

## Eternity in the Moment: William Blake and Mary Oliver

BY JENNIFER DAVIS MICHAEL

Seven white butterflies  
delicate in a hurry look  
how they bang the pages  
of their wings as they fly

to the fields of mustard yellow  
and orange and plain  
gold all eternity  
is in the moment this is what

Blake said Whitman said such  
wisdom in the agitated  
motions of the mind ...<sup>1</sup>

OF ALL the modern and contemporary poets who have been influenced by Blake, Mary Oliver might seem an unlikely heir. We think automatically of the visionary system of Yeats, the pugnacious lyricism of Roethke, the prophetic excess of Ginsberg, or the erudite obscurity of Geoffrey Hill. We certainly don't expect to find Blake's challenging and transcendent poetics echoed in simple verses that celebrate the "god of dirt,"<sup>2</sup> the messy world of vultures, skunks, and pond scum. On the other hand, Oliver's deliberate invocations of Blake prod us to look again at his attitude toward nature and the physical body. Even her most "naturalistic" poems, like the one above, are steeped in the language of art: the butterflies' wings are "pages" like those of Blake's illuminated books, their energy the "agitated / motions of the mind." For both poets, the human mind marks the border between the material and spiritual worlds, and the poet's task is to awaken the reader's imagination toward some purpose. That purpose generally is not made explicit but rather grows organically out of the visionary experience: an experience in which "ordinary" perception is suspended.

Unlike the notoriously difficult Blake, Oliver's poetry seems accessible to the point of simplicity. Winner of both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, she consistently ranks among America's best-selling poets.<sup>3</sup> Not all critics share this

1. Mary Oliver, *West Wind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) [hereafter *WW*] 3.

2. Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) [hereafter *NS*] 120.

3. Dwight Garner, "Inside the List," *New York Times* 18 Feb. 2007: 26; see the list of contemporary best-selling books at the Poetry Foundation web site <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org>>.

popular enthusiasm: one has accused her of "a peculiar lack of genuine engagement with the natural world,"<sup>4</sup> and others find her poems formulaic and predictable.<sup>5</sup> Renée Loth cheerfully (if somewhat condescendingly) writes, "Her 'Wild Geese' has become so popular it now graces posters in dorm rooms across the land. But don't hold that against her."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the mixed response to Oliver turns upon a crux of romanticism, which often finds itself divided between the populism of Wordsworth's "man speaking to men" and the haughtiness of the misunderstood genius, which easily shades into contempt for poetry that succeeds in the marketplace.

Oliver has been characterized as a neo-romantic, but, her defenders hasten to add, her poetry is "not a flight into the transcendent."<sup>7</sup> This defensive notion of transcendence as flight indicates how far we have come in our material pragmatism, but it also reveals some confusion as to the meaning of the word. In theological terms, transcendence (existing apart from the world) is often contrasted with immanence (inhering and abiding in it). The word "transcend," however, literally means "to climb over or beyond," and we may ask what one is to climb upon in order to reach those supernatural heights. It is one thing to argue that God exists beyond the created universe, but if poetry is to transcend the earth, it must take off from solid ground. Blake represents the heavenly city, Jerusalem, as a city built "In Englands green & pleasant Land":<sup>8</sup> this material earth is where the prophet must start, no matter how lofty the goal.

Just as Blake warns against "Single vision & Newtons sleep" (E 722), Oliver presents a world that is more than matter. In "What Is It?" a white flower becomes a snowy egret, as the poet asks, "how could anyone believe / that anything in this world / is only what it appears to be[?]"<sup>9</sup> Oliver shares with Blake a commitment to seeing beyond the opaque surfaces of things to find "the white fire of a great mystery" (*HL* 59) even in a grain of sand, and eternity not in an hour (as in Blake's "Auguries of Innocence") but, more intensely, "in the moment." Through such Blakean images as sunflowers, moths, snakes, and roses, Oliver's adaptation and reinterpretation of Blake help us to reevaluate both his "mysticism" and his view of nature, two crucial subjects that are often misunderstood. By communing with nature in a way that neither idealizes it nor accepts its absolute otherness, Oliver joins Blake in challenging and

4. Gyorgyi Voros, "Exquisite Environments [review of Oliver, *White Pine* (with others)]," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 21.1-2 (1996): 231.

