have a profound belief in rebirth – the notion that death, far from being an end, is simply the beginning of another round of existence. The term given to the process of birth, death and rebirth is *samsara*. Every time we are reborn, we enter an existence characterized by *dukkha* (suffering, pain, unsatisfactoriness). The cycle of rebirth will continue indefinitely until we attain awakening and liberation from *samsara* (Peacock 2003:116).

Liberation from *dukkha* is only possible when the trepidation of Impermanence has been conquered; this is true liberation for the individual. Milstead explains this process of liberation from a Zen perspective (1998:33): “Zen teaches that if the ego is released, there is no entity to ‘have’ a fear of death or life. In effect, Zen Buddhism puts an end to the fear of death by killing the illusion of the ego”.

Oliver’s “mortal wheel” (line 25) reflects this understanding; in order for any garden to flourish, the “diseased, the superfluous” must be pruned or eradicated. In the same way, the ego must undergo a similar process; it must “die” before it is released from its delusion about reality:

Breaking all chains, losing every concept, every idea, sounds very frightening to the ego’s mind. But actually when we let go of every concept, we land on this infinite ground of eternal bliss, and that bliss is not some kind of religious or mystical experience, some altered state of consciousness. That bliss is not the result of doing something to our consciousness, rather it is the pure state of our consciousness (Thubten 2012:74).

This is why “knowing the hour of fulfilment” is parallel to *kenshō*; being awakened is a process of introspection and cutting through the ego’s illusionary state. Awakening does not happen overnight and takes true dedication and a willingness to change on the part of the Buddhist practitioner: it is “buried in years of patience”. This is not a straightforward process because the ego will inevitably resist; it desperately wants to cling on to everything, almost like the “heart blanching / in its fold of shadows” (“The Terns”). Harris (2009:42) uses the term “rebecoming” and “re-death” for rebirth, because, to Buddhists, there is no distinct self or soul (*ātman*) that reincarnates in the Hindu sense:

His [the Buddha’s] words are often explained by the analogy of a candle: just as a dying flame can light a new candle, so the dissolution of one personality gives rise to another. ‘There is rebirth of character’, explained the Buddha to a Brahmin who asked if his soul would be reborn, ‘but no transmigration of a self. The thought-forms reappear, but there is no ego-entity transferred’.

Although Christensen (2002:137) is not writing from a Buddhist stance, his observation of Oliver’s philosophy of Impermanence links with that of rebirth or rebecoming: “As Jean Alford observes, Oliver redefines human immortality ‘as a self-denying mortal life in communion with the eternal processes of nature’. This continual reintegration of individual into whole denies any abiding sense of discrete entity”.

The idea of rebirth is also to be found in Part 8 of “Gravel” (*The Leaf and the Cloud*:44 lines 1-10):

Listen, I don’t think we’re going to rise  
in gauze and halos.  
Maybe as grass, and slowly.  
Maybe as the long-leaved, beautiful grass

I have known, and you have known –  
or the pine trees –  
or the dark rocks of the zigzag creek  
hastening along –

or the silver rain –  
or the hummingbird.

A further thematic undertone of this part of the poem is overcoming the dualistic notion of self / other; the idea that there are only two possibilities – going to heaven or hell after the physical

body's demise – is approached from a fresh vantage point. Thurston (1999:30) likens Oliver's non-dualistic approach to that of Thomas Merton's Zen poems:

Oliver's relationship to the natural world goes beyond that of a subject looking at an object. Like many of Merton's Zen poems, Oliver does not worry overmuch about such subject / object dualism. 'Something disinclines Oliver to tremble over boundaries between herself and nature, or subject and object, as philosophers would have it'.

"When Death Comes" (*Wild Geese*:73, lines 1-10) contains multiple personifications of death, thus challenging the traditional heaven / hell notion inherent in many religions:

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox;

when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
What is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

Burton-Christie (1996:77) makes the following points about "When Death Comes":

There is a painful ambiguity here. On the one hand, death itself cannot be skirted; its inevitability, driving force, and finality are clear – like the hungry bear, the purse snapping shut, the measles-pox, the 'iceberg between the shoulder blades'. There is no hope for escape, no sense of a better place beyond death – it is merely a 'cottage of darkness'. On the other hand, she is expressing a hope that even at the moment of death she will retain an interest in the shape and texture of things. This is not, then, a meditation on eternal life; it is a *memento mori*, a meditation on death.

In "When Death Comes", Oliver opens the door for the reader into the "cottage of darkness", which certainly does not end there, but is a continuation of the speaker's "curiosity". Oliver urges the reader's curiosity by employing the "when death comes" anaphora, making the reader want to know what form death will take this time. The "cottage of darkness" metaphor becomes

a mandala for the reader to ponder, as different readers will have different responses to the sets of images or memories it evokes from them. The image of opening a door to the cottage of darkness is also present in “Am I Not Among the Early Risers” (*West Wind*:8, lines 44-45): “Have I not been ready always at the iron door, / not knowing to what country it opens – to death or to more life?” Another door metaphor connected to death is to be found in “Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches?” (*West Wind*:62, lines 26-30): “To put one’s foot into the door of the grass, which is / the mystery, which is death as well as life, and / not to be afraid! // To set one’s foot in the door of death, and to be overcome / with amazement!” The notion of death as a type of building, a cottage of darkness, is found in “Pilot Snake” (*West Wind*:9, lines 23-25): “there is only / that soft dark building / death”. As in most of her poetry, Oliver does not mystify death:

she is unwilling to idealize the natural world or leave it behind in seeking heightened spiritual awareness. Rather, she articulates an utterly particular and concrete sense of spiritual transformation that emerges in and through the ordinary, transfigured by poetic imagination (Burton-Christie 1996:79).

Burton-Christie goes on to say that

she notices not only the brute fact of death – much of her poetry is given over to an unflinching examination of the power of death in the natural world – but also asks: what value do we give it in our experience? Is death a final, irrevocable darkness? Or does life somehow endure? (1996:82).

Rebirth, the “eternal processes of nature” and “continual reintegration” (Christensen 2002:137) of Stanley Kunitz’s garden are reiterated in “Skunk Cabbage” (*American Primitive*:44, lines 17-21):

But these are the woods you love,  
where the secret name  
of every death is life again – a miracle  
wrought surely not of mere turning  
but of dense and scalding re-enactment.

