
The Posthuman intersubjectivity of vegetal life in the Poetry of Mary Oliver

Dr Manu Remakant

Associate Professor, Department of English, SN College, Chempazhanthy

We live in a world surrounded by plants where they play a crucial role in our evolutionary history and also in our present anatomy. Only a short stretch of imagination is needed to see in the shapes of our fingers and hands correspond to twigs and branches of trees. Without plant's harvesting of sunlight to make energy there is no way, other lifeforms sustain themselves in the planet. The energy that plants trap through photosynthesis, the carbon dioxide they use and the oxygen that they produce as a result make the planet liveable for other creatures.

Yet the proper understanding of plants in shaping our world has remained poor throughout human history. Anthropocentrism views human agency as special and the most powerful in the hierarchical order of things which have relegated other life forms including plants into the background. But recent studies on animals emerged from the social justice movement from the late 18th century helped in the initiation of animal protection movements in the West. The zoocentric philosophy got a shot in the arm in the last century with the emergence of many bioethical theories which accorded equal status to animals along with men.

But the enfranchisement of animals created a new binary with the position of plants and other 'non-sentient' beings further slipping down the rung. The agency of plants acting in response to the environment through their complex chemical mechanisms and sensorialities is too sessile and undramatic to get attention from science and theoretical philosophers. The vegetal life could only be seen as a backdrop in the cultural canon of the West against the deluge of stories that portray human and animal elements as the main characters. While the zoocentric studies focused on our representations of animals in our literary and cultural world in order to

rewire our perception of what it needs to be human, an ignorance of the role of plants in building our identity remained as a lacuna in life studies.

In short, the lack of proper scientific studies on the sentience of plants portrayed them in poor light in human culture, art and literature. Ecopoetry which evolved in late twentieth century tried to address this issue by recalibrating their focus on the vegetal other. Poets like Mary Oliver, by extolling and identifying with the other in nature, by giving them a tongue to speak, by exploring their hidden faculties, tried to explore vegetal life with a consciousness that can act independent of outside agency.

The challenge that human imagination faces in encountering plants is their peculiar dimensions, movements and responses that are all utterly alien to human perception of characteristics that constitute life and sensation. It was Aristotle who placed plants as intermediaries in a continuum of sentience with absolutely inanimate nature on one end and the human at the other:

”The whole genus of plants,” Aristotle says, ”while it is devoid of life as compared to an animal, is endowed with life as compared with other corporeal entities. Indeed, as we just remarked, there is observed in plants a continuous scale of ascent toward the animal.” (6).

Plants are yearning towards sentience - now occupying a liminal space between the two extremes - but are caught on the way, according to Aristotle. The Linnaean system of classification of plants which was based on the organisation of sex organs also helped in relegating the vegetal life into a class by itself that has no relation to any other species. At the most they have been studied for their utilitarian or for aesthetic purposes for human beings. Their inability to move at a rate human being can see or communicate in a language he can understand are reasons for pushing them down historically to lower rungs of sentience.

In *Plants as Persons*, Matthew Hall focuses on the attention scientists gave to vegetal life throughout history. According to the writer it was Theophrastus (circa 371–287 BCE), father of Botany, who first gave some importance to plants in his studies. He saw plants as

“autonomous beings, rather than as slaves for humankind” (32). Henry Bergson also says that animals and plants have to be observed using different scales. “We should define the animal by sensibility and awakened consciousness, the vegetable by consciousness asleep and by insensibility” (Bergson 1998, 112).

Modern scientific research with the help of electron microscopes enabled people to realise that plants are “much more complex than the sum of their constituents”(Baluška and Mancuso 2007, 206). Unlike the popular concept that plants are just automations responding to external stimuli in a destined way, the “intelligent plant” is found to integrate aspects of communication, sensing, and emergence into its ontological bearing (Pollan 2013).

Attitudes to vegetal life are always in a state of flux as art and literature in different historical periods engage in different ways with the scientific outlooks on plants. That is perhaps why the Aristotelian-Linnaean way of classifying plants according to anthropocentric methods of observing had influenced our literature for long. Plant blindness, or the inability to see plants in human life, is rampant in the cultural milieu of the western canon steeped in anthropocentrism.

Perhaps it is in poetry that vegetal life plays a significant role as symbols and metaphors. In green poetry, poets often view plants as autonomous, active and intelligent always in engagement with their surroundings. Such an attitude places green poetry in the larger conceptual framework of ecopoetry that uses language to deepen a sense of nature’s presence in our lives.

Ecopoetry represents a non-anthropocentric way of conceiving our environment and planet. The poetic attempts to perceive the world from the points of view of plants involves a conscious shift from the trappings of anthropocentrism. The nature poems of Mary Oliver, renowned American poet, boldly take up the project of dissolving the borders between plants and the privileged species including man to conceive a more complete and realistic world. The liminal spaces between various species were explored in order to disprove the watertight compartments that separated life from life.

Mary Oliver was born in 1935 in Ohio, America. A recipient of Pulitzer Prize for poetry she has more than thirty published collections including the famous *American Primitive* (1983) to her credit. The widespread appeal for her epiphanic nature poems ensures her to be one of the most popular nature poets in the twentieth century America. Wherever in nature her agile and roving eyes wandered and fell phenomenal poems were born. Her poetic philosophy regarding nature recalls the outlook of great nineteenth century writer, Henry David Thoreau and his phenomenal work on *Walden*.