5. See, for instance, David Barber's review of *New and Selected Poems* (*Poetry* 162.4 [July 1993]: 233-37).

6. Renée Loth, "Our Own Seven Wonders," *Boston Globe* 2 Sept. 2007: E9.

7. Douglas Burton-Christie, "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," *Cross Currents* 46.1 (spring 1996): 84.

8. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1988) [hereafter *E*] 96.

9. Oliver, *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) [hereafter *HL*] 27.

dismantling many of the binaries that have come to define romanticism: mind and nature, self and other, soul and body.<sup>10</sup>

### Allusions and Appropriations

Before exploring Oliver's explicit allusions to Blake, it is worth noting that many more of her poems show a general affinity with him, especially the Blake of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for whom "every thing that lives is holy." Her "Sand Dabs"—a series of aphorisms named for "a small, bony, not very significant but well-put-together fish"<sup>11</sup>—recall the Proverbs of Hell both in their pithy insight and in their celebration of nature's variety and minutiae: "The fur behind the mouse's ear stuns the finger with its softness" (LL 85). "If you think daylight is just daylight / then it is just daylight" (WW 24).<sup>12</sup> Another warns the aspiring poet, "Don't close the poem as you opened it, unless your name is Blake and you have written a poem about a Tyger."<sup>13</sup>

While Oliver's recent poems, such as those in *Thirst* (2006), invoke a more explicitly Christian idiom, she joins Blake in rejecting a repressive moralism. One of her best-known poems, "Wild Geese," begins:

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.<sup>14</sup>

Blake repeatedly divorces the Gospel from morality, stating, for instance, "The Gospel is Forgiveness of Sins & has No Moral Precepts" (E 619). On the other hand, Oliver's celebration of the "soft animal of your body" might seem, at least to the later Blake, to be a denial of the spirit: a suggestion that we are *only* mammals. As her poem continues, however, it affirms a larger, more expansive incorporation: "the world offers itself to your imagination, / ... / ... announcing your place / in the family of things." It is through the body (as Blake would agree) that paradise is regained: "This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment" (E 39). Through the free play of energy, "the only life ... from the Body" (E 34), both Blake and Oliver conceive the reintegration of the universe, a "family of things" that is simultaneously material and spiritual.<sup>15</sup>

10. Janet McNew notes further that "all of these dichotomies have also been philosophically and mythically related to that most pervasive pair, masculine and feminine" ("Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* 30.1 [1989]: 60).

11. Oliver, *Long Life* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004) [hereafter LL] 81n.

12. Also reminiscent of the end of "Auguries of Innocence" (E 493).

13. Oliver, *Blue Pastures* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995) 89.

14. Oliver, *Dream Work* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986) 14.

15. Matthew J. A. Green refers to this aspect of Blake as "visionary materialism." See his book *Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Even the presentation of Oliver's books suggests Blake's tutelary spirit. An early chapbook, *The Night Traveler*, features one of Blake's woodcut illustrations to Virgil's *Pastorals* on its cover, suggesting a complicated relationship both to nature and to literary history.<sup>16</sup> Nature is first mediated through Virgil, then through Blake, and finally through Oliver, who calls attention to the bookish ways we apprehend the "book" of nature. In "Farm Country," she challenges the reader who may have derived sentimental notions of rural life from literature: "Maybe you think life is chicken soup, served / In blue willow-pattern bowls."<sup>17</sup> The rest of the poem describes the speaker sharpening knives, putting on apron and boots, and entering the henhouse. Other poems in this chapbook include "The Lamb," a first-person tale of lost innocence in a dangerous natural world, and "Winter in the Country," an Experienced account of "prey and hawk together, / Still flying, both exhausted, / In the blue sack of weather" (NT n. pag.). Her sympathy for the predator, both here and in subsequent work, recalls Blake's celebration of the lion and the tiger.