Contrary to a common perception that the natural world exudes mainly beauty, binary oppositions such as cruelty and beauty, life and death, remain mutually inclusive in the wild; they are always incorporated within the same cycle. However, Oliver employs the word “secret” in line 18 because rebirth – new life after death – is not evident on a surface level. It is only

when one starts to investigate these cycles for oneself, that the truth about the life-death cycle becomes more evident: although everything is subject to decay, that same decay is recycled into new life forms:

Oliver's choice of adjectives emphasizes that this ceaseless transubstantiation is no ethereal dissipation of unwoven energy. Indeed, *scalding* vividly evokes the image of skin – the 'border guard' between self and other, in Gary Snyder's words – blistering and giving away, destroying any final pretence of separation. Moreover, the verb *wrought* insists that even in death something is being *made* (Christensen 2002:137).

The notion of non-dualist thinking is manifest in the description of the skunk cabbage; its name is already suggestive of the smell it exudes: "lurid" which "flows out in the most / unabashed way" (lines 10-11). However, in order to love and accept the world – "these are the woods you love" – the skunk cabbage must be considered in an integrative way. Not even the skunk cabbage contains only negative qualities, it also has another purpose, although it is not easy to imagine at first: it is an emblem or catalyst for change from being trapped in the past which Oliver describes as a "frozen waterfall" (line 23). Therefore, getting dislodged from this frozen state requires non-dualist thinking: "Dogen-zenji said, 'Although everything has Buddha nature, we love flowers, and we do not care for weeds' [...] We should accept weeds, despite how we feel about them" (Suzuki 1970:119).

The point Oliver seeks to convey is that it is not necessarily only the "pretty" (line 27) things that are life-changing ("ferns and flowers"), but particularly the tough, "lurid" (line 10) aspects of life (lines 21-27):

Not  
tenderness, not longing, but daring and brawn  
pull down the frozen waterfall, the past.  
Ferns, leaves, flowers, the last subtle  
refinements, elegant and easeful, wait  
to rise and flourish.  
What blazes the trail is not necessarily pretty.

Oliver solicits readers to reverse, or at least reconsider, their conventional thinking about the world: although the skunk cabbage "is not necessarily pretty" (line 27), it is an integral part of regenerating necessary change in nature: "what blazes the trail". This regeneration rejuvenates: "but daring and brawn / pull down the frozen waterfall, the past" (lines 22-23). The "brawn" in line 22 links with the overall description and purpose of the skunk cabbage: it smells lurid because it devours protein, making it a carnivorous plant. "Brawn" brings to mind muscular

strength as well as animal flesh (the lurid smell stems from rotting insect carcasses trapped in its “green caves”). Although the “you” dreams of “ferns and flowers” (line 3) which are “the last subtle / requirements, elegant and easeful”, they are not the elements that will cut through the delusions of the self which attach it to the past. These “refinements” are too slow, they “wait / to rise and flourish” (lines 25-26). This process may take years because flowers and ferns are more delicate in nature when compared to the skunk cabbage. In contrast, the skunk cabbage “blazes the trail” (line 27), which means that, if seen as a metaphor for the ego, shakes the self from its attachments to the past as well as its habitual thinking (lines 3-8):

you come, dreaming of ferns and flowers  
and new leaves unfolding,  
upon the brash  
turnip-hearted skunk cabbage  
slinging its bunched leaves up  
through the chilly mud.

Notable too is how the skunk cabbage is rooted in and thus grows from “the chilly mud”. This has resonances with the lotus which, in order to produce its exquisite flower, grows in the mud. Moreover, the skunk cabbage not only grows in the mud, but in the “chilly” mud. This suggests its toughness, because most plants die off during winter, but the skunk cabbage thrives, even in the iciness of winter. In addition, the word “brash” gives an indication of its overpowering nature, supported by the “rough” (line 13) and “powerful (line 16). According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (2007:n.p.), brash means “vulgarly self-assertive”, thus providing a link with the next part of the poem in which Oliver describes its luridness (lines 9-16):

You kneel beside it. The smell  
is lurid and flows out in the most  
unabashed way, attracting  
into itself a continual spattering  
of protein. Appalling its rough  
green caves, and the thought  
of the thick root nested below, stubborn  
and powerful as instinct!

Mann (2004:24) views “Skunk Cabbage” as “a movement from death to resurrection” which “also applies to human spiritual transformation”. The “ponds” that are “dissolving” (line 2) are reminiscent of the spiritual transformation Mann talks about. These “ponds” link with the past, to the “frozen waterfall”. On the one hand, the skunk cabbage is a terrible metaphor of death and decomposition: “lurid”, “continual spattering / of protein”, “Appalling”. On the other hand, it

parallels the changing of winter to spring; it has a “thick root”, it is “stubborn” and “powerful as instinct”. Its “thick root” suggests that, although the skunk cabbage literally looks and smells like a death trap, it also has life flowing through it. Watts (2000:71) reiterates the idea that, even though death is present everywhere, “the root” continues to exist which is “the source from which consciousness comes”. He continues this train of thought: “The Japanese feel that death is a completely natural event; it is only, as it were, the dropping of the leaves; and yet the root underneath is always there” (2000:69).

However, it is the odoriferous quality of the skunk cabbage, its most prominent and disgusting feature, that is a metaphor for the recycling process. This is also evident in “This Too” (*The Truro Bear*:53) in which the speaker discovers a decomposing fawn under oak trees: “There was the smell of change, which was / stink” (lines 8-9).

Oliver proposes that one needs to look beyond the repugnant outer appearance and stench of the skunk cabbage. The same idea pertains to our usual abhorrence of death; seen from another angle, death also has regenerative qualities: “We need only abandon our usual partial, prejudiced point of view in order to discover that what was hitherto insignificant, mean, or loathsome has come to have significance, value, and beauty” (Cook 1981:29).

In this way, abandoning one’s usual dualistic thinking – in this context, that the skunk cabbage is only loathsome – cuts through the delusions of the ego-self, something that is not likely to happen when the “you” dreams of “ferns and flowers”. Osler sums up attachment and delusion that keep the self chained up in an unenlightened state:

A delusion is anything that separates us from our life, anything that is not in harmony with our true nature or the truth of our situation. It is delusion when we look at life through the distortions of ignorance, prejudice, resistance, fear, anger, avoidance, expectation, resentment, guilt. Cutting through delusion means to put down these ways of responding to the world, it means to see things as they are, and to deal with them clearly and decisively (2008:90).

