



# Flourishing as Productive Paradox in Mary Oliver's Poetry

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## **Abstract**

This thesis provides a new way of reading the Romantic inheritance and spiritual themes in Mary Oliver's poetry, through a framework that accommodates her paradoxical poetical and spiritual subjectivities. Existing scholarship characterizes Oliver's poetry as feminist, Romantic, eco-poetical, or theistic, but this study resists placing singular classifications on her work in order to illustrate that hers is an explorative poetic project, which is formed out of ambiguities and paradoxes. I employ the concept of flourishing, which is a synthesis of feminist theological, ecological feminist, and deep ecological definitions, as a new framework through which to read Oliver's contradictions. Flourishing is based on the physical and spiritual interconnectedness, or mutuality, between the human, nature, and God, which results not only in the continuance of life, but also in an expansion of sympathy and knowledge of other subject positions. Flourishing occurs through mutuality, which does not attempt to create likeness between the human, nature, and God, but aims to interconnect them through an ethic of inclusion. Flourishing is itself paradoxical because it depends on interconnectedness at the same time that it maintains the boundaries of each different body.

I will use the framework of flourishing to examine the paradoxical poetical model that Mary Oliver creates in her prose writing, which she then applies to an exploration of subjectivities in her lyric practice. Flourishing will also illuminate Oliver's depiction of intuitive religion and naturalized spirituality, which are anti-authoritarian, anti-formalistic, and based on subjective spiritual experience. In contrast with intuitive forms of religion and spirituality, flourishing will also be used to examine Oliver's moralized landscapes and traditional representations of the divine, both of which represent a more conventional doctrinal or orthodox belief system. Throughout this thesis, I will establish how flourishing elucidates Oliver's paradoxical poetical and spiritual model, which, through her re-formulation of the lyric tradition, resists a singular subject position in favor of an ethic of mutuality and inclusion.

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## Preface

Despite the many collections of essays and poetry that Mary Oliver has published, there remains a relatively small body of critical analysis devoted to her writing. She is, however, a best-selling poet<sup>1</sup> who is popularly anthologized and whose poetry has been adopted by different groups and causes. Her poems tend to be anthologized in two general ways: poetry about the natural world and, a somewhat less definable genre which can be labeled as therapeutic, life affirming or inspirational poetry. One of Oliver's best-known poems, "Wild Geese," wherein she reassures us of our place "in the family of things" (l. 8, 14 *Dream Work*), is featured on a depression recovery website (*Depression – Recovery – Life*) and is sold, in poster-size, by a yoga lifestyle company (*Yoga Life Style*). Oliver's poetry has also been featured in Christian journals (*Spiritus*) and church sermons (*Unitarian Society of New Haven*). Oliver's poetry is apparently as appealing to the new age spiritualist as it is to the Christian Unitarian and, since the publication of *Thirst* (2006) and *Evidence* (2009), a growing body of explicitly Christian content has appeared in her work and received interest by reviewers, such as Ward who states: "Oliver appeals not just to a God-in-nature but to the sacrament of the Eucharist" (1). Although it would be inaccurate to refer to Oliver as a strictly Christian poet, there remain a number of her poems that are "starkly religious" (Ward 66) and that praise a "Lord" god. If Oliver is not a Christian poet, there are a variety of other spiritual titles that she has been assigned: "seeker after divinity" (Makuk 553), pantheist (Christensen 136), "spiritual sentinel" (Doyle 1), and "earth saint" (Lohmann 16).

Some critics interpret Oliver's work as feminist due to what they consider to be a rewriting of traditional religious models, but many of Oliver's poems refer to a "He," or Lord God. Other critics identify a desire for union with a maternal nature in Oliver's poetry, which they consider to be evidence of an emancipatory project that distances her work from the patriarchal models of the Romantic tradition. However, Oliver's subject is often a self-conscious observer of nature who is unable to connect with the natural

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing this thesis, her 2010 collection, *Swan* is the number one contemporary best-seller on the *Poetry Foundation's* website, with *Evidence* (2009) holding the fourth position and four other of her collections listed in the top thirty. *Thirst* (2009) has been on the list for one hundred and sixty eight weeks and *New and Selected Poems: Volume Two* (2005) has been on for one hundred and eighty eight weeks.

world and is, therefore, not always able to find succor in Mother Nature's lap, but instead turns to a transcendent god-figure who is sometimes the patriarchal Judeo-Christian Father. Oliver's poetry has also been characterized as exemplifying a high Romantic voice that does not reflect feminist or environmentalist ideals, but this does not account for the common philosophy between Romanticism and contemporary environmentalism, which is examined in the field of Green Romanticism in studies by Bate, Coupe, and McKusick. Mary Oliver's Romantic inheritance does not result in the exclusion of contemporary environmentalism and the concept of flourishing relates equally to traditional and contemporary ideals of interdependence and interconnectedness.

Ecocritical studies of Mary Oliver's work have been the most illuminating. Ecocriticism, put most simply, "is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Other critics, such as Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic, Glen A. Love, and Greg Garrard, have built upon Glotfelty's definition with ecocritical approaches that also focus on finding environmental implications in literature, placing emphasis on the life sciences, and "giving space to both [the] literary and cultural" (Garrard 5), respectively. Mary Oliver's work has also been referred to as ecopoetry, which, similar to ecocriticism, does not have a singular authoritative definition, but is a broad term used to describe verse that "seeks reconnection between the human and nature" (Borthwick 1). John Elder, Jonathan Bate, and J. Scott Bryson have all contributed significant criticism to the field of ecopoetry, all of which I will explore in my Introduction in order to establish that Oliver's poetry is, for the most part, ecopoetical, but also that the term lacks a spiritual and theological element, which is a significant aspect of her work. The concept of flourishing, with its meaning grounded in feminist theology, can be used as way of studying contemporary ecopoetry that studies the relationship between the human, nature, and God.

The primary purpose of this study is not to suggest ways in which Oliver's poetry does something new, but to provide a new way of reading Mary Oliver's poetry that accounts for her traditional and contemporary relevance as well as her often-contradictory depictions of the relationship between the human, nature, and God. The extent of Oliver's Christian content is a similar issue for critics as is her Romantic inheritance, which has been denied by some in order to avoid condemning Oliver's poetry to irrelevance for the contemporary reader. This thesis uses the contemporary concept of flourishing, its definition being a synthesis of different uses in the fields of feminist theology, ecological feminism, and deep ecology, as a new framework through

which to read Oliver's poetry. Flourishing, due to its theological significance, provides a new way of reading Oliver ecocritically, but within a framework that accommodates a mutual relationship between the human, nature, and God. Flourishing is dependent on mutuality, which is another term that I have synthesized from its feminist use, along with Donald S. Berry's interpretation of mutuality from Martin Buber's *I and Thou*.<sup>2</sup> Mutuality is a term used by feminist critics to refer to "a knowing that transforms the self who knows, a knowing that brings into being new sympathies, new affects as well as new cognitions and new forms of intersubjectivity" (Bartky 71-2). Feminist mutuality resists privileging one perspective or experience over another. Martin Buber's theological conceptualization of mutuality accepts boundaries between people and perspectives, but these differences do not inhibit relationship and inclusion. I propose that the core of flourishing, which is mutuality, is the key to a new reading of Mary Oliver's poetry, as it accounts for her work's theological content without being restricted by binaries where either the human, nature, or God is given ultimate and singular authority. Mutuality, which is the interconnectedness that forms the basis of flourishing, creates relationships as opposed to hierarchy.

In the Introduction, I will provide a summary of the three conceptualizations of flourishing from which I have derived my own definition, as well as developing the concept of mutuality. The second half of the Introduction will be a review of the significant critical works on Oliver's poetry, ordered according to the four primary theoretical frameworks that have been applied to her work: feminist, Romantic, ecocritical, and theological. The introductory chapter establishes that existing studies have neglected to read Oliver's poetry as ambiguous and resistant to singular classifications, which, this thesis will show, is best negotiated through the concept of flourishing and its inherent mutuality.

In Chapter One, I will employ the framework of flourishing to interpret the paradoxical poetical model that Mary Oliver and the Romantics create in their prose writing. I will then consider how Oliver's exploring subject negotiates its paradoxical framework in "Breakage" (*Why I Wake Early* 2004) as compared to Whitman's "Song of Myself" (*Leaves of Grass* 1855). I will also compare the dialogic transactions in Oliver's "Both Worlds" (*Red Bird* 2008) to Coleridge's in "Frost at Midnight" (*Fears in Solitude* 1798) in order to demonstrate that Oliver's relational lyric voice is not a strictly

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas W. Mann refers to Buber's *I and Thou* in his study of Mary Oliver's intersubjective relationship with nature (28-29), which is the most sustained study of her theology. I will examine Mann's study in the Introduction and Chapter Three.

contemporary project, but represents an inheritance of the style of the “greater Romantic lyric” (Abrams *Correspondent Breeze* 76). Chapter One demonstrates that Oliver’s paradoxical and explorative subjectivities, which are evidence of Romantic and contemporary feminist and ecological ideals, represent mutuality and flourishing through their inclusion of multiple perspectives in the development of the poetic subject.

In Chapter Two, I use the framework of flourishing to read Mary Oliver’s intuitive religion and spiritualized nature, which she inherits from the American Romantics such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Intuitive religion, for the American Romantics, represents anti-authoritarianism and anti-formalism, which are also elements of Oliver’s religious framework. Oliver’s intuitive religion recontextualizes and reconceptualizes traditional Judeo-Christian doctrine by dissociating it from the institutional Church and situating it in the natural world, making spiritual experience personal and unique. In the second half of Chapter Two, I examine the naturalized spirituality that Oliver creates, wherein spiritual exchanges and relationships between the human and nature do not require sanction, blessing, or any involvement from a god-figure, but still honor mutuality.

Chapter Three examines Mary Oliver’s moralized landscape,<sup>3</sup> which takes on a morally pedagogical function, and her traditional representations of the divine that take shape as either mother or father figures. In contrast with the intuitive religion in Oliver’s poetry discussed in Chapter Two, Chapter Three demonstrates how the natural world imparts a clear message of the virtue of sacrifice to the human, and God becomes more clearly associated with traditional representations of the divine. Although Oliver’s moralized landscape and god-figures represent doctrine and authority, they portray possibilities instead of privileged, orthodox positions. Readings of Mary Oliver’s poetry have not accounted enough for the tensions and paradoxes within her oeuvre—in particular, those that form her spirituality—but this study frames Oliver’s Romantic inheritance through the contemporary theological, feminist, and ecological concept of flourishing, which enables a more holistic and yet nuanced reading of her work.

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<sup>3</sup> I take the concept of a moralized landscape from M.H. Abrams’ definition and development of the term in relation to the Romantic lyric in *The Correspondent Breeze*, as well as Jonathan Bate’s use of the term in *Romantic Ecology*, which I will contextualize and develop in Chapter Three.

## List of Abbreviations

<i>AP</i>	<i>American Primitive</i> , Mary Oliver
<i>BP</i>	<i>Blue Pastures</i> , Mary Oliver
<i>CB</i>	<i>Correspondent Breeze</i> , M.H. Abrams
<i>DSA</i>	“Divinity School Address,” Ralph Waldo Emerson
<i>LB</i>	<i>Lyrical Ballads</i> , William Wordsworth
<i>LL</i>	<i>Long Life</i> , Mary Oliver
<i>NS</i>	<i>Natural Supernaturalism</i> , M.H. Abrams
<i>RB</i>	<i>Red Bird</i> , Mary Oliver
<i>RE</i>	<i>Romantic Ecology</i> , Jonathan Bate
<i>TM</i>	<i>Twelve Moons</i> , Mary Oliver
<i>WDWK</i>	<i>What Do We Know</i> , Mary Oliver
<i>WIWE</i>	<i>Why I Wake Early</i> , Mary Oliver

## **Introduction**

### **Flourishing: A New Framework for Reading Mary Oliver**

Flourishing is the physical and spiritual interconnectedness between the human, nature, and God, which results in the continuance of life and an expansion of the human's sympathy and knowledge of other subjectivities. Flourishing is based on the paradox of mutuality, which is the seeking of relationships without requiring unity through the dissolution of difference. The above definition of flourishing is itself a synthesis of three existing definitions from Grace Jantzen, Chris J. Cuomo, and Arne Naess who use the term in the fields of feminist theology, ecological feminism, and deep ecology, respectively. My new conceptualization of flourishing is influenced by all three in order to create a holistic definition of the term which best describes the interconnectivity between the human, nature, and God in Mary Oliver's poetry and that captures the interrelationship between the spiritual and earthly, as well as the relationship between language and nature. Reading Oliver's poetry through the framework of flourishing illuminates the complexity and paradoxical nature of her lyric voice and spirituality.

The second section of this chapter will establish why there needs to be a new way of reading Mary Oliver's poetry and how flourishing provides this unique framework. Over the past two decades, Oliver's poetry has been the subject of feminist, Romantic, ecocritical, and theistic studies. However, the paradoxes and inconsistencies in her work have yet to be acknowledged and investigated and require a dynamic theoretical approach that can accommodate her contradictions. Critics have resisted characterizing Oliver's work as Romantic or as having Christian content, for fear of limiting her work's meaning and alienating her contemporary reader. However, Romanticism is a primary influence throughout her oeuvre and provides the basis of its distinctive features: her exploring lyric subject; her formulation of intuitive religion; and her representation of spiritualized nature. Christianity, which is both implicit and explicit in Oliver's work, influences both her moralized landscape and representations of the divine. These two traditions of Romanticism and Christianity do not limit the meaning and significance of Oliver's work but contribute to a relationship of mutuality that also represents contemporary spiritual and ecological ideals. Flourishing provides a new way of reading Mary Oliver's work that accounts for its paradoxical and inclusive nature and explains its contemporary relevance while acknowledging her traditional influences.

## The Concept of Flourishing: A Model of Mutuality

The existing definition of flourishing that has been most influential in forming my own concept of flourishing is from Grace Jantzen who uses the concept of flourishing as a feminist theological alternative to the Christian doctrine of salvation. Feminist theologians reexamine Christianity and its doctrines in an attempt to critique and eliminate the oppression of women in society and the Church as well as to destabilize dualisms and hierarchy that subjugate women. Feminist theology identifies “[t]he need to redefine church away from a handed down androcentric revealed tradition and a clericalist mindset” and aims to provide “a new understanding of scripture, based on a personal and communitarian experience” (McEwan and Poole 231). It is precisely this new understanding of scripture and community that Jantzen’s concept of flourishing offers. Jantzen states that flourishing “is a significant biblical concept” (Jantzen “Flourishing” 70), but despite its appearances in scripture, it has been overshadowed by the doctrine of salvation,<sup>4</sup> which devalues the human’s earthly state. Flourishing is a substitute for doctrine that emphasizes fallen nature and original sin by stressing mutuality instead of the patriarchal tradition of Christianity wherein God, the Father and creator, is hierarchically superior to the human and nature. The elements of Jantzen’s definition that are most useful to bring to an analysis of Mary Oliver’s poetry are the importance of the present and earthly, the destabilization of hierarchy, and spiritualized nature.

The concept of flourishing is grounded in the present and earthly, which ensures that its spiritual significance and meaning is accessible during one’s earthly existence, as opposed to being something that is reserved as an ultimate reward in the afterlife. The term “flourishing” is inherently grounded in the material and ecological through its etymology: “The word ‘flourish’ is etymologically linked with flowers, with blossoming ... As a noun form, a ‘flourish’ is the mass of flowers on a fruit tree, or the bloom of luxuriant, verdant growth” (Jantzen “Flourishing” 70). Even though the term “flourishing” is used, by Jantzen, in a spiritual context, it derives its meaning from a reference to the natural world, which implicitly links the earthly to the divine.

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<sup>4</sup> The word “flourish” and “flourishing” appear nineteen times in the King James Bible and “blossom” appears six times. The word “salvation,” the predominant doctrine, appears one hundred and fifty eight times.

In flourishing, the importance of the present and earthly is reinforced not only through its etymological links to the ecological, but also by a re-valuation of the human's flawed earthly state. Jantzen believes that the doctrine of salvation implies that the human needs rescuing from his or her earthly existence, while flourishing encourages the human to embrace the present rather than awaiting for fulfillment to be bestowed upon them at a later date. The concept of flourishing discourages the belief that "the human situation is a negative one, out of which we need to be delivered" (Jantzen "Flourishing" 70). In adopting the concept of flourishing as a substitute for the doctrine of salvation, more value is placed on the human's life instead of relegating the hope of spiritual satisfaction to the afterlife. Because it remains grounded in the present and earthly, flourishing creates a theological model of accessibility with a focus on valuing the human situation.

Another aspect of the feminist theological emphasis on the present and earthly is a greater valuation of physical bodies and mortality rather than belief in eternal life and salvation. In traditional Christian theology there is a belief in the afterlife and the doctrine of the ascension of the soul, but in Jantzen's concept of flourishing "the embodied sexuate self [is] the subject of divine becoming" (*Becoming Divine* 178). This means that the physical body can be a site of the sacred during a person's earthly existence. This exaltation of the embodied self embraces the present human condition, on earth, but is controversial in a traditional Christian context wherein, according to Jantzen, traditional theology teaches "corporeality must be sloughed off if immortality is to be achieved" (178). However, according to feminist theological flourishing, spiritual experience depends on the body, which is an important part of meditating on and connecting with the present and earthly.

In Jantzen's definition of flourishing, in order to enable subjective spiritual experience, there must be a destabilization of hierarchy, which creates a more inclusive model of exchange and community between the human, nature, and God. The dismantling of hierarchy is directly related to the valuation of the present and earthly because the natural world is no longer considered subordinate to an unknown, divine world or afterlife. The destabilization of hierarchy also implies that the human does not need rescuing by a divine savior. Jantzen's definition of flourishing encourages interdependent and mutual growth between bodies on earth, rather than encouraging belief in the goal of individual salvation. To be able to flourish and achieve spiritual satisfaction on earth, without the need of a divine savior, gives the human agency and allows spiritual experience to belong in the earthly. Embracing flourishing instead of

salvation is also less deistic. This, however, does not dismiss the need for religious figures, but changes how one should interpret them: “Jesus would not be envisaged as the heroic saviour entering human history from outside, but rather one who manifests what it may mean to live fully and naturally in the creative justice of God” (Jantzen “Flourishing” 71). A destabilization of hierarchy allows a valuation of different, subjective spiritual experiences as opposed to maintaining a singular authoritative version of that which is sacred.

The third and final element of Jantzen’s doctrine of flourishing is the spiritualization of nature, which turns the natural world into a symbol or representation of the divine, making the sacred something real and accessible. Spiritualizing nature not only makes the divine accessible to the human in the present and earthly, but it also assigns more value to the natural world, depicting it as more than just a resource to be exploited. According to Jantzen, instead of awaiting outside, divine intervention, “the metaphor of flourishing would lead to an idea of the divine source and ground, the one in whom we are ‘rooted and grounded in love,’ in whom we are the branches and can bring forth much fruit” (“Flourishing” 71). In this statement, Jantzen connects spiritual fulfillment to the earth, which she then connects to the human and, although this spiritual connection between nature and the human does not deny the existence of God, allows a spiritual exchange to take place outside a religious institution. Flourishing depends on a spiritualized nature, which puts the sacred within reach of the human, making spiritual awakening accessible to individuals who have a devotional relationship with the natural world.

The importance of the present and earthly, the destabilization of hierarchy, and spiritualized nature are the primary elements of Grace Jantzen’s feminist theological flourishing<sup>5</sup> and are those that will inform my own holistic conceptualization of the term in approaching Mary Oliver’s poetry. Even though Jantzen’s feminist theological definition of flourishing is grounded in scripture, it reinterprets the term independently of authoritative Christian doctrine in an effort to give it significance within the spiritual community between the human and nature, outside an institution. Jantzen’s definition of flourishing does not offer an explicit vision of God, besides describing what He is *not*, which is the heroic rescuer or redeemer who is separate or elevated from the human

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<sup>5</sup> There are other feminist theological articulations of flourishing, such as Helen Oppenheimer’s statement that flourishing occurs after the “[e]nd of man” (163), in the afterlife. Mary Grey uses the term to refer to the human’s recovery of the positive dimension of eros” (404), which makes the term more anthropocentric with a focus on the human’s sensuality and physicality.

until he or she has need of salvation. In place of Christian patriarchy, Grace Jantzen's concept of flourishing establishes a sense of mutuality between the human, nature, and God, which allows subjective spiritualities to develop, unconstrained by orthodoxy.

The second definition of flourishing that influences my own is Chris J. Cuomo's ecological feminist definition of flourishing, which is also based on the importance of fostering community and mutuality but deals with the term's ethical implications as opposed to its spiritual meaning. In *Ecological Communities: An Ethic of Flourishing*, Cuomo opens her discussion of flourishing by distinguishing between ecological feminism and ecofeminism, because both feminisms present a different view of nature. Ecofeminists believe that women and nature share similar qualities, which Cuomo refers to as being "object attentive" in that they "focus on similarities and relationships between the object of oppression, say 'women' and 'nature' (Cuomo 22). Broadly speaking, ecofeminists endorse traditional qualities assigned to women such as "moral goodness [...] purity, patience, self-sacrifice, spirituality and maternal instinct" (Plumwood 9), but this belief in the "angel in the ecosystem" (Plumwood 10) is overly simplistic and only reinforces societal dualisms such as associating nature with the feminine and the good, while culture is associated with the masculine and the intellect. The difficulty with some ecofeminist projects is that, because they are object-attentive and maintain that nature and women are both feminine, for example, they reinforce oppressive dualisms where features that are "supposedly shared by subjugated beings and classes" (Cuomo 23) are not scrutinized. Ecological feminists, however, are critical of traditional roles and characterizations and think about "how to give a positive value to what has been traditionally devalued and excluded as nature *without* simply reversing values and rejecting the sphere of culture" (Plumwood 11). Cuomo suggests that even the environmentalist movement has not questioned established norms and meanings of nature and believes that "seminal thinkers in environmental ethics have not argued for, or incorporated, the unsettling notion that 'nature' is a constructed concept, not a self-evident or absolute referent [...] Many of their conclusions reify other ethical norms by relying exclusively on the central tenets of modern Western culture" (44). Redefining nature is relevant to ecofeminists but is an exercise that can also illuminate cultural construction of the natural world for environmentalists. This differentiation between ecofeminist and ecological feminism is general, but it does create an important distinction between ways that nature and the feminine are characterized and how they become associated. Flourishing requires that nature no longer be subjugated and exploited, but should not, as a result, transcend the human. Cuomo points out that,

although the term flourishing is not explicitly used in the two different fields, it is most illuminating as a feminist ecological ethic: “Despite the absence of explicit discussions of flourishing, commitment to the well-being of moral objects is the basis upon which oppression, degradation, and other forms of harm and manipulation are rejected by feminism and ecofeminism” (62). Cuomo’s flourishing is an ideal principle for ecological feminism because it depends on the defiance of hierarchy and an ethical treatment of all life forms, which is similar to the mutuality represented in Grace Jantzen’s concept of flourishing, but with an added emphasis on the subjugation of nature as a feminine body.

From Cuomo’s use of the term, I have drawn on three primary emphases: the body, community, and self-directedness.<sup>6</sup> Grounding an ecological feminist concept of flourishing in the body and the idea of process contributes to building an ethical consciousness wherein, like Jantzen’s valuation of the human state, the physical world of the human and nature must be cared for by every individual. That “flourishing occurs in bodies” (Cuomo 73), explicitly states that the meaning of flourishing is not something esoteric or abstract, but relates to one’s physical well-being and health. To locate flourishing in the body ensures that the implications of the word, like Jantzen’s, remain grounded in the present and material rather than standing for an unattainable ideal. Identifying flourishing as something that occurs in process also reassures the individual that there is no instant gratification to be achieved, but it is something that requires time and consistent contribution. These two elements of ecological feminist flourishing relate to the body and its purpose in representing flourishing as something both inclusive and attainable, as well as something that requires time and process to develop. All of these aspects illustrate that flourishing is not simply a gift bestowed on selected individuals from an authoritative source, but is something that can be self-created.

The emphasis on community also serves to reinforce the importance of the ethical treatment of others, instead of simply looking after one’s individual needs. That

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<sup>6</sup> In her own definition, Cuomo presents the ecological feminist meaning of flourishing as having seven elements, all of which relate to the three themes that I have listed above. The seven elements are:

- Flourishing occurs in bodies
- Flourishing occurs in process
- Flourishing is achievable by individuals only in communities
- Flourishing is achievable by individuals as well as aggregates
- Flourishing requires good consequences and good persons
- Flourishing requires integrity and ‘self’-directedness
- The flourishing of moral agents requires the flourishing of moral objects. (73-77)

“flourishing is achievable by individuals only in communities” (Cuomo 74) is of the utmost importance because, whether one is engaged with other humans, animals, or plants, flourishing is not flourishing unless it represents a form of communal or ecological interconnectedness. According to Cuomo, “[t]o be extracted from community, human or otherwise, is to lack relationships and contexts that provide the meaning, substance and material for various sorts of lives” (74). Interconnectedness is necessary to physical survival, as well as the human’s expanding sympathy and awareness of other subjectivities. That “flourishing is achievable by individuals as well as aggregates” (Cuomo 74) emphasizes the interdependence and sense of community required in flourishing: “The concept of flourishing is something that can be applied to individuals and communities, and individual and communal flourishing contribute to each other dialectically” (Cuomo 74-5). If a community is flourishing, a large number of its members should also be flourishing and, if an individual is flourishing, it should be a result of his or her community also flourishing. Therefore, if an individual prospers as a result of exploiting another, this would not be considered a flourishing because it does not represent the good of the whole.

The third and final emphasis that I have taken from Cuomo’s study of flourishing is self-directedness, which depends on ethical activity within a community without having it enforced by an authoritative source: “Flourishing requires good consequences and good persons” (Cuomo 75) and “[t]he flourishing of moral agents requires the flourishing of moral objects” (Cuomo 76). Cuomo’s flourishing emphasizes the importance of an individual’s good and moral actions to the flourishing of the whole. The *individual* must be good, act with integrity, and treat other lives morally in order for communal, interconnected flourishing to occur. The importance of the individual’s actions raises the question of how autonomy functions within flourishing. In Cuomo’s study, she states that ecological feminists “promote the unhindered unfolding of nonhuman life through policies of (human) nonintervention” and that “examples of nonhuman flourishing that do not require human intervention are superior to flourishing brought about by human interference” (76). Flourishing does require the human to care for other lives and to acknowledge their moral value, but nonhuman communities are self-directed and do not require human interference. Noninterference, in general, is ideal but some level of intervention as moral action can be conducive to a holistic flourishing, which is an element of Mary Oliver’s work that I will explore in Chapter Three. When an individual rescues an animal or plant life from perishing, an organism is, therefore, enabled to continue living and the human, in seeing the impact of

his or her virtuous action, will experience a growing sense of sympathy and understanding of other subjectivities. Autonomy must be nurtured in order for individual bodies to have the space and freedom to experience and grow, but examples of goodness in the form of intervention and rescue must also be set.

