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Generative Tension between “God” and “Earth” in Mary Oliver’s “Thirst”¹

Paul T. Corrigan

*Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart.*

Mary Oliver, “Thirst”

Through nearly fifty years of poetry, Mary Oliver has undertaken the task of loving nature as a deeply spiritual work. The spiritual nature of her work has always been unconnected, at least overtly, to formal religion. She has long been recognized instead as one of those spiritually minded people who find it necessary to reject formal religious concepts of God because of a profound interest in nature.² Anthony Manousos, one of the earliest critics to write about her poetry, explained her work in just such terms. Citing lines from Oliver’s poem “Fawn”—“Sunday morning and mellow as metal / the church bells rang but I went / to the woods instead”—Manousos argues that “Ultimately, [Oliver’s] vision of nature is celebratory and religious in the deepest sense. . . . Nature is . . . where the poet can discover the joy and terror, the sustaining truths and feelings *that conventional religion and modern society seem unable to provide.*”³ Over the past several decades, many critics have echoed this sentiment.⁴ But recently, Oliver has taken several new directions, which gives occasion to reassess the nature of spirituality in her work. As the dust jacket on her recent book *Thirst* puts it, there are “two new directions in the poet’s work . . . grief . . . and . . . faith.”⁵

The grief comes with the death of Molly Malone Cook, Oliver’s partner of forty years. And the faith, undoubtedly related to the

grief, takes on the character of an orthodox Christian spirituality. Though Oliver remains consistent in *Thirst* with her earlier work in many ways, insisting still that "My work is loving the world," this recent book introduces to her work for the first time an abundance of traditional religious references and images.⁶ *Thirst* opens with an epigraph from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*; moves on to present prayers, churches, altars, candles, and scriptures; and contains many instances of "Christ," "Lord," "God," and forgiveness. In a poem titled "More Beautiful Than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord," Oliver tells the reader, "The Lord forgives many things, / so I have heard."⁷ A few pages later, she speaks of wanting "Christ to be as close as the cross I wear."⁸ Most significant to the study of Christian theology and spirituality, however, is Oliver's new awareness of God that takes center stage in *Thirst*, informed by these and other traditional religious images and expressed in orthodox Christian ways. The major note of Oliver's spirituality before *Thirst* had primarily to do with the Earth and with tensions on Earth; the primary theme of Oliver's Christian spirituality in *Thirst* is a tension between "God" and "Earth."

In what follows, I first show, through looking at select poems, how Oliver articulates the tension between God and Earth in *Thirst*. Then, working recursively, I explore how certain traditional Christian concepts—the concepts of *apophatic* and *kataphatic*—are well suited for understanding this tension. Following that, I will discuss how Oliver engages the tension between God and Earth through the act of poetry, moving beyond expressing artistic theological principles to making use of them in a generative spiritual practice. Finally, I come to suggest that we can find in *Thirst* a model of a contemporary ecological spirituality and a body of poems through which we ourselves can join with Oliver, as readers, as spiritual seekers, and as lovers of God and lovers of Earth.⁹

The Tension between "God" and "Earth"

Oliver first introduces the relationship between God and Earth, as such, in the fifth poem of *Thirst*, "Musical Notation: 1." In this poem she describes "the pale green wing" of the "luna moth" as "like a musical notation," displaying the close detail and metaphoric imagination that have always characterized her work.¹⁰

She sees things, she says, for what they are physically and for what else they are, maybe even spiritually: "Clouds are not only vapor but shape, mobility, silky sacks of nourishing rain. The pear orchard is not only profit, but a paradise of light."¹¹ The poem tells of one dog who "adored flowers" and another who "loved sunsets."¹² The flowers, dogs, and sunsets are flowers, dogs, and sunsets; but they are something more as well.¹³ As ever before in her work, what that something else is may or may not be able to be put into words. As something new in her work, however, this poem also gives us theological reasons why natural things are what they are, why they are something else as well, and why a poet might care to take notice.

