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A HKR 346. § ad 76. § (4) c) pontja értelmében:

„… A szakdolgozathoz csatolni kell egy nyilatkozatot arról, hogy a munka a hallgató saját szellemi terméke…”

NYILATKOZAT

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Pusztazámor, 2025. 04. 15.

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EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Humanities

MA THESIS

Writing the Veil:
Mary Oliver's Ecopoetical Quest in The Leaf and The Cloud

Fátylat írni:
Mary Oliver ökoköltészeti vizsgálódásai a The Leaf and The Cloud című kötetben

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Abstract

The present thesis investigates the ecological potentials of poetry as reflected in Mary Oliver's book-length poem, *The Leaf and the Cloud*. Building on John Ruskin's concept of the ecosystem as a 'veil'– a necessary protective layer between humans and the cosmos – Oliver explores the poetic possibilities of performing ecological thought. According to my hypothesis, *The Leaf and The Cloud* demonstrates that the text itself can serve as a veil, a delicate fabric in which all beings are radically intertwined while also exercising their unique agency. To substantiate this claim, I will begin by briefly introducing Mary Oliver's work, then turn to the notion of the veil as articulated by Ruskin in the motto of *The Leaf and The Cloud* and elaborate on its implications. Following that, I will discuss Emerson's ideas on Transcendentalism, grounded in his concept of the 'transparent eyeball.' Next, I will establish a theoretical framework for ecology based on the writings of David Abram, Timothy Morton, and Bruno Latour, focusing on the subject-object dichotomy and the metaphor of the veil. Afterwards, I will analyze the seven chapters of the book, exploring their perspectives on different life forms, attention, alienation, and poetry, while identifying the ecological significance revealed in each case, drawing from the essays of Mark Johnson, Janet McNew, Kirstin Hotelling Zona, and J. Scott Bryson. Finally, I will return to the notion of agency and the veil, considering the ecological implications of Mary Oliver's poetic exploration.

Introduction

It is currently very difficult to feel justified to meditate on the human-nature relationship in poetry and writing literary criticism that offers at best a few feeble answers and a myriad of further questions about the complex and nuanced issues of representation, the subjective-objective dichotomy, access, and immersion, and agency. If one, as a scholar, takes seriously

the claims of climate scientists, and if we acknowledge the ongoing climate catastrophe while confronting the disastrous reluctance of decision-makers and entire societies to take substantial steps towards a sustainable future, the first response is naturally a form of activism, whether political or artistic. However, this sense of urgency has paradoxically been with us for over fifty years. We have called for action, and we have urged others to 'act now' for an unacceptably long time, achieving some success but undoubtedly lacking a clear paradigm shift. Thus, if one seeks to develop an ecological way of thinking, in which everything is intertwined, entangled, and interdependent, it seems reasonable to investigate our cultures to uncover the ideas driving exploitation and to explore the philosophies that contribute to our inhibitions. This exploration has been undertaken by distinguished scholars across various disciplines, and during my research, I discovered that there is now a growing interest in ecology emerging from where it should have originated in the first place: the humanities.

Nevertheless, there is often a sense of ambiguity behind the practical implications of attributing ecological characteristics to language, and in our case, poetry. As J. Scott Bryson shows in *The West Side of Any Mountain*, Thoreau, who first had serious poetic ambitions, gradually abandoned lyrical writing because he perceived this mode as unsuitable for expressing the radical, the wild (120). Likewise, in the first chapter of *Redstart,* Forrest Gander interrupts his meditations on a possible ecologically sound language by stating "Maybe there is no reason to expect that values purportedly connected to poetic form encourage behaviors structured by those values. Which is to say, maybe poetry makes nothing happen (14)." He then moves on to discuss the Sapir-Whorf theory and dives into recent studies on Aboriginal languages, suggesting that there is a correlation between our language and our beliefs (14-16), but his doubt lingers on. Similarly, *The Leaf and The Cloud,* the subject matter of the present essay, is continuously exploring the boundaries, the limitations of lyrical language. To figure out the nature of poetry's effect on our perception of the planet's flora and fauna, or to debate its

potential as a tool for ecological activism, are by all means beyond the scope of this paper. Indeed, I would not like to fall into the trap of overestimating its effects or make this ancient and generally meek means of self-expression responsible for more than it is. To put it maybe too brusquely, I do not think that we should choose to go after philosophers and poets instead of Exxon and Gazprom. Still, while trying to navigate away from the temptation of strict utilitarianism, I will also attempt to have a gently pragmatic approach, as this paper strives to show through analyzing Mary Oliver's *The Leaf and The Cloud* that poetry does not only have ecological qualities, but potentials too; that it can steer towards an appreciation of interdependence and the agency of life forms.

The main concern of my analysis can be distilled into a simple yet inescapably trivial question: How can poetry be ecological? Despite the overwhelming complexity and weighty implications of this question, I have a great source of help and a somewhat clearer textual space to retreat into: *The Leaf and The Cloud*, a book-length poem by Mary Oliver. I am convinced that this piece addresses the same question, and its seven chapters present seven different perspectives on it, often in a playful and self-contradictory manner, but also with a sense of seriousness and transcendental orientation rooted in the 19th-century works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Ruskin, Walt Whitman, and many others. The motto taken from Ruskin's *Modern Painters* carries special significance in my interpretation since it introduces the concept of the veil. This veil, composed of the leaf and the cloud, exists between humanity and the material-spiritual absolutes of the world, tempering the latter's energy to accommodate the fragility of the former (LC 1). Oliver found this to be a revealing and rich idea, centering her exploration of poetry's meaning around this motif. As Kirstin Hotelling Zona aptly notes in "An Attitude of Noticing," Oliver encourages the reader to perceive her text as a veil through her choice of title (130). Accepting this invitation, I intend to explore the ecological implications of reading poetry as a veil and uncover additional layers in which this mediating element is present in Oliver's world.

Indeed, as Mark Johnson powerfully argues in "Keep Looking," Oliver's whole body of work provides firm proof that she is "a self-conscious, unembarrassed Romantic (80)." Johnson also highlights that Romantics had much more varied and subtle views on ecology and consciousness than is assumed by modern critics (78-81). Still, since Oliver's book also critiques and expands Romantic ideas, or, as Laird Christensen asserts in "The Pragmatic Mysticism of Mary Oliver," "replaces the old, pernicious myth of human independence with an ecological tale of inclusion in a community of interrelated presences (135)," I aim to involve contemporary theories on ecology in the analysis of *The Leaf and The Cloud*.

First, David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* will help us understand the problem of the infamous gap between mind and body, an idea very much promoted by 19th-century thinking. Relying on phenomenology, Abram advocates a position based on the reciprocity of the senses, which opens a conceptual possibility for meaningful interspecies contact (49). To put it simply by using Oliver's central metaphor again, if one can look through the veil at another being, this being should be likewise able to look, or sense through the veil back at one. Abram's philosophy bears great resemblance to Oliver's poetry, their ideas can be both illuminated by analyzing their work side by side, as Bryson does in his chapter dedicated to the latter (*The West Side of Any Mountain* 45-75).

But what if the veil is ripped? Or so thick that it is impossible to look through? Or is its surface not half-transparent, but reflective? Or if we are not on its side, but actually in it, tangled in its fabric? I will investigate these questions aided by Timothy Morton's eclectic and poignant observations made in *Ecology without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought*, two books that polemize extensively with mainstream directives in ecocriticism. Morton reveals the controversial aspects of ecomimesis rooted in Romantic consumerism and deconstructs the notion of separation between the natural and the human world. By calling attention to the unfathomable complexity of the ecosystem, he undercuts the desire for direct and unmediated

access between its members. Besides the refinement of the concept of the veil, his criticism of Abram's ecomimetic writing will foster our understanding of Oliver's occasional dissatisfaction with the poetic mode.

Finishing with Bruno Latour's influential essay, *Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene*, a new perspective will be introduced into the subject-object dichotomy, which is at the center of both contemporary ecological thinking and modern poetry. This problematic dichotomy is a crucial element of the veil and its spatial quality, meaning that it can divide the one who is looking and the one who is being looked at, subject and object. Latour challenges the binary opposition that is very much owned by the literary forerunners of Oliver and urges toward a radical distribution of agencies (15).