So far, Oliver would seem to be in tune with Blake's nuanced approach to the natural world, and even to echo his understanding of the human role in constructing nature. Other references, however, suggest a more limited and even sentimental impression of Blake. The poem entitled "'Just a minute,' Said a Voice ..."<sup>18</sup> alludes to Blake's tale of witnessing a fairy's funeral, reported in Allan Cunningham's early biography.<sup>19</sup> In another poem, "The Swan," Mrs. Blake misses her husband's company: "he is so often / in paradise" (HL 16-17). *West Wind*, the volume whose title alludes so strongly to Shelley,<sup>20</sup> nonetheless begins with an epigraph from Alexander Gilchrist's biography in which Blake claims to have touched the sky with his stick.<sup>21</sup> Each of these anecdotes seems to emphasize a Blake quite different from Oliver: a visionary (or simply airy) eccentric far more attuned to worlds beyond the world of dirt, blood, and bones that fills Oliver's poetry. The apparent incongruity demands closer scrutiny.

Several decades ago, Northrop Frye cautioned against referring to Blake as a "mystic," reserving the term "mysticism" for "a form of spiritual communion with God which is by its nature incommunicable to anyone else." For the artist this experience could only be "a means to another end," i.e., the poem. Frye suggests replacing "mystic" with "visionary": "A vision-

16. Lisa Steinman cites "Oliver's Virgil [coming] by way of Blake" as a marker of Oliver's disengagement from history, as though there could be an unmediated experience of the ancient past. See "Dialogues between History and Dream," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26.2 (1987): 436.

17. Oliver, *The Night Traveler* (N.p.: Bits Press, 1978) [hereafter NT] n. pag.

18. Oliver, *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) [hereafter WTWE] 45.

19. Reprinted in G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 640-41.

20. A poet Oliver clearly admires, to the point of naming a dog Percy.

21. Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus,"* vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1863) 328.

ary creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism.”<sup>22</sup> Where I quarrel with Frye is in his characterization of the visionary’s world as “higher” and “spiritual.” Surely what Blake and Oliver create is our own world, only transformed. The objects of perception have not disappeared, but rather have become translucent media for divine light.

Oliver’s adoption of Blake as mentor suggests a desire to look through, not merely at, the things of this world. Looking through, however, comes only after looking at them with reverence, and resisting what Douglas Burton-Christie calls “the impulse to domesticate.”<sup>23</sup> In “The Swan,” the allusion to Mrs. Blake leads directly to the speaker’s epiphany that “paradise” is not a distant place:

Of course! the path to heaven  
doesn’t lie down in flat miles.  
It’s in the imagination  
with which you perceive  
this world,  
and the gestures  
with which you honor it.  
Oh, what will I do, what will I say, when those  
white wings  
touch the shore? (HL 17)

Imagination, then, is not a means of transport to another world, but rather a way of opening the “doors” (as Blake would say) of the senses with which we perceive this world: “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (E 35). Eternity moves toward the speaker in the shape of a swan, and she has only to stand still to receive it. One has only to recall the myth of Leda to understand her panic at this approach and her urge to turn away from the divine.

“This Morning Again It Was in the Dusty Pines” (NS 23-24) describes another encounter with a bird, in the tradition of Keats’s “Nightingale,” Hopkins’s “Windhover,” and even Plath’s “Black Rook.” Unlike her predecessors, however, Oliver has no conversation with the owl and receives no epiphany from it. Instead, she emphasizes the impossibility of communication, her own “stony silence” and the owl’s turning away. Like “god’s bark-colored thumb” (NS 24) or Blake’s eagle, the owl is “a portion of Genius” (E 37) at once revealed and elusive. For all her effusions over flowers, hummingbirds, dogs, and cats, Oliver spends at least equal time on the wild, the ugly, the dangerous: bears, skunks, alligators. These, too, manifest aspects of the divine.

22. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947) 7-8.

23. Burton-Christie 80.

“Spring Azures” is, at least on the surface, Oliver’s most problematic appropriation of Blake, as it seems to reinforce a false split between spirit and matter to produce an airy-fairy Blake. First, the poem describes the butterflies “bow[ing] down / ... / to drink the black rain water” before rising to “float away into the fields.” The speaker then expresses weariness with the “great bones” of life and wishes for wings to “rise / from the black rain water.” “And then,” she says,

I think of Blake, in the dirt and sweat of London—a boy  
staring through the window, when God came  
fluttering up.

Of course, he screamed,  
seeing the bobbin of God’s blue body  
leaning on the sill,  
and the thousand-faceted eyes.