The opening sentences of "Musical Notation: 1" tells us: "The physicality of the religious poets should not be taken idly. He or she, who loves God, will look most deeply into His works."¹⁴ In such a statement Oliver identifies herself as a religious poet or at least in solidarity with religious poets. She also brings "physicality" into a specific relationship with "God." The tension at this point is subtle but significant in light of Oliver's earlier work; whereas in much of her early work it may seem that "God" could be equated more or less with "Earth," in this poem they are clearly only deeply related. The natural created things of Earth relate to God as God's "works." Clouds, pears, flowers, dogs, sunsets, and luna moths are what they are physically, metaphorically, and spiritually because they are God's "works," made, owned, and cared for by God. Religious poets "look most deeply into" the earth, not because of their love for the earth per se, though indeed they do love the earth such that their "physicality" "should not be taken idly." Rather, religious poets "look most deeply into" the earth because of, in light of, and through their love for God.

"Musical Notation: 1" presents the relationship between God and the works of God only in terms of joy. But, of course, there are complications inherent in loving one thing through loving something else other than that thing. Another poem, one of several long poems in *Thirst* deeply saturated with religious language, speaks more pointedly to the more painful aspects of the tension. "On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate (Psalm 145)" picks up on the distinction between God and the works of God even in its title. Oliver sets this poem on Earth, at the edge of Earth where

"the ocean [is] a blue fire."¹⁵ The fifth section speaks directly to the question at the core of the whole book:

So it is not hard to understand
where God's body is, it is
everywhere and everything; shore and the vast
fields of water, the accidental and the intended
over here, over there. And I bow down
participate and attentive

it is so dense and apparent. All the same I am still
unsatisfied. Standing
here, now, I am thinking
not of His thick wrists and His blue
shoulders but, still, of Him. Where do you suppose, is His
pale and wonderful mind?¹⁶

Oliver points here in no uncertain terms to the tension between God and Earth (or between God and God's works), casting it this time in terms of God and God's body and, again, prioritizing not God's "thick wrists" or "blue shoulders" but God's self beyond these things.

She "bows down" at the "dense and apparent" presence of God on Earth. But, "All the same," she is "unsatisfied" with only that part of God that the earth can contain. It seems that in her earlier work, this kind presence, the "shore" and "vast fields of water," would have been more than enough to satisfy her, even as they still give her joy in this and other poems in this book. It is possible that this dissatisfaction is also present in her earlier work, in the longing that many of those poems often express, but nowhere is it stated as directly and clearly as it is here. Here, she clearly wants something more, something deeper than the earth alone can offer. Her dissatisfaction points to a desire for the deepest reality of God's self. (In the choice of metaphors here, the "pale" "mind" of God seems to stand in, paradoxically, for God's self, only because it serves as a "lean" and "porous" image to contrast with God's concrete and earthy body.)¹⁷ "Where do you suppose," she asks, "is [God's] / pale and wonderful mind?"

In another of the long poems in *Thirst*, "Six Recognitions of

the Lord," Oliver builds on this distinction between "God" and "God's body" to provide insights into the way the tension is experienced by the spiritual seeker living in the middle of it. Section one speaks of wanting to know God beyond language: "I know a lot of fancy words. / I tear them from my heart and my tongue. / Then I pray."¹⁸ Section two speaks of the opposite impulse, the impulse to choose "the sweet grasses of the field" over "[God's] voice, [God's] / tenderness." "Impatience puts / a halter on my face," the poet says, "and I run away over / the green fields wanting your voice, your / tenderness, but having to do with only / the sweet grasses of the fields against / my body."¹⁹ Section three returns to the impulse to know God beyond Earth, language, or desire. The poet describes herself "loung[ing] on the grass" and then "enter[ing] the place / of not-thinking, not remembering, not- / wanting." She imagines this place as "the cloud, or, perhaps, the lily floating / on the water."²⁰ The fourth section includes both impulses and speaks directly of the tension between them:

Of course I have always known you
are present in the clouds, and the
black oaks I especially adore, and the
wings of birds. But you are present
too in the body, listening to the body,
teaching it to live, instead of all
that touching, with disembodied joy.
We do not do this easily. We have
lived so long in the heaven of touch,
and we maintain our mutability, our
physicality, even as we begin to
apprehend the other world. Slowly we
make our appreciative response.
Slowly appreciation swells to
astonishment. And we enter the dialogue
of our lives that is beyond all under-
standing or conclusion. It is mystery.
It is the love of God. It is obedience.²¹

The poet knows something of God in nature and she knows about something else of God not contained in the "heaven of touch."