Although it is less spiritual and more focused on interpersonal relationships than Jantzen's, Cuomo's concept of flourishing, emphasizes the importance of the bodily, community, and self-directedness, all of which relate to ethical interconnection. Interconnectivity and interdependence are also key elements of a holistic flourishing, which underline the necessity for good and virtuous action by each individual. The balance between the self and the whole is also an important issue within flourishing and, although Cuomo discourages human intervention, in a holistic flourishing, which requires mutuality between the human, nature, and God, it should take place with great care and consciousness.

The third and final definition of flourishing that is relevant to introduce here is taken from Arne Naess' deep ecology movement and focuses on an ideal human to non-human interaction, which involves assigning all bodies intrinsic value. This concept of flourishing comes from Arne Naess's original formulation of deep ecology in his 1973 essay "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement." What Naess outlined in this essay has since been translated and reformulated by David Rothenberg into eight points, which combine to create a framework of human and non-human flourishing. While Naess used the word "blossom," Rothenberg adopts the term "flourishing," which captures the importance of thriving and growth in deep ecology.

The deep ecological movement is characterized by some critics as being ecocentric due to its call for a decrease in the human population in order for non-human life to flourish. However, the goal of deep ecological flourishing is to have both human and non-human life thrive alongside each other: "The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes" (Rothenberg 29). In a deep ecological flourishing, the human's restraint from, and lack of interest in, tampering and interfering with nature exemplifies a reverence for the natural world that could otherwise be dominated and irresponsibly consumed. According to Naess, the natural world should not be depicted as an unattainable ideal, but provides a landscape in which the human can thrive without exploiting.

Within a deep ecological flourishing, self-realization is the development of the individual's sense of autonomy that is nurtured by the larger community. When the

individual thrives, or self-realizes within a community, he or she will be motivated to contribute to and maintain the mutual source of this empowerment. Naess differentiates between “self-realization” and “Self-realization”; the latter being the ultimate goal because it “includes personal and community self-realization, but is conceived also to refer to an unfolding of reality as a totality” (Rothenberg 84). In other words, it is a discovery and expansion of one’s total self as it is a part of the interconnectivity and interdependence of a whole, rather than simply being the “narrow ego” (Naess “Self-Realization” 13). Naess also states that self-realization depends on outward contact with community in order for there to be change in the individual: “[b]ecause of an inescapable process of identification with others [...] the self is widened and deepened... Thus, all that can be achieved by altruism—the *dutiful, moral* consideration of others—can be achieved—and much more—through widening and deepening the self” (“Self-Realization” 14, original emphasis). Naess’s concept of self-realization has an inherent moral aspect because the good of the individual is dependent on the good of the whole and vice versa. In Naess’s self-realization, the individual discovers life’s meaning through his or her relationship within a community, which should ensure good and moral actions.

All forms of flourishing require that community functions ethically. Cuomo’s study provides an in-depth development of the concept of flourishing as it relates to ecological feminist ethics and why the term implies ethical activity. An explicit investigation of ethics creates an interesting point of comparison between Cuomo and Jantzen’s conceptualizations of flourishing. For Jantzen, a key question to ask with regards to flourishing is, “who flourishes, and at whose expense?” (“Flourishing” 71), which suggests that the term always connotes exploitation. Flourishing, then, “lends itself readily to a politicized theology of justice and protest” (71-72). Cuomo, on the other hand, makes the case that flourishing is inherently ethical, otherwise we would refer to someone’s prosperity as “exploitation,” “mastery,” or “enslavement.” Although both Jantzen and Cuomo consider the ethics of flourishing, Arne Naess also states that *nature* becomes an embedded part of the ethics of flourishing. No matter what the elements or community members of a particular definition of flourishing, it requires some ethical standard in order to survive.

While the concept of flourishing I deploy has been shaped by the work of Jantzen, Cuomo, and Naess, it is important to distinguish it from other formulations of the word in other fields. The definition of flourishing that will be used throughout this thesis is distinct from the anthropocentric concept of “eudaimonia” and the

contemporary psychological concept of flourishing because it interconnects the human, nature, and the divine through the dissolution of hierarchy. Aristotle examines eudaimonia as an ethical term and although it can be translated as both “happiness” and “human flourishing,” which both invite subjective definitions, eudaimonia is meant to represent that which is *objectively* good. According to Thomas E. Hill, eudaimonia, as an ethical term, “was not a subjective condition, such as contentment or the satisfaction of our preferences, but a life that could be objectively determined to be appropriate to our nature as human beings” (143). The disadvantage in adopting Aristotle’s eudaimonia as a definition of flourishing is that, despite its attempt to be based on that which is objectively good, conceptualizations of what constitutes happiness will vary greatly and to select one would be exclusive. In studies on eudaimonia, the “exact meaning [of flourishing] varies with different theories of the human good” (Rasmussen 2), but it is *human* good that remains central to its definition. To entangle flourishing with concepts of happiness and contentment places too much focus on the human individual, which detracts from its mutuality with nature and the divine. Eudaimonia, in theory, is an ethical term, which is an important element of my concept of flourishing, but it remains too anthropocentric to apply to a study of Mary Oliver’s poetry. Rather than focus on an individual’s emotions, my concept of flourishing refers to the physical and spiritual interconnectivity that results in a continuance of life and in an expansion of sympathy and knowledge of other subject positions.

Human flourishing is also a term used in positive psychology<sup>7</sup> to describe human well-being and the individual’s mental health, which makes the term more individualistic and anthropocentric than how I will use it in this thesis. According to psychological uses of the term flourishing, it can mean “to live with an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth and resilience” (Fredrickson and Losada 678). Like Cuomo’s definition, Fredrickson’s and Losada’s involves a concept of virtue and ethical behavior, but Cuomo’s is based on interdependence and considers flourishing to be a mutual result for both nature and human communities, as opposed to only occurring in individuals. In another psychological study of human flourishing, *Personal Project Pursuit: Goals, Action, and Human Flourishing* (Little), the conceptualization of flourishing relates to personal advancement and progress, which also limits flourishing to being an individualistic

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<sup>7</sup> Positive psychology “is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus on psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 5).

achievement. This focus on personal progress emphasizes “personal goals” (Little xvii) and the individual being “proactive” (Wright 440) as ways to flourish. Human flourishing, in positive psychology, deals primarily with individual flourishing as opposed to mutual or communal flourishing, which engages with both the natural world and the divine.

In sharp contrast to these understandings of flourishing, my conceptualization of flourishing is based on mutuality, which is a form of intersubjectivity between the human, nature and God, in which difference is maintained, not dissolved. My conceptualization of mutuality is a synthesis of Martin Buber’s definition (*I and Thou* 1923), Donald S. Berry’s reinterpretation of Buber’s mutuality (*Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber* 1985), and S. Bartky’s feminist use of the term (*Sympathy and Solidarity* 2002). Without mutuality, there is no flourishing and the essence of my use of the term “mutuality” is taken from Martin Buber’s concept of the I-Thou relationship in which everything is interrelated within God. Buber differentiates between having an I-it relationship with others, which results in an objectification, with having an I-thou relationship, which results in exchange and understanding. Buber uses one’s I-Thou relationship with a tree as an example of mutuality instead of objectification: “The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way. Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual” (Buber 14-5). The tree’s meaning does not depend on the human’s perception, but the tree has intrinsic value as a Thou, within the eternal Thou, or God: “In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal *Thou*; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou*; in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*” (Buber 14, original emphasis). Mutuality is the key to flourishing because it does not depend on a god-redeemer, but interconnects God, the human, and nature within the same category of Thou. The I in relation to the Thou is the equivalent of the I in relation to the community, or the whole, that is so important in a flourishing: “The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting” (Buber 17, original emphasis). In my conceptualization of flourishing, mutuality replaces hierarchy and Buber’s definition is important to my own because of its emphasis on interconnectedness while maintaining the uniqueness of all beings and objects.

Another important element of mutuality that my own study emphasizes is the importance of the exchange between the human and nature. Donald S. Berry's study of Buber's mutuality is unique because it uses the term to encourage the human's "care for the things and beings of the natural world" (Berry xi). According to Berry, Buber's mutuality has too often been used only to discuss humanity in isolation. For a study of Oliver's poetry, which is focused on the human's interaction with the non-human, Berry's form of mutuality is the most inclusive. Buber's work was "centered on identifying the possibilities between persons," as well as "all that meets us in any way whatever" (Berry 3). Berry sees mutuality as being something that represents all of the human's relationships, as opposed to only the interpersonal or the exchange between the human and God. The basis of mutuality is having relationships that appreciate "the necessity of the absolute distinction between the self and the other," which means that "the image of unity is displaced by the image of relation" (Berry 8). Rather than seeking absorption of the self into the divine, Buber states that "all real living is meeting" (Buber 11), which maintains that encounters and meetings must take place between the self and other, but that boundaries and difference will also remain between them.

My concept of mutuality, which is the basis of flourishing, emphasizes the replacement of objectification with relationship, the importance of engaging with the natural world, and an expansion of one's knowledge and sympathy, which I derive from S. Bartky's contemporary feminist use of mutuality. According to Bartky, mutuality is "a knowing that transforms the self who knows, a knowing that brings into being new sympathies, new affects as well as new cognitions and new forms of intersubjectivity" (Bartky 721-2). Bartky's definition involves an expansion of self-knowledge through a growing understanding of others, which is similar to the concept of the relational lyric subject that will be examined in Chapter One. Mutual community does not require a hierarchy or authority to function, but accounts for each individual's significance and subjectivity. Within my concept of flourishing, mutuality is an element of its framework that takes place between the human, nature, and God without establishing a hierarchy or singular authoritative subjectivity.

In a framework of flourishing, mutuality replaces hierarchy with inclusive relationships between the human, nature, and God that still maintain the difference between each. Mutuality ensures that a single source of authority does not develop, but that, instead, sympathies expand and boundaries are respected. In the following section, I will provide a survey of existing criticism of Oliver, which will demonstrate why my

conceptualization of flourishing provides a new way of reading Mary Oliver's poetry and the tensions that it creates between her traditional and unconventional literary and cultural influences. When Oliver is read as feminist, Romantic, eco-poetical, or theistic, it should be with an understanding of her work's ambiguous relationship to each strict category and her exploration of paradoxical poetical and spiritual models.

### **The Case for Flourishing: Reviewing Mary Oliver Criticism**

Mary Oliver was born in Ohio in 1935 and attended Ohio State University and Vassar. She published her first collection, *No Voyage and Other Poems*, in 1963, which was followed by *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems* (1972) and *Twelve Moons* (1979). Oliver then published *American Primitive* (1983), which won her the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1984. *American Primitive* confronts the dark elements of nature without condemning them, an observation echoed in Stanley Kunitz's review of the collection, which appears on the book's back cover: "[Oliver's] special gift is to connect us with our source in the natural world, its beauties and terrors and mysteries and consolations." Kunitz captures the duality of Oliver's nature, which is evident early in her career, as her human subject seeks closeness with nature, but is also becomes more aware of the inherent difference between herself and the natural world, which is a theme that continues. Oliver has written a book-length poem (*The Leaf and the Cloud* 2000) and experimented with prose poems (*West Wind* 1997 and *White Pine* 1994) and while her collections maintain continuity through their similar subject of nature and by extending a series of poems between them (e.g. a series of poems about Oliver's dog, Percy, begins in *New and Selected Poem, Volume Two* and continues until 2010 in *Swan*). However, despite this continuity, each collection also has a subtle difference in tone or focus that distinguishes it from the others. *Dream Work* (1986), for instance, explores human fear and anger while *House of Light* (1990) has a consistently peaceful and accepting tone. *What Do We Know* (2002) emphasizes the importance of gratitude and *Why I Wake Early* (2004) explores the balance between questioning and relinquishment. All of Oliver's collections examine the relationship between the human, nature, and a divine third term, but between collections, and even poems, the poetic subject's perspective can change.

Despite her popularity, Oliver has remained a private individual who gives very few interviews and, within these, her poetry rather than her personal life is the focus.

However, Oliver has not been guarded about her long-term relationship with the late Molly Malone Cook, to whom she has dedicated the majority of her collections. On the cover of *Long Life* (2004) is a photograph of Oliver and Cook in Provincetown and Oliver wrote the text for a collection of Cook's photographs called *Our World* that was published in 2007. Sue Russell is the one critic who has taken up Oliver's same-sex relationship as a significant influence in her poetry and states that, "[u]ntil 1993, the sexual preference of poet Mary Oliver was a trade secret, albeit not a very well-kept one" (21). Russell's study makes a connection between Oliver's political and narrative ambivalence with "a lesbian literary tradition" (21):

Mary Oliver will never be a balladeer of contemporary lesbian life [...] but the fact that she chooses not to write from a similar political or narrative stance makes her all the more valuable to our collective culture. Poets who choose indirection as a strategy do so, at least in part, because that is what poetry means to them as a form of expression that can transcend its historical context. (Russell 22)

What Russell identifies in Oliver's work is the lack of a clear "stance" (Russell 22), which is similar, in essence, to the contradictory depictions of nature that Stanley Kunitz identifies in Oliver's poetry early in her career. Oliver deals with duality, or uses what I refer to as productive paradox, throughout her oeuvre rather than privileging one subjectivity. By 2010, Oliver has published twenty-three collections of essays and poems, two poetry handbooks, and two audio recordings of her poetry and she continues to give poetry readings.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this thesis is to provide an in-depth and original analysis of the extent of Oliver's paradoxical poetry, which has been, to date, only identified by a few critics, such as Annette Allen who states that, "[i]n all of Oliver's poetry, the otherness of the natural world and her longing to merge with it coexist with doubt about the value of human consciousness from which the language she uses, springs" (847). Because Oliver consistently writes about the human's relationship with nature, there is a tendency, in critiques of her work, to generalize this as an idealized union between two worlds, but this is not the case. The human subject in Oliver's poetry often confronts her own alienation from nature and the inadequacy of language in her attempts to describe the natural world. Oliver's poetry has always used productive paradox in her exploration of lyric subjectivities and spirituality, which is evidence, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, of her Romantic inheritance.

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver gave a reading at the Ohio Theater in Cleveland in April 2010, which is reviewed by Karen R. Long in the *Plain Dealer*.

Acknowledging the inconsistencies in Mary Oliver's work can further complicate conclusions about the nature and degree of her feminism and her own resistance to feminist interpretations of her poetry. In a 1994 interview, Oliver dismisses feminist readings of her work as misguided: "many younger female critics, especially those who work from feminist precepts—they critique me from a feminist point of view, and I don't always have a lot of patience with it" (Oliver in Olander 1-2). Oliver has expressed a desire to avoid gender issues in her work in order to encourage an inclusive experience for her reader. In an interview with Steven Ratiner, Oliver explains that her poems' speakers are not meant to be male or female and, to Eleanor Swanson, Oliver expresses her desire to allow her poem to belong to each reader, individually: "I am trying in my poems to vanish and have the reader be the experiencer" (7). Despite the author's aversion to creating feminist works, Oliver's egalitarian approach is, nonetheless, similar to the ideals of community and interdependence in Chris J. Cuomo's ecological feminist concept of flourishing and although Oliver does not identify her poetry as feminist, her work exemplifies the feminist ethic of mutuality and flourishing.

Feminism faces the problem of becoming over generalized and oversimplified and defining exactly what "woman's poetry" is can be controversial. Jan Montefiore explains that "[w]omen's poetry is a huge resource of both female and feminist meaning, and it is crucial that we identify a tradition of specifically female poetry, not in order to 'place' particular poems, but so as to understand female experiences" (3). However, when women's poetry comes to represent female experience instead of *experiences*, it risks becoming a universalized concept. When a single voice defines what is falsely considered to be a shared experience among women, it "leads to the assumption that a single, 'orthodox' feminism can embody the aspirations of all women and thus mocks the multiplicity of female experiences" (Fox-Genovese 229). Adrienne Rich, who is another popular female poet writing at the same time as Oliver, has been applauded by some critics for embracing her role as "woman-poet" and acknowledging the range of women's difference as well as for being accessible and consciousness-raising. Ideally, feminist poetry will "encourag[e] women to listen to one another, to speak their minds, and to see the material of their daily lives in systemic terms as evidence of how patriarchy works" (Hartman 157), as opposed to seeking to define what is a common experience. Rich, however, has also been criticized for essentializing women's experience. Being a female writer can lead to an automatic label of "feminist poet," which Rich embraces but Oliver denies in order to avoid having her poetic voice

become representative of a common voice that will inevitably exclude and misrepresent both men and women. Oliver seeks to offer an inclusive poetry that is unrestricted by feminist dogma.

Even though Mary Oliver does not self-identify as a feminist poet or gender her poetic subject, her work can still be read as representing elements of feminist concepts of flourishing. What is most appropriate about the concept of flourishing in considering Oliver's feminism is that it allows ambiguity and paradox. Although the concept of ambivalence may have negative connotations, it is a fitting term with which to consider how Oliver's poetry engages with feminist issues. In *The Feminist Difference*, Barbara Johnson considers whether "there is a *necessary* ambivalence within feminism today" (2). Ambivalence can be interpreted as being a weak or temporary position, but Johnson suggests that "[p]erhaps there is something healthy about claiming the right to ambivalence [...] ambivalence is perhaps the state of holding on to more than one story at a time" (2). To choose between binaries leaves little flexibility, but to remain ambivalent allows a traversal between worlds, which spares the poet from claiming a singular authoritative voice. In Patricia Yaeger's "The Father's Breasts," she argues that feminist criticism has been limited by its prescription to identifying what is considered a "common locus" (6) in literature: "In focusing on the patronym, or the phallus, or the father's law, we seek theoretical consensus or codification of the phallogo- and femino-centric when each of these 'centrics' may be happening in several different and incommensurable dimensions at once" ("The Father's Breasts" Yaeger 6). Yaeger suggests a new way of reading that enters into the "dimension of the 'incongruous'" (6). Her new strategy of reading is derived from Foucault's description of the heteroclite, which "describes a multiplicity of zones that cannot be read simultaneously" ("The Father's Breasts" Yaeger 6). Foucault's heteroclite embodies "the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry" (Foucault xvii-iii). The heteroclite enables feminist interpretations to break into new dimensions of meaning and defies a formulaic approach to gender representations that only reinforce binary opposition: "The heteroclite [...] should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid,' 'placed,' 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus beneath them all" (Foucault xvii-iii). Like Barbara Johnson's ambivalent feminism, Patricia Yaeger's heteroclite is a feminist implement that allows a freedom to interpret and discover new meaning outside strict binary oppositions. In a similar vein, Oliver's

poetry depicts paradoxical relationships between the human, nature, and God that create a tension which is best analyzed in a reading that does not require what may be considered to be common loci for interpretation. The dynamic between the human, nature, and God changes easily and rapidly in Oliver's work and that requires acceptance of ambiguity and unsettlement.

Even though Mary Oliver's poetry demonstrates Romantic and Christian influence, these traditionally patriarchal systems become ambiguous in her work, which contributes to her ambivalent feminism. Critics such as Janet McNew and Vicki Graham have offered feminist readings of Oliver's poetry and argue that her Romantic influence has been transformed and superseded by feminism. Janet McNew believes that Oliver's poetry revises patriarchal myths and that "so much important contemporary criticism in the romantic tradition [is] unable to appreciate the kind of nature poetry that Mary Oliver writes" (2). According to McNew, it is through her intimacy and comfort with nature that Oliver rewrites masculine myths. Graham also believes that Oliver's poetic subject is able to mimic and dissolve into nature: "Oliver as observer seems to have inserted herself into the natural world, getting closer to and becoming more intimately connected with the observed than is humanly possible, as though the bear she watches is herself" (364). Both Graham and McNew take for granted that union with nature in Oliver's poems is always sought and achieved, but Oliver's poetic subject often remains a self-conscious observer of nature rather than a unified part of it, which is the key to mutuality, as she seeks relation without union.

When writing about Mary Oliver's poetry, critics tend to conflate the voice of the poetic subject with the voice of the poet, which assumes a female experience that is defined by the female's closeness to nature. Throughout this thesis, I will use a feminine pronoun to describe Oliver's poetic subject for consistency, but the human poetic subject is seldom gendered in the author's effort to be inclusive. In a study about identification between women poets, Robin Riley Fast compares Mary Oliver to Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop as representing a dialogue between women poets that is represented through poetry about the sea. Although Fast acknowledges that Oliver relates to male authors such as Whitman and Thoreau, she believes that she "conceives of her own poetic voice as a woman's voice" (364) and invites "us to look at her work in relation to that of other women writers" (364). However, there is no evidence in Oliver's poetry, prose, or interviews that she conceives of her poetic voice as a woman's. Oliver's poems most commonly employ a first-person lyric voice that does not identify as male or female. When her poetic subject references his or her body

parts, which might indicate gender, even if ambiguously, they do not provide hints as to whether or not they belong to the male or female body: They are “ripped arms” (“August” *AP* 3, l. 6), “my long legs, / my poor body” (“Water Snake” *NS* 45, l. 20-1), “my face, my shoulders” (“Just Rain” *Evidence* 60-1, l. 11), and “my thoughtful body” (“The Kingfisher” *NS* 18, l. 16). Oliver’s subject refers to other people in her poems as “her” or “him,” and parts of nature, like the water snake and kingfisher, are male and the deer (“Picking Blueberries” *NS* 12-3) and the ocean (“Ocean” *RB* 15) are female. The speaker of “When Death Comes” (*NS* 10-1) embodies the gender ambiguity of Oliver’s lyric voice when she states: “When it’s over, I want to say: all my life / I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms” (l. 21-3). Oliver does explore gendered roles in her poetry, but these are normally reflected in the natural world or human figures, as opposed to the poetic subject.

Mary Oliver’s poetry has frequently been read through a feminist lens, but these studies make claims about Oliver’s poetic subject that either represent exceptions in her work, or do not acknowledge the paradox within her oeuvre. Oliver’s poetry does demonstrate certain feminist ideals, in particular in her depiction of mutuality. However, the feminism in Oliver’s poetry would be better handled in an ambivalent framework, such as those described by Barbara Johnson and Patricia Yaeger, which allows different subjectivities to interrelate. The concept of flourishing and its inherent mutuality allow Oliver’s poetry to be read as representing experiences instead of experience and to hold more than one story (Johnson, B. 2), within what may be seen as an ambiguous feminism that interacts with Romantic, ecological, and feminist theological ideals.

Critics also interpret Mary Oliver’s poetry as anti-Romantic due to her classification as “woman poet” who has an innate bond with the natural world, but this requires further exploration to clarify how Romanticism portrays the individual’s relationship with nature which is, in fact, conflicted and representative of both alienation and closeness. Patricia Yaeger asserts that Oliver is part of “a countertradition within women’s writing, a tradition that involves the reinvention and reclamation of a body of speech women have found exclusive and alienating” (*Honey-Mad* 2). Yaeger’s study sets out to differentiate between “contexts in which women find language empowering, in which women speak their pleasure and find pleasure in speech” (3). Despite the claim that Oliver reformulates the Romantic tradition, many feminist readers and critics do not favor Oliver’s poetry, which may, in part, “derive from a scepticism that identification with nature can empower women to speak or to

write” (Bonds 1). It is perhaps a distrust of phallogocentrism that has also resulted in neglect of Oliver’s poems that depict a patriarchal, or fatherly God. Identification with nature should not be taken for granted in Oliver’s poetry because there are a number of her poems that represent a poetic subject who is alienated or divided from nature’s single-mindedness. Further consideration must be given to Oliver’s Romantic influence and how this is, in fact, most evident in her depiction of the poetic subject’s paradoxical relationship with nature. The American and British Romantic traditions represent both a desire for closeness with nature and to transcend the earthly, which is a conflict that runs throughout Oliver’s poetry and shapes the productive paradox of her work.

Mary Oliver’s Romantic inheritance has problematized her work for feminist and eco critics, due to their belief that the influence of its tradition is a perpetuation of patriarchal frameworks. Because nature is traditionally considered to be subordinate to culture or rhetoric, Oliver’s poetry, which is almost exclusively centered on the natural world risks having its intellectual and creative potential diminished by an assumed Romantic hierarchy. If her depictions of nature appear to be influenced by the Romantic tradition, which connotes the supremacy of rhetoric, Oliver may render herself “unusable and invisible for feminism” (Johnson, B. 112). The Romantic poet has been characterized as a master of language and a singularly authoritative voice, while nature is considered to be subordinate to the poet’s imagination. However, the Romantic tradition that Oliver inherits, in particular from the Americans, does not enforce strict hierarchy, but creates a paradoxical poetical framework that encourages dialogue and relational subjectivity, which nurtures the mutuality necessary to flourishing.

Oliver’s work has been differentiated from the Romantics due to her poetic subject’s comfortable immersion and dissolution into nature, rather than being fearful of a loss of mastery. However, as I will illustrate in Chapter One, even though the poet and the lyric voice retain mastery in the poem, new sympathies and an ethic of inclusion develops through the dialogue and exploring subjectivities that are representative of mutuality. According to Janet McNew, Oliver is unlike the male Romantic poets because, in her poetry, “immersion [in nature] is a revelation of a mystical consciousness and an experience of renewal” (7). McNew believes that poets such as Whitman and Crane equate immersion in nature with death or loss of consciousness and she sees Oliver’s poetic subject’s absorption in nature as representative of a feminist action that ignores the “defining powers” of “patriarchal boundaries” (10) and embraces a bodily, sensual experience of the spiritual. While Oliver’s subject is intensely connected to nature through sensual contact, it is often the case that any experience of

immersion or dissolution is mediated by the subject's self-consciousness. That Oliver's subject does not dissolve into nature signals an inability rather than a fear: "How could I look at anything in this world / and tremble, and grip my hands over my heart? / What should I fear?" ("Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith," *WW* 37, l. 30-2). Oliver's poetic subject does not fear immersion in nature, but is so conscious of nature's radical otherness that a union with it can only be briefly imagined and, despite a sensual immersion in the natural world, Oliver's subject remains aware of the boundaries between herself and nature.

Mary Oliver's poetry has also been characterized as having an unmediated Romantic inheritance, but this approach has denied her any modern influence, which does not acknowledge the interconnections that are identified in the field of Green Romanticism or Romantic Ecology. Mark Johnson, for instance, believes that Oliver has a high Romantic voice and that her work does not represent "environmentalist or feminist or post-post-modernist" (78) ideals. Johnson does not make a connection between Romantic ideals and contemporary environmentalist and feminist concepts, but this diminishes the contemporary relevance of Romanticism as an early ecological movement. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* popularized the concept of green Romanticism or Romantic ecology and, predating Bate's study on Romantic ecology, is Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), which is considered to have opened "up the question of a native green tradition" (Coupe 15). Williams proposes that the British Romantics use what he refers to as "green language"<sup>9</sup> in their "seeking to find and recreate man" (Williams 132). These readings of the Romantics by Bate and Williams do not foist anachronistic concepts of environmentalism on to Romantic works, but recognize that the Romantics envision nature as not just a resource, but a landscape from which to "learn from, not seek to control" (Williams 50). Again, further consideration needs to be given to how Romanticism is characterized and that it is, in fact, an exploratory and therefore paradoxical tradition that shares many commonalities with the contemporary feminist and ecological ideals that are present in Oliver's poetry.