Well, who knows.  
Who knows what hung, fluttering, at the window  
between him and the darkness.

Anyway, Blake the hosier’s son stood up  
and turned away from the sooty sill and the dark city—  
turned away forever  
from the factories, the personal strivings,

to a life of the imagination. (NS 8-9)

My first response on reading this poem (like that, I imagine, of many Blakeans) was to say, “No, he didn’t turn away from the city ‘to’ imagination. The city *is*, and is made of, imagination, as we see in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.” A second reading, however, led me to a much more subtle analogy. “God’s blue body” is a hybrid of nature and art, the “fluttering” blue azures and the “bobbin” of the weaver’s craft. God was “leaning on the sill,” the same “sooty sill” from which Blake turns away. Eternity is manifest in this dirty world, “in love with the productions of time” (E 36). In other words, Blake’s imagination is fed by the city even if, and as, he turns from it. Imagination does not so much rise above the earth but from it, as the butterflies from the rainwater.

Oliver’s repetition of the phrase “turned away” also echoes the final stanza of Blake’s “Introduction” to *Songs of Experience*:

Turn away no more:  
Why wilt thou turn away  
The starry floor  
The watry shore  
Is giv’n thee till the break of day. (E 18)

These lines are addressed to the “lapsed Soul” of Earth, urging her to remain connected to eternity despite her temporarily bound condition. There is some irony in Oliver’s application of similar language to the young Blake, who (she claims) turns away from the earthly city to build his heavenly one. Perhaps her apparent misreading is deliberate. The turning away that

Oliver describes in Blake mirrors her own struggle in the poem “Singapore” (*HL* 8-9), where the speaker experiences “a darkness ... ripped from my eyes” as she watches a woman cleaning ashtrays in the airport toilet.

A poem should always have birds in it.  
 Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.  
 Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.  
 A waterfall, or if that’s not possible, a fountain  
 rising and falling.  
 A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

The poem moves back and forth between the speaker’s current surroundings (mundane, even disgusting) and her fantasy of the ideal poetic landscape, which she gently satirizes. The fulcrum on which her consciousness pivots is the wordless encounter with the cleaning woman, whose work Oliver compares to “a river,” her dark hair to “the wing of a bird.” Although she would like to transport the woman magically from the squalid restroom to the riverbank, she acknowledges that “This probably won’t happen.” The poem’s resolution resists fantasy even as it denies the dichotomy of the natural and man-made worlds:

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only  
 the light that can shine out of a life. I mean  
 the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,  
 the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean  
 the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

Like the young Blake whom Oliver imagines at the windowsill, the speaker feels a visceral “disgust” at the woman’s labor and its environment (the placeless place of the airport). The apparent non sequitur about what a poem “should” contain seems intended to mock not only Oliver’s other poems but also her reader’s post-romantic expectations. Even the desire to free the woman from her servitude seems, in part, self-serving: another way to sanitize the poem, in keeping with the pastoral tradition that conceals human labor. On the other hand, as David Baker says, “the poet’s own job is similar to the custodian’s, to serve as caretaker to the human *and* the natural, to try to make the world clean again; in essence, for Oliver, not to ignore the world in the first place, since beauty and grace are characteristics of people as well as snowy owls.”<sup>24</sup> More than that, the conclusion of “Singapore” brings nature into the airport restroom by means of that look that passes between the two women. The poem is “filled with trees, and birds” because the speaker is able to see the beauty in the other woman’s work and in her person; because she resists her own revulsion long enough to see into another’s life. Similarly, in “Spring Azures,” the “sooty sill” of Blake’s London is the same window in which God appears to him, and his turning to imagination is a turning toward the incarnation of that God.

24. David Baker, “Recent Poetry [review of Oliver, *House of Light* (with others)],” *Kenyon Review* ns 13.1 (winter 1991): 197.

## Thel, Oliver, and the Politics of Mother Nature

Perhaps Oliver’s most sustained engagement with a Blakean text appears in “Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches,” which concludes the volume *West Wind*. This poem may be read as an answer to Blake’s *Book of Thel*. The “you” of the poem is trapped in the solipsistic selfhood that Blake so often condemns, a Urizenic state that, if it acknowledges the world outside it at all, sees it as “only an entertainment.” The great failure for Oliver, as for Blake, is the failure to pay attention: “Never to enter the sea and notice how the water divides with perfect courtesy, to let you in! / Never to lie down on the grass, as though you were the grass! / ... // No wonder we hear, in your mournful voice, the complaint that something is missing from your life!” (*WW* 61).