The notion of rebirth inherent in the “lurid” skunk cabbage which parallels the cutting through delusion Osler talks about is evident in “Rain” (*Wild Geese, Part 7 The Forest*:69, lines 1-11):

At night  
under the trees  
the black snake  
jellies forward

rubbing  
 roughly  
 the stems of the bloodroot,  
 the yellow leaves,  
 little boulders of bark,  
 to take off  
 the old life.

The enjambments between lines 1 to 6 are suggestive of the continuous movement – “jellying forward” – of the black snake, which recalls the coiling and slithering action Oliver uses in “The Black Snake” and “Members of the Tribe”. Burton-Christie (1996:79) observes the following: “Notice the rhythm of the language here. The short phrases are themselves suggestive of the slow, methodical ‘jellying forward of the snake’”.

In addition, the darkness motif employed in “The Terns” (*House of Light*:64) to describe the heart blanched in the fold of its own shadow is continued here: “At night” corresponds with the black colour of the snake. There is a temporary movement from darkness to light in lines 18 to 20 (“Rain”): “In the distance / the moon and the stars / give a little light.” This suggests that the process of change does not involve only suffering, but that there is always a shift between darkness and light, however short it may be.

The process of sloughing its skin does not involve the “tenderness” of “ferns and flowers” (as seen in “Skunk Cabbage”) but the roughness of the lurid skunk cabbage: the snake has to rub itself “roughly” against the “stems of bloodroot” (line 7), the “yellow leaves” (line 8), and “boulders of bark” (line 9) in “order to take off / the old life” (lines 10-11). The full-stop after “old life” is essential to accentuate the fact that the transformation process of the snake has been set in motion; at the same time, it also signifies a kind of death. Significant is the fact that the snake “jellies forward” in sloughing off its skin; it does not resist the transformation; it physically disentangles itself from its skin, showing that it is not attached to it in any way.

The physical process of sloughing off the skin and the transient quality of its “old life” mirrors the Buddhist notion of the *skandhas*: “To underscore life’s fleetingness the Buddha called the components of the human self skandhas – skeins that hang together as loosely as yarn – and the body a ‘heap’, its elements no more solidly assembled than grains in a sandpile” (Smith and Novak 2003:57).

Then the speaker makes a confession (lines 12-17):

I don’t know

if he knows  
 what is happening.  
 I don't know  
 if he knows  
 it will work.

The essence of these questions makes readers ponder their own response to life's tough changes, uncertainties, and death. In addition, Oliver addresses another focal issue: why humans struggle to accept *anicca*, unlike the natural world which never resists it. Loy (quoting Brown) elucidates the inherent difference between humans and animals when it comes to dealing with Impermanence:

If death gives life individuality and if man is the organism which represses death, then man is the organism which represses his own individuality. Then our proud views of humanity as a species endowed with individuality denied to lower animals turns out to be wrong. The lilies of the field have it because they take no thought of the morrow, and we do not. Lower organisms live the life proper to their species; their individuality consists in their being concrete embodiments of the essence of their species in a particular life which ends in death (1996:35).

Loy's assertion – “their individuality consists in their being concrete embodiments of the essence of their species in a particular life which ends in death” – is evident in Oliver's employment of *adéquation* throughout the poem: “*Adequation*, for Oliver, means refraining from idealizing or symbolizing the natural world, letting it stand forth in all its other starkness. It means recognizing there may be no meaning there at all, or at least no symbolic meaning suggestive of transcendence” (Burton-Christie 1996:79). This non-transcendence is especially palpable in lines 33 to 34: “where life has no purpose / and is neither civil nor intelligent”, and its repetition in lines 35 to 36.

In addition to *adéquation*, Oliver employs anaphoric repetition, starting with lines 21 to 22 which repeat lines 23 to 24:

In the distance  
 the owl cries out.

In the distance  
 the owl cries out.

The repetition of these lines is significant because they are separated by the white space of the page. The first, "In the distance / the owl cries out", includes the last two lines of the first stanza. Its mirror-image is repeated in the first two lines of the new stanza. The two stanzas are separated by a full-stop which emphasises the specific periphery or liminal quality that is in place. Both the full-stop and white space serve as a pause to the reader which is a temporary suspension of movement across the white space. However, the repetition of the same two lines in the next stanza functions as a reminder that the snake has entered another neck of the woods: that of the owl which is death and hardship. In addition, the snake has crossed this boundary from his old "safe" life; he is jelling forward from under the trees into "the owl's woods" which has a more ominous quality:

By the time we meet the owl, however, this slow building rhythm begins to take on another, more ominous connotation: these are 'the woods of death / the woods of hardship ... where life has no purpose / and is neither civil nor intelligent'. The simple self-evident clarity of these lines does little to mask the horror that lurks beneath them: this is the way life really is, the poem suggests, and neither you nor I nor the snake nor owl can do anything about it (Burton-Christie 1996:79).

More anaphoric repetition follows in the second stanza: "woods" (lines 26 to 28); "these are the" in lines 26 to 28; "crawl and crawl" (line 29), and "where you" (lines 29-31):

The snake knows  
 these are the owl's woods,  
 these are the woods of death,  
 these are the woods of hardship  
 where you crawl and crawl,  
 where you live in the husks of trees,  
 where you lie on the wild twigs  
 and they cannot bear your weight,  
 where life has no purpose  
 and is neither civil nor intelligent.

On occasion, anaphora is referred to as catalogue verse or the catalogue technique. In the context of this particular poem, its purpose is to list qualities or features of a particular place in which a diversity of things are happening. This diversity is palpable in the repetition of "these are the woods" because different images and motifs are brought to the reader's attention. The same is true of the "where you" repetition. In addition, the anaphoric repetition introduces a tone of conversational urgency to Oliver's message; it is almost as if she is conversing directly with readers, eager to ensure they observe everything. This becomes even more apparent when she

employs the second person from lines 30 to 33. This technique of address indicates that Oliver is transferring the microcosm of the woods to the macrocosm of life. The “death” and “hardship” of the woods become parallel motifs for *anicca* and *dukkha*. The way Oliver constructs the notion of transience is by repeating the idea throughout; this becomes the universal truth in “Rain”, especially through its addressing the “you” or the reader: “The basic teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of transiency, or change. That everything changes is the basic truth for each existence. No one can deny this truth, and all the teaching of Buddhism is condensed within it” (Suzuki 1970:102).