Ecopoetry represents another theoretical approach that has been taken towards Mary Oliver's work and is one that focuses primarily on the human's relationship with nature, with some interest in representations of the divine. Ecopoetry is a form of poetry that deal with the human's relationship with nature, which is studied and critiqued in the field of ecocriticism, a theoretical approach that attempts to reconnect

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<sup>9</sup> The term "green language" is taken from John Clare's *Pastoral Poesy*: "A language that is ever green" (Williams 132).

the human to the non-human realm, which has been historically divided by literary critics: “The compartmentalization of knowledge effected by this divide is central to what Bruno Latour (1993) terms the ‘Modern Constitution’, which sunders the human from the non-human realm, while defining society’s relationship to nature predominantly in terms of mastery and possession” (Rigby 152). Ecocriticism suggests a way past this division and a way “to regain a sense of the inextricability of nature and culture” (Rigby 152). Cheryll Glotfelty’s definition of ecocriticism, which is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii), is most commonly referenced, but, as stated in the Preface, is often expanded by other critics. Besides being a study of how the human and non-human interact, ecocriticism can also imply an ethical approach when it is what Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic refer to as “advocacy-based ecocritical studies” (xxii). Branch’s and Slovic’s study expands upon Glotfelty’s definition of ecocriticism in order to include “the reading of any work of literature (in any genre) in an effort to discern its environmental implications” (xix). Glen Love’s *Practical Ecocriticism* connects the literary theory of ecocriticism with science and Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* serves as a general guide to ecocriticism in various areas of cultural production. The term is used broadly to study and refer to various cultural works that deal with interpretations of the environment and the human’s relationship with nature. Flourishing is not a term used in the field of ecocriticism, perhaps because of the spiritual connotations that it has acquired through its ecological and feminist theological uses. However, the concept of flourishing *is* an ecocritical approach in that one of its main interests is how the human and non-human interact, but also considers God and spirituality to be included in this relationship.

Like ecocriticism, ecopoetry has been assigned many definitions and is a term that has been used to describe Mary Oliver’s poetry. David Borthwick defines ecopoetry as describing “a mode of metaphysical enquiry which recognizes our profound alienation from the natural world and suggests ways of enacting a reconnection” (1). Borthwick’s definition assumes an original or “natural” connection between the human and nature, that must be restored, but still acknowledges that, currently, nature remains radically other, which is in keeping with the basis of mutuality. J. Scott Bryson, in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, provides three characteristics of ecopoetry: “ecocentrism, a humble appreciation of wildness, and a skepticism toward hyperrationality and its resultant overreliance on technology” (7). Skepticism toward hyperrationality, for instance, allows for a belief in something invisible and divine, but does not state this explicitly. Bryson also states that while ecopoems “are indeed

simply the latest in a long line of nature poetry, they also are in some ways a new type of poem, a new movement in poetry, one that seeks to stir the reader to action in new ways” (*West Side* 3). Bryson’s definition of ecopoetry distinguishes itself from others by marking the genre’s advancement from the Romantic tradition: “while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, [ecopoetry] also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems” (*Ecopoetry* 5). Oliver’s poetry is firmly rooted in the Romantic tradition, but through the concept of flourishing, it becomes evident that Oliver’s work also advances beyond the traditional as she engages with contemporary of interconnectedness and mutuality. This thesis does not argue that Oliver’s poetry is doing anything new, but that the concept of flourishing is a new way of reading her work that embraces the traditional influences in her work as well as acknowledging the aspects of her poetry that represent contemporary ecological, feminist, and theological ideals.

Mary Oliver’s poetry can be defined as ecopoetry because it seeks a reconnection between the human and nature (Borthwick 1), discourages hyperrationality (Bryson *Ecopoetry* 7), and represents a desire to teach, which Oliver states as her goal: “And what I think is at the centre of human life—we can speak, we can tell each other momentous things to such a fine degree. It’s amazing and it’s sustaining. We can listen to each other and learn from each other” (Oliver in Ratiner 62). As well as this synthesized definition of ecopoetry, John Elder’s Foreword to Bryson’s edited collection, *Ecopoetry*, serves as a good standard approach to ecopoetry as he suggests it should be viewed “as a dialogue and an adventure rather than as an easy connection of any kind” (ix). This definition reinforces my synthesized conceptualization of mutuality as something that transforms the self through knowledge and fosters inclusion without denying boundaries and difference. Ecopoetry does not suggest a single authoritative approach to ecology or poetry; just as Mary Oliver’s poetry does not offer a single subjectivity from which to view the human, nature, and God. Ecopoetry, including Oliver’s, is a medium in which to explore human to non-human interaction within an ethic of mutuality.

In order to differentiate ecopoetry from other kinds of eco-writing, there is a need to define ecopoetical form. George Hart, in reviewing Bryson’s *Ecopoetry*, points out that, among ecocritics, there is a consensus on the subject matter that ecopoets deal with, which is the human’s relationship with nature, and that “some intriguing considerations of rhetoric and poetics emerge as well” (281). The relational subject, which I will explore in Chapter One, is an example of what Hart refers to as an

ecopoetical form. However, Hart also points out that the issue of *ecopoetics* needs further consideration: “if there is such a thing as ‘ecopoetry’ written by ‘ecopoets,’ it must have an ‘ecopoetics’...[ecopoetics] is never adequately defined, and often the presence of environmental subject matter appears sufficient basis for the claim that a poet is practicing ‘ecopoetics’” (281). This issue of Oliver’s eco-poetical form is a topic that is discussed in Chapter One and is illustrated in her employment of the ecological or relational subject that seeks identification with nature while maintaining a singular lyric voice. In “Ecology, Feminism, and Postmodern Lyric Subjects,” Dorothy Nielson defines the relational subject as an eco-poetical form that emphasizes the importance of the singular lyric voice that has dialogue and relationships with others as part of its development. According to Nielson, “the lyric subject has ecological implications” (127) because the contemporary poetic subject inevitably will reflect “environmental concerns” (128) in a world where global warming and sustainability are a part of the shared consciousness. However, similar to the overarching field of ecocriticism, the existing definitions of ecopoetry seldom include an explicit consideration of where the spiritual, religion, and God exist within the connection between the human and non-human.

The definition of ecopoetry does not always include the presence of a divine third term, but there has yet to be a study on how Oliver’s poetry, as ecopoetry, engages with concepts of God. Viktor Postnikov provides a definition of ecopoetry that includes God: “Eco-poetry [...] can be best described as an intuitive attempt to harmonize oneself with the world, a “talk with God,” enacted through nature” (1). This definition is useful because it suggests that the subject’s relationship with nature is a form of conversation, or dialogue, as opposed to a supplication. Postnikov’s ecopoetry is anthropocentric due to his focus being on the idea that nature is an inspiration for art and that “eco-poetry will come out from the abode of poets and artists, and establish itself as a natural way of human behavior: each expression becoming spontaneous and beautiful” (1). Postnikov’s definition of ecopoetry is unique in that it is theistic and accounts for a third term in the relationship between the human and non-human: “Many of us do not believe in God. We may have our own ideals or imaginations. Yet gradually, as a collective human consciousness evolves, we may learn to recognize the chasm that separates us from the universal well-being” (1). A definition of ecopoetry that accounts for a third term does not have to result in a hierarchy over which a traditional god-figure is master of the human and natural world, but can include the divine in a mutual relationship with others. Characterizing Oliver as an ecopoet can

illuminate the exploratory nature of her poetic subject's relationship with the natural world, but the role of the divine third term is an equally important factor in Oliver's work.

In the last decade, more interest has been given to the religious and spiritual content in Mary Oliver's poetry and the only book-length study looking solely at Oliver's poetry deals with her representations of God. In *God of Dirt: Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God* (2004), Thomas Mann considers how Oliver's depictions of nature correspond to Biblical language. He describes Oliver's natural world as "the Other Book of God" (x) and draws a comparison between Oliver's poems to verses from Genesis, the Psalms, and various other Books from the New and Old Testament. For instance, Mann uses the Biblical symbol of the tree of life and the story of "The Calving of the Deer" (34), a story from Job, as Judeo-Christian motifs found in Oliver's poetry. Mann complicates these motifs by suggesting that they do more than just indicate a Christian inheritance, but that the tree of life, for instance, establishes an I-Thou relationship, which is a concept that Mann borrows from Martin Buber, wherein "a tree as subject [has] its own spiritual significance" (Mann 28) to each individual and the tree, therefore, has a relationship with each individual, which creates "intersubjectivity" or "relation [that] is mutual" (Mann 29). According to Mann, many parts of nature imply "dogma" (28) because they have been used as Christian symbols and it is Buber's system of significance that allows both the tree's Christian significance as well as its distinctiveness from any symbol system. Mann employs Buber's theory when dealing with nature as symbolic in Mary Oliver's poetry, which allows nature to have a broad meaning, which does justice to the ambivalence and ambiguity in her work.

Mary Oliver's spirituality is also influenced by the Romantic religious revisionist spirit. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams argues that Romantic works were a revisioning of Christian theology: "concepts and patterns of Romantic philosophy and literature are a displaced and reconstituted theology" (65). Even those works that are considered a secular "form [of] a devotional experience" (65) are reminiscent of Christian theology. Abrams makes this claim, in part, based on the Romantic tendency to revert to "the stark drama and suprarational mysteries of the Christian story" (66) and their interest in depicting extremes of "destruction and creation, hell and heaven, exile and reunion, death and rebirth, dejection and joy" (66). Although Abrams' study focuses on the British Romantics, the American Romantics were also reacting against orthodox Christianity, formulating what I refer to as an intuitive religion and

spiritualized nature that I will discuss in Chapter Two. Oliver's spirituality, along with that of the American Romantics, represents a reconstitution of the Christian myth in order to represent the spirit and interests of their time, which both centre on mutuality instead of religious authority and formalism.

In Oliver's poetry, God is accessible in the earthly, through having contact with the natural world, but this easy access is part of a dismantling of hierarchy wherein the divine is elevated above and beyond the human's grasp. In contrast with Mann's biblical study, Laird Christensen believes that "outdated narratives" (135) regarding the "pernicious myth of human independence" (135) from nature are replaced in Oliver's poetry with an alternative vision of ecological identity. Christensen states that Oliver's poetry teaches us "to embrace our participation in the community of all life" (136) rather than rely on a strictly individualistic identity. Christensen does identify some "explicitly religious diction" (145) in Oliver's poetry, however, his interpretation of the diction suggests that hers is a reimagining and reinterpretation of its meaning, as her poetry "offers salvation from the belief that we are divided from this world, salvation from despair in the face of mortality" (145). Christensen uses the word "salvation" in a way that defies its traditional meaning, making Oliver's poetry of presence and interconnection a new form of savior. This alters the meaning of "salvation" dramatically and brings it into the present and earthly rather than reinforcing its otherworldly implications. Christensen also uses traditional religious diction by describing the "baptism" (146) by river that takes place in "Poppies" (*What Do We Know* 32) but he uses the word in a way that mimics Oliver's own Christian revisioning. Oliver does use traditional religious language, but she does so in a way that does not always represent a direct inheritance but offers a recontextualization and reinterpretation of its significance.

Oliver engages with the Christian tradition, but her use of it is sometimes ambivalent and part a more general spiritual searching. Janet McNew believes that Oliver's mythic plot is one that seeks union with a feminine nature as opposed to "[t]hat mythic third term, whether it be called Redemption, God the Father, or the Transcendent Imagination" (5). However, some of Oliver's poems do seek union with God and some appear as a question asking what form the mythic third term comes in. Also, Oliver's nature is not always feminine, which results in polysemous and inconsistent representations of the sacred that shift from seeking comfort from Mother Earth to giving praise to a fatherly god, or a divine "He." The paradox of the divine and Oliver's varied depictions of God are topics that are dealt with in Chapter Three.

This thesis undertakes an in-depth study of Mary Oliver's Romantic influence as well as her spirituality and, in order to capture her exploration of tradition and the unconventional, I use flourishing as a concept that encompasses the productive paradox in Oliver's work that encompasses both the contemporary and the Romantic. The concept of the productive paradox in Mary Oliver's poetic project shares some similarity with Paul T. Corrigan's concept of "generative tension"<sup>10</sup>, but both of these projects have different scopes. Corrigan's article examines Oliver's spirituality in *Thirst* (2006) and believes that the collection reflects a "new awareness of God which takes center stage" (1). The tension that Corrigan identifies is between Oliver's earlier spirituality, which "had primarily to do with the earth and with tensions on earth" (1), while "in *Thirst* [it] is a tension between 'God' and 'Earth'" (1). Although *Thirst* is the most explicitly Christian of Oliver's collections, her previous collections do include diverse representations of a divine third term, which is evidence that the question of God's existence and location is something that has always been a factor in her work, due to the mutual relationship between the human, nature, and God. As Corrigan correctly points out, critics have dealt with the various tensions and boundaries in Oliver's poetry, but states that "[t]he 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'" (4-5). In contrast with Corrigan's and other critics' terms for the tensions in Oliver's work, this thesis includes within its conceptualization of flourishing, an understanding of how paradox can be productive. However, in flourishing there is mutuality between God and the earth that does not remain limited to one privileged location in the earth or God. In Corrigan's study, God in Oliver's *Thirst* "consists of God alone beyond all of the things of God" (5) and the earth "consists of the natural world [...] the faith tradition she has joined, her partner of forty years, all of her poetry, and all other things" (5). Corrigan establishes that the earth and God create a binary in these terms, but that an "interplay" (Corrigan 5) between the Christian apophatic and the kataphatic<sup>11</sup> prayer negotiate

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<sup>10</sup> From Corrigan's "Generative Tension Between 'God' and 'Earth' in Mary Oliver's *Thirst*," an essay, which, at the time of writing this thesis is forthcoming (2010) in *God, Grace, and Creation: The Annual Volume of the College Theology Society*.

<sup>11</sup> "Catholicism distinguishes between two different approaches to spirituality. *Apophatic*, or 'negative' spirituality stresses interiority, 'imagelessness' and 'wordlessness.' *Kataphatic*, or 'positive' spirituality is image-driven and uses analogies to speak of God" (Mujica 741, my emphasis). Corrigan uses these terms to differentiate between how Oliver seeks God *beyond* images in *Thirst*, while, in her previous collections, God was sensed in other things. However, even though Oliver may seek

between the two. *Thirst* is presented as the introduction of the apophatic in Oliver's work and, although Corrigan acknowledges that the apophatic and kataphatic come in and out of use in the collection, his study marks *Thirst* as a new stage in her spirituality, which creates too clear a division from the theological explorations in her previous collections. Oliver's paradox is formed through her lyric voice and its Romantic inheritance and Corrigan's study characterizes Oliver's poetic project as being like personal prayer, but he does not consider the reader-author pact<sup>12</sup> and the tradition of the poet's mastery through language that are both significant influences on her work.

Mary Oliver has been characterized as feminist, Romantic, eco-poetical, or theistic, but existing studies establish these terms as mutually exclusive when, in fact, they all intermingle to create a productive paradox in Oliver's poetry. Feminist critics have misrepresented Oliver as writing as a woman poet who desires or feels a close connection to the natural world. However, Oliver's poetry often describes the poetic subject's sense of alienation from nature and when the subject does exist in community with nature, there is no evidence that this relates to any gendering of nature or the human. Studies that consider Oliver's to be a high Romanticism do not account for the paradox of the tradition, wherein the poetic subject seeks closeness with nature as well as the ability to transcend it. In both feminist and Romantic studies of Oliver's work, not enough notice has been given to the inconsistencies in her work and that they represent an exploratory poetic subjectivity and spirituality that draws from both feminist and Romantic influences. A similar limitation has occurred with regards to characterizations of Oliver's work as eco-poetical because these have not acknowledged the traditional religious influence in her work, placing the primary importance on the relationship between the human and nature. God, or some form of a divine third term, is often present when the human and nature relate in Oliver's poetry and this presence of the divine calls for an expanded definition of what Oliver's eco-poem consists of, because it involves more than the earthly. Similarly, those studies that have concentrated on Oliver's traditional Christian theology have failed to provide a vision of how the traditional interacts with the importance of the human's relationship with nature. This thesis offers a new way of reading Oliver's poetry that identifies the mutuality between the human, nature, and God, without denying the inconsistencies and

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God beyond metaphors of the natural world, her search takes place in the language of poetry, which denies a true wordlessness.

<sup>12</sup> The author-reader pact is a concept that Oliver addresses in "The Swan" (WH 24), which I will discuss in Chapter One.

paradox in her work. The concept of flourishing provides the framework wherein paradox is productive for both the poet and the reader.

Flourishing, as a productive paradox, is a term that illuminates the interconnections in Mary Oliver's poetry and the contradictions that spur the poetic subject's continued exploration. The first chapter of this thesis, "Flourishing in Paradox: Mary Oliver and the Romantic Tradition" explores how the Romantic lyric tradition has influenced Oliver's poetic voice, but argues that within this tradition, there is an interchange between the belief in the mastery of language versus a confrontation with its inadequacy. This conflict is a theme that runs through Chapter One and Two because it is interconnected with the human's need to familiarize concepts of the divine instead of allowing them to remain other. Throughout this thesis I refer to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman as American Romantics, as opposed to Transcendentalists, even though the latter is also a category that they are sometimes placed in. According to Lawrence Buell, the three major concerns of the Transcendentalist movement are: spirit, nature, and man and the main tendencies in Transcendentalist writing are: "the impulses to prophecy, to create nature anew for oneself, and to speak in the first person singular" (Buell *Literary Transcendentalism* 20). To use the term Transcendentalist to refer to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman is to imply that "nature was of secondary importance" (Buell *Literary Transcendentalism* 146) to them and to not underline the Romantics' own paradoxical project, wherein communion with nature was valued as much as transcending it. Transcendentalism is an element of American Romanticism and this project examines the paradoxical influence of the Romantics on Oliver's poetry, which consists of the contradiction between transcendentalism and a firm grounding in the earthly. Oliver is influenced by both the British and American Romantics, which will be demonstrated in a comparison between their poetry and Oliver's throughout this thesis. The paradoxical relationship that the Romantics establish between the spiritual versus the earthly and mastery versus inadequacy are central influences on Mary Oliver's lyric voice and spirituality.

## Chapter One

### Flourishing in Paradox: Mary Oliver and the Romantic Tradition

Mary Oliver's essays about poetry create a paradoxical framework that is then explored in her poems by her lyric subject who explores seemingly contradictory positions. Oliver's essays are interspersed within her collections of poetry, which creates a conversation between her voice as author and the voice of her poetic subject, or what she refers to as her "*formal self*" (WH 24), both of which are influenced by the exploring Romantic subject. The poetic subject's explorations consist of speaking as a singular authoritative voice as well as participating in a dialogue and relationship with other subjects. This exploration of subject positions is evidence of Oliver's Romantic inheritance, as it does not privilege a single authoritative voice, but creates an ethic of flourishing wherein the poetic subject explores subjectivities. The poetic subject also explores the location of mastery and assigns it to the human, nature, and God, which disallows the concept of power as deriving from a singular source. Oliver's essays create a framework that explicitly outlines the role of the poet and poetry, which involves two main paradoxes. The first paradox is that the poet is expected to be both grounded in the earthly as well as embracing the transcendent. The second is that the poet should feel a sense of oneness with all of the earth's bodies as well as accept nature's radical otherness. The second aspect of the paradoxical poetical framework formulated in the prose of both Oliver and the Romantics, is that they accept and embrace nature's otherness in some essays, but also look to nature for a sense of community in others. Nature's otherness or alterity is defined by the sense of its complete dissociation and difference from the human world. However, Mary Oliver, like the Romantics, attempts to translate the ungraspable otherness of nature, which denies its otherness by making it conform to their language. In contrast, to seek community with nature is achieved when the poet depicts all bodies as interconnected and of equal value.

In the second section of this chapter, I will discuss Mary Oliver's lyric practice and how her poetic subject negotiates the paradoxical poetical framework that she constructs in her prose writing, which results in a fluency and multiplicity of subject positions that move between the singular and the dialogic. I will use two well-known Romantic lyrics, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Samuel T. Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," to compare and contrast with Oliver's exploring lyric subjectivities. Oliver's lyric introduces the paradox between speaking as a singular authoritative voice

versus engaging in a dialogue with her environment and the reader as an expression of relational subjectivity. The singular authoritative lyric voice assumes a masterful position in the poem, which manifests itself in the form of instruction and a depiction of what is meant to be the uncontested truth of a poem. The dialogic lyric is not limited to one speaking voice, but represents an exploring poetic subject who allows other voices to speak, which, in Oliver's poetry, are most often the voices of plants or animals. Relational subjectivity is when the poetic subject attempts self-definition according to its interactions with others, not just from isolated self-reflection. Dorothy Nielson defines what she calls the ecological or relational subject as being a "paradoxically hybrid form—dialogic and lyric—[which] both challenges the transcendent subject and yet encodes subjectivity" (140). The paradoxical nature of the relational subject makes it a useful term in analyzing Whitman's, Coleridge's, and Oliver's lyric explorations. Oliver's lyric voice seldom sustains one subject position while it explores singularity, dialogue, the transcendent, the earthly, community, and otherness, sometimes all within one poem, sometimes favoring one over the other. The breadth of exploration that the poetic subject undergoes within Oliver's poems occurs fluently, in such a way that each position receives equal exploration, which creates inclusion and mutuality. In Oliver's prose and poetry, the exploration of contrasting subjectivities creates a fundamental tension but the paradoxes in her work are productive in that they motivate the writing of poetry and the exploration of subject positions.

### **Mary Oliver's Prose Writing: A Romantic Poetic Model**

Mary Oliver has written a substantial body of prose writing that discusses poetics and her relationship, as a poet, to the natural world, which are interspersed throughout her collections of poetry. Oliver's statements on poetics are similar to those of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman because they create a paradoxical relationship between the human and nature wherein nature is the human's primary inspiration, but the human is also expected to transcend it. Oliver and the American Romantics write prose about the importance of the poet and poetry and how both should be immersed in the earthly while, at the same time, aspire to produce writing that transcends the ordinary. In establishing an earthly connection, the three authors encourage an appreciation of all aspects of the physical and material world, no matter how small and insignificant. However, the American Romantics, in particular, consider sensual engagement with the material world to be a conduit to spiritual and transcendental experience. Poetry is considered to be alive, like nature, which again associates it with

the earthly, but all three authors also believe in the natural world and literature's transformative effect, which they compare to a spiritual or mystical experience.

For Mary Oliver and the American Romantics, the natural world is the primary source of inspiration for the poet, which results in an expectation of poetry's ability to embody and represent the earthly and material. In "Pen and Paper and a Breath of Air" (*BP* 45), Mary Oliver describes the various notebooks that she uses to record the fragments of writing that she later expands into poems: "In the spring and fall notebooks especially, there are pages where the writing is blurred and hard to read. Spring and fall are the rainy seasons, and almost all of the entries are made somewhere out-of-doors" (*BP* 46). For the American Romantics, like Oliver, the interconnection between the imagination and the natural world reinforces the importance of the natural world as the primary source of inspiration for the writer. Thoreau foregoes the social pressure to depend on high culture for inspiration, in favor of having a view of Walden Pond and the surrounding woods that provides a sufficient muse, or stimulus, for his writing: "Though the view from my door was still more contracted, I did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination" (*Walden* 87). For Emerson, nature and his poetry become intertwined to create an image of his life as part of the natural landscape: "My book should smell of pines and resound with the hum of insects. The swallow over my window should interweave that thread or straw he carries in his bill into my web also" ("Self-Reliance" 38). For Oliver and the American Romantics, the material and earthly are the best inspiration, but they absorb their surroundings in a non-exploitative way, without feeling the need to dissect it.

Nature is not just a source of inspiration in the American Romantic tradition, but is also a symbol of poetry's vitality, which differentiates verse from what is considered to be a dead and stagnant prose. In *Walden*, Thoreau uses poetry as a metaphor for the earth, which depicts verse as something alive, growing, and always changing. He differentiates between books and poetry because the former, to him, connotes lifelessness and stagnation: "The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly" (309). Thoreau considers poetry and poets to be more active and alive, which is why he associates them with the earth that he refers to as "the poem of creation" (*Walden* 85). Thoreau's vision of poetry is one that is not only living and active but indicative of flourishing, which he represents with the metaphor of growing flora: "living poetry [is] like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a

fossil earth, but a living earth” (*Walden* 309). For Thoreau, poetry is alive and has potential for growth, which offers more freedom than books that collectively come to represent the conventional and canonical. Thoreau intertwines nature and poetry in his metaphors, but also in his daily descriptions of life, for instance, when squirrels sit under his feet as he sits reading or writing (*Walden* 310). For Thoreau, poetry is a metaphor for the natural world, which is growing and vital.

Similarly, Whitman grounds his concept of poetry in the earthly through his belief that language should attempt to mimic the fluency of nature’s movement and essence, which creates an image of poetry as evolving and mimetic. In the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman defines exceptional literature as capturing the essence of nature’s different parts and believes that “to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the triumph of art” (13). Whitman considers the poet who captures the life of nature in his or her literature as a master of the art. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman compares the human body to poetry, which reinforces its conceptualization as a living, active entity: “your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body” (Preface *Leaves* 747). Poetry is like the kinetic movement of the body and the human body’s movement is compared to the fluency of language. Comparing poetry to the human form, like nature, gives poetry a familiar quality, which saves it from abstraction.