After the philosophical grounding, I will focus on *The Leaf and The Cloud* and analyze its seven parts, concentrating on the poem as a veil and its ecological potential in simultaneously representing interdependence and agency. While reading the first chapter, *Flare*, the self-negotiating aspect of poetry will come to the forefront. I will discuss the significance of ambiguity, the heterogeneity of voices and themes, and the poem as nourishment. Then, as Oliver broadens the perspective on writing in general in *Work*, I will follow her attempts at conceptualizing the ecology of her commitment. In *From the Book of Time*, probably the most complex chapter, Oliver examines the boundaries and limitations of writing and attempts to part the veil to discover the meaning of beauty. I will analyze this section with a special focus on the enlargement of the self and the necessity of recognizing the other's agency. Next, in *Riprap*, we are led through a playful search for the self and a wide array of ontological questions, exploring writing's (in)ability to address these issues. The last three sections, *Rhapsody*, *Gravel*, and *Evening Star*, display the veil at work as Mary Oliver sets out to engage with the three perennial subject matters of poetry: love, death, and God. By recycling images and metaphors, and connecting patterns and natural phenomena from earlier chapters, she weaves off the veil

in ecstatic passages, attempting to grasp the supernatural in the ordinary and the physical. Here, the desire for communion and coming to terms with the unreachability of the other, the dilemmas of panentheism, and the ecology of death will be analyzed focusing on the threats, ambiguities, and opportunities that a radical distribution of agency carries. In my view, Oliver ultimately places the speaker of her poem inside a cosmic veil, within a grand design that functions similarly to *The Leaf and The Cloud*, complete with its dead ends and ever-expanding rhizomes of meaning, all "hesitations and grammar (LC 12)."

Finally, I will reiterate the most important findings of this study focusing on the distribution of agency, complemented by Latour's, Gander's, and Morton's proposals for ecological thinking and poetry, highlighting the achievement of *The Leaf and The Cloud*'s in that regard. Following that, I will emphasize the possibilities that the metaphor of the veil offers for writing ecopoetry and thus conclude the paper.

Introduction to Mary Oliver's Poetry and Reception

Before turning to Ruskin and Emerson to trace the roots of Mary Oliver's poetic quest, the ground will be briefly prepared for analysis by placing the poet in context. Although her recognition remained primarily domestic, Oliver has been one of the most widely read contemporary poets of the US. Her career spans six decades from the early '60s until she died in 2019, throughout which she published essay collections, poetry handbooks, and over thirty books of poetry. She was born in 1935, in Maple Heights, Ohio, and spent most of her life in the small seaside town of Provincetown, Massachusetts, with her partner Molly Malone Cook, to whom, just like most of Oliver's writing, *The Leaf and the Cloud* is dedicated. After winning the Pulitzer Prize with her collection *American Primitive* in 1984, and the National Book Prize with *New and Selected Poems* in 1992, Oliver's work gained significant public attention and appeal. Her poems *Wild Geese* and *The Summer Day* made it into school curriculums, her books

led bestseller shortlists, and, as Dara Mandle remarked in "Nature Rules," Oliver's poems and persona attracted large crowds with people from all walks of life (1.) Although her recognition was probably the widest in the 1990s and the early 2000s, her works are still very much present in contemporary literature and popular culture, not in small part because of their apparent viability in the online space, as Rachel Syme suggests in "Mary Oliver Helped Us Stay Amazed."

Besides the general sense of artistic recognition, Mary Oliver is regarded as a touchstone for contemporary nature writing. In his review of *New and Selected Poems*, her fellow poet and mentor Maxine Kumin calls Oliver „an indefatigable guide to the natural world, particularly to its lesser-known aspects (19)", and many reviewers, critics, and fans echo his statement. Her work is often paired up with Gary Snyder's, Wendell Berry's, or Joy Harjo's poetry, and, as Johnson suggests, most often gets discussed in environmentalist and feminist frameworks (78-79). However, Oliver refuses to be categorized in either of those in her essays (*Winter Hours* 99), and in an interview with Steven Ratiner (*A Solitary Walk*). Instead, she consistently determines her writing more a spiritual practice, and states in "The Poet's Voice" that "the poem is to transcend the ordinary instance, to establish itself on a second, metaphysical level (*Blue Pastures* 105)." This mode pursued throughout her writing life might account for her popularity as well as for some of the harsh criticism her work received. William Logan called it "doggy pastoral (*Broken Ground* 99)" and her "a poet laureate of the self-help biz (*Shock and Awe* 1)." Similarly, David Orr, and Stephen Burt both criticized the self-help quality and the emotional directness in Oliver's poetry in their New York Times reviews according to Ruth Franklin's article "What Mary Oliver's Critics Don't Understand." Indeed, as Laird Christensen asserts, her poetry is ritualistic in that it is built upon the Wordsworthian conviction that one can „half-create" one's experience, and thus, one's life (148). And of course, Emerson also firmly stood for an individuality that was founded on self-respect and self-reliance, as Richard Gray notes

in *A History of American Literature* (114). Accordingly, there is a strong sense of conviction in *The Leaf and The Cloud* as well about one's capability to learn and improve themselves, to "study the difference between water and stone (9)" and take the results, the poem in this case, as "nourishment (7)".

Stripped of the overtone of capitalism, self-help, a notion firmly rooted in the American identity originating from 19th-century ideas of freedom, is an integral part of Mary Oliver's ambition. As it will be discussed at length, her idea of beauty indeed has a strong Transcendentalist strain, meaning that she does not consider it to be an exclusively aesthetic quality since there is a possibility of learning from its design. The fact that 'the good' and 'the beautiful' are ultimately not separate for her might very well seem bizarre to the post-modern critic, although Oliver expresses serious doubts about the exact nature of that relationship between the aesthetic and the moral, the 'meaning.' Of all the chapters in *The Leaf and The Cloud*, Riprap probably deals most extensively with this issue, as we shall see.

The Leaf and The Cloud in Oliver's Oeuvre

Published in 2000, and composed in the late nineties, it is a singular piece in Oliver's oeuvre, which is mostly made up of short, unrhyming free-verse pieces arranged carefully into cycles and books. This format seemed to suit her very well throughout her career, especially in its later period when, as she remarked in an interview with Krista Tippet, Coleman Barks's translations of the Persian poet Rumi became a supreme model for her (*On Being*). Her shorter poems are nevertheless quite varied formally, ranging from short lines, condensed stanzas, and abrupt breaks which, as Carolyne Wright observed in her review of *American Primitive,* have kin in William Carlos William's work (109), to column-shaped poems with longer lines and a more relaxed pace, or odes with separated, fragmented sections. Christensen aptly recognizes that the length of the line usually correlates with the desired mood in Oliver's case: the short ones aim

to keep the focus on the observed, the long ones provide space for reflection (142). This often applies on a micro level to *The Leaf and The Cloud* and might very well account for the macro level too. With its seven chapters, it is a systematic exploration of thoughts and themes and has a linear as well as a cyclical structure. Johnson identifies its form as a Romantic project in Emerson's and Whitman's vein (90-93), and I would add Shelley (who also had a long poem titled *The Cloud*), and of course, Wordsworth's *Prelude*. They all opted for a longer, lyrical form when trying to establish a framework that was large enough to contain their ideas and visions on the workings of the world, and also flexible enough to apply a variety of voices, settings, and registers. In its enumerative raptures, celebrations of bodily contact attempts to further and further enlarge the self, and a preoccupation with leaves, *The Leaf and The Cloud* is probably closest to Whitman's magnum opus, although it is certainly different in its more restrained lilt, self-doubting arguments and meditative tone.

The question of the form can be not only approached from tradition but from theories of ecopoetry as well. If a poem's ambition is not just to represent, but to embody ecological thought, it should be capable of sustaining a wide array of heterogeneous images, voices, devices, scenes, and agents, which might easily result in a heftier volume. While striving to define ecopoetry, Gander mentions among others the rejection of closed, self-imposed illusions of totalities in favor of "open texts' and the "rigorous attention to patterning" as desirable qualities in an eco-poem (11). Like Gander, J. Scott Bryson also attempts to define ecopoetry and emphasizes the strong expression of interdependence as a necessary quality in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (6). Although not directly correlating with length, the above guidelines do encourage a complex, ample textual space. In the case of *The Leaf and The Cloud*, that is achieved by a great formal variety in terms of line lengths, enjambments, and stanzas, by images, metaphors, and phrases recurring slightly altered, by the thematic division and the modal union of the seven chapters, by intertextuality and playful self-reflexivity, by claiming

exact, closed meanings in particular textual instances and preserving an overall ambiguity and openness on the whole. Constructing a veil requires space, and Mary Oliver is not reluctant to provide that. In *The Leaf and The Cloud*, she steps away from the usual thematic structure of her poems, which, as Christensen claims, expand from "a narrow perceptual focus" to move on " a well-worn transcendentalist path from direct observation toward revelation and an enhanced recontextualization (140)." Indeed, in this book, Oliver seems to reverse her course and begins with ontological and aesthetic dilemmas to seek guidance in the particular instance. However, as there are an infinite number of instances with often contradictory meanings, this results not in a satisfactory conceptual closure but in a swarm of implications that are often not possible to resolve in any other than a merely rhetorical way. The poet is conscious of that and playfully emphasizes it all through the piece, most directly in *Riprap*. I will duly discuss that further, as well as the structure of poetic observation, but for now, I hope that these points could succinctly illustrate the need for a philosophical book-length poem, which is otherwise unprecedented in Mary Oliver's poetic oeuvre, and also emphasize the ecological significance of this form.