In this “complaint that something is missing” I hear the voice of Thel, who struggles to find some purpose in the face of her mortality, complaining “who shall find my place” and “no one hears my voice” (E 4). Other poems of Oliver’s also suggest conversing with objects in nature, as Thel does, in order to understand one’s place in the cosmos:

Last night  
 the rain  
 spoke to me  
 slowly, saying,  
  
 what joy  
 to come falling  
 out of the brisk cloud ....<sup>25</sup>

In “Have You Ever Tried ...” Oliver speaks not in first but in second person, shifting at times into a prophetic, questioning mode:

Who can open the door who does not reach for the latch?  
 .....  
 Who will behold the inner chamber who has not observed  
 with admiration, even with rapture, the outer stone?

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

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

To set one’s foot in the door of death, and be overcome  
 with amazement! (*WW* 61-62)

These exhortations seem to evoke and encourage Thel’s sequence of conversations with the Lilly, the Cloud, and the Clod of Clay, in which she seeks to learn from them her place

25. Oliver, “Last Night the Rain Spoke to Me,” *What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002) 36.

in the natural world but shrinks from identifying with them: "I am not like thee." Many of Oliver's exhortations are phrased as infinitives, "to put, to set," but then these "to"s become prepositions, as "god the ten-fingered" (fully incarnate) nods "to the flowers ... to the song ... to the triplets of the honey-suckle." In other words, the act of placing oneself in a receptive position leads to relationships with all these objects.

Thel, of course, "[sets her] foot in the door of death," as her catabasis brings her to "her own grave plot," which yields no answers, but only a series of despairing questions about the horrors of the natural body. Specifically, the questions protest the vulnerability of the senses: "Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction? / Or the glistening Eye to the poison of a smile! / ... / Why a Tongue impress'd with honey from every wind?" (E 6). When Oliver's poem shifts from second person to first, the speaker sits "among the thorns," speaking "to the wild roses: / deny me not, / but suffer my devotion." Like Thel, she hears a voice from the plants, though not the elaborate rhetoric of the Lilly or Cloud. The roses (apparently) speak to her in italics, countering "*those dark shouters, / caution and prudence*"<sup>26</sup> with the command "*Fall in! Fall in!*" Here, instead of falling into military rank, the implication is to fall into life: precisely the calamity that Thel fears.

Like Thel, Oliver's speaker seems to retreat at the end, with a similar ambiguity: "I climb. I backtrack. / I float. / I ramble my way home." Yet she does so without Thel's shriek, and with a distinct implication that to be "home" is to be at home in the natural world. More particularly, as Vicki Graham points out, Oliver uses the physical senses to imagine herself "into the body of another": a blurring of ego boundaries that "many theorists claim put[s] the woman writer at risk."<sup>27</sup> Many critics, of course, have debated the validity of Thel's "virgin fears": Frye, for example, reads her flight as a refusal to be born.<sup>28</sup> More recently, some have defended her rejection of a patriarchal world that absorbs the woman into the cycle of nature.<sup>29</sup> Oliver's poem obliquely takes part in that debate, while her role as both "woman poet" and "nature poet" has created similar challenges for her critics.

Janet McNew has skillfully analyzed Oliver's romantic inheritance, pointing out her resistance to the "male" romantic tradition of "achieving an identity that transcends nature."<sup>30</sup> With her "unpatrolled ego boundaries," Oliver "avoid[s] the anxious either/or questions which run through much male nature poetry."<sup>31</sup> McNew's analysis, however, challenges some