Like her Romantic precursors, Mary Oliver inherits the American Romantic belief in the importance of grounding poetry in the earthly as a way of representing verse as being something that is alive. Throughout Oliver’s career she has always written prose about poetry and how it should be written: Oliver published *A Poetry Handbook* in 1994, followed by *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (1998), and *Winter Hours* (1999) which contains essays about Poe, Frost, Hopkins, and Whitman. In her Foreword to *Long Life*, Oliver states that poems can be like the bodies in nature that they describe. Poems, according to Oliver, “just sit there on the page, and breathe. A few lilies, or wrens, or trout among the mysterious shadows, the cold water, and the somber oaks” (*LL* xiv). Besides turning language and poetry into a literal representation of living, breathing nature, Oliver looks to the natural world as a way of grounding the human in the physical world, or, as stated by Jean B. Alford, reconnecting the human “to his [or her] roots in the natural processes of all life”

(284). Oliver echoes the American Romantics when she considers poetry to have another vital quality besides its embodiment of living, breathing forms on the page. According to Oliver, it is the responsibility of the poet to create something new: “Poets must read and study, but also they must learn to tilt and whisper, shout, or dance, each in his or her own way, or we might just as well copy the old books” (*LL* xiv). Oliver considers poets to be more engaged in creating something lively and new than the prose writer, which is implied in her conceptualization of poetry as a “dance” (*LL* xiv). Prose is “good, sturdy and comfortable” (*LL* xiv), but “[p]oems are less cautious” (*LL* xiii). Oliver depicts poetry as daring and risky, as though the life of the poet and the poem are at stake in its writing and the writing of poetry is associated with adrenaline, while prose is safe and consistent because it is simply meant to explain something, rather than create something new, which is also emphasized by Bryson in his description of ecopoetry (*West Side* 3): “Working on prose and working on poems elicit different paces from the heartbeat” (*LL* xiii). As Oliver goes on to describe the task of the poet, she associates her occupation with living fully: “That’s the big question, the one the world throws at you every morning. ‘Here you are, alive. Would you like to make a comment?’ This book is my comment” (*LL* xiv). Oliver considers her books to be analyses of life, and each one opens a different conversation, or creates a dance for the reader to engage with.

For Oliver and the American Romantics, poetry and nature both represent growth, but growth is also depicted as the potential for a more spiritual transformation, which then leads to an elevation of both nature and poetry as being transcendental. Reading unique, inspired writing reassures Emerson, for instance, that newness, change, and possibility do exist and that humanity is not destined only to exist in what Thoreau calls the “ruts of tradition and conformity” (*Walden* 323). For Emerson, poetry has the power to enable its reader to transcend the everyday and achieve spiritual awakening:

In my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps, and do not believe in remedial force, in the power of change and reform. But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with the new wine of his imagination, writes me an ode, or a brisk romance, full of daring thought and action. He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities. (“Circles” 173-4)

The poet offers his or her reader something newly imagined, or is able to transform the old into something new. Emerson believes that the poet “claps wings to the sides of all the solid lumber of the world” (“Circles” 174), which indicates that the poet works with

the earthly but illuminates and enlivens it. According to Elizabeth Addison, Emerson depicts nature “both as bedrock of existence and as counterpart to the mind” (111), which gives it the “ability to signify spiritual facts in a universal language” (111). Emerson depicts poetry as something that is as simple and accessible as the natural world, but both become the inspiration for spiritual transformation and transcendent illumination.

Thoreau and Whitman also depict poetry as representing the transcendent and extraordinary, which disrupts the idea of poetry as being strictly grounded in the earthly and visible. The American Romantics depict the poet as one who constructs, creates and contributes with the action of writing, which “is equivalent to leading an army, going into nature, or governing a people” (Hoffman 59). The American Romantics believe that the transformative power of writing can alter a reader’s consciousness, which is a power that transcends one’s physical presence in the natural world and implies the mastery of the poet. Thoreau also sees writing and reading as a participatory activity of passing down tradition and ideas through the transformative vision of each individual reader and writer. However, as mentioned earlier, tradition, for the American Romantics can also have negative connotations and be associated with stagnation. Writing “may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;—not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of an ancient man’s thought becomes a modern man’s speech” (*Walden* 102). The concept of the tradition of language takes on a paradoxical position, as it connotes stagnation as well as being associated with an organic process of change created by sharing ideas between individuals. The American Romantics depict poetry as being able to surpass and transcend the natural world, which is the essence of their paradoxical depiction of verse, which portrays poetry as being like the living earth as well as representing something beyond nature.

Sensuality serves as the common denominator between poetry’s connection to the earthly and the transcendent for the American Romantics. Paying close attention to the touch, smell, sight, and sound of the natural world awakens the imagination of the poet. Although it is Thoreau and Whitman who devote the most consideration to sensual descriptions of nature, Emerson also demonstrates a conceptualization of how nature inspires the sensual: “We penetrate bodily this incredible beauty; we dip our hands into this painted element; our eyes are bathed in these lights and forms” (“Nature” 296). Emerson’s image of how the sensual interacts with the world occurs when someone does not simply observe or absorb things in the world, but penetrates its exterior.

Emerson's choice of the word "penetrate" implies the author's phallogocentric domination of the physical environment through his own body and senses, which contradicts the idea of poetry deriving from nature spontaneously, or "naturally," as though it were an organic part of it. Besides its dominant implications, Emerson's vision of a sensual experience in nature has a mystical quality as his vision is enveloped by what becomes an undefined but illuminated vision. The sensual, for Emerson, embodies the author's ability to harness the natural world's mystic potential, which disrupts the conceptualization of poetry being firmly rooted in the earthly.

Thoreau's sensuality does not share Emerson's connotations of dominance, but it remains a necessary conduit for spiritual experience. Thoreau is careful to distinguish between different kinds of sensuality and warns against that which is uncontrolled, or self-indulgent. Thoreau compares the way we gratify our sensuality with the way that we eat and uses an excerpt from the Book of Matthew that states that it is not the "food which entereth into the mouth [that] defileth a man, but the appetite with which it is eaten" (*Walden* 218). The reason that focus and close attention should be given to one's senses is because, according to Thoreau, sensuality should be a spiritual, devotional experience. In *Walden*, he cites the Vedas as instructing the individual to take command over his or her passions and senses in order to feel a close approximation to God:

the spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion. The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. (*Walden* 219)

Thoreau believes that the body is a temple and emphasizes the difference between animal sensuality and the pure devotional form that brings the human closer to God. The human must control the "reptile and sensual" (*Walden* 219) that is a part of each person in order to achieve the pure, spiritual sensuality that illuminates the "sweet and beneficent society in Nature" (*Walden* 132). Thoreau endorses the sensual as long as it remains a pure, devotional experience as opposed to a gluttonous over-indulgence. In Jane Bennett's study of Thoreau's nature, she points out that "the senses hold an esteemed place within his ethic; it can even be said that Thoreau's texts are designed as 'a medium capable of forming and altering perception, in which the 'formation of the sense' chiefly takes place" (38). When one can achieve a "sensibly" sensual relationship with the natural world, he or she will pave the way for spiritual awakening and an

inspired imagination. Thoreau's conception of sensuality is thus paradoxical in that it is used either to connect the human with the natural world or to aid in surpassing its animality, which is considered to be base.

Mary Oliver, like the American Romantics, believes that the sensual is that which interconnects the earthly and the divine. Oliver believes that poetry is alive like nature, but, like Emerson, she also assigns poetry the ability to transcend the world. In critical studies of Oliver's work, sensuality is perhaps taken for granted because it permeates every poem and every description of nature that she creates. Sensual contact with the natural world inspires the poet, but for Oliver and the American Romantics, its inspiration can extend poetry from its grounding in the earthly and elevate its reaches into a transcendent realm. The material stimulates Oliver's sensuality and inspires her poetry, but she associates heightened sensuality with having a transcendent experience, which contributes to her paradoxical message about poetry being both of and above the earth.

In Oliver's prose writing, she describes the sensual as being associated with the divine and the concept of the soul: "All the world is taken in through the eye, to reach the soul, where it becomes *more*, representative of a realm deeper than appearances" ("Emerson: An Introduction" *LL* 48, original emphasis). Sensual contact with the earthly can lead Oliver to moments of mystical clarity: "as I stepped from under the trees into the mild, pouring-down sunlight I experienced a sudden impact, a seizure of happiness. It was not the drowning sort of happiness, rather the floating sort" ("The Perfect Days" *LL* 33). The sensual touch of the natural world has a "mystical" ("The Perfect Days" *LL* 34) dimension, where the narrator's floating implies an out of body or transcendent experience. This image of Oliver simply standing "in the rose petals of the sun" (*LL* 34) takes on a saintly quality as she feels herself infused with the sun's rays, which convey a spiritual blessing. Oliver's interpretation of the earthly continues to have a transcendent meaning when she considers how even just the physical appearance of an owl can impart wisdom: "And I can imagine sitting quietly before that luminous wanderer the snowy owl, and learning, from the white gleam of its feathers, something about the arctic" ("Owls" *Owls* 15). Beyond this imparting of knowledge, Oliver depicts the great horned owl's power as being strong enough to end her life: "if one of those should touch me, it would touch to the center of my life, and I must fall" (*Owls* 15). Oliver depicts sensual contact with nature as being spiritually and physically transformative at the same time that she refers to her experience as not being "anything extraordinary at all" ("The Perfect Days" *LL* 34). The earthly is all around and,

therefore, not considered to be extraordinary by Oliver, but its effect on the human remains exceptional as she says of her experience in the sun: “it was a moment I have never forgotten, and upon which I have based many decisions in the years since” (*LL* 34). Oliver allows the paradox to remain between the earthly and extraordinary and it is the poet who can explore both extremes and who dwells in paradox without exclusion.

The poet’s ability to dwell in paradox also extends into his or her ability to consider nature as both familiar and other. Nature’s duality, as both a community for the human and radical other is captured in Emerson’s “Nature” where he embraces the paradox of the natural world: “Here is sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes. Here we find nature to be the circumstances which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her” (294). Nature’s otherness is an exceptional force, but this does not discourage the poet’s attempts to characterize it through language. Emerson’s sense of ease in accepting nature’s otherness may, in fact, be a denial of its alterity as he attempts to make it familiar and gain control of it with words. Emerson comes close to representing the radical otherness of nature later in his essay when he resigns himself to not really being a part of nature: “there is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere, keeps no faith with us” (“Nature” 306). Otherness is described as tormenting, or provoking the human, which reinforces an anthropocentric perspective on nature, but nonetheless comes closer to demonstrating that nature’s otherness is beyond summation by language.

Unlike Emerson, Thoreau worries that the human’s feeling of alienation from nature will result in a diminished stewardship of the natural world. Thoreau states, “[w]e are not wholly involved in Nature” (*Walden* 135), but believes that feeling a part of nature can be imagined: “I may be either the drift-wood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it” (*Walden* 135). The extreme of being an inanimate object or a Hindu god illustrates the power of the imagination in creating an ideal image of union, but also demonstrates a misunderstanding of nature’s reality. Thoreau can *imagine* feeling a part of nature, but the very consciousness that allows this imagining reinforces his human boundaries: “However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it” (*Walden* 135). Thoreau accepts that his self-consciousness will never allow him to dissolve entirely into nature. According to Alfred I. Tauber, Thoreau felt very strongly that there was a spiritual level to nature that would never be accessible to the human: “Ideal nature is not simply out

of reach of rational consciousness, it is unknowable in any sense and thus beyond Thoreau's pencil, in any mode" (Tauber 183). When Thoreau is a spectator of nature, "he divested himself of his mystical cloud and strode forth to engage the world in minute detail, well aware of the self-other separation" (Tauber 179). Thoreau acknowledges that nature represents an otherness that the human can never fully grasp, but depicts this in such a way that does not create an image of nature as alien, but of the human as irresolvably limited by the inadequacy of language.

Whitman's acknowledgement of nature's otherness is more implicit than those of Emerson and Thoreau because he approaches nature more often as its master and believes that it is best understood through the poet's translation. Whitman believes that the poet "give[s] all subjects their articulations" (Preface *Leaves* 749), but also allows nature to have a level of mystery that he does not attempt to articulate. According to Matt Cohen, Whitman was taken "by Hegel's dialectic of nature and a vision of an ultimate synthesis that would give meaning to existence" (54), but he "resisted the temptation to reduce the challenge of describing [...] natural phenomena to such a synthesis" (54). Sometimes Whitman derives meaning from nature, but he also sometimes depicts the human and, more specifically, the poet, as the source and creator of meaning. Whitman's image of the poet inhabits the difference of nature and "acknowledges the appropriateness of both remaining opaque to human understanding" (Handley 141). The poet, for Whitman, is a "seer" (Whitman, Preface *Leaves* 747) who creates a world that rises above "all the instruments and books of the earth and all reasoning" (Preface 746). The poet can gain inspiration from nature, but does not have to conquer it by defining all of its parts because, as part of the paradoxical Romantic poetic model, power also resides in the human imagination.

In her prose writing, Mary Oliver depicts poetry and nature as places to escape to and as places of solitude and healing, but she also depicts nature as an ungraspable other. However, like Emerson and Thoreau, Oliver feels able to bask in otherness, which inevitably creates a familiarity that, in fact, denies its otherness because she transforms it into something familiar through language. Reflecting upon her childhood, Oliver interconnects nature and writing and considers both to have been a solace to her in difficult times: "I quickly found for myself two such blessings—the natural world, and the world of writing: literature. These were the gates through which I vanished from a difficult place" (*BP*, "Staying Alive" 64). Oliver characterizes not only nature but books as representing an otherness that cannot quite be comprehended or captured by an outsider: "And this is what I learned, that the world's *otherness* is antidote to

confusion—that standing *within* this otherness—the beauty and the mystery of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books—can re-dignify the worst-stung heart” (*BP* 64). Oliver creates an interesting image of how to cope with otherness; not by becoming one with it, but by simply being in its presence. She is able to insert herself in the natural world without necessarily trying to, or being able to, absorb or process its meaning. In literature and nature, Oliver believes that simply acknowledging and being in the presence of otherness is healing, which may, in fact, render the other familiar.

The American Romantics depict nature as paradoxically both familiar and alien, but that the poet has the ability to negotiate between the two. In Whitman’s Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he describes the poet as not only a member of community with the natural world, but also being the immeasurable force that travels between all places as he “incarnates [the country’s] geography and natural life and rivers and lakes” (742-3). The poet becomes omnipresent in the natural landscape and a foundation of the earth: “On him rise solid growths that offset the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock and liveoak” (743). Whitman’s image of the poet is dominating and has a god-like status, but this is represented as resulting in a unification, or community, as opposed to an oppression or mastery. However, by eliminating the otherness of nature by turning into something familiar, the poet negates the otherness of nature, which is a masterly action.

In *Walden*, Thoreau also becomes a part of the landscape as part of his poetic project, but, like Whitman, he depicts this human imposition on the landscape as natural and organic as opposed to being oppressive. He builds his home out of the trees from the woods in which he will live and, sees this, not as an exploitation, but as an exercise in familiarity: “Before I had done I was more the friend than the foe of the pine tree, though I had cut down some of them, having become better acquainted with it” (*Walden* 42). Thoreau believes that in being in nature and working from it, he builds a relationship and understanding of the natural world. Thoreau feels most a part of nature’s harmonious community during his time spent on a fishing boat in the Pond. Returning to the woods from a visit to “a village parlor” (174), Thoreau finds himself “serenaded by owls and foxes” (174). It is during his solitary time spent fishing on the pond that nature literally pulls him out of dream and into connection: “It was very queer [...] to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again” (175). This small pull from a single fish reconnects Thoreau to his environment, but this is representative of his relationship with nature throughout *Walden*, as he always pays close attention to the intricacies of his surroundings and a sense of nature’s unity. Thoreau believes that the amount of time spent within and

physically close to nature equates to a union, or bond. He does not consider his inhabitation of the woods or his fishing from the pond to be a form of mastery or exploitation.

Like Thoreau and Emerson, Oliver does not consider her presence in nature to be exploitative and believes that as a poet, she can dwell comfortably in otherness (“Staying Alive” *BP* 64). Even though Oliver sometimes sees herself as an inserted, or extraneous presence in the natural world, there are moments when she cannot help but seek a connection to the *other* that she finds so comforting and examples of this contradictory urge are included in the same collection, *Blue Pastures*, as those where she is happy to dwell in otherness. In her essay called “Fry” Oliver watches thousands of fish in the “shallows” (*BP* 61) and finishes the short piece by asking “which one am I?” (61). This desire for identification is more extreme and imposing when Oliver describes her encounter with a mother cat: “Once I put my face against the body of our cat as she lay with her kittens, and she did not seem to mind. So I pursed my lips against that full moon, and I tasted the rich river of her body” (*BP* 65). This kind of boundary crossing, where Oliver becomes more than a silent observer of nature, is unusual, but serves as an example of the different ways through which she has sought identification and community with nature, which she considers to be both other and familiar. For Mary Oliver, when the poet is not creating a transcendent version of the landscape, she will feel the impulse to seek communion with the earthly that grounds and surrounds her, as she literally gets down onto the earth, as she tries “walking on all fours” (*BP* 68) in order to see the world “from the level of the grasses” (*BP* 68). This paradox of being an earthbound poet versus being a transcendentalist poet is well represented in her prose writing as she struggles with her role being within or above the world.

The final paradoxical element of Mary Oliver’s and the American Romantics’ poetical framework, is the poet’s ability to master the natural world through language versus the natural world mastering the human’s imagination. In *Walden*, nature’s mastery is not explicitly written into the text, but it becomes apparent through the narrative shift within the text: “As *Walden* unfolds, the mock-serious discourse of enterprise, which implicitly casts the speaker as the self-creator of his environment, begins to give way to a more ruminative prose in which the speaker appears to be finding himself within his environment” (Buell *Environmental Imagination* 122). In *Walden*, this change from working to penetrate the landscape to slowly being absorbed

by nature is less about nature overtaking Thoreau and more about the writer relinquishing mastery over the landscape.

The paradox of mastery also surfaces in Mary Oliver's prose writing when she sometimes assigns mastery and control to the natural world and sometimes acknowledges that the human's language represents its own form of mastery over nature. For instance, in "Wordsworth's Mountain" (*LL* 21), she depicts Wordsworth as being controlled by the mountain that ushers him into another realm. His experience of being in the presence of mountains "led his mind, from simple devotion of that beauty which is a harmony, a kindly ministry of thought, to nature's deeper and inexplicable greatness" (*LL* 23). Oliver depicts the mountain as being in control of Wordsworth and does not depict its power as tyrannical or repressive, but as leading to personal growth. In this case, Oliver sees nature as master of the poet as the mountain "*perceived* him; it leaned down over the water; it seemed to pursue him" (*LL* 23). This vision of the mountain as pursuing the poet shifts the location of mastery from the writer to the natural world, which represents another primary paradox that Oliver inherits from the Romantics.

Oliver describes nature's mastery over the poet as a form of gift, but the human's mastery over nature is depicted as oppressive. In "A Few Words" (*BP* 91), Oliver paints the mastery of language in a negative light as she reflects on how nature is so often referred to as "cute, charming, [and] adorable" (*BP* 92). According to Oliver, such selective language strips the natural world of its "dignity, and authority" (*BP* 92). It is in considering the impact of language on the natural world that Oliver identifies the human's tyrannical power:

Thus we manage to put ourselves in the masterly way—if nature  
is full of a hundred thousand things adorable and charming,  
diminutive and powerless, then who is in the position of power?  
We are! We are the parents, and the governors. The notion  
facilitates a view of the world as playground and laboratory,  
which is a meager view surely. And it is disingenuous, for it  
seems so harmless, so responsible. But it is neither. (*BP* 92)

Oliver issues her statement on the human's masterly capabilities as a warning and states that the human should allow nature to be the "wheel that drives our world" (*BP* 92), rather than insisting that the world be "piloted by man" (*BP* 92). Oliver believes that if we see the natural world as cute and charming, it will exclude "the other view of nature, which is of a realm both sacred and intricate, as well as powerful, of which we are no

more than a single part” (BP 92). Any time the human uses language to characterize nature, it is a form of mastery that will never adequately describe nature’s otherness. However, when Oliver characterizes nature as being spiritual, she does not consider this to be a form of mastery because, even though it attempts to assign nature a higher status, it remains limited by the inadequacy of language.

Mary Oliver does not always embrace nature’s otherness but, instead, seeks community with it. There are instances, however, wherein she attempts to minimize differences in order to feel a sense of universal community: “We live [...] in the same country, in the same household, and our burning comes from the same lamp. We are all wild, valorous, amazing. We are, none of us, cute” (BP 93). Having acknowledged the danger in assuming mastery over nature, Mary Oliver does not resist the desire to feel in community with the natural world: “Human or tigers, tigers or tiger lilies—note their differences and still how alike they are!” (BP 93). It is in this declarative sentence that Oliver is most explicit about her paradoxical approach to the human and the natural world, as she acknowledges nature’s otherness, but remains certain that, ultimately, everything is interconnected.

The poetical statements of Mary Oliver, like those of her American Romantic precursors, create a paradoxical framework which her poetic subject negotiates in her lyric poetry. In their prose writing, Oliver and the American Romantics refer to poetry as grounded in and inspired by the earthly, but they also represent poetry’s transcendental potential. This spiritual experience must be derived from a sensual engagement with the natural world, which acts as an interconnector between the earthly and the spiritual. Oliver depicts poetry as being vital and alive like nature, which also means that it is assigned a transformative ability, which is comparable to nature’s own physical change and growth and its capacity to flourish. Nature represents community to Oliver as well as being something completely other, but this otherness tends to be idealized and made familiar through the mastery of human language. However, mastery is also assigned to the natural world, as it has the power to move and transform the poet.

The singular authoritative lyric voice has traditionally been considered solipsistic because it is only one voice, going uncontested by any others. The lyric poses an interesting problem because it is characterized as an expression of emotion or as a personal reflection and yet, as is declared at the end of *Leaves of Grass*, “I am large...I contain multitudes” (1316). The traditional lyric voice is sometimes considered to be biographical, but it is also given an almost god-like status: “The poem seems to be an utterance, but it is the utterance of a voice of indeterminate status” (Culler “Poetics of

the Lyric” 75). However, it is seldom that the poetic subject acknowledges this tension between the biographical and the omniscient, which creates an ambiguous and exploratory lyric voice. What is revealed through an ambiguous characterization of the lyric voice is an understanding that what is referred to as the singular voice is not diametrically opposed to the dialogic, but that it too embodies a dialogic and relational subjectivity.

Besides being characterized as authoritative and uncontested within the poem, the singular lyric voice has also been labeled anti- or asocial because it represents a solitary voice, but even in its apparent isolation, the lyric voice will reflect some grounding in a social context and ideologies. In “Lyric Voice and American Democracy,” Glenn Freeman argues that the lyric has, despite its Romantic association with the singular authoritative speaker, always been a social form, as it inevitably reflects its social and historical context, as opposed to simply being a voice overheard. Freeman points out that the idea of the “personal” Romantic lyric was assumed to be a “competing interest of the ‘social’” (11), an opposition which he dismisses. The lyric can encompass a broader view and is capable of negotiating and interacting with multiple and sometimes opposing influences and is a “means of interaction” (Freeman 26): “The lyric is uniquely able to interrogate and deconstruct the individual-social binary that is essential to enabling new visions of individual and group agency” (Freeman 26). The individual imagination of the Romantic tradition has exclusive, elitist connotations due to its perceived lack of connection to the social, but M.H. Abrams also argues that Romantic writers have been unjustly characterized as asocial: “Romanticism is often described as a mode of escapism, an evasion of the shocking changes [...] of the modern industrial world. The fact is that [...] these writers were obsessed with the realities of their era” (“English Romanticism” 43). The typical Romantic lyric, which is expressed by a single voice, is still representative of a social context through its particular focus and ideology:

In short, even in poems which are ostensibly presented as personal statements made on particular occasions, the conventions of reading enable us to avoid considering that framework as a purely biographical matter and to construct a referential context in accordance with demands of coherence that the rest of the poem makes. The fictional situation of discourse must be constructed so as to have a thematic function.

(Culler “Poetics of the Lyric” 167)

The singular lyric voice can be authoritative, but does not necessarily represent an isolated subject or a fixed and therefore singular subject position. The lyric is often characterized as being biographical, but social context, ideologies, doctrine, and beliefs can all be unearthed in the lyric poem, which represent influence outside a narrow, self-formed identity.

The idea of the lyric as an asocial art form is due, in part, to the tradition's focus on the natural world, which represents an escape from human society and, therefore, a disconnection from the collective consciousness. With the Romantic individual turning to nature for reflection or escape, it is assumed that he or she runs the risk of losing touch with social issues. Raimonda Modiano suggests that turning to nature represents an extreme loss of social awareness while not having contact with nature is equally destitute. Looking to nature for self-reflection "either surrenders the self to nature to such an extent that he [sic] must face the consequences of broken domestic and social ties, or he protects so firmly the independent power of the mind that he finds himself deprived of the nourishing contact with nature" (Modiano 51). In giving too much authority to nature, the poetic subject will risk losing his or her voice while, at the same time, contact with nature is a necessary resource for the poet's inspiration. For the Romantic individual to strike a perfect balance between "pantheism" or "subjective idealism" (Modiano 51) is considered exceptional and Coleridge attempts to resolve these extremes by seeking "integration of self and objects" (Modiano 51) wherein a relationship is enabled despite differences, which is much like the concept of mutuality.. The poetic subject's turning to nature does not have to result in the exclusion of the social as long as the reader is able to redefine the meaning of social to include nature.

In learning how to integrate the self and nature, there is a risk that the human's language will overpower the otherness and potential mastery of nature. According to David Baker, Wordsworth's self-image was "transcribed into a landscape that itself takes the shape of the human psyche" (200), which appropriates nature for human purposes without assigning it inherent value. Wordsworth believes that "[p]oetry is the image of man and nature" and that "there is no object standing between the Poet and the image of things" ("Preface" *Lyrical Ballads* 73), which may result in the projection of self onto nature if the poet's vision is uncomplicated by any external influence. The idea that the individual mind "takes over the initiative" (Abrams *ML* 91), means that not only is physical nature dominated by the human, but also that the human constructs his or her own epiphany, rather than investing faith in a divine third term to impart spiritual wisdom. Studies of the lyric also raise the question of how the mind's initiative over

nature develops: “an individual confronts a natural scene and makes it abide his question, and the interchange between his mind and nature constitutes the entire poem, which usually poses and resolves a spiritual crisis” (Abrams *NS* 92). A poetry that seeks epiphany in nature may appear to be informed by naturalism, but, according to Abrams, it is in fact informed by a “myth of mind” (*NS* 94). Abrams believes that in this poetry of mythic mind, the human takes over the role of God and translates the world through his or her idealistic philosophy (*NS* 92). Not only is the lyric characterized as being anti-social, but it can also become narcissistic if all initiative lies in the inward-looking poetic subject who does not seek external dialogue. Although nature can be thought to broaden the poet’s mind, nature may also be superseded by the imagination.

In the Romantic lyric, the poetic subject’s voice will be encumbered by ideologies that have been shaped and influenced by society, which further deny the lyric’s characterization as entirely asocial. All of these influences also make it difficult to imagine a lyric voice that is unencumbered by a self-consciousness that would mediate and restrict a real “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” (Wordsworth “Preface” *LB* 82). The poet’s necessary self-reflexivity inevitably grounds him or her in their socio-cultural context. Jerome McGann believes that Romantic poetry is inevitably doctrinal and believes that sincerity and spontaneity are “stylistic conventions” (63) of the Romantics. He argues that they are illusions that disguise doctrinal material: “In Romantic poems we will characteristically follow the play or development of ideas, the movement of consciousness in its search for what it does not know that it knows” (63). McGann identifies sincerity and spontaneity in Romantic poetry as constructions, but the “spontaneous overflow” (Wordsworth “Preface” *LB* 82) of poetry is inevitably entangled with social context, ideologies, and cultural conventions.