The Romantic-Transcendentalist Influence

Critics almost unanimously identify Oliver's most significant literary influence among the leading figures of 19th-century Anglo-Saxon literature: Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth. This is mostly right, although it would be mistaken to see her as a lone Romantic standing isolated in the poetic trends of 20th-century America, for she was an ardent reader of Edna St. Vincent Millay, a close neighbor and friend to Maxine Kumin and Norman Mailer, and a correspondent and literary ally of James Wright, Robert Bly, and May Swenson, not to mention her strong attraction towards the poetry of Rumi, Hafez and Basho. Still, the predominant literary tradition on which she consciously and consistently relies is 19th-century Romanticism and

Transcendentalism. Indeed, in the third section of *Rhapsody*, she mentions reading Shelley, Plato, Godwin, Carlyle, and Emerson when describing her chief occupation (LC 34). Their influence can be traced in Oliver's inkling toward conversational language, her understanding of the spiritual duty and responsibility of the artist, and her devotion to nature. However, *The Leaf and The Cloud* does not celebrate the individual's capacities as supreme, and neither does it apply the 19th-century dichotomies of mind-body, nature-civilization, and human-animal in its arguments. Still, as the poem's main metaphor, the veil was also conceived by one, if not the most influential theorist of the time, I believe it is important to discuss the ideas of Ruskin and Emerson to better understand the ambitions of the text.

John Ruskin and Modern Painters

In the fifth volume of *Modern Painters*, John Ruskin's long and passionate treatise on William Turner's art and the craft of landscape painting, the aesthetics of plant life (*Of Leaf Beauty*), and the various vapors of the atmosphere (*Of Cloud Beauty*) are discussed in great detail. As Sara Atwood claims in *Imitation and Imagination: John Ruskin, Plato, and Aesthetics*, one of Ruskin's chief aims was to champion landscape painting's reputation in the visual arts and the public sphere (162). This meant that while emphasizing Turner's merits, he also had to establish a theoretical framework around this new way of painting. As Robert Hewison states in *The Argument of the Eye*, Ruskin was convinced that beauty has an objective existence and a divine source, and by systematically analyzing abstract visual qualities, he sought to gain a deeper understanding of natural aesthetics (62). Thus, in *Modern Painters* he included intricate drawings of leaves, discussed the biology of buds, and speculated about the physics of cloud formation alongside visionary passages such as the following, the motto of *The Leaf and The Cloud*:

> 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. But the heavens, also, had to be prepared for his habitation.
>
> Between their burning light,—their deep vacuity, and man, as between the earth's gloom of iron substance, and man, a veil had to be spread of intermediate being;—which should appease the unendurable glory to the level of human feebleness, and sign the changeless motion of the heavens with a semblance of human vicissitude.
>
> Between 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 vapor. (101)

In the beginning, Ruskin refers to the start of *Of Leaf Beauty*, where, following a biting critique of how humanity treats the natural world entrusted to them by God, he establishes the concept of the earth-veil made up of plant life based on Biblical foundations (1). Then, in the section of *Of Cloud Beauty* previously mentioned, he completes his cosmology by adding "the flying vapor" to the veil. Ruskin presents "the earth" as the essence of matter and "the heavens" as the ultimate essence of "spirit," two extremes that are unattainable and perilously overwhelming for humans. The veils of plant life and water cycles – the ecosystem, in short – exist to make the world habitable for us; we need their "appeasing" presences to survive in both physical and spiritual senses. Ruskin is certainly anthropocentric in his views and claims self-imposed moods (the earth's "gloom") as universal, not shying away from the excess of pathetic fallacy (an artistic device he coined and condemned). Nonetheless, his perspective presents a very different interpretation of the Judeo-Christian creation story, which has historically, and even now, often been viewed as a divine license for absolute domination. Quite the opposite, he emphasizes our dependence on and embeddedness in the natural world. With the concluding sentence "His life

being partly as the falling leaf, and partly as the flying vapor," he implies a bond between humans and the veil, suggesting parallels in our forms of life that make us more akin to it than to the material and spiritual extremes. This, along with Ruskin's insistence on the necessity for mediation between the realms of his cosmos and denial of any supreme material or spiritual understanding for humanity, clearly indicates a fundamentally ecological stance.

Emerson and The Transparent Eyeball

The half-transparent or half-obscuring character of the veil makes it a very rich metaphor. It attracts and sustains attention, but ultimately does not yield to it, it can hide, shelter, and separate; a deeply ambiguous, very fragile substance that most often reveals more about the one who is trying to look through it than the reality behind it. And of course, defining and isolating the individual threads in its fabric would inevitably result in tearing it apart. In a sense, not only the ecosystem but consciousness can also be seen as the ultimate fabric that filters reality into experience. Since physical veils can also be lifted, the thick mist above a field can rise, it is logical to wonder whether it is possible for all layers of veils between the perceiver and the perceived to disappear. And if yes, how? For Ralph Waldo Emerson, this question of achieving the widest possible vision was of utmost importance.

As Gray notes, the natural world "was a manifestation of spirit (115)" for Emerson, from which aesthetic pleasure, intellectual adventure, and, most importantly, a moral understanding could be gained (116). Indeed, he states in *Nature* that there is a "moral law [that] lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process (V. 2)." Throughout his Emerson repeatedly formulated and polished the laws that he claimed to be deductible. According to Gray, based on the coexisting variety of unique life forms, Emerson argues for equality and democracy; inspired by the frugal, efficient, and genuine presence of animals and plants, he advocated for modesty, simplicity,

and individual freedom (118). Therefore, beauty has an indispensable role for him in attracting and engaging the senses to draw in and challenge the mind in an epiphany to recognize patterns that would otherwise pass unnoticed. In probably the most famous section of *Nature*, he describes such an event happening to him:

> Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. […] Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (I. 1)

This passage and its implications for observation and immersion are frequently discussed by ecocritics. Johnson, Zona, and Davis all connect it to Oliver and/or the notion of the veil. When discussing subjectivity and ego-dispersal in *The Leaf and The Cloud*, Zona quotes this passage to illustrate a moment of "self-abandonment" when the veil is parted, making the "darkness" and "deep vacuity" "provisionally" accessible (132). Johnson looks at the other side of the coin by pointing out a section in *Winter Hours* where Mary Oliver echoes Emerson's rapture of widening vision. He emphasizes the shared ambiguous feelings of gladness and fear, framing it as an instance of a Romantic quest, an "intellectual adventure of not-knowing" (80-81). Conversely, Todd Davis in *The Earth as God's Body* highlights Oliver's ambition of achieving an ecological gaze that "encompasses more than the individual" by citing the transparent eyeball as a means to gain a totality of perspective (619). Davis also identifies the veil as sometimes representing God, death, or mystery, which "opens into some other form of life, some other way of knowing (617)". As we can see, all these remarks point to the radical change of perspective and the ecstasy that accompanies it, implying a lifting of the veil that covers meaning. However, I do not agree with Zona that it results in access to the Ruskinian extremes;

rather, the vanishing egotism allows access to the veil- to the Leaf and the Cloud. There exists an ecosystem of which the speaker is a “part and particle of,” which, in Davis's and Emerson's pantheistic worldview, is God's body. Johnson's observations on fear and joy, and “the intellectual adventure of not knowing,” can also be better understood from this perspective, if we consider that the realization is not that the veil reveals a meaning, but that the veil itself is the meaning. Furthermore, the speaker is immersed in it and has a visceral connection to it- a joyful fact for Emerson. However, this also means that it is impossible to have an outside point of view and an objective understanding of the ecosystem. This discrepancy haunts and fuels Emerson's, and I believe, Oliver's ideas of nature, as well.