Although an array of things are described in the woods, Oliver also employs a structure of linking thematic material: the last two lines of each stanza are repeated in the first two lines of the following stanza. The purpose of this repetition constitutes the conclusion of each stanza which then becomes an opening theme of the next: the conclusion of the first stanza is to introduce the owl that is the metaphor for death and hardship because of its associated predatory instincts. Stanza 2 ends in the assertion that life is basically indifferent or empty and cannot be divided into binary oppositions. Stanza 3 ends with the snake finally sloughing off its old skin which links back to the beginning of stanza 1 in which the initiation of the whole process is described. This technique is essentially part of free or organic verse, as Oliver explains: “The free-verse poem sets up, in terms of sound and line, a premise or an extension, and then, before the poem finishes, it makes a good response to this premise” (*A Poetry Handbook*:68).

A similar technique Oliver employs is the repetition of certain key motifs within the thematic material; these also serve as binding devices. Some of the motifs are explicit repetitions such as “life” (lines 11, 33, 36), and “woods” (lines 26-28). However, some motifs are more implicit and associative: the word “death” (Impermanence) is repeated in taking off “the old life” (line 11); smelling “like the bodies / of flowers” (lines 40-41), and “the old skin splits” (line 43). “Hardship” (*dukkha*) is described through certain processes the “you” must undergo in the woods: “where you crawl and crawl” (line 29); “where you live in the husks of trees” (line 30); “where you lie in the wild twigs / and they cannot bear your weight”, and “where life has no purpose / and is neither civil nor intelligent” (lines 33-34).

The repetition of these motifs serves as a reminder to what Oliver is highlighting in “Rain”: the motifs of life, hardship, death, and regeneration. Implicit in these motifs is the idea of non-attachment; the snake simply sloughs off its skin (lines 42-48):

At the back of the neck  
the old skin splits.  
The snake shivers

but does not hesitate.  
 He inches forward.  
 He begins to bleed through  
 like satin.

Watts (1962:142-143) explains that the essence of Non-attachment is that one does not resist the transient nature of life but that, if one flows with it, *dukkha* can be overcome:

[...] the strange sense of timeless moments which arises when one is no longer trying to resist the flow of events, the peculiar stillness and self-sufficiency of succeeding instants when the mind is, as it were, going along with them and not trying to arrest them.

Watts (1962:62) goes on to assert that Emptiness is intrinsic to the mind which does not cling, just as “life has no purpose / and is neither civil nor intelligent”:

Transitoriness is depressing only to the mind which insists upon trying to grasp. But to the mind which lets go and moves with the flow of change, which becomes, in Zen Buddhist imagery, like a ball in a mountain stream, the sense of transience or emptiness becomes a kind of ecstasy.

This “kind of ecstasy”, that is found in bridging the divide between dualistic concepts through Non-attachment and acceptance of *anicca*, is manifest throughout Oliver’s poetry:

Oliver lies closer to the founder of Buddhism here [in her attitude about death] than to the founder of Christianity, but more than simply accepting death she seems to embrace it – as the secret ingredient in the recipe of nature and culture alike, the umami that somehow makes this life of suffering sweet with purpose and meaning (Prothero 2008:46).

The concluding lines of “Rain” illustrate nature’s willingness and ability to flow with the “great wheel of growth, / and decay, and rebirth” Oliver sketched in “Stanley Kunitz”. This is the bedrock of the Buddhist philosophy – to accept Impermanence through Non-attachment (Smith and Novak 2003:57):

he [Buddha] believed, we are freed from the pain of clutching for permanence only if the acceptance of continual change is driven into our very marrow (*Vajracchedika* or *Diamond Sutra*):

*Regard this phantom world*

*As a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,  
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
A flickering lamp – a phantom and a dream.*

This excerpt from the *Diamond Sutra* pertains to “We Should Be Well Prepared” (*Red Bird*:53, lines 1-10) in which Oliver employs anaphoric repetition throughout to evoke Impermanence. In addition, she alternates examples of transience from nature – “plovers”, “dead fox”, “leaves”, and “river” – with those from the everyday domestic: “mold”, “cake”; “sourness”, and “cream”. She also utilises human encounters: “The way someone says: we must never meet again”, and “The way somebody comes back, but only in a dream”:

The way the plovers cry goodbye,  
The way the dead fox keeps on looking down the hill  
with open eye.  
The way the leaves fall, and then there’s the long wait.  
The way someone says: we must never meet again.  
The way mold spots the cake,  
the way sourness overtakes the cream.  
The way the river water rushes by, never to return.  
The way the days go by, never to return.  
The way somebody comes back, but only in a dream.

Alternating examples from the natural, domestic, and personal worlds stresses the fact that there is not an aspect to life which does not entail Impermanence. Furthermore, the end-stops emphasise the finality each example articulates. This is a type of “shock” tactic Oliver confronts her readers with, because the ultimate question she wants them to think about is: if all phenomena are underscored by loss, how will you live your life to the fullest each day? Burton-Christie (1996:85) ponders this:

What is at issue here is something as personal and particular and ultimate as whether we are prepared to risk loving this world, knowing we cannot hold onto it – perhaps *because* we cannot hold onto it. The sense of ultimate loss again serves to sharpen our sense of the natural world’s haunting, alluring texture; it poses for us a stark choice about what we will do, how we will live *now*.

**NON-ATTACHMENT AND *DUKKHA***

*What we love, shapely and pure,  
is not to be held,  
but to be believed in.*

Oliver (*Evidence*:3)

Like Oliver, Chödrön (2003:20) draws attention to the passing away of everything in life; its brevity and uncertainty: “How are we going to spend this brief lifetime? Are we going to strengthen our well-perfected ability to struggle against uncertainty, or are we going to train in letting go?”

This need for “letting go” – Non-attachment – constitutes the central idea behind “On Losing a House” which deals principally with our need to hoard material possessions (*What Do We Know*:30, Part 2, lines 1-13):

Where will we go  
with our table and chairs,  
our bed,  
our nine thousand books,  
our TV, PC, VCR,  
our cat  
who is sixteen years old?  
Where will we put down  
our dishes and our blue carpets,  
where will we put up  
our rose-colored,  
rice-paper  
shades?

Oliver reiterates the idea that clinging or attaching oneself to anything only brings suffering, as evidenced in these lines from “In Blackwater Woods” (*White Pine*:30, Part 1, lines 29-32): “how it all / gathers and vanishes, / how it all / goes up in smoke”. Another poem in which Oliver stresses the futility of merely hoarding material possessions is “Lilies” (*House of Light*:12, lines 1-10):

I have been thinking  
about living  
like the lilies

that blow in the fields.