She also knows that there is a tension between the two "places" in that, somehow, "we maintain . . . our / physicality, even as we begin to / apprehend that other world."

This tension between God and Earth that Oliver expresses in theological and experiential terms in each of these poems can best be understood within the context of the Christian mystical tradition that makes a similar distinction, if not the same exact distinction, between God and the things of God. This is the apophatic tradition of the *via negativa*, the negative way, which is pointed to, perhaps incidentally, by the fact that Oliver uses the metaphor of "the cloud" to speak of a place of "not thinking" and by the fact that she takes the epigraph for *Thirst* from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.²²

The Tension between Apophatic and Kataphatic Understandings of and Approaches to God and Earth

As scholars of Oliver's work have well explored, Oliver has long worked at the boundaries, intersections, and tensions between things, most prominently the boundaries, intersections, and tensions between nature and the self, though also, in a related manner, between the self and the other, between the soul and the body, between consciousness and the loss of consciousness, and between transcendence and immanence.²³ Roxanne Harde, for instance, argues that, "In its entirety, *American Primitive* [the book for which Oliver won a Pulitzer Prize] encourages a blurring of boundaries and sets forth a fusion of self and nature that leads to an enriching of the human and natural worlds."²⁴ Questions of the boundaries, intersections, and tensions, then, have always been central to questions of spirituality in her work. This continues to be the case in *Thirst*, though with a different tension in question.²⁵

In criticism about Oliver's work before *Thirst*, it is the question of transcendence versus immanence that received the most critical attention. Some critics celebrate Oliver for achieving transcendence paradoxically *through* immanence with nature. In a chapter on "The Nature of Transcendence in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," for example, Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack suggest that Oliver seeks something of an "animal transcendence" wherein "the soul might

literally take on both spiritual and physical characteristics."²⁶

Others praise Oliver for seeking immanence with nature *instead of* transcendence. For instance, Janet McNew argues that "The transformation [Oliver] describes is the opposite of transcendence, as it associates her with 'lichens and seeds.'"²⁷ Commenting on the poem "Humpbacks," McNew sees Oliver choosing body over soul: "Once again the 'spirit' shows a tendency to move skyward while the 'bones,' often her image for bodily quintessence, dive downward into a singing, earthly communion. The odd thing about this body/soul configuration is that the soul's yearnings appear both foolish and less genuinely visionary than the wise dreams of the body."²⁸ Later she adds, "In Oliver's 'primitive' world, physicality thus becomes the most visionary spirituality."²⁹

Still others celebrate Oliver's ability to *alternate between* immanence and transcendence. Douglas Burton-Christie agrees with McNew about Oliver's "singing, earthly communion" but also finds a spiritual transcendence that is not "foolish" or "less genuinely visionary."³⁰ "In balancing . . . two seemingly divergent impulses [letting nature be as it is and infusing it with higher meaning]," he argues, "Oliver evokes a deeply integrated spirituality of the ordinary, helping us to see and embrace what is, after all, one world, where nature, spirit and imagination rise together."³¹

Whichever side or sides these scholars see Oliver emphasizing as she explores these tensions, the terms in which they frame the tensions all share in common something different from the terms that frame the primary tension in *Thirst*. The terms of these tensions—self and nature, body and soul, immanence and transcendence—are contained within Earth and so are decidedly different from the terms of the tension between "God" and "Earth." With her movement into orthodox Christian language, Oliver explores a new boundary. Invited to use theological terms by Oliver's own use of religious language, I suggest that this new tension between God and Earth can best be understood in terms of the Christian concepts of the *apophatic* and the *kataphatic*. In *Thirst*, Oliver makes a clear distinction between "God's body" and God's self. Belden Lane explains that the "distinction between God's essence and God's 'place,' the one wholly unknowable and the other more accessible to human sensitivity, . . . recurs often in the [apophatic] tradition."³²

Though many have written on the apophatic and kataphatic traditions, increasingly in recent decades, I use Belden Lane's description here because his project in his book *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* has to do with connecting the apophatic approach to God with a spiritual engagement with the natural environment.³³ As the negative way of apophatic spirituality means seeking God "beyond images" and the positive way of kataphatic spirituality means seeking God "through images," the task of connecting landscapes, which essentially are images, to the negative way necessarily means struggling with the tension between apophatic and kataphatic realities. This is exactly what I see Oliver doing in exploring the tension between God and Earth.