Ecology and The Veil

Coined by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel, the term ’ecology’ is derived from the Ancient Greek noun ‘oikos’ meaning ‘dwelling place’, ‘house’. Rather than isolating and prioritizing a single species or specimen, this term indicates an inclination to study a communal space, its construction, its inhabitants and their relationships. If we take Ruskin’s metaphor, it means examining the position and the fabric of the veil, its veins, vapors, colors, and inhabitants. Indeed, ecology's core assumption is, as Timothy Morton claims in the introduction to *The Ecological Thought* that “Existence is always coexistence (4),” which implies a fundamental equality between everything that exists, as Morton later observes (7.) Eco-scholars are striving to explore how the citizens of this living world are connected, how we humans represent these connections, and how we perceive ourselves in them. Hence, ecology genuinely strives to be large enough to encompass the traditional dichotomies of body-spirit, culture-nature, and subjectivity-objectivity. I believe it is not coincidental that all of those, especially the latter, are also central dilemmas of modern poetry, as it has been the ambition of countless theorists and artists to resolve, recalibrate, or renounce them to achieve new forms of art and ways of

thinking. However, with the reality of the ecological crisis, these dichotomies appear to be haunting more than ever. Therefore, before turning to Mary Oliver's *The Leaf and The Cloud* to examine its ecopoetic quest, I will briefly display and contrast Bruno Latour's, David Abram's, and Timothy Morton's contemporary ideas of ecology to identify the challenges in nature writing and refine the concept of the veil.

Reciprocity

David Abram arrives at the same problem on a different route in *The Spell of The Sensuous* when arguing for the significance of subjective experience and questioning the supremacy of science in the vein of phenomenology (30-35). Abram starts from its founder, Edmund Husserl's notion of replacing objectivity with intersubjectivity, an ever-expanding collective of individual experience (32), and continues with Maurice Merleau-Ponty to assert the subject's inherent unity with its body (38). Finally, he makes a crucial step back towards the collectivity of those who participate in perception, claiming that precisely because of our physicality, we are all at once subjects and objects in the ecosystem, which makes their opposition ultimately redundant:

> Once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity, does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that *any* visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me. (67)

In my view, Abram makes a powerful case for the body and the ecological potential of acknowledging and using the senses, which, as Bryson remarks, is also a fundamental part of Oliver's poetry (84). She consistently presents stones, water, and light as animate, not to mention plants and animals, and the speaker of her poems, whose encounters are rooted in acute sensual participation. And, as we will see, it is not only the human who sees and reacts, but the

other members of the ecosystem also recognize and react to her. Abram moves on to discuss at length the specific ways in which language is bound in sensuality and proves that it "belongs to the animate landscape as much as it belongs to ourselves (56)," through ethnological observations of animism in oral, or ancient literate cultures. For this paper, the most important takeaway from his points is that language is determined by the specific ecosystem of its speakers and deeply shapes how they experience their relationship with the other agents in it; that language is sensual and formative. Indeed, he is conscious of that when he proposes that "we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and the world is perceiving itself *through* us (49)," using the powerful metaphor of the veil for the human body and consciousness to drive home the ecological significance of the inherent reciprocity in our sensory participation. I believe that Mary Oliver's vision of poetic observation is remarkably similar, if not identical to what Abram suggests. For them, and also for such innovators of 20th-century American poetry as Charles Olson and the Black Mountain Poets, the idea of genuine interspecies contact is confirmed by the corporeal presence of agents, and they often provide narratives of such encounters that serve both as accounts and instances of sensual language use. Hence, based on Abram, *The Leaf and The Cloud* can be read as a celebration of radical bodily embeddedness as well as a display of language that is rooted in the sensuality of its environment.

The Mesh

In *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton seriously challenges Abram's position, particularly his language in instances where he describes an immersive experience, as I have just noted. Tracing its origins in Romantic consumerism, Morton analyzes and deconstructs the concept of Nature, showing that it often hinders our much-desired ecological understanding. He argues that the experience of immersion in nature, a state celebrated by the previously discussed Romantic poets, quickly transformed into a product that promises an altered state of

mind, not dissimilar to drugs (110-112). According to him, in Romantic capitalism, nature "is always 'over there,' behind the shop window of distanced, aesthetic experience; even when you are 'in' it, as the elegiac frenzy of much nature writing demonstrates (113)." After identifying how the ideal of pure wilderness contributes to our inability to adopt an ecological approach, Morton transitions to discussing literature's role in environmental consumerism. His key term for this is ecomimesis, which he critiques with Platonic fervor throughout the book, claiming that this mode of writing merely offers "objectified subjectivity (112)," creating the illusion of communion while sustaining exploitative behavior. He describes ecomimesis as "instead of sitting back at one remove from the consumer object, one tries to become it […]. No sooner does the subject turn into the object, in this fantasy, than the object naturally starts to behave like a subject (112)." He critiques narrative passages from *Spell of the Sensuous* for their uncontrolled ecomimesis and points out that through its ceaselessly moving focus and sensual, ambient tone, Abram's prose attempts to disguise itself as authentic text (128-131).

I believe Morton highlights an especially important tendency in how the illusion of immediacy is crafted in nature writing. There is indeed a great temptation to omit the awkward and incomplete, obscuring the indirectness, mediation, distance, and cycles of reflection essential for the experience to take textual shape. Furthermore, there are significant issues with mimesis itself, as Morton observes, drawing on Theodor Adorno's thoughts on the eeriness of birdsong in art: "The copying of nature […] is the domination of nature – but also, in a dialectical twist, a condition of being spellbound by its dominating quality (152)."

Besides criticism, Morton does not offer a new trajectory in this book. It is more in *The Ecological Thought* where he expresses his views on what it means to be ecological in a cosmos of "strange strangers," and proposes a metaphor for it, the "mesh" (14). He points out that his term is used in various disciplines, and it is a particularly useful ecological concept that carries ambiguous meanings of density and patchiness, hardness and fragility, and implies

entanglement; it refers to the thread as well as to the hole (28). These are all qualities that are also true for Oliver's veil, in fact, they appear to be the same in that they convey a sense of "radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise (*The Ecological Thought* 8)". However, Morton arrives at this metaphor on a fundamentally different track than Oliver and Abram. He repeatedly argues that the fact of interconnectedness, in fact, results in more uncertainty because "Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully "itself" (15)," Therefore the boundaries of self and other are less and less pronounced if we zoom in on the edgeless, centerless mesh, which "extends inside beings as well as among them. (39)" These beings are the "strange strangers," and the more we know about them, the more uncanny they become (15), since "Their strangeness is part of who they are. After all, they might be us. And what could be stranger than what is familiar? (41)" With these statements, Morton emphasizes that acquiring an ecological perspective by nature includes acknowledging all that one does not and cannot know about the others with whom one is entangled in the mesh. Indeed, the notions of connection, embeddedness, and communion, which are commonly used phrases for nature writing, often imply a superficial sense of security and knowledge, when in fact the relationships between lifeforms are complex, ambiguous, and strange. Morton criticizes those who aim to cover this up for the sake of aesthetic effect, and claims that ecological thought should be "Staying with uncertainty (60)." He also suggests that through its inherent vagueness and ambiguity, ecological art can "allow us to glimpse beings that exist beyond or between our normal categories (61)." I presume that Oliver and the Transcendentalists would definitely agree with him on that, despite their difference in focus. Nevertheless, as we shall see in a few pages, the strange and uncanny are subtly but consistently present in *The Leaf and The Cloud*'s text, which indeed enhances its ecological potential as a mesh or veil.

Toward a Radical Distribution of Agency

In his seminal essay *Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,* Bruno Latour powerfully affirms the need for establishing new ways of representation that are not bound by our notions of subjectivity and objectivity. He claims that the ecological crisis cannot be "contemplated coldly from a distant place" as there is direct human involvement in it, and thus the traditional notion of objectivity is fundamentally subverted (2). In Latour's view, humanity ascribed subjectivity to itself by objectifying the Earth, and created a self-sustaining dichotomy that is at the foundation of modern science (4-5). However, it is now apparent that the Earth is a "full-fledged actor," and in the reality of the crisis, humans "have resigned themselves to playing the role of the dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subjects" (11-12). Nature is an actor in our "geostory," but how, asks Latour, can our history, literature, and philosophy tell such a story (3)? To unpack Latour's point, I would paraphrase it as that we are not used to attesting subjecthood to anything but the human, which proves to be a disastrous bias, and also a great challenge for contemporary arts and science. Although considering 20th-century poetry, especially the Radical Modernists and their legacy, it appears as if they did recognize this problem, hence their preoccupation with objectivity. William Carlos Williams's famous dictum "No ideas / but in things (*Collected Poems* 55)," or indeed Mary Oliver's "family of things (*Collected Poems* 119)" channeled into a deep inclination to express the equality of all material creation that is present in American poetry since Whitman. Still, Latour warns against the tendencies of either "deanimation" or "overanimation" (16), as they are prone to sustain the traditional dichotomy that caused the problem in the first place. Instead, he claims it is not an "objective background" that qualifies a subject, but sharing "agency with other subjects," and the encounter with other agencies will make us "shift away from dreams of

mastery as well as from the threat of being fully naturalized (5)". In my view, the metaphor of the veil can reflect the intermingling of agencies, and since by nature it is not in the background, but rather in-between, it can be used to call attention to their proximity, and their embeddedness. Thus, a text that is built up in that fashion might be able to contribute to "the crucial political task" that Latour identifies as "distribut[ing] agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible—until, that is, we have thoroughly lost any relation between those two concepts of object and subject (15)."