They rise and fall  
in the wedge of the wind,  
and have no shelter  
from the tongues of the cattle,  
and have no closets or cupboards,  
and have no legs.

The theme of Non-attachment is also prevalent in “I Own a House” (*Swan*:38, lines 9-10): “And there are days I wish I / owned nothing, like the grass”.

Abe (1985:206) summarises this deep attachment as the delusion of the ego which ultimately causes *dukkha*. This craving is equal to fundamental ignorance of the ego-mind steeped in duality:

When Gautama the Buddha says ‘the cause of suffering is craving’, he means by craving not simply the attachment to pleasure but a deeper and more fundamental attachment that is rooted in human existence [...] this fundamental attachment originates in an illusory view of life in the world which is the result of the basic ignorance innate in human nature. Craving is a human passion linked to man’s deep entanglement in the duality of pleasure and suffering, and deeply rooted in ego.

Milstead (1998:16) reiterates the root cause of *dukkha*:

According to Buddhists, suffering can be eliminated only by eradicating its cause, which is ignorance of the true nature of the world. Buddhists say that when human beings accept the true nature of the world, that it is impermanent, they are no longer ignorant and they no longer suffer.

“The Buddha’s Last Instruction” (*House of Light*:4, lines 1-24) deals in part with this suffering by centralising the last sermon of the Buddha in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*:

Therefore, Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves, be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp; hold fast to the Truth as a refuge. Look not for a refuge in anyone beside yourselves. And those, Ananda, who either now or after I am dead shall be a lamp unto themselves, shall betake themselves to no external refuge, but holding fast to the Truth as their refuge, shall not look for

refuge to anyone beside themselves – it is they who shall reach the very top-most Height. But they must be anxious to learn. (Kornfield and Fronsedale 1996:124).

The lamp metaphor was later rendered as “Be an island unto yourselves”, but the older text-layer (“lamp”, translated by T.W. Rhys-Davids, the founder of the Pāli Text Society) is used here because it coincides with “The Buddha’s Last Instruction”.

In “The Buddha’s Last Instruction”, Oliver uses the light metaphor which is the lamp’s equivalent, contrasting it with “died” in line 3:

‘Make of yourself a light,’  
said the Buddha,  
before he died.

Significant too is the fact that “The Buddha’s Last Instruction”, which centralises the light motif, was first published in the volume, *House of Light*. This light motif is also found in “At the Lake” (*White Pine*:18, lines 18-20):

Inside every mind  
there’s a hermit’s cave  
full of light

What the Buddha was conveying to his followers through the light / lamp metaphor is a pivotal Buddhist axiom: Do not take any doctrine or saying for granted as being the absolute truth and don’t follow any guru blindly. Test any ‘wisdom’ for yourself and let your inner voice be the only voice of reason; don’t rely on anyone else to tell you what to believe. Throughout his years of teaching, the Buddha always likened his own teachings (*dharma*) to a raft: you use it to cross the river and then it should not be carried further but be discarded; it is only a means of transformation but should still be pondered and examined. Trungpa’s (the founder of the Shambhala teachings, based on Buddhism) assertion about working with one’s inner resources rather than trusting those of others links with the idea of finding your own truth:

The basic point of the Shambhala teachings is to realize that there is no outside help to save you from the terror and the horror of life [...] Eventually, you must realize that *you* have to do something rather than depending on technology, financial help, your smartness, or good thinking of any kind – none of which will save you. Often, in the Buddhist tradition, it is called the *vajra* truth, the diamond truth, the truth you cannot avoid or destroy. We cannot avoid our lives at all (1999:18).

In line 4 of the poem Oliver reiterates the idea that the speaker is reminded of the Buddha's key message – finding your own truth – because she “think[s] of this every morning” when she watches the sun rising (lines 4-10):

I think of this every morning  
as the east begins  
to tear off its many clouds  
of darkness, to send up the first  
signal – a white fan  
streaked with pink and violet,  
even green.

The light metaphor is expanded in Oliver's description of sunrise: it is the light tearing “off its many clouds / of darkness” (lines 6-7). This is significant because light triumphing over darkness each morning can be likened to the human mind that has overcome the darkness of ignorance about the Ultimate Reality of life which is that everything is subject to Impermanence (signified by the implied sunset in the poem) but, that, at the same time, there is always new life (sunrise). The Shambhala tradition underscores this: “The Shambhala training is also a response to suffering and pain, the misery, terror, and horror that have developed throughout what is known as the setting-sun world: a world based on the fear of death, fear of oneself, and fear of others” (Trungpa 1999:17-18). Tearing off the many “clouds” also points to the Wisdom Mind or No Mind as it penetrates the cloudy or unclear thinking of the ego-mind which thrives on fear.

Trungpa calls this penetrating light of the sun “a dot in space” or “a dot in the open sky”, which is Shambhala's emblem, The Great Eastern Sun:

The dot is always there; it's primordial. We didn't even inherit it. *Inherited* means that something is handed down by generations. But in this case, we simply *have* it. Therefore, it is called the primordial, unconditional dot. That dot exists in a *big* sky [...] The dot is also the *source* of basic goodness, its fuse or starting point. Out of that primordial experience, we begin to realize basic goodness (Trungpa 1999:21).

The fact that the sun is rising in the east (line 5 of the poem) links to the idea that Buddhism has germinated in the East (India, south-east Asia, China, Japan, Tibet). This, in turn, echoes the Great Eastern Sun: “The sun is always rising, which means that there is always the potential for human beings to discover their own goodness and the sacredness of the world” (Mukpo, quoted in Trungpa 1999: *xvi*).

Finding your inner truth – your own ‘light’ – contains an essential element of Buddhist thought: The Four Noble Truths which are linked to Impermanence (the birth-sickness-old age-death cycle). Moreover, “light” is inherent in the word “enlightenment” (nirvāṇa). The light motif is also present in “When I Am Among the Trees” (*Thirst*.4, lines 12-16):

The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, ‘It’s simple,’ they say,  
 ‘and you too have come  
 into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
 with light, and to shine.’

Oliver emphasises the centrality of this teaching (11-14):

An old man, he lay down  
 between two sala trees,  
 and he might have said anything,  
 knowing it was his final hour.