Mary Oliver believes that the poet should uphold a reader-author pact and that the poem has social implications. Oliver’s essay, “The Swan” (*WH* 24), is explicit about the social expectations of her poetry as it describes the necessity of engaging with one’s physical environment as well as with the reader, which contributes to an understanding of the contemporary lyric as socially aware and connected to its reader and context. Oliver provides the criteria for writing poetry and states that each poem should be “rich with ‘pictures of the world’” and that it should “carry threads from the perceptually felt world to the intellectual world” (*WH* 24). Oliver believes that poetry should reflect more than just the self and also that it should represent the interweaving of the poet’s

interior or “intellectual world” (*WH* 24) and the material, sensual world. She also states that every poem must have a “spiritual purpose” (*WH* 24). Not only does Oliver’s essay describe her poetry as being less dependent on the imagination than the traditional Romantic lyric, it also sets up a dialogic relationship with the reader: “I want the poem to ask something and, at its best moments, I want the question to remain unanswered. I want it to be clear that answering the question is the reader part in an author-reader pact” (“The Swan” *WH* 24).

The ecological, or relational, subject embodies the dual nature of the contemporary lyric because it maintains the importance of the poetic subject while still seeking connection with the natural world. The three main characteristics of the ecological subject are: relational subjectivity; the resistance of inner/outer and body/mind division; and a strong sense of connection to the earthly. The first of these three elements, relational subjectivity, is the core of the ecological subject because it defies traditional Romantic subjective idealism: “The ideal lyric’s monologism suggests that the self is a discrete entity that transcends the interconnections that are basic to the material realm” (Nielson 130). The ecological subject, rather than transcending the earthly, looks to the natural world for meaningful interconnections and self-realization. Therefore, the meaning of the self is directly related to its relationships with others as opposed to simply projecting the self onto the world.

Mary Oliver’s Romantic inheritance is demonstrated by her prose writing about poetics, which creates a paradoxical relationship between the poetic subject, the natural world, and the transcendent. For Oliver and the Romantics, the poet and the poetic subject are meant to be in contact with the natural world in order to feel grounded in the earthly, but this is contradicted by the expectation that the poet be someone who can also transcend the earthly. Poetry is considered to be alive and a representation of the individual imagination, as opposed to being a copy of a stagnant tradition, but both Oliver and the Romantics sometimes depict tradition as a valuable way of preserving poetry as an art form as opposed to a strictly individualistic outpouring. Poetry is transformative and Oliver and the Romantics see this as an opportunity to change the poet and the poetic subject into someone more expansive, but also to reach the reader with whom they feel a social and spiritual contract or pact. The poet has a paradoxical relationship with nature as he or she can be transformed by the natural world just as easily as they can master nature with language. Nature is sometimes acknowledged as radical other, but, when the human desires closeness, can be translated into something

familiar, which defies its true otherness. For Oliver and the Romantics, the poetic and poetic subject's relationship with nature and language is paradoxical, but they embrace their contradictions as being a part of the vitality of poetry: "By its very nature poetic discourse is ambiguous and ironical, displays tension, especially in its modes of qualification; and close reading, together with knowledge of connotations, will enable us to discover the tension and paradox of all successful poems" (Culler "Poetics of the Lyric" 162). What I aim to illustrate through an analysis of Mary Oliver's poetry is that the paradox of poetry is a productive one, which creates an ethic of flourishing through contradiction and exploration that resist a single, fixed, authoritative subjectivity.

### **Exploring Lyric Subjectivities in the Romantics' and Mary Oliver's Poetry**

In the tradition of the Romantics, Mary Oliver's lyric subject explores the singular and dialogic voice, which results in a paradox between the desire to have a dialogue with the natural world and the reader, versus gaining mastery over them from an uncontested position of knowledge. For both Oliver and the Romantics, exploring lyric subjectivities represent mutuality, but no single subjectivity is privileged or superseded by the other. In order to illustrate Oliver's inheritance of the exploring Romantic lyric subject, I will compare her "Breakage" (*WIWE* 32) with Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Contrasting these two poems illustrates that language and nature have a paradoxical relationship, which fluctuates between one mastering the other. Due to their paradoxical relationship, both nature and language acquire ambiguous meaning, which disable language's hierarchical position over nature and vice versa. In the second section, a comparison of Oliver's "Both Worlds" (*RB* 51) with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" will be the basis for a discussion of the Romantic paradox of the singular versus the dialogic lyric voice and how, in both poems, the subject remains singular, but relational. These comparative analyses will illustrate the paradoxical nature of the Romantic lyric and show how Oliver inherits its poetical framework.

Oliver's essay about Whitman's verse, "Some Thoughts on Whitman" (*WH* 62), identifies and admires his author-reader pact, wherein she sees him as an instructor or mentor, as opposed to using the poem as a strictly self-focused exploration. Oliver identifies Whitman's poetry as representing a broad spectrum of relevance for the reader: "*Leaves of Grass* is indeed a sermon, a manifesto, a utopian document, a social

contract, a political statement, an invitation, to each of us, to change” (WH 63). *Leaves of Grass* was first published in 1855 as a collection of only twelve poems and was added to over the years until the collection contained over one hundred and fifty poems. Whitman’s collection was initially ignored, but after the United States went through a civil war the poem became representative of “communitarian nationalism” (Frank 402) and “the democratic sublime” (Frank 402). Whitman’s collection encapsulated the individual’s power of expression as part of a larger revolution. *Leaves of Grass* is not simply a recollection of personal experience and emotion, but is a form of the personal that extends outwards and relates to the reader’s life: “*Leaves of Grass* assumes an intimate audience of one—one who listens closely to the solitary speaker. That is, to each reader the poem reaches out personally. It is mentoring, it is concerned; it is intimate” (WH 69). For Oliver, intimacy, the personal, and the social do not just coexist, but are codependent in Whitman’s poetry. To Oliver, Whitman’s lyric represents an opportunity to reach the reader through the personal and to affect change and, similar to Emerson, self-examination does not have to equal a detachment from the rest of the world: “Emerson would not turn from the world, which was domestic, and social, and collective, and required action” (Oliver LL 48). Oliver detects a pragmatic approach in the poetry of both Whitman and Emerson, in that both see poetry as a means of exploring the self as well as a way of engaging with the reader and changing their outlook. Even though Oliver compares Whitman’s poetry to a sermon, manifesto, or contract, she does not suggest that it is dogmatic or limiting, but that it is something to be embraced. Oliver’s own poetry represents the ideal poetical model that she identifies in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* by using ambiguous language and changing priorities in order to expose her reader to an expanse of perspectives.

The significance of language, in “Song of Myself,” becomes a paradox because it is depicted as being both inadequate and empowering. The poetic subject becomes critical of his own self-reflection when nature points out its meaninglessness and the inadequacy of human language in comparison to nature’s physical action: “The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he / complains of my gab and my loitering” (1331, 52). In Oliver’s “The Lark” (WIWE 38-9), nature has a comparable message for the poetic subject when the bird tells her to “Squander the day, but save the soul” (l. 36). Nature urges the human to live actively instead of simply contemplate, which is also the subject of Oliver’s “Blue Iris” (WDWK 53), wherein the fly and the wind both question the poetic subject, who sits inside reading books. Both parts of nature ask “What’s that you’re doing?” (“Blue Iris” WDWK l. 4, 8), which causes the poetic subject to yearn for

an escape from the confines of the mind. Similarly, the speaker of “Song of Myself” believes that he does not require language and that his true self is embodied by sensual and physical wildness, rather than words: “I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (1332-33, 52). However, the irony of this declaration is that it is delivered through language, which he is, in fact, ultimately dependent on. Language is associated with the domestic and cultural, while the speaker’s authentic, inner state is said to relate to the inarticulate and wild, but this is an alterity and otherness of the self that can never truly be reached until language is completely abandoned.

The other side of the paradox of language in “Song of Myself” occurs when the poetic subject’s words are depicted as masterly and powerful. The speaker refers to the persuasiveness of language and its conduciveness to teaching others:

My words itch at your ears till you understand them.

I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up the time

While I wait for a boat,

(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue  
of you,

Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen’d.) (1246-48)

That the words “itch” suggest that their meaning is lingering, insistent, sensory, and will not be ignored. The speaker qualifies his speech by stating that he does not take language for granted or consider it to be a temporary or disposable token. Having “loosen’d” his own tongue from repression, the ability of speech is depicted as being a powerful gift for the speaker who is able to sing the song of himself and also, according to him, to speak for all of humanity. However, the speaker also qualifies the kind of language that is effective as self-expression and devalues that which is overly formal or insincere: “Logic and sermons never convince, / The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul” (653-54, 30). The speaker values verbal expressions of self, but those forms of rhetoric that are associated with political or religious agendas are distrusted and, according to Ivy G. Wilson, Whitman “privileges a social cohesion not promulgated or maintained by contract or force” (202). Language can be a lingering power that best captures an expression of self, but Whitman only endorses it when it is representative of the individual imagination, as opposed to it being a repetition of an institutional belief. The logic of argument and sermons indicate the singular and uncontested, while Whitman’s project is one of plurality that “generates multiple and simultaneous possible interpretations” (Miller 47). It is in Whitman’s aversion to formal

or rational speech that the paradox of language is most clear in “Song of Myself” because, although the speaker does not wish to be subjected to someone else’s rhetorical agenda, the poem is a form of sermon: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assumed you shall assumed, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (l. 1-3). The poem becomes the forum in which the poet and other individuals are interconnected through spoken language.

At the same time, language is also considered by Whitman to be something that should be overcome because it can too easily become a singular indulgence in the self. Self-expression is, in part, made possible with language, but the speaker of “Song of Myself” depends more confidently on his senses as a way of creating an exchange between different bodies, which results in a self-realization. The poetic subject believes that, sometimes, there is more power to be found in resisting verbal expression: “Writing and talk do not prove me, / I carry the plenum of proof and everything else in my face, / With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic” (579-581, 25). Language is seen by the speaker to diminish the integrity of the unspoken and untranslatable union that he senses he is a part of with the rest of the world. Rather than attempt to justify the self and his position in the world through speech, the speaker decides to find his own self through sensual absorption in the natural world and the abandonment of speech: “Now I will do nothing but listen / To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds / contribute toward it” (582-83, 26). The ideal self, who achieves self-realization, has a plurality of influences, which can only be developed through contact with others, which is referred to as the “fully integrated self” (Hatch 10), as opposed to “the simplistic and one-sidedly positive outlook” (Hatch 10). Language is depicted as being monologic in “Song of Myself” and, because the speaker believes in personal development through exchange and community with others, sensual contact becomes an alternative to a solitary speech-act.

Language is also depicted as disabling by Whitman because it can be used in complaint and inaction, which leads to complacency and powerlessness. A polarity is created when communing with nature is presented as the alternative to language, as opposed to having an interdependent or supplementary relationship:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid  
And self-contain’d  
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one dissatisfied, not one demented with the mania  
    Of owning things  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived  
    Thousands of years ago,

Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth (684-691, 32)

Language is described as being an outlet for discontent where one's unhappiness can reach beyond the boundaries of the self and infiltrate the consciousness of others. Nature, which is, according to the speaker, "self-contain'd," remains single-minded and without need of verbal language as a tool of self-expression. The human, however, is burdened by self-consciousness and this constant looking to the self is depicted as a form of paralysis. Language is depicted as the last resort, or as an outlet for the human who does not understand him or herself, while nature, which is unquestioning in its place and purpose, has no need for words and rhetoric because it has an innate certainty and self-understanding. Language, in "Song of Myself," can become a limiting and futile exercise, in particular, when its sole purpose is self-reflection.

Similarly, there are instances in "Song of Myself" when nature and language are closely associated and nature is used as a metaphor for language, but their equation does not result in a complimentary union. Language that is like nature is simple, and although this is depicted as being liberating and positive, it does also imply that language that is "natural," or simple, is marginalized from social and cultural relevance. The speaker describes the "friendly and flowing savage" (976, 39) as using "words simple as grass" (983, 39). Equating language with the natural world connotes simplicity and, although Whitman admires the savage's freedom, it is nonetheless depicted as naïve and uncivilized.

The association between language and nature, then, creates a contradictory model of nature that is both a simplification and an exclusive spiritual code. In "Song of Myself" nature, instead of language, embodies the power to transform and change the individual. The speaker uses the grass as a representation of nature on which to meditate and which becomes the impetus, or central inspiration to reflect on life and to change. A child asks the speaker: "*What is the grass?* Fetching it to [the speaker] with full / hands" (l. 99). Having physical contact with grass becomes a mode of transformation as the speaker comes to see, while holding the grass, how spiritual and the material are interconnected:

Or I guess [the grass] is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,  
...

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe  
Of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow  
zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the  
same, I receive them the same (l. 102-03, 105-09)

The grass is a unifying but paradoxical symbol that interconnects all of those who live on the earth as well as linking the earthly to the transcendent through metaphor.

Whitman uses the grass as the commonality between all people as it exists under the feet of humanity and represents that which belongs to the earth as well as that which can symbolize the spiritual. Grass is the unassuming common denominator in the poem, which represents accessibility to the natural world and spirituality that is everywhere and abundant. As God's handkerchief, the grass acts as a landscape on which humanity is delicately held or, as the poetic subject states, a keepsake left on earth by the Lord, which acts as a reminder of the divine. Grass becomes a spiritual and physical force that perseveres in spite of the human's prejudice, boundaries, and despair—it becomes a symbol of ever-renewing hope and growth. Grass is the child of the earth, but also represents inevitable death, or "the beautiful uncut hair of graves" (l. 110, 6).

Whitman's grass, which is also compared to a "hieroglyphic" (l. 106) suggests that its sanctity is coded, which makes it an exclusive spiritual symbol. This codification of the natural world contradicts its otherwise easy accessibility and embodies the paradoxical representation of nature and the human's relationship to it in "Song of Myself."

It is the poet who gives grass a dual meaning in "Song of Myself," and it is also through human perception that its duality can create a paradox in which to dwell as opposed to having to assign one of its meanings supremacy over the other. The poetic subject "perceive[s] after all so many uttering tongues" (l. 119, 6), but what is determined from the perception of multitudes is a holistic understanding of life as interconnected with death and of the earthly as interconnected with the transcendent:

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd  
babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,

And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one  
good,  
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all  
good. (l. 133-35, 7)

The poetic subject associates the ability to see life's dual nature with becoming an other-worldly or spectral figure that exists beyond the body. In "Song of Myself," the perception and acceptance of life as multitudinous is considered to be difficult or exceptional and is something that the poet can achieve and then translate to his reader. Even though Whitman considers language to be limiting for most, it remains an advantage for he who can wield it wisely. It is the poet, in this case, who is depicted as having the ability to translate the complexity of life to others, which, even though Whitman seeks commonality between people, gives the poet a privileged position. Throughout "Song of Myself," nature symbolizes transformations from life to death and the earthly to the spiritual, but it is the perception and language of the poet that articulates the meaning of nature's change and growth. This dependence on language to express nature's meaning creates an ambiguous relationship between the two where nature is said to be the embodiment of everything and yet language is its master. This paradox between nature as all-encompassing and language as that which can contain it runs throughout Whitman's poem and it is the poem as inclusive landscape that spurs multiple angles of exploration.

In "Breakage" (*WIWE* 32), Mary Oliver creates an ambiguous depiction of language and nature and, despite her admiration of Whitman's poem as sermon, or contract, her poem is ambivalent about its own didacticism. Like "Song of Myself," nature in "Breakage" has layers of meaning in its individual parts as well as its entirety. Nature becomes a metaphor for language in "Breakage," which, unlike Whitman's depiction that either transforms into the oversimplified or exclusive, does not create any negative connotations for the simplistic and makes the immeasurable something that borders on the transcendent but does not become obscured.

In "Song of Myself," Whitman believes that it is through the sensual that connection will be made between the earthly and the transcendent, but in Oliver's "Breakage," it is both sensuality and language that create interconnections between the earthly and transcendent as well as the human and nature:

I go down to the edge of the sea  
How everything shines in the morning light!  
The cusp of the whelk,

the broken cupboard of the clam,  
the opened, blue mussels,  
moon snails, pale pink and barnacle scarred—  
and nothing at all whole or shut, but tattered, split,  
dropped by the gulls onto the gray rocks and all the  
moisture gone.

It's like a schoolhouse  
of little words,  
thousands of words.  
First you figure out what each one means by itself,  
the jingle, the periwinkle, the scallop  
full of moonlight.

Then you begin, slowly, to read the whole story.

The poem begins in a liminal space, at the edge of the sea, where the poetic subject confronts the difference between her world of self-consciousness and the physical world of nature. The human's difference from nature is not separated by a strict barrier, because there are brief moments when the human feels difference dissolve and other times when the human is most aware of nature's otherness. The difference between the natural world and the human world are not dissolved in "Breakage," but the poem does become an inclusive landscape in which they can coexist. Having the speaker go into nature and overlook it positions her as a seeker, but this seeking embodies a tension between accepting nature's otherness and wishing to master it. In the second line of the poem, the speaker expresses wonderment as she exclaims about "the morning light!" (l. 2). However, in the lines that follow, nature's parts are listed and it is compared to a "schoolhouse" (l. 10), which suggests a tone of formal learning in the poem. Opening the poem on the edge of the sea, between wonderment and mastery, sets a tone of ambiguity and tension for the rest of the poem. The speaker's acknowledgement of her difference from nature captures the constant tension between the human and the natural worlds, but their difference does not inhibit the human's learning and the fostering of an ethic of mutuality.

In "Breakage," nature's physical transformation is a metaphor for the human's potential to flourish. The concept of flourishing as a transformation and expansion both highlights the similarity between the human and non-human worlds, but, paradoxically, also illustrates how different they are. The poem begins in the morning, which

foreshadows the spiritual awakening that the speaker will experience by the end of the poem, as morning represents newness, when everything “shines” (l. 2) and perspective is fresh. This awakening recalls Emerson’s belief in writing as being able to break “up [his] whole chain of habits” and see new “possibilities” (“Circles” 173-4). Under this new morning light, the speaker identifies the whelk, or sea snail, clam, and blue mussels. All of the creatures are described as being altered in some way, as their bodies are broken, open, tattered and split, which gives a dark tone to the image. This violence and destruction is put in perspective and teaches the human that there is usually a good reason for loss in the natural world. In “Breakage,” this mini-massacre of sea bodies is a result of the hunger of gulls. In “Breakage,” the sea creatures represent the “desire” and “appetite” (Fast 371) of the whole sea as they are broken apart in order to feed other bodies, all of which takes place under the illumination of the sun, which represents the human’s growing sense of understanding from having contact with nature. Like Thoreau, Oliver’s poetry makes the reader “anticipate a dark underside to every ideal. Thus its ultimate effect is to alter the character of desire, rendering it less total, less confident, less dogmatic” (Bennett 110). In “Breakage” nature is depicted as having both a light and dark side and, rather than attempting to neutralize their difference, they exist in an ambiguous relationship together in which they are very different as well as interconnected. In confronting nature’s dark and purgative aspects and their ambiguous relationship, the poetic subject gains a broadened and expanding sympathy that does not require binary organization.

Unlike “Song of Myself,” “Breakage” is ambivalent about the poem’s didacticism as it represents the natural world as ideal for providing experiential learning as well as it being similar in structure to institutional learning, which is also given value. The poem demonstrates how learning and language have an indeterminate range of meaning and that nature can be an important representation of this, but the poetic subject resists being explicit about the poem as a lesson. The shift, in “Breakage,” from a focus on nature to a focus on learning and language, represents one that J. Scott Bryson believes to be common in Oliver’s poetry of the nineties: “Oliver consistently shifts from one side ‘of the beautiful water,’ in her role of strict observer of beauty, to the other, in her role as imaginer of alternate consciousnesses” (*West Side* 124). In “Breakage,” this shift is somewhat different in that the speaker retains self-consciousness throughout and the shift of perspective occurs when she becomes the instructor instead of nature. The speaker’s experience in nature transforms into wisdom that is passed on to the reader. Rather than imagining an “alternate consciousness” (Bryson *WS* 124) Oliver takes a

pragmatic and didactic approach in this poem as the scene of broken bodies scattered on the rocks is “like a schoolhouse” (l. 10). Like the American Romantics, the natural world is “pasture enough for [the] imagination” (*Walden* 87) and sufficient terrain for learning. The image of the dry sea bodies, scattered on the gray rocks, becomes like a chalkboard where words are spelled out as part of a lesson. However, this schoolhouse is referred to as one “of little words” (l. 11), which means that either the words are simple or that there are only a small number of words used in this schoolhouse. In either case, the length of the poem’s lines shortens to reinforce the sense of minimalism that accompanies the image of “little words.” The poem, itself a self-contained unit, is like a one-room schoolhouse full of words where little ones become “thousands” (l. 12). The “thousands of words” do not overwhelm the speaker who decides to “figure out what each one means by itself” (l. 13). Learning happens in steps and each one, no matter how small and simple, contributes to a larger understanding of individual bodies as well as their broader context. Even though Whitman states in “Song of Myself,” that “You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (l. 36-7, 2), the poem is what Oliver refers to as, “a sermon, a manifesto, a utopian document, a social contract, a political statement, an invitation, to each of us, to change” (*WH* 63), which is meant to persuade. As previously stated, Oliver endorses Whitman’s poem as a manifesto, but in “Breakage,” persuasion is disguised and implicit in her description of nature, which becomes its own schoolhouse.

Part of the ambivalent nature of the didacticism in “Breakage” is that, although nature teaches the human, the poetic subject still declares that it is impossible to master nature’s vast meaning and encourages the reader to embrace the boundlessness of the natural world and explore it without seeking a measurable result. Like the American Romantics, Oliver’s poetry encourages a sensual exploration of nature because it tends away from the seeking of taught, formal knowledge, towards a personal, intuitive experience. Having a sensual experience of nature does not exclude having an intellectual and imaginative experience, as long as the latter does not aim for mastery over the natural world. Thoreau, for instance, intertwines the intellectual with his devotional sensuality when he describes his head as “hands and feet” (*Walden* 98). In “Breakage,” learning occurs instinctually through the speaker’s contact with the various parts of nature, rather than by direct, or explicit instruction from a superior individual. In “Song of Myself,” when Whitman associates learning or language with nature, it becomes something oversimplified, such as the savage’s language, or something

exclusive and codified, such as the grass as hieroglyphic. In “Breakage,” nature’s simplicity is ambiguous because, on the one hand, the speaker begins by simply listing the bodies that she sees, “the jingle, the periwinkle, the scallop” (l. 14), but these bodies are “full of moonlight” (l. 15), which symbolizes their embodiment of a depth of spiritual meaning. Therefore, the poetic subject does teach the reader by pointing to nature’s spiritual depth but it is through a metaphor that is integrated seamlessly with the other lines that simply list the literal parts of nature. Oliver’s didacticism comes in the form of metaphor wherein language and learning are interconnected with nature in way that makes instruction a part of the landscape of the poem. Similar to Thoreau’s “inward exploration” (Bennett 40), Oliver’s poetry teaches the reader “to avoid the inquisitorial zeal of Augustinian confession, for the Wild must be treated at a distance, else it ceases to be an object of fascination and become something to devour” (Bennett 40). However, Oliver’s poetry does feature learning that is derived from nature without being a dissection or exploitation of the natural world and its parts.

Oliver’s poetry is sometimes more critical of learning and language, in particular, when it is associated with the human’s rationality and logic, which relates to formal rhetoric that is learned through secular or religious institutions. Nature, in Oliver’s poetry, can become the opposite of the human conceptualization of language and learning as meaningful. In “The Lark” (*WDWK* 38-9), the rational human mind is juxtaposed with the bird’s instinctual existence when the speaker states that it is “[b]etter to be a bird” (l. 32) after watching the lark’s “pectorals / ploughing and flashing” (l. 10-1) and its “shoulders working / his whole body almost collapsing and floating” (l. 27-8). The speaker decides that the human is “reconciled [...] to too much” (l. 30-1) and associates the bird’s physical existence with freedom. For Emerson, although he does not wish to sacrifice his rational mind, the natural world does serve to break up the intensity and monotony of intellectual pursuits when he states that his “book should smell of pine and resound with the hum of insects” (“Self-Reliance” 38). Emerson does not wish to simply be a physical body in the natural world, but sees it as interwoven into his intellectualism. In Oliver’s “Percy (Nine)” (*RB* 39), which was published six years after “The Lark,” the speaker has a more accepting view of the human’s rationality. She wonders what it must be like to be her dog, “not / thinking, not weighing anything, just running forward” (l. 11-2). However, the speaker recognizes the human’s desire for both the single-mindedness of nature as well as the “the examined life” (l. 7) of Emerson: “there are days I wish / there was less in my head to examine” (l. 8-9). Even though some of Oliver’s poems are more critical of

human rationality than others, they also accept that the human's self-reflexivity enables an exploratory and revelatory life, which has its own spiritual rewards.

On the opposite page from "Breakage," "Where Does the Dance Begin, Where Does It End?" (*WIWE* 33) addresses, more explicitly and critically, the restrictions of taught knowledge if it does not allow ambiguity. The speaker of the poem tells us: "Don't call this world an explanation, or even an education" (l. 12). It is not that Oliver's poetry is anti-education, but that the concept of an "explanation" implies a singular or final response to something, when the ideal is inclusion and mutuality. This message appears to contradict the message in "Breakage," which is to learn or "figure out" (l. 13) meaning in the world. However, "Breakage" does distinguish between institutional or formalistic learning and self-directed intuitive learning. Whitman also dismisses that which is taught by an authority in favour of individual experience when he locates the divine inside himself, as opposed to the "churches, bibles, and all creeds" ("Song of Myself" 526, 24) of formal religion. In "Where Does the Dance Begin," the words "explanation" (l. 12) and "education" (l. 12) suggest an anthropocentric impulse to apply value only to things that have a use in the human world. The message of "Where Does the Dance Begin" is not to dismiss the importance of the natural world, but to avoid assigning it a quantifiable value.

In place of the concept of "explanation" (l. 12), the speaker of "Where Does the Dance Begin" encourages the reader to seek experience and engagement, both of which imply mutuality and inclusion as opposed to a single or final answer. The speaker uses the whirling of "the Sufi poet" (l. 13) as an example of a physical experience that denies the rational, but remains an intellectual and spiritual activity. The whirling of the poet in Oliver's poem represents the interconnection of the individual's physical body with the spiritual world.<sup>13</sup> The whirling poet is a symbol of freedom from intellectual isolation because it engages the body, but, as opposed to being a strictly individualistic ritual, in this poem it is associated with the poet Rumi, which grounds the physical whirling and its spiritual significance in a tradition of written language. Whirling also represents the uninterrupted cycle of life and death, which Oliver consistently embraces in her poetry. The necessary deaths in nature, followed by new life represent both the

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<sup>13</sup> Whirling is an activity done by various Sufi orders including the Mevlevi Order "which is rooted in the teachings of Jalal ad-Din Rumi" (Whitehouse 5). When performed by a Sufi, whirling represents "the cosmic joy experienced by the simultaneous effect of annihilation and glorification" (Friedlander 87). However, Bill Whitehouse also notes that whirling or "Sufi dancing" is taught in "health clubs and New Age centers" (4).