Through briefly discussing the relevant ideas of Ruskin and Emerson, two prevalent thinkers among those who influenced Mary Oliver and *The Leaf and The Cloud*, I hope I could reveal the foundations behind the cosmology, the ambitions, and the aesthetics of this long poem. Then by examining the notions of agency, reciprocity, and the mesh, I aimed to provide three different, but also overlapping perspectives on ecology. With Latour's, Abram's, and Morton's guidance, the subject-object, human-nature dichotomies were interrogated and challenged, and, most importantly, the ecological relevance of the veil, the main metaphor of *The Leaf and The Cloud*, was affirmed. Surely, there are more figures to discuss to get a comprehensive picture of Mary Oliver's predecessors and to gain a wide perspective on the turbulent field of ecocriticism. Still, I believe that this theoretical grounding is firm and diverse enough to support the textual analysis of *The Leaf and The Cloud.* Now I will focus on the seven chapters of the poem and discuss their unique place and function in – and as – the veil.

Textual Analysis of The Leaf and The Cloud

Flare – Writing 'It'

After the motto by Ruskin, which presents the symbolism and the conceptual habitat of *The Leaf and The Cloud*, the main text begins with a jovial, direct, and plain gesture, nevertheless rich in its implications: "Welcome to the silly, comforting poem." This self-reflexive line defines the poem as a poem (with curious, appealing qualities), and us as welcomed readers, guests inside a certain place. Then it briskly sets off in a need of further self-definition and makes negative statements highly adorned with metaphor, allegory, and onomatopoeia. Indeed, despite the repeated "it is not", one might get easily carried away from the actual statement that is being made by the intense, flashing pictures varying in scale from God to a beetle, and the sensual cadence of the wind shaking the catalpa blossom is so fully ringing that it might take some time for the reader to account for their lingering sense of dissatisfaction, and ask the question: But *what does it mean* (a question frequently asked later by Oliver) that the poem is "not the sunrise"? It can mean that it is not the text's ambition to present itself as a natural phenomenon, as a sublime object outside of human culture. Or, to put it blatantly, the poem does not strive to be anything else, even if this thing is as magnificent as the sun, but itself. Furthermore, we can also interpret these statements as a reluctance to engage in eco-mimesis if we consider that the line "It is not the rain falling out of the purse of God;" might suggest that the rejection applies not only to "the rain" but for the whole metaphor, even if it is as magnificent as "falling out of the purse of God." This shows a fundamental ecological approach as these lines present a wide range of natural phenomena through poetic devices and create a distance from them with outspoken non-identification.

However, if we consider the first section of *Flare*, it becomes clear that the poem's body so far is made up of what it denies. In my view, this inherent tension is a prerequisite to Timothy

Morton's notion of "radical openness" (*The Ecological Thought* 8), which results in an energy that pushes the poem on into further self-negotiation and reflection throughout its entire length. Indeed, the ever-so-slightly dissatisfied "Mostly, though" –s of the second section balance out the vivid, ambient pictures of the anecdotic barn:

> Mostly, though, it smelled of milk, and the patience of animals; the give-offs of the body were still in the air, a vague ammonia, not unpleasant.
>
> Mostly, though, it was restful and secret, the roof high up and arched, the boards unpainted and plain. (LC 2)

Besides the sustained tension, it is also important to note that the addressee of the second section is "you," which is always a curious issue in Oliver's poetry in general. Here, the minute details support the idea that it might be the narrator addressing themselves, however, there is a consistent use of the narrative 'I' in the following sections, which would make that quite redundant. Thus, we could interpret it as a generic 'you,' or a direct address of the reader (the first line is a precedent for it), but then it appears as a quite oppressive, arrogant gesture to impose a certain memory upon an 'other,' even if the aim is to create sympathy and immersion. In my reading, this ambiguity is a subtle, though successful way of destabilizing the subject-object dichotomy, and adds to the effect of the overflow of images in creating a sense of entanglement for the speaker and the reader. Curiously, this whole contradiction is eliminated in section 11, where the whole experience is suddenly denied:

> Anyway,
>
> there was no barn.
>
> No child in the barn.

No uncle no table no kitchen.

Only a long lovely field full of bobolinks. (LC 6)

As Johnson observes, this would be easy to interpret as a sly, cynical move, or a transcendentalist cliché to renounce reality (94). I find the placement of this deft destabilization of fact and I-you relationship masterful and apt, as it introduces complete ambiguity this far into the poem when the reader is invested and ready to embrace it. Then, after building up the rhetorical tension with sharp, quick, and unadorned lines, Oliver resolves section eleven with a mass of bobolinks, which we expect in vain to be a certain truth, a resolution of the previous ambiguities. Or maybe it does make us resolve to let go of dichotomies and focus on the page instead, linger on the sentence with the field and the bobolinks, those musical, migratory birds who will soon move on from that field, just like us.

Between sections 2 and 11, significant issues arise. Introducing the concept of death, the speaker plays on Whitman's grass as a graveyard plant in section 3. The half-transparent, frail green moth, one of the poem's main characters, is introduced while dying against a lamp's glass or a crow's beak, while still possessing "feistiness and not a drop of self-pity. / Not in this world (3)." This brave little green 'veil' serves as a model for Oliver, as well as for the entire course of the poem. Indeed, in sections 5, 6, and 9, the speaker follows the example of the green moth and briefly evokes her parents, the primary source of grief, to ritually bury both- including here "the demon of frustrated dreams," the father:

Listen,

This was his life.

I bury it in the earth.

I sweep the closets.

I leave the house. (4)

With these dry and powerful lines, the poem makes it clear that it does not want to deal with personal trauma, to avoid the danger of self-pity and to stay focused. In 6, the speaker kisses them goodbye, and we swiftly move on to section 7 where in another self-negotiating move, the poem asks:

Did you know that the ant has a tongue

with which to gather in all that it can

of sweetness? (4)

The aim of this abrupt and somewhat didactic question is not clear at first, especially with the slightly intimidating repetition, as if making sure that it is not a rhetorical move. How am I supposed to answer? Yes, no? What is the difference? Sections 8 and 10 help to understand Oliver's intention here, and show that the orientation is twofold: there is a deep wish to intimately connect the reader to the veil of the poem and start a dialogue, and to account for the text's sensuality by evoking the ant as an example for the 'tongue' (which is always referring to language as well in Oliver's oeuvre) and the attraction to 'sweetness,' to beauty.

The final section sustains the tones of 7, 8, and 10, and guides the ambiguous, lonely 'you' with consolations like this:

Let grief be your sister, she will whether or no.

Rise up from the stump of sorrow, and be green also,

like the diligent leaves. (6)

This exemplifies Emersonian transcendentalism in action. We observe the speaker drawing inspiration from a natural phenomenon (the cut stump sending up new shoots), recognizing a universal pattern of renewal, and applying it to her specific situation. Furthermore, as Johnson notes, there is an echo of Thoreau's call for exuberance in line 14 (90). For Oliver, loneliness represents the profound issue that can only be addressed through an ecological vision, a sense of belonging described as "the family of things" in *Wild Geese* (*Collected Poems* 119), and the veil in *The Leaf and The Cloud*. Thus, promoting interconnectedness serves as both a moral and environmental imperative. A key manifestation of this is eating, where bodies and beings radically transcend their boundaries, always accompanied by a spiritual tone of communion in Oliver's poetry. Consequently, the poem's ultimate self-definition, which also aspires to be "a little temple (LC 5)," centers around food, specifically "dark bread (7)."

Ideas frequently flare up unexpectedly in *The Leaf and The Cloud*; however, the recurring lines of motifs and registers are interwoven throughout the piece, forming a fabric that facilitates a sustained examination of the ideas they embody. In my view, *Flare* negotiates its own ecology as a poem and establishes that *The Leaf and The Cloud* aspires to serve as a veil. Now, we shall shift our focus to *Work*, which adopts a broader perspective of poetic writing.