Lane explains that "Reaching beyond language, beyond the capacity of the mind to entertain the divine mystery, [is] the chief impulse of the apophatic tradition, both in theological method and in the practice of a life of prayer."³⁴ It is exactly in this reaching beyond language and the mind that Oliver joins in the apophatic tradition when she says: "Of course I have always known you / are present in the clouds . . . But you are present / too in the body, listening to the body, / teaching it to live, instead of all / that touching, with disembodied joy."³⁵ The play between the phrases "in the body" and "disembodied joy" serves as an instance of the "twisted language of paradox and negation" that has necessarily always characterized the apophatic tradition.³⁶

This newly articulated awareness of God in such traditional religious terms as beyond language, beyond sense, and beyond nature is what makes the tension between "God" and "Earth" so different from the tensions that were her primary focus in earlier work. All of the terms of those tensions—self, nature, transcendence, immanence—are part of Earth, are kataphatic. Even transcendence takes place as part of and within the boundaries of Earth, whether transcendence of the self into nature, into imagination, into higher consciousness, or into loss of consciousness in "the body of another."³⁷ In *Thirst*, "Earth" consists of the natural world Oliver has loved so long, the faith tradition she has joined, her partner of forty years, all of her poetry, and all other things. "God" consists of God alone beyond all of the things of God.

While in a sense there exists an inseparable chasm by definition between the apophatic and the kataphatic, and while the

apophatic aspects of God and apophatic spiritual practices such as silent prayer are prioritized in the tradition of the negative way, orthodoxy generally understands an interplay in the spiritual life between apophatic and kataphatic experience, practices, and ways of seeking. Lane emphasizes that "these two ways of describing the mystery of God—the way of darkness and the way of light, the ambiguity of silence and the transparency of articulation—cannot be separated."³⁸ "Apophatic and kataphatic ways," he argues, "continually critique and revitalize each other."³⁹ One way in which Oliver expresses the experience of the relationship of the two in her work is to note that it is difficult to move beyond the positive way to the negative way. For her, even though she feels a strong draw to the apophatic way, this difficulty is especially understandable since she has lived as a kataphatic poet of the natural par excellence for so many decades. Usually, as Lane and others have pointed out, such a movement happens only when one experientially encounters the limits of the imaged world, when nature and language, sense and the senses, cannot prove to be ultimate.⁴⁰ We can imagine that the death of Oliver's partner contributed to Oliver's turn to the negative way. Though, even with such loss to help one along, entering the negative way is difficult, and as the journey into the negative way is recursive, entering it is never complete. To desire God beyond all the things of God while still living in this world means to deal with the tension between the apophatic and the kataphatic. Thus, saying "Slowly . . . Slowly," Oliver relates how the two remain connected, or at least not fully separable, in the lived experience of them:

We do not do this easily. We have
lived so long in the heaven of touch,
and we maintain our mutability, our
physicality, even as we begin to
apprehend the other world.⁴¹

Generatively Practicing the Tension between God and Earth

Belden Lane points out that the apophatic tradition has always been both a theological tradition and a tradition of spiritual practice.⁴² Appropriately, Oliver's engagement with the tradition takes

both forms. Throughout *Thirst* she explores the apophatic and the relationship between the apophatic and kataphatic in theological terms, as we have seen. However, for her, in addition to whatever else poetry might be, it is also, even primarily, a spiritual practice. Thus in the performance note to a recent recording of her poems, released the same year as *Thirst*, Oliver exclaims that "Poetry is prayer."⁴³

In a poem, for instance, like "On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate (Psalm 145)," as she stands on the beach or sits at her desk thinking of the beach, asking "Where do you suppose is [God's] pale and wonderful mind?" she both articulates a theological tension and engages that tension in practice through acts of reflecting, writing, and listening. In "Six Recognitions of the Lord," Oliver describes such a practice as "the dialogue / Of our lives that is beyond all under- / standing or conclusion . . . mystery / . . . the love of God . . . obedience."⁴⁴ In the last poem of *Thirst*, itself a prayer, Oliver calls the practice a "long conversation." She says to God: "Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart."⁴⁵