feminist critics, who are wary of the female poet's identification with nature.<sup>32</sup> To them, Oliver may sound too much, not like Thel, but like the Cloud or the Lilly or the Clod of Clay: too willing to lose herself in the natural cycle. Indeed, her poem "October" celebrates the speaker's disappearance into, or out of, the natural world. After a fox passes by, apparently without seeing her, she thinks: "so this is the world. / I'm not in it. / It is beautiful" (NS 62). We note immediately the contrast with Blake's proverb "Where man is not nature is barren" (E 38).<sup>33</sup> Yet Oliver does not say that the world is beautiful because she is not in it. Rather, as Burton-Christie notes, "nature does not need us to be what it is." He further points out the irony in which the speaker maintains her subjectivity in order to make that aesthetic judgment.<sup>34</sup> Graham has a slightly different view of the same paradox: "Giving up human subjectivity would mean ... giving up the ability to mime herself into the body of another. ... Oliver's poems suggest that we need language and self-consciousness in order to experience stepping outside of language and the self."<sup>35</sup>

According to feminist critics, romanticism's tension between the imagination of the self (usually male) and the "otherness" of nature (usually female) creates a special problem for women writers. As Margaret Homans puts it bluntly, "Mother Nature is not a helpful model for women aspiring to be poets."<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere she writes, "the feminine figure who becomes an object by merging with nature, dying as a result, represents the masculine appropriation of femininity."<sup>37</sup> McNew points out that according to this principle, the woman poet can claim voice and identity only through following the masculine model of transcendence. She also argues, however, that Oliver negotiates a third way, neither an alienated transcendence of the earth nor a passive surrender to it: "Oliver's visionary goal ... involves constructing a subjectivity that does not depend on separation from a world of objects. Instead, she respectfully confers subjecthood on nature, thereby modeling a kind of identity that does not depend on opposition for definition."<sup>38</sup> This strategy seems consonant with Blake's view of a humanized universe.

32. I have not been able to find a feminist critic who lays this charge against Oliver directly, although McNew, Graham, and Diane Bonds all set out to defend her against "skepticism that identification with nature can empower women to speak or to write" (Diane S. Bonds, "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," *Women's Studies* 21 [1992]: 1).

33. Mark S. Lussier challenges the usual reading of this proverb and further notes how the Proverbs of Hell invite readers "to adopt behavioral models from nature," just as *Marriage* challenges the prevalent dualisms of mind/body and spirit/matter. See *Romantic Dynamics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 58-59.

34. Burton-Christie 81.

35. Graham 367-68.

36. Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 13.

37. Homans 221.

38. McNew 72.

26. Another echo of Blake: "Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity" (E 35).

27. Vicki Graham, "'Into the body of another': Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other," *Papers on Language and Literature* 30.4 (fall 1994): 353.

28. Frye 232-33.

29. See, among others, Helen P. Bruder, *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), chapter 2.

30. McNew 75.

31. McNew 67, 66.

The subjectivity that McNew finds in Oliver appears likewise in Blake's *Milton*:

Seest thou the little winged fly, smaller than a grain of sand?  
It has a heart like thee; a brain open to heaven & hell,  
Withinside wondrous & expansive; its gates are not clos'd,  
I hope thine are not: hence it clothes itself in rich array;  
Hence thou art cloth'd with human beauty O thou mortal man.  
Seek not thy heavenly father then beyond the skies . . . .

(20.27-32, E 114)

Oliver's "How Would You Live Then?" recalls *Milton* in its celebration of a humanized nature, a landscape animated by the human imagination. She asks, "What if a hundred rose-breasted grosbeaks / flew in circles around your head? What if / the mockingbird came into the house with you and / became your advisor?"<sup>39</sup> The anaphoric "what if" questions are repeated often enough to shift their effect from contrary-to-fact to "what if this is the case?" What if the stars are shouting their names? By the end of the poem, the object of "what if" is not the external event but "your" perception of it: "What if you suddenly saw . . .? What if you finally saw . . .?" Though Oliver seems much more invested than Blake in the tangible reality of nature, she shares his understanding that perception is what makes it real for us. And in the final lines, as she affirms the "silver of water" and the yellow of sunflowers over money and gold, she concisely discriminates between the two possibilities for nature in Blake: the negating materialism that closes the senses, and the visionary openness in which a grain of sand contains a world.