Work – Writing Life

As Zona puts it, Oliver simultaneously " articulates " and " exercises" her work in *The Leaf and The Clou*d (132). The speaker discusses the 'poiesis' she engages in, first identifying her subject as "a woman sixty years old and of no special courage (LC 9)" in the first stanza of section 1. Then, she attempts to comprehend the ecosystem with which she strives to interact in the second stanza. The 'I' and the spring pickerel (who will be another important figure), the child, the

snail, and the lilies are separate yet; however, after the dynamic depiction of the hunter and the hounds, the world and the 'I' converge in work:

> Everyday—I have work to do:
>
> I feel my body rising through the water
>
> not much more than a leaf;
>
> and I feel like the child, crazed by beauty
>
> or filled to bursting with woe; (10)

The stanza continues with the snail and the lily, "who believes in God / though she has no word for it," then shifts to identify with the hound, the hunter, the hunted fox, and its pawprint, culminating in a "dusty toad" who looks up to see the "white clouds." From the leaf in the first simile, we journey to the cloud in this rapture of identification, concluded by the statement: "I am a woman sixty years old, and glory is my work (10)." Oliver's aim seems clear: a radical expansion of the self, sharing this with others through intense observation, and striving to be one with the world. However, the poem's speaker also disappears into the enumeration, dispersing among all the agents, leaving the original identity of a sixty-year-old woman as no more than a husk. Yet, 'glory' can connect all the forms she inhabits and leads back to the aspect of work, the effort that must be invested in this empathy.

In the following four sections, the world becomes increasingly a narrative, a text. We see the lifecycle of the grass and 'us' interact with its life by cutting and sneezing its pollen, then peonies, the bat, the "cloud" of butterflies, a year-round impression of a meadow, interrupted by the statement "This is the world (11)." The natural cycles and the physicality of life are the world, but what about the urgency to express this vision? "Would it be better to sit in silence? (11)" as Oliver puts it in section 3. She moves on quickly into an elevated, Whitmanesque mode

to assert that the "sweet and electric (12)" words are an integral part of being human, just as silence for the rock sitting in the stream and concludes that our making of texts out of words, "hesitations and grammar," thus belongs to the world (12). The "electric" words are charged with agency, weaved by the web of grammar, and made half-transparent by hesitations. The veil of poetry conjures up Luke, the dead dog in section 4, and then the brief narratives of section 5 varying in scale from the century plant's flowers to the "rosy comma of the radish (13)." However, it is not just that living beings depend on the poetry of the ecosystem, but also vice versa, as Oliver suggests in section 6. The narrative of love needs "the spurge of roses, and the long body of the river (13)," and their interdependence creates what Oliver calls "song." This leads to an intriguing realization: the rock that was depicted as silent a few stanzas ago, might be "deliberate music" lying in the field, as well as "the river glancing and leaning against the dark stone (7)." This on the one hand implies that to be "music" the only requirement is to be embedded like the stone, the ear of corn, and the river, and on the other hand the speaker is not by far the only 'singer' around. This results in the following determination in stanza 2, section 7:

> So I will write my poem, but I will leave room for the world.
>
> I will write my poem tenderly and simply, but
>
> I will leave room for the wind combing the grass,
>
> for the feather falling out of the grouse's fan-tail
>
> and fluttering down, like a song.

The stance of not wanting to monopolize poetry appears genuinely ecological in this instance, as well as in the whole of *The Leaf and The Cloud*. However, the immediate reflex of

aestheticizing and anthropomorphizing the wind makes this pledge somewhat paradoxical; the speaker seems to partly fail in not imposing this poem over others. Then the section continues with a playful and capricious Whitmanian enumeration of what the speaker will sing for from the ghost of Shelley and the number 3 to coyotes (14-15), although the fourth stanza's promises again appear paradoxical:

> I will sing for the iron doors of the prison,
>
> and for the broken doors of the poor,
>
> and for the sorrow of the rich, who are mistaken and lonely (14)

The objective of including the wounded of the human realm is positive and often painfully absent from ecopoetry; however, as there is no more elaboration of their individuality, their agency, the stanza unintendedly ends up only as a superficial emotional appeal and an attempt to diversify the enumeration. Nevertheless, the cadence of *Work* is fully ringing, when the wish to sing returns to the broadest perspective, the veil:

> I will sing for the veil that never lifts.
>
> I will sing for the veil that begins, once in a lifetime,
>
> maybe, to lift.
>
> I will sing for the rent in the veil.
>
> I will sing for what is in front of the veil, the
>
> floating light.
>
> I will sing for what is behind the veil –
>
> light, light, and more light.

This is the world, and this is the work of the world. (15)

Here, we can see a subject, the veil, which is very hard to grasp as is apparent from the text. Its qualities change from line to line, it is ambiguous in its lifting, in its imperfectness in the "rent." Something is tearing up the fabric – humanity? The climate catastrophe? Or, taking the other meaning of the word, there is a temporary dwelling inside the fabric that allows for an intimate entanglement. And what is there to make of the homogeneous, endless extremity that it divides, light veiled from light? The veil's strangeness and agency require the speaker (and the reader) to iterate and reiterate the way they perceive it, and thus the accumulation of promises to sing can become the song. Furthermore, the veil as a system is so great that it requires all its singing members, all "the world" to do so, not only the speaker of *The Leaf and The Cloud*. This resonates with Abram's previously quoted visionary statement "We are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and the world is perceiving itself *through* us (49)," but also supplements it with the central need for an agency for each of 'us' and the resulting ambiguity, which is inevitable for the "work," for the poetry of the world to happen.

From The Book of Time – Beyond Writing

"I rose this morning early as usual, and went to my desk. But it's spring (17)," starts Oliver in the third chapter of *The Leaf and The Cloud*. Her speaker then leaves the house, touches a few leaves (!), and watches a cloud (!) of butterflies, to finish the first section by causally negotiating the epic conclusion of *Work*:

And I am thinking: maybe just looking and listening

is the real work.

Maybe the world, without us,

is the real poem. (17)

The relaxed, conversational tone here contrasts sharply with the elevated, vatic voice, which aligns with a contemplative, non-interfering approach stemming from the grand, universal purpose of poetry. Nevertheless, the fact that Oliver is essentially writing about not writing implies that this work is fundamentally impossible to abandon; even in a state of 'not writing,' a person engages in the poiesis of the ecosystem. It turns out that the speaker is reluctant to depart from this; rather, she strives to be fully present, much like the "lonely leaf" yearning for the "veering, plum-colored clouds," exclaiming "I'm here, I'm here! Now, now, now, now, now (18)." In one sense, Oliver departs here from the poetry she has established so far by reducing her text to pure deixis. In another sense, she arrives at it by seeking to forget the "enclosure (18)" of the self and to maintain that Emersonian "glad[ness] to the brink of fear (I. 1)" without a clear moral or rational objective. Thus, she does not focus on direct observation of natural phenomena but instead on their subconscious manifestation:

I dreamed

I was travelling

from one country

to another

jogging

on the back

of a white horse

whose hooves

were the music

of dust and gravel

whose halter

was made of leafy braids

of flowers

whose name

was Earth (18-19).

The horse carries her through an ever-changing landscape that suddenly transforms into water. ‘Earth’ also quickly turns into a veil of white cloth that turns into a swan, which witnesses the speaker’s “huge and unruly pleasure (19),” flickering out her red tongue. The motifs of music, water, the leaf, and the swan's cloud-like feathers masterfully weave this section into the whole. *The Leaf and The Cloud* reaches a focal point here: it is the Earth that carries the overwhelmed speaker through the transformation, and, for the first time, it is she who is looked at by the swan. Zona rightly observes that her overwhelming joy initially arises from being saved from drowning in the water, but it may also stem from her final recognition as a genuine subject by the bird. Zona interprets this instance as a decisive moment for the abandoned poetry since the metaphor of the veil-like white cloth can bridge the radically enlarged self (the horse and its rider) and her distinct being (as perceived by the swan) (134). Although the veil of poetry might

seem to block direct access to the present, it allows for a passage between different ways of being present.

Moving on the same path, the whole of section 4 is a quotation from Plato's *Symposium*, where the transformative power of the collective beauty of all living things is emphasized (LC 20). Inspired by the dialectic of Plato, the poem now takes off in a new direction to become a platform for questioning the structure of the self (section 5) and the world (section 6), and emphasizes the benefit of embodiment in coping with the overwhelming uncertainty imposed by those questions. The mind and the body are finally united in "lying in the sand" and appreciating the petals of a rose. The last line ("Roses, roses, roses, roses.") can be seen as an ultimate, unreflected turning towards what is there, as well as a playful challenge of Gertrude Stein's dictum on the self-referential nature of language (LC 22).