At times this "conversation" means an active artistic and intellectual exploration. At other times it is not a conversation with any words but a simple presence with both God and the Earth. In some of her poems Oliver refers to these times of silence, but they take place at the margins of the poems, at the places where the poems end, and outside of the poems all together. The conversation takes place walking, watching birds, looking at flowers, reflecting on them as they are, reflecting on "what else they are," lying down in the grass, writing poems, offering prayers, and sitting still.

Such long conversations that take place equally "in the heart" as on the page or by an ocean and that, like *lectio divina*, are largely kataphatic work concerned with the apophatic realities of God, are integral to the practice of a Christian spirituality that would engage both the apophatic and the kataphatic. As one mystic put it: "[The spiritual life] exhibits rightful contact with and renunciation of the Particular and Fleeting; and with this ever seeks and finds the Eternal—deepening and incarnating in its own experience this transcendent otherness. . . ."⁴⁶ Taking part in such a tradition, Oliver names an "unsatisfaction" with God's body while maintaining that "those who love God look most deeply

into His works." She holds together "*positive opposing terms* . . . words and values [and spiritual realities] that don't contradict each other yet still exist in some real and ongoing tension."⁴⁷

Then, ultimately, she comes to rest in God without a resolution, beyond the need for a resolution. After and during lulls in the conversation, Oliver allows times of not talking, times of resting with "nothing" but "prayers" and "thirst." After she practices taking hold, she practices letting go. She engages the tension or relationship between God and Earth, and then having gained something—gratitude, openness to God, and a space of silence—she leaves the matter gratefully in God's hands. So, from the same prayer poem that calls this process a conversation, the last words of the book read: "Who knows what will happen or where I will be sent, yet already *I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing*, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning."⁴⁸

It may be that the tension between God and Earth does not even exist ontologically. But, undoubtedly, it does exist in a real and sometimes painful way in human experience, particularly for those who have come up against the limits of the imaged world. One cannot truly love and be present to God without being led back to loving the world. And one cannot truly love and be present to the world without being mortally disappointed. We can all pretend, of course, to love either God or the Earth exclusively. We can even pretend to love both without any tension. But such pretending, or ignoring, does not produce spiritual fruit. It is through the tension—or rather through practicing the tension—that spiritual fruits are produced. It is for this reason, I think, that St. Paul says "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

The proximate purpose of this spiritual practice (other than "obedience," which is one reason Oliver provides) is to gain something spiritually useful. The hope is that engaging the tension between God and Earth as a spiritual practice will generate some useful transformations. Immediately after asking "Where do you suppose is [God's] pale and wonderful mind?" Oliver hopes: "I would be good—oh, I would be upright and good . . . to enter the other kingdom: grace, and imagination and the multiple sympathies: to be as a leaf, a rose, dolphin, a wave rising slowly then briskly out of the darkness to touch the limpid air, to be God's

mind's servant, loving with the body's sweet mouth—its kisses, its words—everything.”⁴⁹ What Oliver gains from her generative spiritual practice, other than a book of poems, is a deeper understanding of both Earth and God. And, if the hopes she expresses throughout the book are fulfilled, she also gains a more sanctified, patient, kind, and joyful self, a self better able to serve the earth and those on the earth and better able to serve God.

Conclusion

In a recent address on “Studying Spirituality in a Time of Ecosystemic Crisis,” Mary Frohlich proposes that “those of us who study or teach Christian spirituality are called to place the Earth and its wounds at the center of our attention” because “deep contemplative consciousness must itself be grounded, literally, in the life of the Earth.”⁵⁰ Insisting that we need something deeper than “a simplistic romanticism of Earth-connection,” Frohlich reaches, like Lane, for the depths of apophatic spirituality.⁵¹