Apart from synthesising the Buddhist teachings, the Buddha had another reason to transmit this specific teaching: knowing that he was dying, he had to convey to his followers that it was the *dharma* or the teachings – not him – that was important. This is one of the main reasons he did not appoint a new leader or dharma heir before he died:

What the Buddha wanted to convey to Ānanda is quite clear. The latter was sad and depressed. He thought that they would all be lonely, helpless, without a refuge, without a leader [...] so the Buddha gave him consolation, courage and confidence, saying they should depend on themselves, and on the *Dhamma* he taught, and not on anyone else, or anything else (Rahula 1978:61).

The fact that “they would all be lonely, helpless, without a refuge, without a leader” is apparent in the last line of the poem: “He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd”.

In lines 15 to 16, Oliver continues the light motif:

The light burns upward,  
 it thickens and settles over the fields.

In lines 7 to 8, the light sends “up the first / signal” which is reminiscent of a smoke signal which is continued here: it “burns upward” and it “thickens and settles over the fields” just like smoke, giving it almost an ethereal quality. Smoke hanging over fields also sketches a rural atmosphere, which links with where the Buddha died: Kushinara, a tiny village at the time. Oliver further extends the rural image through the villagers (lines 17-18):

Around him, the villagers gathered  
and stretched forward to listen.

Important here is the reference to “villagers”, and not the Buddha’s disciples, who are mentioned in the “Be a lamp onto yourselves” excerpt. This makes it easier for the reader to identify with the role of “listener” to the poem’s message. In addition, the fact that the villagers “stretched forward to listen” stresses the idea that there were many people who were eager to listen to the Buddha’s last words.

The upcoming radiance of the sun is commensurable with the Buddha’s imminent death and parinirvāṇa and, in turn, the *kenshō* the speaker experiences (lines 19-30):

Even before the sun itself  
hangs, disattached, in the blue air,  
I am touched everywhere  
by its ocean of yellow waves.  
No doubt he thought of everything  
that had happened in his difficult life.  
And then I feel the sun itself  
as it blazes over the hills,  
like a million flowers on fire –  
clearly I’m not needed,  
yet I feel myself turning  
into something of inexplicable value.

The idea of the sun “hanging” in the blue air links with Trungpa’s idea of the “dot in the open sky” which is our fundamental good nature or Original Mind, unfettered from habitual tendencies. Moreover, the fact that it is “disattached”, emphasises the unattached nature of this “primordial dot”, something which has to be uncovered in order to understand the nature of Impermanence. The “ocean” of yellow waves links with Tibetan Buddhism’s Dalai Lama, whose title means “ocean of wisdom”. Oliver inverts the conventional idea of an ocean by placing it in the air; the sun becomes this ocean with its radiant waves: “its ocean of yellow waves”. The fact that the speaker is “touched everywhere” implies that this is not only happening on a physical

level; she is touched in a manner which is changing all preconceived ideas of the self and the world: change is inevitable.

Throughout the poem, Oliver employs the technique of alternating three seemingly disparate narrations: the Buddha's last sermon and death, the unfolding sunrise, and the speaker's own enlightenment. However, as the poem progresses, these three become steadily unified: the sun finally rises, which corresponds with the Buddha's death and the speaker's epiphany. "No doubt he thought of everything / that had happened in his difficult life" (lines 23-24), not only highlights the Buddha's ascetic and monastic path after he had left his royal surroundings, but invariably levels out to the speaker thinking about her own troubled life as well. This, in turn, radiates to readers who might also consider the difficulties of their own lives. In "Spring" (*West Wind*:12), Oliver employs the image of a road to mark the Buddha's difficult life, marked by transience and *dukkha*: "when he turned to the long dusty road without end" (line 19).

In "The Buddha's Last Instruction", the risen sun is a catalyst of complete change for the speaker: "And then I feel the sun itself" (line 25). Here, the "I" comes in direct contact with the sun; it is not only thickening and settling over the landscape, but "blazes", becoming even more powerful in its force because it can be likened to "a million flowers on fire". In addition, "blaze" is a powerful verb which can be linked back to the skunk cabbage's ability to "blaze the trail". "Fire" is also an apposite image because, as an element, it has deep significance to the Indian psyche; one of the Buddha's sermons is called "the Fire Sermon", and is employed by Eliot in *The Waste Land*.

In line 28, the speaker says "clearly I'm not needed" which links with Chödrön's notion of egolessness as discussed in "One or Two Things", "October", and "To Begin with, the Sweet Grass". Subject-object duality has disappeared; the speaker and "The Great Eastern Sun" have merged. Implicitly, the ego-self has fallen away and merged with the primordial No-self:

Humphreys (1962:126) quotes Huang Po to the effect that Mind is the Buddha and goes on to affirm that 'there is only mind, and this Mind, which is No-Mind, cannot be caged in any idea or limited at all. The appearance of two-ness is an illusion which we shall learn to overcome' (McLeod 1990:67).

By overcoming the ego-self, the "I" is now free to experience life, and, more especially, the moment, fully: "yet I feel myself turning / into something of inexplicable value" (lines 29-30). Then Oliver switches to the Buddha for the last time in the poem: "slowly", he raises "his head" which on one level confirms his weak physical state. On the other hand, "slowly" emphasises the mindful manner with which he is experiencing the last moments of his life. "Slowly" also

reiterates the slow and methodical sunrise described in the poem. Lastly, looking the “frightened crowd” in the eye, also suggests the Buddha’s spiritual warriorship: with that look, he encourages the crowd not to be attached to him anymore but to live their lives fearlessly: “Anything you are attached to, let it go. / Go to the places that scare you” Chödrön (2003: Epigraph).

“The Buddha’s Last Instruction” synthesises aspects related to Impermanence: letting go of the ego-self in order to experience the “primordial dot”; conquering dualistic thinking, Non-attachment which all lead to freedom from *dukkha*.

In the same way, Oliver’s oeuvre espouses *anicca*; Prothero (2008:44) explains that Oliver’s poems “are animated by death, and they work on me because they speak about the mysteries of mortality in a language that feels like home”. Impermanence is a fundamental Buddhist tenet that is directly linked to the Four Noble Truths which principally deal with *dukkha* and how to gain freedom from it. In the same way, Oliver instructs and helps readers to gain insight into their own lives and to accept transience and loss. Moreover, her poems are maxims of how to transform the ego’s fearful existence into a life, marked by amazement and joy. This is precisely what Prothero asserts as a reader of her poetry:

I decided as well to try to be in the world for a while after the manner of a Mary Oliver poem – [...] to sit with my losses, to take what is given rather than what is desired, to attend to the presence of death in the midst of life, to venture out into the storms rather than taking refuge from them (2008:45).