“annihilation and glorification” (Friedlander 87) that the Sufi whirlers honour. In Mary Oliver’s poetry, the poetic subject is given great power of acceptance and understanding, instead of dominion or control over the natural world through an all-encompassing knowledge of nature’s scientific processes. The poetic subject’s power is in the abandonment of the desire to *know* everything in favour of *experiencing*, which is enabled through the physical and sensual, such as dancing for inspiration. In “Where Does the Dance Begin,” the movement of nature and the whirling of the poet are both assigned a transformative, or creative power: “Doesn’t the wind, turning in circles, invent the dance? / Haven’t the flowers moved, slowly, across Asia, then Europe” (l. 8-9). Like the American Romantics, the physical world of nature and the intellectual mind of the poet are intertwined as they both represent unrestricted movement and change through the dance, which is a metaphor that Oliver uses throughout her oeuvre for poetry. In “Song of Myself,” nature and the intellectual are not as easily intertwined because Whitman only imagines them as two polarized options, which results in an oversimplification or overly codified and exclusive version of both nature and language. However, it is possible for these extremes to become less contradictory when the human perceives their difference and embraces their potential mutuality instead of reinforcing their mutual exclusion. In “Where Does the Dance Begin,” the poetic subject creates a contrast between the physical dance as spiritual experience with the intellectual dance of poetry, both of which coexist and contribute to spiritual awakening and transformation.

“Breakage” begins with the speaker, or “I,” stepping into nature and learning from the “little words” (l. 11) of the natural world, but, by the end of the poem, it is “you” who is deciphering meaning and, in the final line of the poem, it is “you” who begins “to read the whole story” (l. 16). Intertwined with the expansion of the poetic subject from “I” to “you” is another way of reading the poem as the final line of the poem encourages a reading of the “whole story” (l. 16). This final line has the reader compare the “whole story” (l. 16) of the poem with the “little words” (l. 11) and single lines of which it is comprised. This dialogic engagement from the poetic subject with the reader causes the reader to re-examine the poem one more time and consider “what the reader would make of it” (Oliver, “The Swan” *WH* 26). The looking back and re-reading of the poem is reinforced by the word “slowly” (l. 16), which, due to its being separated by commas, actually slows the reading of the poem. The exercise in slowing down and looking back also re-enacts a rational and methodical form of learning, which contrasts with the more instinctual learning in the rest of the poem. The poem

transforms from being the personal experience of the poetic subject into a shared experience with the reader. The handing over of experience from the poetic subject to the reader is an illustration of the poet's mastery over the poem and the reader, but there is potential for the reader to gain agency in the reading of the poem through a conceptualization of the changing subjectivity as a form of mutuality and flourishing.

"Breakage" and "Song of Myself" both explore the boundaries between the human and natural world in an attempt to achieve a spiritual and intellectual awakening. Both poets believe in the reader-author pact, which means that both poems are intended to offer some form of instruction and mentoring to the writer. "Breakage" is more ambivalent about being didactic than "Song of Myself," whose poetic subject is also clearly stated as the voice of Walt Whitman, the author. Oliver speaks as her formal self in her poems and is, therefore, less explicit about the poem being spoken by a rhetorician or wordsmith. Oliver teaches in her poems, but her poetic subject is dialogic, which does not have the same connotations of authority and oppression that a singular lyric voice may have. The final line of "Breakage" encapsulates the dialogic lyric by giving the experience described in the poem to the reader because it is the reader who explores the *whole* story of the poem and can choose to accept its instruction or not. "Where Does the Dance Begin" is more direct in its message about learning as it dissuades "explanation" or "education" from the world. What is most important in "Breakage" and "Where Does the Dance Begin" is to relinquish concepts of formal and institutional learning, which imply a set of singular, final answers that offer its own intellectual rewards. Oliver's poems, in the tradition of the Romantics, create paradox and ambiguity in her depictions of language and the natural world, but rather than serving to confuse her reader, they enable mutuality, which maintains difference, but also creates a flourishing through its interconnections.

Mary Oliver's "Both Worlds" is another example of her inheritance of Romantic paradox, but unlike "Breakage" and "Where Does the Dance Begin" which deal with the tension between language and nature "Both Worlds" deals with the lyric voice as both singular and dialogic. "Both Worlds" is from Oliver's 2008 collection, *Red Bird*, which comes four years after *Why I Wake Early* ("Breakage" and "Where Does the Dance Begin") and represents a more explicitly self-reflexive mood in the poet. Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" (120)<sup>14</sup> provides a classic Romantic comparison, or

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<sup>14</sup> Taken from *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose* (2004), edited by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano

“hyper-canonical romantic work” (Kandl 393), for Oliver’s “Both Worlds” because it is an example of the traditional singular lyric voice that still engages in dialogue as part of its self-reflection, which is an exercise in inclusion and mutuality, which is the basis for my contemporary concept of flourishing. “Frost at Midnight” was first published in 1798 in a collection called *Fears in Solitude* and has been interpreted as being both an intensely meditative poem as well as being spoken by a public voice with intent to reach the reader (Kandl 395). In M.H. Abrams’ “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” he lists Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” as an example of what he refers to as the “greater Romantic lyric” (*Correspondent Breeze* 77), which he defines as follows:

They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on [...] frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. (76-7)

Although it is not explicit in the above definition, Abrams also notes that nature, which plays such an important role in the speaker’s revelation, does not, in fact, have agency or authority. Instead of depicting nature as having the power to pursue the human, Abrams frames nature as being something used and manipulated in the Romantic writers’ “process of intellection” (“Structure and Style” 77), or imagination. Abrams goes on to state that the greater lyric “is only a special instance of a very widespread manner of proceeding in Romantic poetry” (79), but “Frost at Midnight” does include all of its criteria. The poem is not simply “an intensely subjective meditative lyric written in isolated retirement and reflecting the isolated consciousness of its author” (Magnuson 190), but depicts an exploratory poetic subject that maintains its individual boundaries, and those of others, as well as seeks dialogue and reciprocal interaction.

The lyric voice in “Frost at Midnight” is relational, which means that it is both singular and dialogic. Besides being categorized as a greater Romantic lyric by Abrams, “Frost at Midnight” is known as one of Coleridge’s conversation poems, which has similar implications as a dialogic lyric, with some minor differences. According to David S. Miall, “[t]he term Conversation Poem originates with Coleridge: a poem first printed in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is entitled by him ‘The Nightingale; a Conversational Poem, written in April, 1798’” (97). The definition of a dialogic or conversational

poem is essentially the same because, in each case, the lyric voice seeks participation or reciprocity from someone or something else. However, it is Aviram and Hartnett's more expansive definition of the dialogic poem which embodies the relational subjectivity in "Frost at Midnight": "Rather than expressing a single, overpowering emotion, the poem displays an array of emotional states. Rather than being a single, sustained meditation with a unified self, the poem is a collection of meditations in dialogue with one another" (205). The dialogic represents the different voices that can manifest through a single subject's emotional exploration while the conversation poem, according to Chris Baldick's definition, is "addressed to close friends, and [is] characterized by an informal but serious manner of deliberation that expands from a particular setting" (70). The conversation poem connotes an intimacy or exclusivity, while the dialogic, which has a broad outlook, has more of a social interest, with an awareness of and interest in affecting the speaker. Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and Oliver's "Both Worlds" are best characterized as dialogic poems due to the broad scope of their subjectivities.

"Frost at Midnight" is formed by the poetic subject's personal reflections, but these meditations are inspired by contact with the natural world, inanimate objects, and his sleeping son, all of which illustrate the importance of relationships as influences in the poem. The poem opens with a description of nature around the cottage which leads into the speaker's "[a]bstuser musings" (l. 6). The frost's "secret ministry" (l. 1) and the "owl's cry" (l. 2) introduce and frame the poetic subject's meditative space within the cottage. Even though the natural world surrounds the speaker, emphasis is also placed on the personal contemplation of the subject who sits in "solitude" (l. 5), "meditation" (l. 9), and "silence" (l. 10). Within this meditative scene, the poetic subject then identifies with a piece of ash, which is the impetus for an exploration of childhood memories. From this digression, the poetic subject returns to thoughts of his sleeping child, who lies next to him in the cottage. The poetic subject interacts with the natural world, a piece of ash, and his child to create an exchange outside of the self, which expands his ability to travel through memories and visions of the future.

The dialogic nature of "Frost at Midnight" is characterized by the necessity of the poetic subject's exchanges with things outside himself in order to self-reflect and self-realize. "Frost at Midnight" consists of what David Miall refers to as "images of reciprocity" (102). Reciprocity is different from the traditional conversation format because the response that the poetic subject seeks does not have to come in the form of spoken language, but simply represents an interconnection between the subject and its surroundings. The speaker in "Frost at Midnight" is isolated from other human

company, but he still manages to conjure images of mutuality. The first example of this is when the speaker thinks of the piece of ash from the fire as a “companionable form” (l. 18). This is the most explicit reciprocal image that the speaker creates in the poem because it refers to his own identification with the inanimate object—even though it is an unlikely place to self-identify, it works to trigger the speaker’s exploration of memories. Angela Esterhammer believes that the relationship between the poetic subject can be considered “dialogic, inasmuch as the fluttering motion of the ash is its mode of expression, its ‘word’” (44). Identifying the ash as a signifying element is important in enabling a more inclusive understanding of dialogue within the poem. Miall points out two other important instances of reciprocity in the poem, which illustrate how the dialogic form runs implicitly throughout the work in a subtle way that does not disrupt the centrality of the individual poetic subject. The second image of reciprocity in Coleridge’s poem is the sound of church bells he recollects from his youth that are “apparently evoking in him a powerful sense of connectedness to some future fulfillment” (Miall 103). Remembering the church bells and the emotions that they cause to surface is a form of exchange, or dialogue between different periods in time. In “Frost at Midnight,” dialogue extends, not just from the speaker, but between separate subjects and objects in the poem. Therefore, even though it is a singular voice speaking, it is not an isolated subject. What is most interesting about Coleridge’s images of reciprocity is that they are inclusive of the human, nature, and the divine and take a different form than the explicit language exchange of human conversation. Reciprocity is, then, not limited by or dependent on human language or words, but is, nonetheless, a form of dialogue.

In “Frost at Midnight,” nature is depicted as both transcendent as well as providing an earthly community for the human, which creates a broad landscape in which the poetic subject can explore. Nature is depicted as material and earthly as well as representative of the transcendent and spiritual and, as the poetic subject describes the natural world around him, it becomes clear that nature represents something other. The “numberless goings-on” (l. 11) of the “[s]ea, hill, and wood” (l. 10) represent both the vastness of the material natural world as well as its indeterminate spiritual meaning. Coleridge’s natural world is accessible outside his cottage, but its common elements represent the unknowable: “In his description of nature in ‘Frost at Midnight,’ he introduces the sublime and the transcendent, not only things transcending experience but also transcending knowledge. He creates an unknowable nature, a sphere beyond our grasp” (Swanepoel 454). From the most simple of physical surroundings, the poetic

subject can conjure divine meaning. The frost's "secret ministry" (l.1) is an example of an accessible part of nature representing divinity. Later in the poem, nature becomes the "lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters" (l. 59-61). Despite this turn to the divine, the final stanza of the poem returns to an earthly nature inhabited by "the redbreast" (l. 67), "tufts of snow" (l. 68), and a "mossy apple-tree" (l. 69), none of which are infused with the transcendent or spiritual, but are physical descriptions of the natural world. The representation of nature as earthly as well as spiritual is illustrated in the final stanza that refers to the "secret ministry of frost" (l. 72). The frost is a physical part of the material world, but it also becomes something mystical and spiritual, which illustrates that the two different depictions of nature, as both earthly and divine are not mutually exclusive, but represent the exploring poetic subject's perception of different subjectivities.

The transcendence of the natural world and its association with the divine give it an authority and superiority over the poetic subject who, in "Frost at Midnight," feels estranged from nature. Even though the divine is apparent in nature and it represents inspiration for the poetic subject, he does not feel close to it and can only hope that his son will have a more intimate experience with it than he. According to Ashok Kumar, "In Frost at Midnight' he reveals nature as the eternal language of God. That's why in order to be in contact with God, we must live in the midst of natural scenes and enjoy them thoroughly" (184). Nature is depicted as "a living whole and is pervaded by Divine Spirit" (Kumar 184). Being associated with God's language gives the natural world an authoritative status over the poetic subject who claims to feel a distance from nature. Coleridge's poetic subject in "Frost at Midnight" was "reared / In the great city" (l. 51-2), which denied him access to nature's beauty. However, despite the poetic subject's claim to have been unaffected by nature in his youth, he nonetheless exhibits a detailed imagining of the natural world in both its earthly and divine meaning. Therefore, in the poetic subject's description of the natural world's different significances, he establishes not an estrangement, but a mastery over the natural world through language. The speaker assumes a humble voice in the poem, but this does not alter the power that his language wields in depicting the details of the natural world and a vision of his son's future. Despite the dialogic nature of the poem, authority is a concept that is not exclusive to human language, but is also embodied in the divine power of the natural world.

The exchanges that take place in "Frost at Midnight" between the poetic subject, nature, and inanimate objects create a dialogue that does not eliminate authority and

hierarchy, but allows a fluid movement between extremes that fosters mutuality and inclusion. A.C. Swanepoel believes that “Frost at Midnight” illustrates a harmony between the poetic subject and the natural world and that it “propagates a non-exploitative symbiosis between nature and humanity, where the mystery of nature is valued and where we acknowledge that we do not know everything regarding nature” (457). However, the poem is less a harmony or symbiosis as it is an exploration of different possible outcomes for the poetic subject and nature. The poetic subject who exhibits an understanding of nature’s earthly and transcendent beauty does not experience an ideal unification with either version of it. Instead, the poetic subject’s boundaries remain ambiguous at the end of the poem, at which point, despite the journeying into memory and future, there is an implied return to the beginning of the poem as the subject points again to the “secret ministry of frost” (l. 72). This return to the frost also brings the speaker to the earlier image of the poetic subject looking out at it from within his cottage, having come full circle. Abrams has a slightly different interpretation of the poetic subject’s relationship with the natural world, wherein he refers to the “transaction” (“Structure and Style” 102) between them as opposed to a union. Abrams refers to this as the “interfusion of mind and nature” (102), which is not a simple melting together, but a pervasion of each force into the other.

Mary Oliver’s “Both Worlds” (*RB* 51-2), demonstrates the inheritance of the exploring Romantic subject similar to that of “Frost at Midnight,” who maintains a singular speaking voice that engages in dialogic transactions as part of its development. The human and natural worlds are clearly divided in “Both Worlds,” which is unusual in a Mary Oliver poem, but writing is depicted as a tool that the human can use to connect with nature. The poem represents both the importance of writing for the human’s sense of purpose and the necessary inspiration that writing derives from contact with nature. In “Both Worlds” writing is depicted as a living thing, like nature, that has no end:

Forever busy, it seems,  
with words,  
finally

I put the pen down

and crumple

most of the sheets

and leave one or two,

sometimes a few,

for the next morning.

Day after day—

year after year—

it has gone on this way,

I rise from the chair,

I put on my jacket

and leave the house

for that other world—

the first one,

the holy one—

where the trees say

nothing the toad says

nothing the dirt

says nothing and yet

what has always happened

keeps happening:

the trees flourish,

the toad leaps,

and out of the silent dirt

the blood-red roses rise.

In “Both Worlds,” language enslaves both the human and the natural world. The location of the mastery of language in “Both Worlds” is ambiguous because it belongs to both the poetic subject and the natural world. The poem begins by depicting writing as a burden for the speaker, rather than something masterful or empowering. The poetic subject’s world is depicted as being ruled by a preoccupation with words, wherein writing dominates the human. The work of writing takes place in an endless cycle as the speaker is “[f]orever busy, it seems / with words” (l. 1-2). The work of writing carries over “for the next morning” (l. 9) and this bringing of sheets of paper forward to the next day illustrates that writing is a process that does not represent a completion, but a process. However, unlike the endless fascination that nature inspires in the human, the process of writing is depicted as being a tedious one that is easily abandoned for more interesting pursuits. The descending indentation of the stanzas emphasizes the repetition of the subject’s writing that continues “[d]ay after day— / year after year—“ (l. 10-1). The work of poetry does not compare to the freedom of the natural world, but poems are nonetheless “little alleluias” (*LL* xiv). Although the poetic subject of “Frost at Midnight” does not reflect on writing, there is some consideration given to the “eternal language” (l. 60) that he does not understand. In Coleridge’s poem, the speaker describes language as eluding him when the poem itself proves otherwise as he manages to capture and master the natural world with the words of the final stanza. In “Both Worlds” a similar contradiction occurs wherein the speaker depicts herself as dominated by the pressure to write, at the same time that she is able to narrate nature’s eternal language, which is, in this poem, the physical growth and movement of its bodies. Both poetic subjects attempt to relinquish a connection to the mastery of language but the detailed representations of nature in both “Frost at Midnight” and “Both Worlds” betray the speakers’ humility. The poetic subject in “Both Worlds” explores the influence of language on herself as well as the natural world, which establishes an ambiguous mastery.

In “Both Worlds” and “Frost at Midnight,” the speaker’s house creates a boundary between herself and the natural world, which is, despite the poetic subject’s humility, symbolic of her mastery. Beyond the walls of the house is the “other world” (l. 16) of nature, where its difference is established as being based on the natural world’s lack of language. Juxtaposed with the busyness of the human world of words, the natural world

has no words as “the trees say / nothing the toad says / nothing the dirt / says” (l. 19-22). It may be that the natural world says nothing or that it is actively opting out of language by saying that it has “nothing” it wishes to share. The poetic subject sees nature’s otherness and voicelessness as the primary division between the two worlds. Unlike “Breakage,” which interweaves the concept of the human’s learning with the natural world, “Both Worlds” does not attempt to neutralize the difference between worlds. However, there is another element of the human’s mastery over the natural world in “Both Worlds” as the poetic subject is able to “leave the house / for that other world—“ (l. 15-6) whenever she pleases. The poetic subject’s ability to leave her work behind and visit the other world at any given moment illustrates that it is not writing that dominates the human, but the human who can cross boundaries at will. This liberal boundary crossing is also seen in the speaker of “Frost at Midnight” who demonstrates the power of consciousness through his meditations on past, present, and future, as well as his ability to embody the natural world with words. Both Oliver’s and Coleridge’s poetic subjects explore different physical worlds and different realms of consciousness, which reinforces the mastery of the speaker.

In “Both Worlds” the ongoing movements and growth of the natural world inspire the poetic subject’s commitment to the process of writing, which establishes another shift of mastery in the poem, as nature is positioned as superior to the human. The constant physical motion of nature is depicted as the best version of work, which is contrasted with the banal repetition associated with the speaker’s intellectual busyness with words. The poetic subject describes her work as repetitive and tedious, while her description of nature’s activities has a peaceful, accepting tone: “what has always happened / keeps happening” (l. 23-4). The repetition of nature carries with it the spiritual connotations of the eternal while the endless work of words is depicted as an unproductive cycle, where each day is left incomplete to be worked on “the next morning” (l. 9). Despite the tedium with which writing is associated, its description as process instead of result is clearly mirrored in the natural world that endlessly changes and grows in the poem. The life of the natural world clearly motivates the act of writing, which is similar to the influence that the natural world and inanimate objects has on the speaker of “Frost at Midnight,” whose meditations and explorations are inspired by outside influences. In both poems, nature’s influence is ambiguous as it is unclear whether the poetic subject is projecting him or herself onto the landscape, or if the landscape can mould the mind of each speaker. Both speakers have a faith in the natural world’s transformative ability and spiritual potential, but whether or not these

abilities can truly influence the human consciousness is unclear. It is ambiguous as to whether it is the human or the natural world that guides the motion of “Both Worlds,” if the natural world has the ability to call the human from her work, but it is the poetic subject’s process of exploration that represents the potential for mutuality and different transactions in Oliver’s lyric.

In “Both Worlds,” the natural world is established as both other and transcendent, but this does not inhibit the poetic subject’s transactions with it. The natural world is described as “that other world— / the first one, / the holy one” (l. 16-8). The status of nature slowly increases in each line as its alterity comes to indicate superiority. Not only is it described as a sacred world, but it is also described as the “first” (l. 17) world, which connotes originality. Unlike “Frost at Midnight,” which establishes throughout the poem, with explicit language, that nature represents the sacred, “Both Worlds” characterizes the natural world as “holy” (l. 51), but its divinity is not reinforced. Keeping the natural world grounded in the earthly enables an easier transaction between nature and the human, who is able to walk in its midst and see that which “keeps happening” (l. 24) in nature. However, even though the natural world is described as more spiritual in Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” this does not inhibit the poetic subject’s transactions with it. Despite nature’s originality and holiness, it remains a landscape that the human can explore freely, wherein all of its activity is witnessed and retold by the poetic subject. This desire to dwell in nature’s otherness recalls Oliver’s poetical statement about nature’s otherness being the “antidote to confusion” (*BP* 64). What Oliver refers to as otherness is characterized as “the beauty and the mystery of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books” (*BP* 64), which is not ungraspable, but can be translated into being something superior to the human’s dwelling in self-consciousness. Therefore, what the poetic subject in “Both Worlds” refers to as other and sacred is an idealized version of the natural world that the human has full access to in the interest of self-restoration. The poetic subject’s closeness to the other is paradoxical in that what is labelled different becomes the familiar through the speaker’s ability to master it through language. The speaker of “Frost at Midnight” constructs a similarly contradictory account of nature as being both representative of the sacred and a spiritual language, to which he does not have access, versus his ability to navigate the natural world through his meditations and to provide a detailed account of nature in the final stanza. Through these paradoxical accounts of nature, both poetic subjects expose a desire to dissolve difference between the human and natural world and, to an extent, they accomplish this goal by creating a version of nature that is created in language.

However, in doing this, they limit what is sacred and holy to only that which is graspable by the human and translatable through language. The poetic subject in “Both Worlds” is able to achieve daily transactions with nature, through her ability to enter into the world and depict it, but, due to the speaker’s self-imposed limitations, no transaction occurs with the transcendental because what is unnameable becomes appropriated and mastered by language into something familiar.

The lack of interpersonal relationships in “Both Worlds” places more emphasis on the poetic subject’s interactions with the natural world and self-reflection than the personal history and context that is established in “Frost at Midnight.” Some of Oliver’s poems describe relationships between her poetic subject and other human beings, but they seldom involve the family, which is inevitably accompanied by hierarchical connotations. When Oliver does depict family, the subject matter tends to be dark and oppressive and these surface primarily in one of her earliest collections, *Dream Work*, 1986. In “A Visitor” (*DW* 40-1), the poetic subject is repeatedly visited by her father in what appears to be her dreams as the father figure returns “on the darkest of nights” (l. 5) and is described as having a “waxy face” (l. 10) and a “lower lip / swollen with bitterness” (l. 11). The father is depicted as being like a ghost, “pathetic and hollow” (l. 22). The father figure in Mary Oliver’s poetry is cruel and vicious in “Rage” (*DW* 12-3) as he is depicted as having “sullied and murdered” (l. 32) his child’s dreams by molesting her. The father is “the wise and powerful one” (l. 8) in the public eye, but becomes “the red song / in the night, / stumbling through the house / to the child’s bed” (l. 11-4). Oliver’s father figure is an oppressive force that is seldom written about. In fact, Oliver has freed her poetic subject from most familial connections, which has the effect of releasing the subject from immediate forms of oppression and hierarchy.

Despite the lack of familial order in “Both Worlds” the poetic subject is depicted as a writer, which positions her within the poem and a more general social context as a potentially powerful individual due to her mastery of language. In “Both Worlds,” the individual poetic subject is empowered by a disconnection from the social as well as inhabiting the role as poet. In “Frost at Midnight” the poetic subject is the patriarch of the family and is represented as the only person awake in his cottage. His late night meditations connote a level of importance and seriousness that the rest of his family is not privy to, which implies a hierarchy wherein the poetic subject is an important figure within his own context. It is also assumed by some critics that the poetic subject in

“Frost at Midnight” is a representation of Coleridge himself,<sup>15</sup> which adds another level of authority to the speaker. The poetic subject of “Both Worlds” writes everyday, which portrays her as a poet even though she does not claim such a title. By not referring to herself as poet, but rather, focussing on the daily toil that writing is, she avoids depicting writing as a powerful act and instead turns it into a process wherein mastery is never achieved. The poetic subject in “Both Worlds” tries to avoid powerful associations by detaching herself from social context and titles, which is similar to Coleridge’s speaker who also does not identify as a poet and who maintains a sense of disconnection from nature despite his ability to portray it in language.

Both poetic subjects are conflicted about their position and where mastery resides, which exemplifies the exploratory style of the paradoxical poetical framework established in Mary Oliver’s and the American Romantics’ prose. “Both Worlds” and “Frost at Midnight” both adhere to the conventions of the greater romantic lyric and maintain the importance of the individual poetic voice, despite their attempts to maintain humility. Even though both poems adhere to the convention of the greater romantic lyric, they also involve contradiction and an exploratory subject that seeks multiple transactions instead of a singular and final answer, which would imply the end of one’s need to explore.