### Looking Again at Blake, Nature, and Environmentalism

What, then, of Blake's notorious hostility to nature? When, in *Jerusalem*, Luvah separates from Vala and "the vast form of Nature like a serpent rold between" (E 193), what we call "nature" is created by the division of the "male" subject from the "female" object. When created things harden into opacity, into "single vision" (E 202), Blake calls that "nature." Kevin Hutchings has persuasively argued that Blake's suspicion of nature is directed not toward its material reality but rather toward the ways in which human beings have constructed, named, and exploited it.<sup>40</sup> Blake never denigrates the minute particulars of the clod, the pebble, or the fly, only "nature" as an abstraction.

Oliver, though often classified (even dismissed) as a "nature poet," similarly avoids referring to nature in that abstract way. Her poems are filled with minute particulars: in "The Summer Day," she replaces the generic phrase "the grasshopper" with "*This grasshopper*" (*HL* 60, italics mine). At the same time, her encounters with vultures, skunks, roses, and turtles take her to the edge of anthropomorphism while recognizing the

39. Oliver, *Blue Iris* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) 57.

40. Kevin Hutchings, *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

limits of complete identification in a fallen universe. In "Entering the Kingdom," the speaker wants to dissolve into the bare attention of the Buddha, "To learn something by being nothing / A little while but the rich / Lens of attention." She is blocked, however, by her persistent human otherness:

But the crows puff their feathers and cry  
Between me and the sun,  
And I should go now.  
They know me for what I am.  
No dreamer,  
No eater of leaves.<sup>41</sup>

Her dilemma places her exactly where Blake finds humanity, avoiding both extremes of solipsism and dissolution of self. As Hutchings says, "it is in the attainment of a balanced relationship between self and not-self that one may develop a healthy sympathy for the things of the earth without violating the integrity or minute particularity of one's own determinate form or identity."<sup>42</sup> In other words, the speaker of "Entering the Kingdom" does not fail in her quest, but the tables are turned on her. She goes into the forest to "learn something," to know, but instead she is known. Without the other, there could be no knowing. "Where man is not nature is barren" because there is none to know it. Oliver turns the tables on Blake here as well: without nature, there is none to know the speaker, no reference point to define herself. As Ryan Cull points out, she avoids the dangers not only of romanticism but also of post-modern irony and solipsism: "Navigating between such extremes, her high achievement is to approach nature through poetic discourse, but in a way that almost allows nature to talk back."<sup>43</sup> Almost, because she is aware, as we are, that what the crows "know" is a projection of her own mind, just as the speaker in Blake's "Infant Joy" projects a voice for the voiceless infant (E 16). The other remains ultimately unknowable: that is "the white fire of a great mystery" (*HL* 59). Like Blake, Oliver rejects the easy (and sometimes dangerous) absorption of or by the other.

Ultimately, Oliver's appropriations of Blake help us to understand both poets more effectively, seeing past the "apparent surfaces" (E 39) of their interactions with nature. The juxtaposition of Blake's more "mystical" moments with Oliver's earthy realism has the dual function of grounding Blake's visions and transfiguring Oliver's mundane encounters. We might view Oliver as "translating" Blake (at least a portion of Blake) for the modern reader. She seizes Blake's ringing assertion that "every thing that lives is holy" and takes it off the il-

41. Oliver, *Twelve Moons* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979) 21.

42. Hutchings 34.

43. Ryan Cull on Oliver's "The Lilies Break Open over the Dark Water," *Modern American Poetry*, an online journal and multimedia companion to *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ed. Cary Nelson <[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/oliver/lilies.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/oliver/lilies.htm)>.

## William Blake, George Romney, and *The Life of George Romney, Esq.*

BY MORTON D. PALEY

luminated page and into the luminous world of the everyday: the woods, fields, and shores of her Cape Cod home. In other words, she offers one example of how a person might “live” Blake’s vision in this world. As a poet who happens to be a woman, she also inherits a legacy from Blake that differs from the prophetic and apocalyptic emphasis of Ginsberg. Oliver’s imagination is no less prophetic, no less radical, but it is radical in the sense of “root”: rooted in the life she sees around her and her effort to see what she calls “the untrimmable light // of the world” (*WIWE* 59) with visionary eyes. Her dialogue with Blake helps us not only to reevaluate the politics of nature and gender in Blake’s work, but also to see that work as a living thing, subject to revision by both readers and writers in the eternal conversation he calls Jerusalem.