Like Thoreau, Oliver was also apprehensive of the Aristotelian-Linnaean tradition that considered nature as a second-rate player. *Walden* with its multisensorial vignettes of nature was a revolt not only against the Cartesian reductionism but also against Carl Linnaeus' binomial system of plant classification. In a journal entry Thoreau warns "the physiologist must not presume to explain [the growth of plants] according to mechanical laws, or as he might explain some machinery of his own making.(2009, 546)"

Even from her earlier works Mary Oliver's verse dwells in the liminal space between plant and human, exploring all the possibilities of transaction between them. Being an introvert she shuts off an outside world with trees and plants in her locality. "The Black Walnut Tree" from her collection, *New and Selected Poems* (1992), follows the talk between the poet and her mother about a walnut tree that is quite old that "its leaves [...] getting heavier/every year, and the fruit/harder to gather away" (Oliver 1992, ll. 11, 13–15). Either they can sell it out to the lumberman to pay down a mortgage or they would let it live out its life till the last days. The utilitarian view of things is not an option for the poet or her mother:

What my mother and I both know
is that we'd crawl with shame
in the emptiness we'd made
in our own and our fathers 'backyard. (
Oliver 1992, 201, ll. 21–29)

Perhaps her affinity towards non-Western ontologies helps her transgress the Linnaean tradition of subjugating nature to lower position. She says "To me, it's all right if you look at a tree, as the Hindus do, and say the tree has a spirit. It's a mystery, and mysteries don't compromise themselves" (Oliver 2011).

The intercorporeality embodied in Mary Oliver's poems makes borders between species porous making communication fluid. Ecocritic J. Scott Bryson characterizes the prevailing intercorporeality of her poetics as "the body's fundamental relatedness to the rest of nature." (2005, 78). This is what Weiss also stresses when that "the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies" (Weiss, 1999, p. 5).

Vicki Graham sees in Mary Oliver's poems a constant interaction between the poet as observer and nonhuman subjects that surround him, which absolutely brings down the already porous border between. "To merge with the nonhuman is to acknowledge the self's mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity" (1994, 353).

The intersubjectivity Mary Oliver's poems embody can be experienced in one of her poems, "Landscape" that draws our attention to the pervasive nature of vegetal bodies, especially moss:

Isn't it plain the sheets of moss, except that
they have no tongues, could lecture
all day if they wanted about

spiritual patience? Isn't it clear
the black oaks along the path are standing
as though they were the most fragile of flowers?
(Oliver 2005, 1103, ll. 1-6)

The poet is sensitive and receptive to the rhetoric that the sprawling moss to gigantic oak trees raises. When the border between the poet-human and the vegetal-other becomes sieve-like the reader cannot relegate the botanical communities just as scenery to the background of everyday consciousness. They are not as what Michael Pollan terms, "the mute, immobile furniture of our world—useful enough, and generally attractive, but obviously second-class citizens in the republic of life on Earth" (Pollan 2015, xi). In the poem "Landscape" Mary Oliver foregrounds an embodied presence of plants that might otherwise have become marginalised.

The ensoulment of the moss with its "spiritual patience" that grows densely and haphazardly in mats refers perhaps to its preference for cool shades and its rootedness to a place. But then surprisingly in the following lines we see the majestic oak trees with the "most fragile of flowers?" An interspecies correspondence is subtly pointed at as the poet marries the moss with the gigantic oak trees within a few lines.

Contemporary studies in Botany have already made strides in finding communication among vegetal life through electrical and chemical signals (Karban 2015) especially when a particular plant is attacked by a predator.

The dialectics in Mary Oliver's poems where multitudinous bodies of nature raise rhetorical questions, enter into dialogue with other vegetal bodies of nature reflect the poetic sensibility that the body as such is permeable, indeterminate, irreducible to any Cartesian-Linnaean system, and even rebellious to any individuated subjectivity. In other words, the intercorporeal body in Mary Oliver's poetics is distinctly posthuman (Haraway 2008; Hayles 2008).

Works cited

Aristotle, "The History of Animals." *The Animals Reader*. Ed., Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald. Oxford: Berg. Print. 2007

Baluška, František, and Stefano Mancuso. "Plant Neurobiology as a Paradigm Shift Not Only in the Plant Sciences." *Plant Signaling and Behavior* 2 (4): 205–7. 2007

Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 1998.

Bryson, J. Scott. *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Eco-poetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2005.

Graham, Vicki. "'Into the Body of Another': Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other." *Papers on Language and Literature* 30 (4): 352–72. 1994.

Harvey, R.B. "Julius von Sachs." *Plant Physiology* 4 (1): 154–57. 1929.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2008.

Hall, Mathew. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. New York: SUNY Press, 2011

Karban, Richard. *Plant Sensing and Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2015.

Oliver, Mary. *No Voyage and Other Poems*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. 1965

———. *New and Selected Poems*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. 1992.

———. "Landscape." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 11 (7): 1103. 2005.

———. "Maria Shriver Interviews the Famously Private Poet Mary Oliver." Accessed 22 May 2016. www.oprah.com/entertainment/maria-shriver-interviews-poet-mary-oliver2011.



Pollan, Michael. "The Intelligent Plant: Scientists Debate a New Way of Understanding Flora." *The New Yorker* December 23 and 30: 92–105. 2013.

Pollan, Michael. "Foreword." In *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*, edited by Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, xi–xiii. Washington DC: Island Press.2015.

Thoreau, Henry David.. *Walden*. Vol. 1. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company. 1882.

Weiss, Gail. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. New York: Routledge.1999.