The last chapter describes the self's life as a flower cut from the archetypal garden, "remembering itself (23)," in a lyrical tone akin to the earth dream, as well as relating to to Plato's ideal of beauty, as Deborah Jurdjevic claims in her review of *The Leaf and The Cloud* (167). This allegory can be interpreted as the irredeemable break between humans and nature and a longing for a primordial belonging; however, I read it as a melancholy and poetic admitting of poetry's limits. The speaker feels a visceral connection to the veil made of "the wings of the leaves" and "the beds of the clouds," yet she cannot grasp them, understand them, or influence them, only glimpse at them through her veil of words, despite the two systems' similarity.

Riprap – Search for The Self Through Writing

After the primordial sea from the dream, *Riprap* starts with a detailed, sensual description of a seascape from a curiously omniscient, under and above-water perspective, which is explained by the last two lines:

the white moon the only boat,

the white heron the only fisherman left on the black rocks. (25)

There are no people here, not even a hiding observant narrator, which recalls the beginning of the previous chapter “Maybe the world, without us, / is the real poem (17).” While attempting to grasp that, his brief section is swarming with mussels and fish, who are all occupied by their own particular lives and have their agency in the sea’s ecosystem. This realization lingers on, while the discussion on beauty continues with Whitmanian passion:

O, what is beauty

that I feel it to be so hot-blooded and suggestive,

so filled with imperative

beneath the edge of its changes,

between the leaves and the clouds of its thousand

and again a thousand opportunities? (26)

The veil presents a thousand opportunities, which intoxicate and also dazzle the poet, who is in and amongst them, as we can see from the following section’s overloaded stack of images, where the speaker tries to make a representative collection of beauty, but of course cannot stop adding to it (27). The abrupt, final realization of the ambiguity in extending subjectivity suggests that the key to understanding beauty is in the self, and the section ends with a curious remark: “*Therefore* (27).” On one hand, this can be read as a self-exposing gesture of the poem

that shows the impossibility of clear consequences, as well as the text's inherent rhetorical inclination towards closure. The threads of the veil could be pulled tight to cohere, but then they would lose their integrity, hence their fabric remains ultimately transparent. On the other hand, it is also an omitting of 'cogito' and 'sum' from the Cartesian equation that is used to determine the boundaries of the self, which suggests a profound understanding of the ecology of the veil, wherein all selves become 'ergo'-s, 'therefore'-s in their interdependence.

This stands out even more in section 6, when the ultimate ecological event, death is discussed. On a corporal level, the "endless granular shuffle and exchange (29)" is apparent, and the phenomenological transformation of the praying mantis into "a green flower" (the Leaf) and the river into "avenues of light" (the Cloud) and the sea likewise reflect interdependence, so this section is also closed with a "*Therefore"* (29). But what happens to the insubstantial part of the self, "the soul" during this process? The speaker of the poem turns to other beings, the wren and the lily to get proof of herself having a soul, but only gets an echo: *The wren, and the lilies* (30). Increasingly frustrated with itself, the 8th stanza leashes out with ontological questions:

> Does the grain of sand
>
> know it is a grain of sand?
>
> Will secrets fly out of me
>
> when I break open?
>
> Are the stars standing
>
> in any order?
>
> Is supplication
>
> useful? (30)

The laconic reply is "*Exactly* (30)". The fact that it is not a 'yes' implies that it is an affirmation of the format rather than an answer, which is also supported by the last question. The poem and its objectives are supported, but a disturbing sense of ambiguity concerning the integrity of the self is lingering. To resolve that, the speaker yet again starts out on the Transcendentalist path of intense observation and returns to the seascape with the white heron in section 9. After a short while, the heron transforms:

> […] her body for an instant is a white fire –
>
> *not herself but the perfection of self,*
>
> *a white fire.*
>
> If I look carefully I can see it (31).

This instant is a parting of the veil when the Ruskinian heavens show themselves and appear not as selfless, but as an ultimate form of self, a very Platonic image. This sensation ends almost immediately but now the material extreme, 'light' seems to have selfhood, which provides just enough insight for the speaker to return to the present in section 10 (31).

The relentless inquiry of *Riprap* validates poetry as a means of engaging with the question of selfhood, which has crucial implications for the agency of all members of the ecosystem. The text serves as a platform for ambiguity, frustration, and an imprint of an ecstatic experience when the veil parted; however, as implied by the abruptness of the closure, poetry's realm lies more within the veil, among strange and uncanny beings like humans and herons. Indeed, as I hope to show, Oliver strives to recreate the veil in the texture of *The Leaf and The Cloud* by

incorporating diverse voices, registers, and intertextuality into its poetic apparatus, as well as presenting life forms as entangled actors who nevertheless actively engage in their own lives. Now, I will turn to the last three chapters, *Rhapsody*, *Dust and Gravel*, and *Evening Star*, to examine how Oliver employs the veil of poetry to engage with the ecology of the archetypal subject matters of human song: Love, Death, and God.

Rhapsody

The colors of gold, green, yellow, and orange with the ripe seeds of summer suggest fulfillment and joy in the first section of *Rhapsody*. The good-humored allegory of rebuked time expresses the wish to remain in the sunny field with the certainty of the 'you,' a presence with whom the space could be shared. The veil of the poem sustains this atmosphere and allows for the inclusion of another being's agency, as we have seen. In fact, section 2 is an enumeration of animal activity that parallels the speaker's reading of 19th-century writers in 3, when the lover arrives exercising her own agency when "whispering" the speaker's name (34). This affirmation of selfhood provokes an invitation from the speaker in section 4, when she invites her companion to appreciate the activity of other forms of life (35). Then, after a blessing of the body parts and recognizing their own unique characteristics, quasi-subjecthood in section 5, the speaker performs her Transcendental poetics on the beloved:

> Because there is no substitute for vigorous and exact
>
> description, I would like to say how
>
> your eyes, at twilight, reflect, at the same
>
> time, the beauty of the world, and its crimes. (36)

This genuine acknowledgment of poetry's exclusive use in connecting the particular and the world in two sides of a metaphor – similar to the dream in *From the Book of Time* – stresses language's value as a mediator, a veil. The final section depicts the hustle and bustle that inevitably happens between two agencies sharing the same space, and that "failing and striving" constitutes an "opera" (36). Thus, the last stanza emphasizes that love is a lyrical narrative, not as static as the "perfect world," but more resembling the dynamism of a long poem.

Gravel

We have seen that the acts of love are pivotal for ecology, as they are instances when different agents' bodies extend into each other. Likewise, eating ("the dark bread of the poem") and ultimately death are also transformative experiences for the self by nature, no wonder that Oliver is so focused on them. However, as we have also seen for a moment in *Riprap*, death carries a great controversy in that its corporeal reality is unquestionable, even celebrated as a recycling of matter as Christensen states (137), but its effect on the self's consciousness is unknown. In other words, it is impossible to reflect on, it is 'gravel,' an impenetrable, small multitude of absence.

The immediate reaction of the self, as we can see in section 1, is to control it. After the speaker's courtly address, she instructs Death in a seemingly ecopoetic language, to disperse her self as much as possible (37), then, probably sensing the futility of this mode, abruptly leaves off the stanza. Noticing the rise and fall of the wind (37), the speaker seeks relief in the certainty of such reliable patterns, but as she walks her dog in sections 2 and 3, the doubt keeps recurring (38-39). Trying to fold the veil of the poem around it, the speaker recalls the swan from *The Book of Time* in section 4, asking:

> Are you afraid?
>
> Somewhere a thousand swans are flying

through winter's worst storm.

They are white and shining, their black beaks

open a little, the red tongues flash.

Now, and now, and now, and now their heavy wings

rise and fall as they move across the sky. (40)

The reiterated "rising and falling" pattern, and the animals' majestic perseverance in the storm of the present contrast the speaker's fear of the ambiguous. *The Leaf and the Cloud* recognizes that death is ecological, which means that it has agency, or rather it unifies the agencies of all of those organisms that strive to incorporate the self and take away its control. Submitting to that, and also to its own finite nature, the poem becomes a venue for farewell in section 5, and also verifies the ontological uneasiness of humanity by stating that it belongs to its nature as agility to water and the stillness to stone in section 6 (40-42). Still struggling to fully incorporate the powerful agency of decay into its veil, the text returns to the threat of the clouds of *From the Book of Time* and the leaf-like green moth "pressing [its] papery body into the light (43)," to get as close to the instance of death as possible in section 7, then the speaker directly speculates about it:

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 (44)

The hope expressed here is to return to the familiar space of the ecosystem's veil, as a leaf of grass which we indeed know from the graveyard scene in *Flare*. It might also be suggested here that the fact of staying in the veil – be it bodily or otherwise – carries sufficient certainty to soothe the self's anxiety. Yet, when the speaker recognizes the agency in "faces of the stars," they, unlike the swan, remain silent and do not reciprocate that recognition in section 9. This poem of "goodbye" and "don't know" (44) battles fear until its last line:

dirt, mud, stars, water –

I know you as if you were myself.