As fascinating as such dialogue is to a literary scholar, the stakes are far higher in the conversation about (and between) humanity and nature. As Sylvia Bowerbank puts it, “in our age of ecological crisis, an ideal of transcendence of nature ... is no less problematic than the ideal of ‘harmony with nature.’”<sup>44</sup> In other words, both the spiritual estrangement from nature and the false ideal of absorption into it become obstacles to surmounting ecological challenges. Bowerbank cites the writings of Martin W. Lewis and others in promoting a “Promethean environmentalism,”<sup>45</sup> humanity’s active management of the planet, in order to slow or reverse the damages already done. Without such management, in Blake’s terms, nature will be barren. Hence, the conversation between Blake and Oliver has ramifications far beyond the scholar’s study or the poet’s morning walk.

Oliver gracefully declines the suggestion that she is an environmentalist: “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.” In the same passage, she resists the common distinctions between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate. If she speaks of “rescu[ing] the world,” it is because, like Blake, she sees nature not as an object of rescue, a damsel in distress, but as part of ourselves: “The man who does not know nature, who does not walk under the leaves as under his own roof, is partial and wounded.”<sup>46</sup> Blake would have to agree: “All things Begin & End in Albions Ancient Druid Rocky Shore.’ / ... / ‘But now the Starry Heavens are fled from the mighty limbs of Albion” (E 171). For both Blake and Oliver, in their different modes, the poet’s task is to make the reader aware both of our fallen estrangement from nature and of our integral connection to it. Both present a world in which the choice between humanity and nature can only be a false one.

44. Sylvia Bowerbank, *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) 3.

45. Bowerbank 10.

46. Oliver, *Winter Hours* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999) 99, 101.

WILLIAM and Catherine Blake returned to London in September 1803, after spending three years in the seaside village of Felpham in Sussex. During the two years that followed, one of William’s most important and time-consuming occupations was assisting William Hayley with the illustrations to be engraved for Hayley’s *Life of George Romney*. Blake had commissions for two of these and hoped for more. These activities were no mere task for Blake, who praised the gifts of “our admired Sublime Romney”<sup>1</sup> and thought, unfairly, that Romney’s talent had been diverted from history to portrait painting by Hayley, asserting in a frank letter to his brother James that Hayley “thinks to turn me into a Portrait Painter as he did Poor Romney” (30 January 1803, E 725). In the extraordinary letter that Blake wrote to Hayley about his renewal of vision “on the day after visiting the Truchsessian Gallery of pictures,” he stated: “I can, with confidence, promise you ocular demonstration of my altered state on the plates I am now engraving after Romney, whose spiritual aid has not a little conducted to my restoration to the light of Art.”<sup>2</sup>

Blake’s esteem for Romney was no doubt intensified by the facts that he had known the older artist in the 1790s and that there had been strong bonds between both their political beliefs and their art at that time. True, Romney was not an easy man to know. His friend Richard Cumberland characterized him as “shy, private, studious and contemplative; conscious of all the disadvantages and privations of a very stunted education; of a habit naturally hypochondriac, with aspen nerves, that every breath could ruffle.”<sup>3</sup> He had some very close friends, but it is significant that, as his old friend Thomas Greene observed, “he seemed always to avoid associating with Gentlemen of his Profession.”<sup>4</sup> The exceptions were three artists in fields far from his own: the sculptor John Flaxman and the miniaturists Jeremiah Meyer and (for a time) Ozias Humphry.<sup>5</sup> After 1772, when Romney showed a portrait of

1. Letter to Hayley, 22 June 1804. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1988) [hereafter E] 753.

2. 23 Oct. 1804, E 756. On this crucial experience of Blake’s, see my “The Truchsessian Gallery Revisited,” *Studies in Romanticism* 16.2 (1977): 165-77.

3. [Richard Cumberland], *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland*, vol. 2 (London: Lackington, Allen, & Co., 1807) 211.

4. Letter dated 9 Dec. 1802 to William Long, another close friend of Romney’s (quoted by David Cross, “George Romney: The Earliest Biography of 1802,” *Transactions of the Romney Society* 9 [2004]: 13-17).

5. Romney and Humphry were in Italy together in 1773-75, but they were not close in later years. Meyer was a highly accomplished miniature