## CONCLUSION

My impetus for this research was to examine the interface between Mary Oliver's oeuvre and Buddhism. I assumed the role of the Buddhist reader, exploring how a main Buddhist theme, together with its linking sub-themes or corollaries, relates to Oliver poetry. Thus, every broad theme – such as Mindfulness, Interconnection, and Impermanence – was explored in terms of an 'aerial view' of Buddhism. The associative sub-themes – such as *Nowness*, Emptiness, or Non-attachment – constituted the 'zooming in' to facilitate a more intense discussion of Oliver's poems.

The reason for employing a Buddhist reading of Oliver's work is that it constitutes a palpable lacuna in extant criticism of her poetry as a whole. This is particularly anomalous since Oliver herself has indicated an interest in the meditative way of Eastern religions such as Buddhism (Ratiner 2002:55). In the same excerpt, Oliver has also been taken by the lack of social involvement of Eastern religions, because of their primary focus on examining and transforming the mind. This is important because Oliver's poetry and prose writings exhibit a lack of social involvement, socio-political as well as Feminist. Although her poetry's main subject is the natural world, she does not write about it simply as an end in itself. Leading readers into the world of owls, trees, snakes, and other natural phenomena, Oliver extrapolates these, often unflinchingly, to vagaries of the human experience. It is at this point where the Buddhist themes are vital because they underscore her amazement at the world, an amazement that is the main topos of her poetry.

Another indication that Oliver's work should be read from an Eastern / Buddhist stance is rooted in Elder's observation: "The 1990 publication of Mary Oliver's *House of Light* was an exciting new flinging-open of doors; it helped me both to understand the relationship between American and Japanese poetry more fully and to reground my reading in New England" (x). In addition, Elder links Oliver's poetry with the haiku tradition, arguing that she "pursues the deepest significance of the seasons" like the haiku poet, Bashō, while adding to "the broad contours of nature" through "pointed particulars" (219). Furthermore, it was through Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* (1994) that Elder was first introduced to Bashō. Elder's American / Japanese link in poetry is significant because in Chapter 2, I review the Japanese influence on American poetry, especially through Ezra Pound's influence.

Imagism was a movement that valued Japanese (and Chinese) influences to the extent that poets such as Pound experimented with the haiku, albeit in an evolved form. As the name "Imagism" suggests, there is an inherent "image" that the movement wanted to distil into the written word, something similar to Emerson's notion of the image which is inextricably linked

with nature: “Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language”, and, “‘Things more excellent than every image’, says Jamblichus, ‘are expressed through images’” (Emerson in Atkinson:292). Oliver’s notion of images dovetails with that of Imagism and Emerson: “I want it [the poem] to be rich with pictures of the world” (*Wild Geese*:63).

I have also traced a link between Imagism, the Japanese haiku, and Zen Buddhism in American poetry. Although Oliver’s poetry does not take the haiku form, the *essence* of Oliver’s poetry can be likened to that of the haiku, as I have explained in some detail in Chapter 2. One of the reasons is that the haiku’s subject matter is rarely human because it avoids articulating directly “human thought or feeling” (Record 1981:9). However, Record goes on to explain that the haiku has survived for more than three centuries because objects or natural phenomena, like the seasons, are expressed as having “intrinsic interest and value” because of their human link. This link resides in the human ability to articulate thoughts and feelings through poetry.

Furthermore, the haiku “expresses the poet’s heightened awareness of the moment through the use of ‘natural,’ sensory images” (Record 1981:11). The haiku thus involves the “direct, ‘objective,’ presentation of images and the avoidance of intellectual, subjective commentary” (11), criteria that link it with Zen’s anti-intellectualising properties. Another association with Zen is the haiku’s sense of immediacy and *Nowness*, which, according to Record (11), creates “an atmosphere of timelessness, inherent in the moment of the poet’s perception and transmitted to the reader”. In considering these observations, I found that Oliver’s poetry resonates with all of them: her principal subject matter is nature; she often writes about epiphanous experiences (*kenshō*) to convey her amazement to readers; and through *adéquation*, she creates poetry that is devoid of intellectualisation, which links her with both Imagism and Zen. However, some critics such as Robert H. Sharf (1995:107) will object strongly to such a claim.

As amplified in Chapter 3 especially, Oliver’s poetry speaks of *Nowness*, helping readers to remain present, in the here-and-now. This ability to stay present is one of the reasons I argue for a Buddhist presence in her work rather than a Romantic reading. Romanticism has a strong link to the past and future: “It places a high premium upon the creative function of imagination, seeing art as a formulation of intuitive imaginative perceptions that tend to speak a nobler truth than that of fact, logic, or the here and now” (Holman 1972:468). In contrast, Buddhism’s bedrock relies on being mindful of the present.

However, having said this, Oliver is not an Imagist poet, because Imagism was a brief movement whose progress was halted by the First World War, although, by that time, Pound was also beginning to move in other directions with his ideas. Imagism constitutes the context of Oliver’s literary tradition; she shares much with *vers libre* and with the definitions of Imagism,

explored in Chapter 1. As shown in Chapter 2, Imagism still exerts some influence in contemporary poetry, especially American. However, the aim of this research is not to prove or suggest that Oliver's poetry is Imagist, only that it has its roots in that part of the American poetic tradition which was, in turn, heavily influenced by Zen.

Similarly, although Oliver has Buddhist themes inherent in her work, I am not employing the argument that she is a Buddhist poet. Having said that, Oliver's poetry does express both implicit and explicit Buddhist themes. Explicit themes were found in poems such as "The Buddha's Last Instruction", and the overt mention of the word "impermanence" as opposed to "permanence", a term which is loaded with Buddhist implications: "And / therefore why pray to impermanence, why not pray to / impermanence, to change" (*What Do We Know*:44). Her knowledge about the "mortal wheel" and the "great wheel of growth, / and decay, and rebirth" (*Dream Work*:44) speaks of acquainting herself with at least some Buddhist notions, such as The Wheel of Existence (*Bhavachara*), found especially in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Other examples can be found throughout the thesis.

However, for the Buddhist reader, implicit Buddhist themes are rendered explicit mostly through the analysis and amplification of individual poems.