How could I be afraid? (45)

This remark on the fundamental embeddedness in the material reality of the world, and the expansion of subjecthood is a philosophical move that is often used by Oliver, nevertheless, as Jurdjevic suggests, it seems to successfully abolish fear by underlining the material familiarity between all forms of life entangled in the veil (167). However, the possibility of self-knowledge which is taken for granted in this reasoning, was seriously questioned by all previous chapters of *The Leaf and The Cloud*. The ecological 'I' is definitely very strange, enmeshed in the veil, channeling into other 'I'-s. At least, the dirt, mud, stars, and water appear to be not more, but equally strange and frightening than the self.

Evening Star

While also synthesizing the previous chapters, Evening Star turns towards the ecology of faith in a final attempt to grasp the design of the veil. The main character and metaphor of this section is the black snake, a masterful choice given its religious and mythical connotations (the first temptation, the Old Testament's healing bronze snake), suggesting connection as a "piece of a circle" and a deep ambiguity when flowing like "black water" (47). It practices and extends its agency when it recognizes and calls the speaker to observe as it goes down the mouse's hole in section 1. The speaker immediately tries to interpret it, guided by her Transcendental inclination, but quickly admits its impossibility and compares her limited human vision to that of the mouse:

> for, dear God,
>
> we too are down here
>
> in such darkness. (48)

The following section deftly uncovers the source of the problem, stating that it is not difficult to recognize and appreciate the divine beauty of nature as long as one remains an outside observer of the veil, which is not an ecological possibility (48). Then, the profoundly simple variation on the theme of the snake continues, pectinated by the evolving argument on the accessibility of God. The speaker "lit the candles," like the smart maidens in Jesus' parable, she is proud of her work of noticing and writing (49) and has no trouble recognizing the divine pattern in the ecosystem's veil, still, she confesses her inability to interpret it in section 5. In the meantime, "The snake never shuts its eyes. / The mouse sits tight (49)" – the incorporating encounter between two fatally different-sized agencies has not happened yet. Likewise, God's

power has not captivated the speaker, who ironically reflects on her previous ontological inquiries as “want(ing) to discover just one more trick” (49).

In the single stanza of section 8, we get the most compact version of an ecosystem as a variation of the snake-mouse theme:

> The snake never shuts its eyes.
> The mouse sits tight
> in the beautiful field. (50)

Oliver deftly handles the uncanny suspense of the situation, while weaving a context, a veil out of the characters so that they become an environment for each other. She attests a spatial quality to the drama, and it becomes an open system, to which countless other life forms could be added. Then, in section 9, the two themes finally meet in a powerful ecological argument for the divine pattern:

> If God exists he isn’t just butter and good luck –
>
> he isn’t just the summer day the red rose,
>
> he’s the snake he’s the mouse,
>
> he’s the hole in the ground,
>
>
> for which thoroughness, if anything, I would adore him,
>
> If I could adore him. (50)

In this unorthodox understanding of omnipotence, God is not qualified divine by positive or pious characteristics, but by being present in every entangled member of the veil, even in the

inanimate hole. God is inherent in their agency and represents the very extension of subjecthood that the speaker is striving toward in her work, which is also, according to Davis, at the heart of Oliver's unique theological stance (620). This draws sincere admiration from her, which continues to increase during the remaining part of the poem. Indeed, Oliver's own ambition seems to be at least partly the snake, the mouse, and the hole in *The Leaf and The Cloud*, to share in their presence while also respecting their agency. For her, this is not possible without the veil of poetry, a means of linguistic mediation that is not necessary for her God. This admiration echoes in the unpunctuated lines of section 10, where the poem gestures toward a wide variety of life forms from crab to baby, from ocean to abalone, and emphasizes in their 'first-ness' that creation is rooted in the present. In the finishing stanzas, Oliver claims that the opening rose is "no more than itself / and more than itself (51)" to emphasize the paradox of God's integral, but also distinct presence inside the veil.

After the incursion to the spiritual realm, the speaker is suddenly facing the pickerel from *Flare*, who gazes at her "astonished." This fish is exercising his agency and expresses the speaker's strangeness in his veil, which immediately dislocates her, and leads to question all that seemed certain just a few sections ago (52). As Zona claims, different moments of the previous sections appear merged in the final stanzas (137), whilst the speaker desperately appeals to the reader in the final section to remember her as a guide to the sentience of all beings, which is suddenly interrupted by another being's agency: the green moth singing "alleluia halleluiah (LC 52)." And finally, the swans arrive too:

> the red tongues of the white swans
>
> shine out of their black beaks
>
> as they shout
>
> as their wings rise and fall

rise and fall

oh rise and fall

through the raging flowers of the snow. (53)

The rising and falling wings, which previously represented the regular pulsing order of the world, now seem to stir up the extreme, impenetrable whiteness of the snow, whose “raging flowers” suggest a speaker on the familiar brink of joy and fear. The agency of the arriving animals fills and moves the veil of the poem, and the outcrying sounds of the swans encourage the speaker to join them to appreciate and praise the moment with her words.

Concluding Notes

Surely, there is much more to be said about how the metaphor of the veil is reflected in the fabric of *The Leaf and The Cloud*. Its intertextuality could be investigated, focusing more on Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Gary Snyder’s notion of riprap as identified by Jurdjevic as his method of composition (167), or Plato’s *Symposium* to prove how Oliver weaves in their ideas to construct this veil. Besides, the prosody of the long poem would also be worth analyzing to better understand how alliteration, enjambment, and rhythm contribute to its subtle cohesion, as well as the arrangement of the stanzas on the page. In the present study, I focused on the ecological potential of writing a veil from the perspective of the subject-object dilemma and distributing agencies; however, it would also be fruitful to discuss poetry as an actual veil

between the observer and the observed, a medium that allows unobtrusive and perspectival engagement with natural phenomena. Indeed, the half-transparent curves and dots of written language seem to mediate between the reader and the extremity of the white and radically open white space of the page in a very similar manner to Ruskin's Leaf and Cloud.

Still, sharing in the sense of urgency that Latour so poignantly expresses, I aimed to analyze the ecological potential of poetry in distributing agency to all members of its system as well as reflecting their ambiguous interdependence, to highlight that these two qualities are ultimately not exclusive. Zona, Johnson, Christensen, and Bryson all share in their recognition that Oliver's writing thrives in the liminal space between contradictory concepts of self, body, and nature, and this paper joins their assumption in its reading of *The Leaf and The Cloud*. Departing from Ruskin's cosmology and Emerson's transcendentalism which focus on the individual's improvement by nature, Oliver also manages to show the limitations of that individual through her speaker and stresses the significance of the agency of other beings who are entangled in the same veil as her.

After supporting Oliver's stance with the ideas of David Abram, Timothy Morton, and Bruno Latour, I discussed the self-negotiation performed in *Flare*, the first chapter. We observed that the text both dismissed isolated ecomimesis and self-centered confessionalism in favor of an ecological exploration of agencies, while also being ready to sustain its own ambiguities. In *Work*, the poem defines its objective as incorporating and participating in the poiesis of the world, and its limitations and 'holes' are addressed in *From the Book of Time*. In this chapter, we witnessed a paradigm shift as the speaker recognizes and submits to the agency of Earth in a visionary passage, and we saw how the metaphor of the veil permits both a distinct and entangled view of the self. Then, in *Riprap*, the poem grapples with the resulting ambiguity and the absence of definitive ontological answers, illustrating how accumulating frustration can also lead to an appreciation of nature's agency when observing the white heron. The ecology of love,

death, and faith is explored in *Rhapsody*, *Gravel*, and *Evening Star* as we follow the speaker through her radical encounters with the agency of a beloved person, natural decay, and God. Throughout these sections, the speaker's growing awareness of other actors results in occasional epiphanies and an increasing entanglement in the poem's themes, which culminates in an overwhelming outcry of swans, to whom the speaker joins with her words in mutual recognition.

As Gander asserts in *Redstart*, the desired structure of ecopoetry can be seen as "compost," "rhizome," and "nest" (13), systems that share both the variety and integrity of their material. The 'veil,' in my view, has these qualities while also accounting for the strange and uncanny nature of being embedded in a web of overlapping agencies, as Morton advocates throughout *Ecology Without Nature*. I believe Mary Oliver expands this metaphor to support her effort to create a textual space that embraces the ambiguity and heterogeneity of life forms and human thought, guiding her speaker and readers through failure, frustration, observation, and epiphany to find and recognize the actors surrounding us. Hence, *The Leaf and The Cloud* offers a complex, open perspective for ecological writing and provokes a reassessment of our agency within the veil.

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