Mary Oliver inherits the paradoxical Romantic poetic framework, which is that which allows ambiguity and inclusion, which are both a part of her poetics of mutuality and flourishing. Oliver, like the Romantics, depicts the poet and poetic subject as grounded in the earthly as well as having the ability to create transcendent works. These paradoxes are illustrated in Oliver’s poetry as the poetic subject negotiates a relationship between the changing position of mastery in between the natural world and language, which results in general ambiguity in order to avoid privileging one over the other. “Breakage,” like “Song of Myself” uses language and nature to instruct the reader, but Oliver is more ambivalent about didacticism and attempts to give agency and experience to the reader. Whitman is more explicit about his voice as mentor and instructor, but unsettles the mastery of language by dismissing words as disabling and self-indulgent. Both poets create ambiguities and paradox in their works, which are productive in that they ensure inclusion and mutuality as opposed to exclusivity. In the comparison between “Both Worlds” and “Frost at Midnight” the Romantic paradox is visible in their singular and dialogic lyric voices that seek self-realization through

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<sup>15</sup> O’Gorman 2008 and Vanwinkle 2004

exchanges with nature, the divine, and the reader. The singular lyric voice is relational, which demonstrates how multiple external influences enrich an understanding of the self and questions the location of mastery. Mary Oliver's prose that deals with poetics, as well as her exploring lyric voice, dwell in Romantic paradox, but this paradox is representative of the mutuality of flourishing wherein difference does not dissolve, but is part of the interconnectivity between the human, the natural world, and the transcendent.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Flourishing Subject: Mary Oliver's Intuitive Religion and Naturalized Spirituality**

Mary Oliver's use of productive paradox is evidenced in her poetic subject's explorations of spirituality, which range from the subjective and unconventional to the orthodox. Oliver's spirituality is a dialogue, or exchange, that represents flourishing through its interconnection of different subject positions. Similar to her relational subject, Oliver inherits her spiritual seeking from the Romantics who rely on the individual imagination as well as tradition for spiritual guidance. The first aspect of Oliver's spiritual paradox is her development of an intuitive religion and naturalized spirituality, which is an inheritance from the American Romantics, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, who resist institutionalism and a strict adherence to traditional doctrine. The unconventional spirituality in Oliver's and the American Romantics' poetry is based on subjective experience, which relies on the individual's intuition in creating an accessible, naturalized spirituality. By associating Oliver with the American Romantic tradition, this chapter aims to illuminate her inheritance, not of a restrictive doctrine, but of an unconventional religious view that reinforces the contemporary concept of mutuality, which is the basis of all flourishing. The first section of the chapter defines the American Romantic intuitive religion, which, although it is anti-institutional, maintains a belief in God but also places great value on self-reliance. Key features of the American Romantic intuitive religion that I will consider are belief in the Over-soul, anti-authoritarianism, anti-formalism, and the existence of God. The American Romantics also create a naturalized or earthly spirituality, which replaces formal religious structures and practices and depends on a dialogue between the human and nature, which is a form of the relational subjectivity discussed in Chapter One in that the poetic subject looks to nature for spiritual self-realization. The second section of the chapter considers how dialogue between the human and nature, without having a god-figure present, creates a naturalized spirituality. Spirituality, in Mary Oliver's poetry, does not take the form of a strict acceptance of inherited tradition, but is a negotiation between the unconventional and the traditional, as the final chapter will explore in greater detail.

## **American Romantic Spirituality: Inheriting the Unconventional**

In American Romantic writing, intuitive religion is a predominant concept that depends on the reinforcement of interconnectivity, interdependence, and mutuality between the human, nature, and God. The intuitive religion and naturalized spirituality of the American Romantics is, however, compatible with contemporary concepts that are used in feminist, ecological, and theological studies. The primary elements of flourishing that are reflected in the American Romantic intuitive religion are the importance of the present and early, and the destabilization of hierarchy as well as an emphasis on the body, community, and self-directedness.

For the American Romantics, spiritual awakening depends on experiential learning rather than church doctrine, which is a belief that takes authority away from the institution and assigns it to the individual. In Emerson's "Divinity School Address" (1838), he introduces the concept of religious sentiment as deriving from "intuition" (31) and addresses the perils of poorly mediated religion. In order to have an authentic religious experience, the individual must experience a felt, or intuited sense of the divine. Emerson's concept of intuitive religion is, in part, related to the importance that he places on the individual imagination and self-reliance: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" ("Self-Reliance" 31). It is not that Emerson disdains religion in theory, but he believes that that which is second-hand and interpreted by someone else lacks inspiration and authenticity. Roger Lundin refers to Emerson's intuitive religion as "championing a view of religion as the experience of inwardness cut off from any specific theological commitments" (xiv). Intuitive religion is not without an interest in the theological, but avoids doctrinal restrictions and tradition. In "The Divinity School Address," Emerson describes how one's religious sentiment should be protected by intuition and must, ultimately, be reinforced by the individual's spiritual conviction in order to have any significance:

whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely: it is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction but provocation that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or reject; and on his word or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing. (31-2)

Emerson warns that religion has become generic and uniform due to the rules of institutional doctrine and he values that which is not filtered through an authority: “[f]or [Emerson] this divine self-fortification called for a sublime indifference towards orthodox treatments of the scriptures and sacraments of the Christian tradition” (Lundin xiv).

The primary element of intuitive religion is a belief in the Over-soul, a term coined by Emerson in his 1841 essay of that name, which is a concept that interconnects and unifies all bodies. Interconnection is much like mutuality because it takes the place of hierarchy. The human, nature, and God are all part of the Over-soul that breaks down traditional Christian order, which places God as hierarchically above the human and all life on Earth. Boundaries between the human, nature, and the divine dissolve under the Over-soul, and God becomes accessible: “there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins. The walls are taken away. We lie open on one side to the deeps of spiritual nature, to all the attributes of God” (“Over-soul” 152). The dissolution of barriers between God and the human is one of the most significant features of Emerson’s concept of the Over-soul and, according to Michael J. Hoffman, for Emerson, the human’s “central task is the need to discover correspondences” (11). For Emerson, the individual can remain unique even when commonality and community are embraced and “the universal sense relies on the individual to voice his or her belief. The notion of a universal sense, for Emerson, is implicitly dependent upon the strength of the individual’s certitude” (Elliott 76). Under the Over-soul, there is unity between bodies, but they depend on the individual to seek correspondences and develop subjective beliefs. Rather than reinforce traditional religious hierarchy and the subordination of earthly life, the concept of the Over-soul establishes unity with all creation while preserving self-reliance, which is a version of mutuality that is itself a relationship between individual beings that does not seek the dissolution of boundaries.

The Over-soul not only unifies the human, nature, and God, but also interconnects the physical and spiritual, which grounds the sacred in the earthly, making spirituality accessible to the individual. This interdependence of the physical and spiritual is another aspect of intuitive religion that relates to the contemporary concept of flourishing and its emphasis on valuing the material and earthly. Emerson and Thoreau identify the interconnection of the physical and spiritual, under the Over-soul, through metaphors of the body. In “The Over-soul,” Emerson uses the metaphor of the

heart's circulation of blood through its different valves to describe the intersection of earthly lives with the divine:

the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly, an endless circulation, through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one. Let man, then, learn the revelation of all nature, and all thought to his heart; this, namely, that the Highest dwells with him. ("Over-soul" 165)

Emerson's theory of the transparent eyeball also exemplifies his unified vision of the spiritual and the bodily in his essay, "Nature": "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 eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (*Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* 16). In order to capture the spiritual experience of nature, Emerson grounds the divine in a physical part of the body, which brings the sacred a step closer to the average individual. However, the metaphor of the transparent eyeball also expands to include the interconnection of the human body with the larger universe and God: "Emerson's 'transparency' indicates his merger into the surrounding landscape, while his identity as an 'eye-ball' suggests his continuing expansion of vision. His union with God is represented through 'the divine 'currents' [that] flow through his veins" (Robinson 159). The transparent eyeball both grounds the spiritual in the material and earthly as well as allows it to ascend to unknown heights and represent the transcendent. As Adrian Bond states, "Emerson tempers his idealism with an empiricist's faith in the physical senses" (40). This faith in the senses reinforces the importance of personal, experiential learning in intuitive religion and relocates power in the individual instead of an authoritarian institution.

In *Walden*, Thoreau also uses a bodily metaphor to describe the interconnection between the human, nature, and God, which depicts the spiritual as accessible to the individual through the physical world. Thoreau's metaphor is somewhat different from Emerson's but it does identify the correspondences between the human and the material natural world: "Is not the hand a spreading *palm* leaf with its lobes and veins?" (*Walden* 307-8). God is another member of this morphing of bodies: "Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf" (*Walden* 308). Emerson uses the metaphor of the heart to emphasize how the divine is interfused with the human while Thoreau uses the idea of

lobes and veins to emphasize the unity of the human and nature under God's creation. In both cases, interconnectivity between all bodies and the divine is reinforced through bodily metaphors. Emerson and Thoreau illustrate the mutuality that they envision between the human, nature, and the divine under the Over-soul, as well as the interconnectivity of the physical and spiritual.

The interconnectivity of all beings under the Over-soul contributes to an expanding sympathy and knowledge, which is the basis of both mutuality and its result of flourishing. Nature and the human are depicted as being participants, together, in the divine, as well as in the present and earthly, as they become neighbors in *Walden*. Thoreau exalts nature and thinks of it as his equal and companion, which is greatly comforting to him and, in response to those who ask him if he desires more than his cabin in the woods, he says: "Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way?" (133). Not only does Thoreau see that he is a part of a universal whole, but he relates his own sense of self to various bodies in nature: "I am no more lonely than a single mullein or dandelion in a pasture, or a bean leaf, or sorrel, or a horse-fly, or a humble-bee" (*Walden* 137). Each of the above parts of nature has a single role to play in the whole ecosystem and each is equally purposeful and worthy of exaltation. Living in the woods has caused Thoreau to see nature as his companion and, even though nature leads a different life than the human, with a different focus, Thoreau understands that they can, nonetheless, have a relationship.

Under the Over-soul, having an individual sense of self is of particular importance to Emerson, who championed the concept of self-reliance, which is a concept that is best illustrated through the natural world's interactions, wherein individual deaths are necessary to the continuance of the whole environment. This belief in self-reliance echoes the importance of self-directedness within flourishing. Thoreau does not believe that animals and plants in the natural world feel loneliness because their place and purpose is so firm and so connected to the larger whole. Emerson sees nature in a similar way: "there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature" ("The Poet" 212) and "[n]othing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole" ("Nature" 302). When the human understands that he or she has a place in the divine unity, loneliness disappears. A belief in interconnection even saves Thoreau from despair when rodents pillage his crops: "These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? ... How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not rejoice in the abundance of weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?" (*Walden* 166). According to Thoreau, nature is intrinsically valuable and

is a model of interconnection as well as self-reliance. These different qualities, independence and investment in the whole, may appear paradoxical, but each one is an equal part of mutuality and every body in nature maintains its value within its own unique boundaries, just as the individual can achieve spiritual experience outside of institutional religion.

Anti-authoritarianism is integral to the intuitive religion of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman because hierarchical division inhibits mutuality and the American Romantics also oppose the Church's authoritative standardization of spirituality and idealize a religion that is unrestricted by formalism. Church doctrine represents theory, tradition, and formality when what Emerson calls for is a felt or direct experience: "I will have no covenants but proximities" ("Self-reliance" 46). Emerson obeys only his intuition and experience instead of the law of the institutionalized Church, which is interpreted and managed by self-appointed authority figures: "If [...] a man claims to know and speak some of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not" ("Self-reliance" 42). According to Emerson, traditional Christianity has created and passed down dilemmas to people that are of no meaning to them in their modern context: "Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, original evil, predestination, and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man,-- never darkened across any man's road, who did not go out of his way to seek them" ("Spiritual Laws" 77). Religious experience, according to Emerson, needs to be about individual intuition and understanding instead of simply being tradition based on repetition or what Michael J. Hoffman refers to as the "official faith" (4). Emerson believes that the individual will only retreat from an enforced faith instead of one that is intuited: "The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul" ("Over-soul" 165).

Besides being anti-authoritarian, the American Romantic religious framework is also anti-formalist, a term that connotes elitism and exclusivity. Emerson uses the term "formalist" in his "Divinity School Address (38) and, although he does not explicitly define its meaning, it implies interpretation of religion that relies solely on dogmatism instead of individual experience. In "The Divinity School Address" he depicts formal religion as that which stifles individual spiritual experience: "Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshiper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin which do not uplift, but smite and offend us" (38). Formalists preach by and from the Book and therefore do not reach the individual imagination and

Emerson places no value on adhering to a religion's formal or traditional elements. Because of this distaste for formal religion, Emerson has little faith in the very preachers to whom he addresses his speech at Harvard: "tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual and not at what is necessary and eternal; that thus historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching" (DSA 40). Emerson believes in preaching as a mode of communication and inspiration rather than being an imposition of doctrine or authority. The American Romantics believe that adhering to the formal and traditional elements of a religion is limiting and does not leave enough room for one's own "truth" and intuitive experience of the divine, which is the basis for spiritual illumination.

Despite the American Romantics' derision of formal religion, they retain a belief in the existence of God as a unifying force between the human and the natural world. Under the Over-soul, in which all entities share a part of the divine, Emerson presents God as an important part of this union: "O my brothers, God exists. There is a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe" ("Spiritual Laws" 81). Any aversion that Emerson feels towards the institutional Church, does not diminish his belief in the existence and importance of a god-figure. In fact, Emerson is not anti-Christian, but eschews "historical Christianity" (DSA 33), which he considers to be defective in two ways: The first defect of historical Christianity is that it has created a version of Christ as a "demigod, as the Orientals or the Greeks would describe Osiris or Apollo" (DSA 34). Emerson describes Christianity as being like an "eastern monarchy" (DSA 34) that dwells "with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus" (DSA 33-4) instead of focusing on the "doctrine of the soul" (DSA 33). Emerson values Christ's message and prophecy but sees them as having been distorted by the authoritative Church and overshadowed by Jesus's constructed persona. He believes that the "insulation and peculiarity" of the Church have degraded Christ's "life and message" and that we should instead "[l]et them lie as they befell, alive and warm, part of human life and of the landscape and of the cheerful day" (DSA 35). An exaggeration of Christ's persona creates a "falsified religion" (Robinson "Emerson and Religion" 161) and "Emerson argued [that] Jesus should not be regarded as a supernatural being but rather as a prophet who most completely realized the divinity within every individual" (Robinson "Emerson and Religion" 161).

The second defect of Christianity, according to Emerson, is the sense that God is dead and that any true spiritual inspiration belongs in the past: "[m]en have come to

speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead” (DSA 36). This second defect reinforces the American Romantics’ belief that Christianity excludes its followers from the possibility of experiencing a direct sense of spiritual inspiration. For Emerson, The Sabbath provides the opportunity for the individual to worship: “the Sabbath, the jubilee of the whole world [...] Let it stand forever more, a temple which new love, new faith, new sight shall restore to more than its first splendor to mankind” (DSA 45). Although Emerson is wary of preachers who teach and do not inspire, he has great faith in verbal communication, “the institution of preaching—the speech of man to men—essentially the most flexible of all organs, of all forms” (DSA 45-6).

The American Romantic intuitive religion replaces traditional doctrine with self-reliance and subjective experience. Its dependence on the interconnectedness of all bodies, as well as the importance of the individual within the whole represents the mutuality of flourishing, which is based on relationships with boundaries. The American Romantic Over-soul creates mutuality between the human, nature, and God and anti-authoritarianism and anti-formalism allow a god-figure to act as interconnector between the human and nature, rather than becoming a distant or oppressive figure. American Romantic intuitive religion is based on interconnection and mutuality, which cannot function within a hierarchical system.

The American Romantics also create a naturalized religion, which inspires a spiritual awakening that is created by contact and dialogue between the human and nature, without God acting as a point of reference for the divine. A sense of the divine third term is not altogether lost in spiritualized nature, but it may simply be an implicit sense of the sacred instead of an anthropomorphized overseer or director. To spiritualize nature is to see it as the primary source of divine inspiration and as a replacement for religious doctrine and scripture. The American Romantic spiritualized nature reveals the sacred to the human through the earthly and material, which means that the divine is highly accessible and inclusive. Spiritualized nature reclaims traditional religious sacraments and rites and uses them as an integral part of the human’s spiritual awakening in the natural world.

Although Emerson and Thoreau both support elements of Christian doctrine and the importance of sacred texts, they maintain that exposure to nature is the primary source of spiritual inspiration. In “Circles,” Emerson states that Christianity, in its traditional form, is impotent and goes on to create an alternative spiritual vision wherein one can be baptized by the elements and beauty of nature:

We have the same need to command a view of the religion of the world. We can never see Christianity from the catechism:—from the pastures, from a boat in the pond, from amidst the songs of wood-birds, we possibly may. Cleansed by the elemental light and wind, steeped in the sea of beautiful forms which the field offers us, we may chance to cast a right glance back upon biography. (174)

Emerson sees nature as embodying the essence of traditional religion, which has been lost through the filters of repetition and institutionalism; nature is “the music and pictures of the most ancient religion” (“Nature” 296). Emerson’s theory of the transparent eyeball also exemplifies his unified vision of the physical and spiritual. His union with God is represented through “the divine ‘currents’ [that] flow through his veins” (Robinson 159). As Adrian Bond states, “Emerson tempers his idealism with an empiricist’s faith in the physical senses” (40). This faith in the senses ensures that religion remains felt by the individual, as opposed to being something taught by an authority. American Romantic spiritualized nature allows the human to locate the sacred in the physical, through the sensual, which interconnects the earthly and the divine.

Thoreau also created a spiritualized vision of nature and believed that it was a more authentic spiritual source for the individual’s illumination than formal aspects of religion. Like Emerson, he depicts immersion in nature as a form of baptism: “I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did” (*Walden* 88). For Thoreau, nature becomes a spiritual jubilee as the whipporwhills chant “their vespers” (*Walden* 123) and the pine groves stand “like temples [...] so soft and green and shady that the Druids would have forsaken their oaks to worship in them” (*Walden* 201). Thoreau represents the sacrament of baptism and other religious allusions through images of nature, but because religious concepts and ritual are taken out of context, they retain their spiritual implications without being limited to the formalistic confines of the institutional church, which allows a subjective experience of the sacred.

The American Romantics create an intuitive religion and a spiritualized nature that are based on the individual’s experience with physical nature. In order to create one’s own intuitive religion, the imagination and self-reliance must be developed without adhering to the conformity of traditional and institutional religion. As well as developing the imagination, the individual must nurture faith in the senses, which are exercised in the natural world as part of an individual’s spiritual illumination. Intuitive

religion does not employ traditional doctrine, but encourages the individual to reinterpret it, which will not always result in a dismissal of God or Christ, but may create a reconceptualization of both within an anti-institutional religion based on having contact with the natural world. The American Romantic intuitive religion creates a religious framework in which the human, nature, and God have a relationship based on subjective experience instead of being fuelled by institutional models and recitation. Spiritualized nature allows intuitive religion to go a step further by allowing spiritual awakening to occur based on a relationship between the human and nature, which is independent of any specific theological belief. Intuitive religion and spiritualized nature are part of Mary Oliver's productive paradox, as they become the central spiritual models in her poems that resist straightforward representations of traditional religion and God.

### **Unsettling God's Mastery with Mutuality**

Mary Oliver's poetry represents all of the elements of American Romantic intuitive religion, but her work exhibits a stronger tension between tradition and the unconventional, as she assigns mastery to different subjects within a poem. Oliver also intensifies the tension between the traditional and unconventional by using intuitive language, instead of formal language to speak to God. Intuitive language is characterized by mutual exchange and communication, which occurs in the form of dialogue, conversation, and informal contemplation, all of which enable spiritual dialogue and mutuality between the human, nature, and God. What is significant about Mary Oliver's intuitive language is that, although it sometimes uses traditional Christian references and alludes to religious doctrine, it does so in a manner that does not impose restrictions on the individual's spiritual experience, but, by using it in the context of the natural world, expands its possibilities. Oliver's poetry recognizes the importance of traditional religious elements, such as preaching as communication and Christ as teacher, but she brings them out of their traditional context and reconceptualizes Christianity in the natural world, where it has a more subjective and intuitive realization. The traditional Christian content of Oliver's poems is employed as a reference to the sanctity of her subject, but usually appears in fragments and allusions so that they do not oppress or restrict the exchange between the human and nature. Oliver's "Six Recognitions of the Lord" (*Thirst* 26, 2006), from her most explicitly Christian collection, and "At the River Clarion" (*Evidence* 51, 2009), from her most recent and more varied collection, both illustrate how Oliver creates a spirituality based on the

traditional and unconventional, or instinctual. Even in what has been accepted as her most explicitly Christian collection, *Thirst*, it is largely an intuitive religious belief that motivates her poetic subject's spiritual explorations. By locating spirituality in the natural world and interconnecting it with the human's subjective experience, Mary Oliver's intuitive religion is a model of flourishing in which relationships are nurtured outside an institutional or hierarchical system of belief.

In "Six Recognitions of the Lord," the poetic subject worships God as well as nature as a spiritual body, which unsettles God's mastery in favor of a model of interconnection and equality. The intuitive religion in this poem is reinforced by intuitive language, which is characterized by an open dialogue and exchange between the human and non-human. In the first stanza of "Six Recognitions," the subject shrugs off formalism in order to speak to God. Like the American Romantic intuitive religion, Oliver's poem does not depict an authoritarian God who must be addressed formally and represents, instead, the speaker's "wanting to know God beyond language" (Corrigan 3). The desire for familiarity and closeness with God is enabled by an informal and intuitive approach to prayer, rather than a recital of Christian prayers that may or may not reflect an individual's religious sentiment and experiences. However, Paul Corrigan also identifies that "Six Recognitions" exhibits an opposite impulse in the second stanza when the speaker addresses God directly and formally, which creates a tension between traditional religious language and informal, or intuitive language. The first stanza of the poem introduces an informal prayer without the subject's apology to or supplication before God:

I know a lot of fancy words.

I tear them from my heart and my tongue.

Then I pray (l. 1-3)

In "Six Recognitions," prayer is a straightforward act that is directly related to the discipline and will of the individual as opposed to being associated with religious obedience. Although the formal language of religion is dismissed, the word "pray" (l. 3) is still used to refer to her address to and contemplation of God, which reinforces the sanctity of her words. In Oliver's poem, the use of a word that denotes tradition and formality to describe that which is an informal expression highlights the spiritual nature of the poetic subject's meditations, but maintains that they are subjective and unique. Another poem by Oliver, called "Praying" (*Thirst* 37), like that of "Six Recognitions," uses informal language, but without losing a sense of spiritual intention and importance. "Praying" states that one does not need a special focal point on which to pray: "it could

be / weeds in a vacant lot, or a few / small stones” (l. 2-4). It is most important to “just / pay attention” (l. 4-5) and let one’s intuition, instead of formality and tradition, guide the language: “then patch / a few words together and don’t try / to make them elaborate” (l. 5-7). The intuitive religion and language in Mary Oliver’s poetry requires the individual to formulate her own praise for the divine instead of simply repeating an institutional tradition. The act of praying is an important part of exalting God and nature, but it must be unhindered by formality.

“Six Recognitions” associates prayer and the body, thereby creating a union between the physical and spiritual, which keeps prayer unique and subjective, but also emphasizes the importance of one’s relationship with the present and earthly as part a religious experience. In the second line of “Six Recognitions,” the speaker strips away formality, which opens the physical channels of her body in order to allow her subjective prayer to take form and come forward as opposed to “the withdrawal of the soul” (“Over-soul 165) that Emerson believed was caused by institutional religion. The image of the heart in Mary Oliver’s poem recalls Emerson’s metaphorical heart as a symbol of the circulation that takes place between the earthly and the divine. The heart in Oliver’s poetry represents the endless exchange between the inner and outer, or the body and spirit. Other poems in *Thirst* exhibit a similar interconnection between the spiritual and physical, such as “On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate” (*Thirst* 55-9). In this poem, the mouth is associated with closeness to God, or being “God’s mind’s / servant” (l. 69-70) and both its physical gestures and involvement in the expression of words are recognized as being part of the subject’s spirituality. Feeling close to God requires “loving with the body’s sweet mouth—its kisses, its / words—/ everything” (l. 70-72). “On Thy Wondrous Works” synthesizes the physical mouth with the immateriality of words, making prayer unique and informal and sensually connected to God through one’s own body and the body of the natural world. Language is an important element of prayer in Oliver’s poetry, but it requires stimulation from the body and senses.

In “Six Recognitions” the poetic subject addresses God formally, but a sense of intimacy between the poetic subject and the Lord is also created due to the subject’s use of emotive language and the lack of a traditional supplication to God. The second stanza begins with formal phrasing but becomes more expressive and intimate:

Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour  
me a little. And tenderness too. My  
need is great. Beauty walks so freely

and with such gentleness. (l. 4-7)

God is considered to be a source of mercy, which implies kindness as well as a level of control and authority, as He is the holder of gifts. However, because the speaker of the poem requests charity from God without supplication, the Lord's mastery becomes unsettled. The speaker anthropomorphizes God into a merciful, tender human figure with open hands. The speaker's request for tenderness is without apology or deprecation, which implies the kind of familiarity that exists between a child and parent, or between lovers. Even though God is the possessor of mercy, the emotional plea of the speaker creates an image of God as familiar and accessible, which contradicts the initial, formal address to him at the beginning of the stanza. The spiritual experience in "Six Recognitions" is meant to be personal and informal, but nonetheless uses the capitalized pronoun for the Lord in order to maintain the importance of God as a member of the speaker's spiritual experience.

Despite the informal relationship that the speaker creates with God, the poetic subject's spiritual experience is varied and includes moments of disillusionment and questioning. The speaker's disillusionment with spirituality mirrors the paradoxical relationship that she has with the natural world, which sometimes imparts a sense of community and belonging and sometimes appears to be radically other than the human. In "Six Recognitions," the poetic subject's felt distance from the spiritual is countered by an acceptance that, just because she cannot comprehend it, it does not mean that the existence of the divine should be forsaken. The informal tone of the poem continues as the poetic subject reflects on her impatience and disillusionment:

Impatience puts  
a halter on my face 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. When I first found you I was  
filled with light, now the darkness grows  
and it is filled with crooked things, bitter  
and weak, each one bearing my name (l. 7-15)

The speaker becomes like an animal, which, although briefly causing her disorientation, leads to clarity that illustrates why the instinctual must supersede the formal when it comes to individual religion. Impatience with formalism is represented through the image of the halter on the subject's newly transformed animal face. In "Six

Recognitions,” the speaker discovers that communion with the natural world creates an escape from religious formalism and institutionalism. As “Six Recognitions” progresses, the speaker of the poem moves away from formal address towards intuitive religion, which is fostered in spiritualized nature. Throughout the poem, the speaker becomes more attuned to her sensory experience of the spiritual, which fosters the individual’s intuitive sense of God through the sweet taste of grass and the *feeling* of being filled with light. This transformation into animal form, which is an indulgence in the instinctual, represents a newfound understanding of the natural world as the landscape in which spiritual awakening is fostered.