The title of this thesis is "Bride of Amazement", a phrase taken from Oliver's poem, "When Death Comes" (*Wild Geese*:73). There, she asserts

When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.

At its core, Buddhism is experiential: "The point is that Buddhism is not a teaching. Its essence consists in a certain kind of experience, a transformation of consciousness" (Watts 1995:10). Buddhism is thus a spiritual tradition which relies on the practitioner to experience his or her own awakening through the practice of Mindfulness and meditation. Of course, this does not mean that Buddhism does not have a rich scriptural tradition which should be ignored. But, in the same way that Buddhism is a "culture of awakening" (Batchelor 1997:20), Mary Oliver's main topos, amazement, relies principally on readers becoming brides of amazement themselves by *experiencing* life. This encompasses questioning it, by listening, looking, smelling; by paying close attention through Mindful Awareness to the world around you. It means being in the here-and-now, and not dwelling in the past. Buddhism is an experience and practice which truly connects with the everyday and the mundane by viewing them as something that may transform one's life. In the same way, Oliver's poetry reveals a sense of

wonderment which remains beyond the bounds of the logical, the scientific, the dualistic, and entirely in the realm of amazement. As she herself writes (Oliver, *Swan*: 32):

Was I lost? No question.

Did I know where I was? Not at all.

Had I ever been happier? Never.

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## A GLOSSARY OF BUDDHIST TERMS

The definitions of these terms were gleaned from the following sources: Keown (2003); Krüger (1991), and Nairn (1999).

***anātman* (Skt); *anattā* (Pāli):** Non-self or the absence of self (*ātman*). The key Buddhist notion that both the individual and objects are devoid of any unchanging, eternal, or autonomous substratum.

***annica* (Pāli); *anityā* (Skt):** Impermanence, transience

***ātman*:** the concept of an independent, unchanging, and eternal identity at the core of individuals and entities.

***dharma*:** The totality of the Buddhist teachings.

***dharma*s:** individual elements that collectively constitute the empirical world. Some of these elements are external to the perceiver while others are internal psychological processes and character traits.

***dharma-dhātu*:** cosmos, universe as understood in a nonteleological manner.

**Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*, Pāli):** The First Noble Truth (Skt. *ārya-satya*; Pāli, *ariya-sacca*) states that there is *dukkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness). Therefore, all of existence is painful. The Second Noble Truth (*samudāya*) is 'arising', and explains that *dukkha* arises because of craving for pleasurable experiences. The Third Noble Truth is 'cessation' (*nirodha*) which incurs that there is an end to *dukkha*. The Fourth Noble Truth contains the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of eight factors leading to *nirvāṇa*.

***gasshō*:** A Japanese term that means 'to bring the palms together' which is a gesture of respect between monastics.

***ji ji muge*:** a Zen term which means Mutual Interpenetration or Mutual Interdependence.

***kenshō*** (Japanese), *ji-en-hsing* (Chinese). Term used in the Ch'an (Chinese Buddhist tradition from which Zen was derived) and Zen tradition that literally carries the meaning 'to see one's

true nature'. This is another notion used for awakening, defined as seeing oneself for what one really is: impermanent, ever-changing, and one with the truth that underlies all of reality.

**Mādhyamaka:** An early Buddhist school established by Nāgārjuna, in the second century CE. This sect had an enormous influence upon the “new wave” of Buddhist thinking that broke away from the more conservative Hinayāna.

**Mahāyāna:** (The Greater Vehicle). This is a separate tradition that developed in the first century CE. It adopted the term *Greater Vehicle* to distinguish itself from the monastic Theravāda (which believed that only Buddhist monks could attain *nirvāṇa*). What distinguishes the Mahāyāna from the Theravāda, is that the former includes the bodhisattva ideal, which is of primary importance. A bodhisattva is one who does all to benefit others, vowing never to enter the final state of *nirvāṇa*, but to instead return to the world to help others. The Mahāyāna also gives importance to the place of lay practitioners. Emptiness plays an important role in the Mahāyāna teachings.

**mu:** Japanese term for Emptiness, *no-thing-ness*, or Non-being

**mujō:** Japanese term for Impermanence, transience.

**Noble Eightfold Path** consists of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Meditation.

**Original Mind or Universal Mind:** A Zen term similar to Emptiness, No-Mind, and *no-thing-ness*, especially emphasising the interdependence and merging with the universe.

**parinirvāṇa:** the ‘final’ or ‘highest’ *nirvāṇa*, usually denoting the state of *nirvāṇa* that is entered at death, in contrast to that attained during life.

**pratītya-samutpāda:** The teaching of Dependent Origination which includes causation and the ontological status of phenomena. It teaches that all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions, lacking intrinsic being.

**samsāra:** A term meaning ‘flowing on’. The cycle of repeated birth and death that individuals undergo until they attain *nirvāṇa*.

**saṃskāra:** The constructing activities that form, shape or condition individual moral and spiritual development.

**shoshin:** Beginner's Mind, especially found in Zen.

**skandha:** One of the five 'aggregates' or components which collectively constitute the human individual.

**smṛti (Skt), sati (Pāli):** Mindfulness, seen from a Buddhist context.

**sunyata (śūnyatā Skt), (suññattā Pāli):** Emptiness, *no-thingness*, or Non-being

**tathatā:** *suchness*; a term which denotes the way things are in truth or actual reality, employed especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism: the essential nature of reality which is beyond the range of conventional thought.

**tathāgatagarbha:** a real and eternally existing essence that is primordially replete with all the qualities of the Buddha. The term was interpreted differently in the Tibetan and Chinese traditions where it was translated as *tathāgata* embryo and *tathāgata* womb respectively. It was also mistranslated as Buddha nature from the Chinese.

**Theravāda:** (Hīnayāna or smaller vehicle; Way of the Elders). Theravādin schools constitute the "Southern Transmission", and are found in Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. These trace their origins to the period immediately following the Buddha's death when eighteen schools of early Buddhism developed. Theravāda is the only modern survivor.

**tilakkhaṇa:** The Three Characteristics of Existence which comprises Impermanence (*annica*), Suffering (*dukkha*), and Nonsubstance (*anattā*).

**wu-nien:** No-thought, thinking of nothing, which have similarities to Emptiness, *no-thing-ness*, and No-self.

**Yogācāra:** An older Buddhist school that emerged in the fourth century CE that precedes the Mahāyāna. Yogācāra means "practice of yoga".