Admitting that the apophatic tradition “may seem like an unlikely . . . resource for an ecocentric spirituality” because of its “emphasis on the necessity of letting go of every attachment to created things in order to be united with God,” Frohlich nonetheless finds there a deep and useful “theology of creation.”⁵² In the spiritual journey of this tradition, she relates, one first recognizes “traces” of God in the created world; then one feels deeply connected with the created world in God; then one passes beyond all of these things into an apophatic “unknowing” in the presence of God. Finally, however, once transformed, one returns to creation “as a servant among servants in the company of God’s wondrous ecosystem.”⁵³ Frohlich finds this scheme useful for connecting an apophatic desire for God with a desire to engage in the Earth. “[T]he positive fruit of the most contemplative ‘night,’” she suggests, “is a radical delight in and interconnection with the totality of the created world, such that one is transformed in its gracious harmony and becomes a prophetic conduit of that same transformation for the rest of creation.”⁵⁴

Without needing to place Mary Oliver in any particular stage (indeed, she demonstrates aspects of each), we should clearly enough be able to see her on such a spiritual journey, a journey

that leads through Earth to God and back to Earth. Her practice of sustaining tension, wanting to pass beyond all created things and wanting still to remain in the created world, aims precisely at the kind of transformation of which Frohlich speaks.

In this way, though Oliver has long modeled a non-religious kataphatic spirituality deeply engaged with the environment, she now contributes a contemporary expression of an orthodox apophatic spirituality deeply engaged with the environment. Engaging the apophatic tradition and the tension between apophatic and kataphatic ways as she does, Mary Oliver offers something significant to the study of Christian spirituality and, more broadly, to readers who feel deeply committed to both God and the Earth and who may themselves have come face to face with the limits of this world.

Notes

¹My thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their careful and useful reading of a manuscript draft for this volume.

²See Sandra Schneiders on the popular understanding of religion and spirituality as mutually exclusive. Explaining “religion” in the usual terms of tradition, institution, and creed, and “spirituality” in terms of an “attempt to relate, in a positive way, oneself as a personal whole to reality as a cosmic whole,” Schneiders argues that the two should be taken up together (“Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 [2003]: 163–69).

³Anthony Manoussos, “Mary Oliver,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Poets since World War II*, ed. Donald J. Griener (Detroit: Gale, 1980), 114.

⁴Manoussos’s assessment well describes nearly fifty years of Oliver’s poetry. Quite a few scholars have discussed the spirituality in her work in similar terms, overtly or implicitly positioning it as being “spiritual” over and opposed to being “religious”: see Thomas W. Mann, “*God of Dirt*”: Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2004), xxi; Douglas Burton-Christie, “Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver,” *CrossCurrents* 46, no. 1 (1996): 87; Jean B. Alford, “The Poetry of Mary Oliver: Modern Renewal Through Mortal Acceptance,” *Pembroke Magazine* 20 (1988): 288; Laird Christensen, “The Pragmatic Mysticism of Mary Oliver,” in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, ed. J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 149; Vicki Graham, “Into the Body of Another”: Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 30, no. 4 (1994): 352–72; Diane Bonds, “The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver,” *Women’s Studies* 21, no.

1 (1992): 1-15; and Jeanne Lohmann, "Mary Oliver, EarthSaint," *EarthLight* 28 (Winter 1997-98): 16, available at <http://www.earthlight.org/earthsaint28.html> (accessed June 19, 2009).

⁵Mary Oliver, *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), dust jacket.

⁶*Ibid.*, 1. See Todd Davis, "The Earth as God's Body: Incarnation as Communion in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 4 (2009): 605.

⁷Oliver, *Thirst*, 31.

⁸*Ibid.*, 33.

⁹As part of a larger project, this essay examines only the tension between God and Earth in those places in *Thirst* where its core terms are most directly expressed. My presentation at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Montreal ("Orthodox Religious Imagery and Eco-Spirituality in Mary Oliver's *Thirst*," November 7-10, 2009) continues this discussion by applying the terms examined in this essay specifically to the poems most full with orthodox or traditional religious Christian imagery. Another segment of the project, currently in progress, looks at the tension specifically in those poems most formally dealing with grief.

¹⁰Oliver, *Thirst*, 7.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³See Burton-Christie: "These two apparently divergent impulses, one anti-symbolic, the other symbolic, ebb back and forth in the poetry of Mary Oliver" ("Nature, Spirit, and Imagination," n.p.).

¹⁴Oliver, *Thirst*, 7.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 57. This poem and all excerpts from *Thirst* are copyrighted and reprinted with the express permission of the publisher (MaryOliverPoetry@KadmusArts.com).

¹⁷Of course, strictly speaking, the "mind" of God does not necessarily equate with God's self any more than the "body" of God does, just as neither the body nor mind of a human person equates with a person's self. Even so, it is impossible to speak of God's self except in metaphors. In the context of this stanza, I understand the metaphor of "God's mind" to refer to God's self because it is connected, almost appositively, to the metaphoric personal pronoun "Him" and distinguished from the metaphor of "God's body." Because such self-contradictory metaphors are necessary to speak of God, poetry makes a well-suited mode for such theological discourse. Belden Lane explains that in speaking of God "lean, porous images" are "able to point to a mystery beyond themselves while at the same time warning of the danger of idolatry present in every image" (*The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 104).

¹⁸Oliver, *Thirst*, 26.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, 26-27.

²¹*Ibid.*, 27.

²²*Ibid.*, ix. On the use of the "cloud" as an apophatic metaphor and on the desert fathers' participation in the negative way, see Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 104 and 161-76.

²³Janet McNew, "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* 30, no. 1 (1989): 60.

²⁴Roxanne Harde, "Mary Oliver," in *Contemporary American Women Poets: An A-Z Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 264.

²⁵The other tensions do not disappear from Oliver's work with the overt introduction of this new one. Indeed, Todd Davis deals precisely with "the Earth as God's body" in *Thirst* and in some of Oliver's work after *Thirst* ("The Earth as God's Body," 622).

²⁶Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack, "The Nature of Transcendence in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," in *Postmodern Humanism in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Reconciling the Void* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 40-41.

²⁷McNew, "Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry," 62.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 69.

³⁰Burton-Christie, "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination," n.p.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 65. Because of her use of orthodox (meaning traditional) Christian images and language throughout *Thirst*, I view Oliver's use of the apophatic tradition as use of Christian apophaticism specifically. Accordingly, in this essay, I use the terms "apophatic" and "the apophatic tradition" to refer specifically to the Christian theological concepts and tradition, even though these terms are often applied more broadly.

³³Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 9-22. Other recent studies on the apophatic tradition include Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts: Vol. 1: Classic Formulations and Vol. 2: Modern and Contemporary Transformations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

³⁴Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 64.

³⁵Oliver, *Thirst*, 27.

³⁶Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 104.

³⁷Christensen, "Pragmatic Mysticism," 144; Burton-Christie, "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination," n.p.; McNew, "Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry," 66; and Graham, "Into the Body of Another," 371. Though the terms "transcendence" as well as "immanence" can be applied to apophatic "experience," the way that these critics use the concepts to indicate experience that is, whether spiritual or not, at least also mental, emotional, linguistic, or physical, puts them in the kataphatic sphere.

³⁸Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 137. See also Mary Gerhart, "The Word Image Opposition: The Apophatic-Cataphatic and Iconic-Aniconic Tensions in Spirituality," in *Divine Representations: Postmodernism and*

Spirituality, ed. Ann W. Astell (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 70.

³⁹Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 77.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 29-36.

⁴¹Oliver, *Thirst*, 27.

⁴²Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 64.

⁴³Mary Oliver, *At Blackwater Pond: Mary Oliver Reads Mary Oliver* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), i. See also Davis and Womack: "The act and artifact of poetry rests solidly at the center of what Oliver perceives to be sacred or spiritual. For Oliver, the poem is a temple where the artist goes to worship . . ." ("The Nature of Transcendence," 27).

⁴⁴Oliver, *Thirst*, 27.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁶Baron Von Hügel quoted in Evelyn Underhill, "The Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-Day," in *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 435.

⁴⁷Joseph Harris, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 25.

⁴⁸Oliver, *Thirst*, 69. Emphasis added.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 57-58. Line breaks have been edited out of this quotation.

⁵⁰Mary Frohlich, "Under the Sign of Jonah: Studying Spirituality in a Time of Ecosystemic Crisis," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 9, no. 1 (2009): 27.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 33.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 36.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 37.