As the speaker immerses herself in nature, she distances herself from the formal and institutional, which results in a clearer and more intuitive sense of God. Retreating into nature, like an animal, gives the poetic subject a sense of serenity and of being in community with the natural world:

I lounge on the grass, that’s all. So  
Simple. Then I lie back until I am  
Inside the cloud that is just above me  
But very high, and shaped like a fish.  
Or, perhaps not. Then I enter the place  
Of not-thinking, not-remembering, not-  
Wanting (l. 16-22)

Having experienced the animalistic descent into darkness, a different, more attuned glimpse of nature occurs with the watching of the cloud. Despite this being a more peaceful experience in nature, it continues to represent a release from formality and allows an exploration of the intuitive and the spiritual. Watching the cloud and feeling as though she is within it enables the speaker to escape her own analysis and self-consciousness and enter into a place that is void of expectations, which allows personal exploration: “But I have not been / asleep. I have been, as I say, inside the cloud, or, perhaps, the lily floating / on the water” (l. 27-29). That the speaker first thinks she sees the shape of a fish in the cloud may be an allusion to a Christ symbol. The poetic subject is not sure if she saw the fish or not, which suggests that the power of imagination can transform the traditional into something more subjective that is based on the individual’s relationship with nature. This uncertainty regarding the form of the fish in the clouds is a metaphor for Oliver’s treatment of Christianity in her intuitive religion, which is that religion takes shape according to the individual’s subjective perspective. The speaker does not cling to the traditional symbol of Christ as a spiritual

revelation, but sees it as part of “the landscape and of the cheerful day” (Emerson, DSA 35). In “Six Recognitions,” having contact with the natural world represents an escape from formality and structure and enables the exploration of one’s intuition and a newfound closeness to the divine.

In “Six Recognitions,” having a relationship with nature gives the poetic subject a sense of independence from societal pressures, which is conducive to an intuitive spiritual experience:

Then I go back to town,  
to my own house, my own life, which has  
now become brighter and simpler, some-  
where I have never been before (l. 30-33)

Having had contact with the natural world and explored her instinctual and animal self, the poetic subject grasps the power of subjectivity as a form of independence.

Communing with nature reinforces the poetic subject’s sense of self-reliance as she asserts ownership over her life, which shows that one can be a member of a community while retaining a unique experience. Boundaries remain between nature and the human, which respects the otherness of the natural world, but does not disable a sense of relationship, or inclusion, between the human and nature. In nature, relationships and correspondences can occur between bodies, while in the confines of a suburb or city, divisions are established between towns, houses, and each individual’s “own life” (l. 31). The contrast between urban and natural settings is best illustrated by Thoreau’s movement, in one day, from a friend’s house in the city, to Walden Pond where a fish tugs at his line to remind him of his reconnection to the natural world. The fish remains in the pond and Thoreau in his boat, but the fishing line serves as the interconnection that “interrupt[s his] dreams and link[s him] to Nature again” (*Walden* 175). In Oliver’s poem, boundaries between the human and natural world do not have to impede their interconnection, but act as reminders of their difference, which nurtures subjectivity.

The poetic subject’s developed sense of autonomy in “Six Recognitions” does not diminish her belief in God as a presence in her world. Intuitive religion denies the inheritance of institutionalized religion but maintains the importance of God in an individual’s spiritual experience, as He is a presence within every part of nature. The speaker’s belief that God is present in everything is based on her intuition and subjective experience, which has more in common with pantheism than Christian theology:

Of course I have always known you  
are present in the clouds, and the  
black oak 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. (l. 34-40)

God is not simply an abstract concept, but a force that inhabits the earthly, “alive and warm” (Emerson, DSA 35), making the holy as accessible as any living body in the physical world. Because God is present in, not just the bodies of plants and animals, but also “the body” (l. 38), he becomes a common denominator and part of the mutuality between the human and nature. God’s inhabitancy of all of nature creates an equalization of earthly bodies while still distinguishing between the grand body of the oak and the wings of birds, which are all representative of the sacred. God is inclusive in “Six Recognitions,” because He inhabits everything equally, but this does not form a unity that blends individuals together, but instead reinforces their differences. God is a part of the poetic subject’s faith and His presence in everything, including nature’s minutiae, unsettles the concept of God as master and creates an even distribution of the divine between the human and nature.

In “Six Recognitions,” a dialogue takes place between the poetic subject, nature, and God and, because this exhibits a mutual contribution from all parties, it further unsettles the traditional representation of God as master. Dialogue, in this poem, represents an informal and inclusive language and, like prayer, is associated with the body. Having mutual dialogue, with both God and nature, contributes to the speaker’s spiritual awakening:

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. (l. 45-49)

The poem continues to move away from the address of the first stanza into an informal dialogue that broadens the poetic subject’s spiritual experience with God and nature. The poetic subject’s spiritual experience reinforces her sense of autonomy as well as connects her to the natural world and God, whom she addresses in familiar tones. Over the course of the poem, it becomes clear that mutual dialogue is what prayer really is,

rather than being a formal language or declaration. Intuitive religion is nurtured by intuitive language, a connection that is also represented in “Thirst” (*Thirst* 69), when the speaker states that “[l]ove for the / earth and love for you are having such a / long conversation in my heart” (l. 8-10). “Six Recognitions” illustrates that it is only through dialogue that the individual can experience mutuality and spiritual awakening. The “dialogue / of our lives” (l. 48-49) is described, in the final line of the stanza, as being the “love of God. It is obedience” (l. 51). Juxtaposing love and obedience affects each word’s meaning, wherein love is something restrained and fully conscious and obedience is something mutual and entered into of one’s free will. Having the two words interact under the concept of dialogue reinforces the importance of exchange in the speaker’s subjective spiritual experience.

The fifth stanza of the poem is addressed to God and, as opposed to being a traditional supplication, is an expression of the poetic subject’s gratitude for participating in dialogue, but it is this freedom to converse and interact with God that inspires His exaltation:

Oh, feed me this day, Holy Spirit, with  
The fragrance of the fields and the  
Freshness of the oceans which you have  
Made, and help me to hear and to hold  
In all dearness those exacting, and wonderful  
Words of our Lord Christ Jesus, saying:

*Follow me.* (l. 52-58)

The dialogue that the poetic subject is able to have transforms into praise of His works, which is simultaneously praise for the beauty of nature. The informal prayer changes briefly when it alludes to the Lord’s Prayer, but the use of the word “feed” (l. 52) instead of “give” distinguishes it from the Christian version. The request to be fed is a metaphor that turns the spiritual gifts of God into something graspable, concrete, and real. That “*follow me*” (l. 58) is in italics suggests that it is another voice speaking directly to the poetic subject and the reader, which emphasizes the concept of dialogue in the poem. The voice that beckons appears to be that of Christ, which further demonstrates a tension between the traditional and the informal or intuitive in the poem as the speaker and the reader can hear Christ speak, but deliberately transforms the Lord’s Prayer into something less conventional. The poem creates intimacy between the poetic subject and God, which is enabled by informal dialogue as well as an abandonment of traditional supplication that reinforces hierarchy and divisions. The

familiarity of the poetic subject's relationship with God is again reinforced when she refers to the "dearness" (l. 56) of His words, which suggests an intimate or emotional exchange. In "Six Recognitions," God does not reside above the earth, but inhabits every part of it and engages in a dialogue with the human and the natural world.

In the sixth and final stanza of the poem the mutuality between the poetic subject, nature, and God is compared to the varying connotations of each season and its inevitable transition to the next:

In spring there's hope,  
    In fall the exquisite, necessary diminishing, in  
Winter I am as sleepy as any beast in its  
    Leafy cave, but in summer there is  
Everywhere the luminous sprawl of gifts,  
    The hospitality of the Lord and my  
Inadequate answers as I row my beautiful, temporary body  
    Through this water-lily world. (l. 71-78)

The change of seasons, each with its own significance and symbolism, represents the natural ebb and flow of dialogue between different beings. The poetic subject has to painfully disentangle herself from formalism, explore a primitive freedom from it, and return to a sense of exchange and mutuality in dialogue with other parties in order to achieve an authentic spiritual experience, which is much more arduous than simply subscribing to the ritual of institutional religion where intuition and instinct are not necessary. In spring there is an emergence of life, or flourishing, which signifies hope, followed by the death of various parts of nature in autumn. Winter is when all appears dormant, and summer is the time of abundance and growth. The characteristics of the seasons also reflect the stages of change that the poetic subject undergoes during her unique spiritual experience. The indentation in every second line of the stanza mimics the sense of retreat and emergence of each season and the ebb and flow of the poetic subject's journey in the poem. Recognition and reverence move from a focus on the Lord to being on the natural world and, eventually mutuality occurs between all three.

Mary Oliver's "Six Recognitions of the Lord" illustrates how intuitive religion replaces formalism with a retreat into nature and using informal language and dialogue with others, which creates mutuality between the human, nature, and God. The concept of God is represented through a capitalized pronoun, but this only serves to maintain a sense of His sanctity without inhibiting a familiar and intimate relationship with the poetic subject. The poetic subject's contact with God is a necessary part of her spiritual

experience, but the natural world is what exemplifies the spiritual without formal restrictions. It is in having contact with the natural world, in a primal state, that the speaker grasps her independence, which nurtures the development of her own intuitive religion. The poetic subject's informal prayer depends on her senses, which are awakened in nature, and her body that contributes to her dialogue with nature and God. The natural world represents a liberated spiritual landscape as well as a partner in dialogue with the human and God. "Six Recognitions" does not only recognize the Lord, but also shows gratitude for the community in which the Lord is a member. Like the American Romantics, Oliver's poem does not dismiss the Lord, but uses Him in an informal spiritual context that allows the individual a personal religious experience, free from institutionalism. Oliver's poetry alludes to traditional Christian symbols and belief, but they are complicated by being contextualized in the natural world wherein dialogue and mutuality exist between the human, nature, and God, which unsettles traditional representations of God as master of the earthly.

In "At the River Clarion" (*Evidence* 2009), the poetic subject's intuitive religion is subjective in that is characterized by uncertainty and questioning, as opposed to finding reassurance in an institutional faith. Nature, in "At the River," becomes more clearly involved in the speaker's spiritual awakening as the natural world, instead of Christ, speaks to her. In this poem, mutual spiritual community comes to full fruition when we see that nature can stand in for, and represent, God without there being any question of the two being mutually exclusive. Uncertainty about the nature of God results in a stronger focus on the exaltation of the natural world in "At the River," but this does not illegitimatize the poetic subject's intuitive religion. Mutuality between the human, nature, and God allows constant interaction in both physical and spiritual ways, but these interactions continue to change, just as the seasons do in "Six Recognitions." The ebb and flow ensures that no single body is the sole voice of the spiritual, but that it is always shared. In "At the River Clarion," the speaker reflects at length on "who God is exactly" (l. 1), but realizes that there is no answer. Accepting that the concept of God is amorphous and immeasurable enables a broader distribution of spiritual values, which includes the natural world in a spiritual conversation.

"At the River" opens with the speaker's understanding of dialogue as an intimate exchange between the poetic subject and the natural world, which establishes the personal nature of intuitive religion in the poem. The dialogue in "At the River" is similar to that which is described in "Six Recognitions," but instead of addressing the concept of God and prayer, the poetic subject in "At the River" engages primarily in

conversation with nature. Sitting in the river Clarion, the speaker listens to the “voices / of the river talking” (l. 5-6):

Whenever the water struck the stone it had  
something to say,  
and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing  
under the water.  
And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me  
what they were saying.  
Said the river: I am part of holiness.  
And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered  
the moss beneath the water. (l. 7-15)

The form of the poem, like that of “Six Recognitions,” moves in and out of indentation, but, in this case, its stanzas mimic the movement of the water that strikes the stone in the current and recedes again. The speaker, by immersing herself in the river, is able to understand its language, which is a chorus of voices. This chorus destabilizes hierarchy by presenting all of the elements of nature as having equally audible voices and the river, which may have a stronger, more dominant physical presence than the other parts of nature, is no more able to express itself than the moss that might otherwise be muted under its current. Not only is the hierarchy of nature unsettled, but the material world is given the power of language, which represents both feminist and ecological ideals by redistributing power:

Imagination is the poet’s power: the power to speak, to name, to bring forth the word. Through metaphorically relocating this power in nature and associating it with the literal, Oliver’s poem challenges assumptions in our literary culture that implicitly deny women the power of imagination and the power of speech by objectifying woman as mute matter...thus the poem implicitly claims these powers for women without giving up the identification with nature that clearly empowers Oliver’s work. (Bonds 4)

Bonds’ feminist reading of Oliver’s speaking nature points out how power can shift from the poet into what would otherwise be a voiceless nature. Power is not centered on a single patriarchal authority in Oliver’s poetry, but is accessible to any member of the mutual community.

The poetic subject’s spiritual awakening in “At the River” does not depend on the persuasion or solicitation of the natural world, but on the speaker’s own willingness to

participate in dialogue or conversation with nature. Nature requires attention and willing participation from the human before mutuality can occur:

I'd been to the river before, a few times.  
Don't blame the river that nothing happened quickly.  
You don't hear such voices in an hour or a day.  
You don't hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears.  
And it's difficult to hear anything anyway, through  
all the traffic, and ambition. (l. 16-21)

Nature waits for the speaker's attention rather than taking a more dominant or persuasive approach. This reinforces the intuitive and personal relationship between nature and the human rather than having nature play the role of authoritative or dictatorial converter of souls. To hear and comprehend nature is not described as an easy task, but something that requires devotion. Much like Thoreau, who used his senses in his spiritual development<sup>16</sup>, the poetic subject of "At the River" understands that communion with nature begins with having physical contact with it and hearing its voices. Preoccupations with one's self inevitably lead to a limited internal monologue, while fostering mutuality with nature requires the individual to fight the tendency to solipsism, look to the external, and engage with it sensually. However, the motivation to do this cannot be coerced from the poetic subject who achieves this wisdom independently of any institutional instruction.

Unlike "Six Recognitions," "At the River" has a secular title and lacks a direct address to God, but it includes Christian allusions to baptism and the River Jordan, but these images create an ambivalent relationship between the traditional and the intuitive in Oliver's poem. The river, in which the poetic subject is immersed, is associated with the River Jordan in which John the Baptist baptized Christ.<sup>17</sup> The poetic subject's baptism in the river represents a walking in Christ's footsteps outside of the formality of a Church sanctioned ritual. The independent baptism, which occurs at the same time as the poetic subject is engaged in a dialogue with nature, does not happen on the speaker's first visit to the river, but after several visits. The time that it takes for the feeling of baptism to occur reflects the intuitive nature of the poetic subject's religious experience. In the Catholic tradition, a baby is baptized soon after birth, under the authority of his or her parents and the institutional Church. Even in adult baptisms, participation of a priest is sometimes required for the sacrament to be acknowledged. In

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<sup>16</sup> *Walden* 218

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 3:5-6

“At the River,” the poetic subject finds her own moment of baptism according to her independent devotion to the natural world. Therefore, the allusion to baptism and the River Jordan indicate a level of sanctity involved in the speaker’s spiritual experience in the natural world, but the traditional is made intuitive and independent from religious institutions.

In “At the River,” the poetic subject explores the possibility of God, but does not depend on His existence for religious confirmation because seeking and uncertainty is a part of Mary Oliver’s intuitive religion. God is a “part and particle” (Emerson, “Over-soul” 150) of everything in the poem, which includes not just moments of peace, but also the dark and painful parts of life:

If God exists he isn’t just butter and good luck.  
He’s also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke.  
Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then  
keep on going.  
Imagine how the lily (who may also be a part of God)  
would sing to you if it could sing, if  
you would pause to hear it.

And how are you so certain anyway that it doesn’t sing? (l. 22-29)

In comparing God to “butter and good luck” (l. 22), the speaker acknowledges that it is tempting to only praise God when things are going well and to lose faith when they are not. The poetic subject also points out, to the reader, that it is easier to dismiss the divine or miraculous as nonexistent than it is to be “certain” (l. 29) of the invisible and immeasurable. The metaphor of God as butter calls to mind the repetitive churning from which it slowly forms and how ritual and structure are not the only ways to connect with God. In other words, God does not have to be conjured, but is always already present to the individual who is devoted to the spiritual. The human cannot simply tune out from God in hard times, which means that recognition of the Lord, in order to maintain true mutuality and interdependence, must be consistent. To recognize God in a tick is an example of His presence in even the most invisible and unattractive parts of nature and also in death. Traditional Christian symbolism is also used to embody God through the lily as the metaphor of the flower is used for God’s love: “I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters” (Song of Solomon, Cant.2)<sup>18</sup>. The lily also alludes to the

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<sup>18</sup> The Song of Solomon does not contain explicit religious content and interpretations of it are divided. The Song describes the courtship and eroticism between a man and

Sermon on the Mount, from the Gospel of Matthew, wherein Christ points to the lilies as examples of the faithful. Christ asks his disciples to “[c]onsider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin” (Matt 6:28-30). The lilies live with the assurance that God will provide. In “At the River,” the speaker suggests that the lily “may” be a part of God, which, while accepting the existence of God, questions His relationship to scripture. In “At the River,” nature is depicted as that which is knowable and certain and God’s location is of secondary importance.

The allusion to the lily of the New Testament becomes part of the poetic subject’s exploration of how the traditional can be reframed within an intuitive religion that is centered on the natural world. The lily in “At the River” is not only a part of God, but is also given a singing voice, which represents a power and spiritual freedom. Diane Bonds points out that “Oliver’s ‘mystical’ explorations are always firmly located in the materiality of nature” (7) and she uses this grounding in nature as “a powerful and critical re-reading of theological and ethical assertions associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition” (Bonds 7). In Bond’s article, she uses a poem of Oliver’s as her example, in which God is absent, leaving nature to be the sole source of spiritual inspiration. However, in “At the River,” a more subtle critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition exists, in which it is only suggested that God may have different incarnations, but is still referred to with the capitalized pronoun of “He.” “At the River” explores God’s boundaries and creates a paradoxical characterization of Him as a patriarchal Lord as well as an indefinable element of the natural world. Because intuitive religion is free from institutional dogma, the poetic subject is free to explore the possibility of God and question His location without diminishing her spiritual experience.

The poetic subject’s openness to imagining God in different places resists creating a strictly transcendent God, but one who is relevant and present within a world full of environmental concerns. When the poetic subject continues to contemplate whether or not God exists, it becomes clear that perhaps it is not a Lord God that is present in the world, but a lowercase god, without mastery over the earth:

If God exists he isn’t just churches and mathematics.

He’s the forest, He’s the desert.

He’s the ice caps, that are dying.

He’s the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts. (l. 30-33)

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woman, which has been interpreted by some as an allegory of the Lord’s relationship with His followers.

Churches and mathematics represent form and structure, which can be sources of comfort, but, because the two are paired in the same line, the similarity between the formulas of mathematics and the canon of religious dogma is drawn. That God is present in such human constructs as churches, mathematics, ghettos, and museums also sends the message that He and the human are interconnected in social and environmental realms. By recognizing that God is a part of the ice caps that are dying both acknowledges nature's fragility as well as the Lord's inability to intervene. Situating God in the melting icecaps suggests that the power of humanity can accelerate the destruction of nature as well as the disappearance of God. God and nature's slow disappearance highlights the negative side of the human's power, which is a self-interest that may exploit others. Freedom from institutional oppression enables an intuitive religious experience for the poetic subject, but "At the River" warns against the individual's own ability to exploit others.

Just as God is present in culture and nature, so too is He present in both life and death. Individual life and death are put into perspective by interconnecting their meaning within earthly life that includes God:

There was someone I loved who grew old and ill.

One by one I watched the fires go out.

There was nothing I could do

except to remember

that we receive

then we give back. (l. 57-62)

God must be embraced for being a part of the good and the bad and so too does death have to be understood in the larger cycle of life that gives and takes. "At the River" presents a case for mutuality as opposed to hierarchy when the description of the death of the poetic subject's loved one is followed by the recollection of the death of the speaker's dog, which is treated as a comparable loss. The mourning of both the dog and the human is complicated by the fact that the dog is named Luke, but the loved one, or "someone" (l. 57), remains unnamed. The withholding of the loved one's name may be a gesture of respect and privacy, but it may also be another method of altering the reader's ingrained value system that does not consider a death of an animal to be significant. The contrast between the two deaths does not diminish the loss of the speaker's loved one, but places it and all death, even that of animals, into the same, large picture. Mutual community continues to unsettle mastery when God is not the

sole source of the power to give and take. The Book of Job states: “the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken way” (Job 1:21), which is rewritten in “At the River” as “we receive” (l. 61) and “we give back” (l. 62, my emphasis). The use of “we” instead of “the Lord” redistributes the power of giving and taking into the hands of many. Life’s balance is ensured by distributing power throughout a network of the human, nature, and God as well as between life and death.

The dog’s death also serves to relate the spiritual aspect of death, which is the departure of the soul, to the material deterioration of the physical body. The dog’s return to the earth, contrasted with the ever-flowing waters of the River Clarion, does not signify an end but a continuation of life:

My dog Luke lies in a grave in the forest,

She is given back.

But the river Clarion still flows

From wherever it comes from

To where it has been told to go. (l. 63-67)

When the individual losses that the speaker suffers are contextualized in the larger picture of nature, the flowing river acts as a symbol of the continuance of life. The poem, however, does not imply that the gains and losses of life will always feel balanced because “Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves” (l. 71). The unpredictable ebb and flow of the river is reinforced by its mysterious start and end points. The “wherever” (l. 66) it comes from and “where it has been told to go” (l. 67) refer to the river but also represent the immeasurability of nature. The river also represents the exploration of the immeasurable in Mary Oliver’s poetry as she “uses the motif of drifting as her defining aesthetic and conceptual frame” (Lucas par. 1). Lucas characterizes drifting as taking “the path of poetry and of reflection” rather than wandering into “shapelessness and uncertainty” (par. 2). Whitman is also referred to as a poet who takes up a poetics of the drift, which is characterized as the “digressive, casual nature of drifting [that] provides an alternative to the ethos of drive, advancement, and progress with which [Whitman] is frequently associated” (Reddy 3). Both Whitman and Oliver demonstrate a motivation to explore and to seek, but this seldom manifests in a clear trajectory, but is about the journey, or the drift. The river as a source of spiritual awakening embodies the visible evidence of life in material nature as well as the belief in its invisible and unknowable aspects, or, its immeasurability: “Oliver returns to the sense of the drift as an alternative to such trajectories of rationality, reinforcing a philosophy and an aesthetics of paradox, and an acceptance of

the questions of self which derive from a visceral, sensuous receptivity to the world of alterity” (Lucas par. 6). The river represents the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual and the poetic subject’s necessary relinquishment of the need for control, which enables the creation of an intuitive religious framework that exists in the spiritual and physical worlds.

The final image in the poem is of the river singing, which represents the spiritual revelation of the human who achieves mutuality with the natural world. It is only the individual who is devoted to the spiritual in the earthly who will hear the singing:

And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river  
keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its  
long journey, its pale, infallible voice  
singing. (l. 80-83)

Earlier in the poem, the speaker questions whether or not one could hear the lily sing, but through the poem’s exploration, doubt is dissolved and communication between the spiritual and the human opens. In “At the River Clarion,” the poetic subject’s concept of God is explored, which does not imply faithlessness, but a freedom to experience the spiritual independently and intuitively. “At the River,” like “Six Recognitions,” recontextualizes and reconceptualizes Christian symbols and scriptural references within a dialogue between the human and the natural world, which illustrates how intuitive religion, although subjective, can also be sacred.

Mary Oliver’s poetry depicts a version of the American Romantic intuitive religion that interconnects the human, nature, and God, but in order for their relationships to exist, mastery and hierarchy must be unsettled. The American Romantic Over-soul is represented in the inclusiveness with which the spiritual experiences are characterized in “Six Recognitions of the Lord” and “At the River Clarion.” The dialogue that occurs between the human and nature in Oliver’s poems represents a network similar to the interconnectedness represented by the Over-soul. The anti-authoritarianism and anti-formalism of the American Romantic tradition is also represented in Oliver’s poetry and is that which enables individual, personal spiritual experiences. The formal, or traditional aspects of the Christian tradition are alluded to in Oliver’s work, but they are recontextualized in the natural world where they become symbols of the individual’s ability to be autonomous from institutional religion. A belief in God, which is another important element of the American Romantic intuitive religion, is also present in Oliver’s poetic subjects. However, the concept of God is

freely explored and questioned without jeopardizing the legitimacy of the individual's spiritual experience. Mary Oliver's version of the American Romantic intuitive religion is based on a vision of the mutuality of the human, nature, and God, which creates dialogue and unsettles mastery.

### **Spiritual Dialogue Between the Human and Nature**

Within Mary Oliver's version of intuitive religion, spiritualized nature is the primary route to the divine even when God is present. The spiritual dialogue that takes place between the human and nature represents a flourishing because it creates a more expansive community that does not depend on an institutionalized hierarchy. Spiritualized nature for Oliver, as well as for the American Romantics, depends on the individual's ability to identify the sacred and holy outside of theological frameworks and religious tradition. God is sometimes an active participant in Oliver's conceptualization of a spirituality, but there are many poems that demonstrate how, through a dialogue between nature and the human, spiritual revelation can occur without a third presence. In Mary Oliver's "Why I Wake Early" (*Why I Wake Early* 3) baptism and resurrection take place without allusion to God. Nature performs religious rites on the human, but, although these have a connection to those of the Christian tradition, in the following poems, these allusions are faint and so far removed from institutional ritual and belief that they become part of Mary Oliver's contemporary spiritualized nature.

In "Why I Wake Early," the poetic subject undergoes a spiritual transformation and sense of rebirth, similar to what the sacrament of baptism represents, but this initiation takes place in the natural world, outside of any religious institution:

Hello, sun in my face.  
Hello, you who make the morning  
and spread it over the fields  
and into the faces of the tulips  
and the nodding morning glories,  
and into the windows of, even, the  
miserable and the crotchety— (l. 1-7)

The poem opens in morning, which foreshadows the sense of newness and beginning that her spiritual awakening represents. The repetition of "and" at the beginning of each

line creates the feeling of taking a step further into nature with the speaker—as though each “and” occurs with each step of the foot. The repetition of “and” also emphasizes the plenitude of the natural world, as one physical body is added to another until an image of abundance emerges. As the repetition broadens the image of nature, there is a simultaneous sense of a growing community into which the speaker enters. The different parts of nature are listed as being unified under the sun and the poetic subject anthropomorphizes them in order to depict their interconnection as creating a community. The tulips have faces and the morning glories nod, a gesture that may be induced by the wind or signal recognition and approval. The community under the sun is further broadened to include all people, even those who do not recognize or appreciate this sense of unity. People, even the unhappy, are touched by the morning sun through their windows, but despite their division, are included in the transformative effect of connectivity with nature. The first stanza of the poem creates a feeling of hopeful beginning as the speaker greets the sun and community is established between the bodies of nature and the human without requiring unification under God.

In the second stanza, the speaker’s community with nature becomes more intimate and personal, which nurtures the individual’s subjective spiritual experience. A baptismal-like transformation occurs with a reference to the traditional Christian ritual, which is used in a non-institutional context:

best preacher that ever was,  
dear star, that just happens  
to be where you are in the universe  
to keep us from ever-darkness,  
to ease us with warm touching,  
to hold us in the great hands of light—

good morning, good morning, good morning. (l. 8-14)

Spiritual transformation and initiation occurs in “Why I Wake Early,” with a nod to Christian rites, at the same time that the concept of baptism is made into something new. In this second stanza, the star is referred to as the “preacher” (l. 8), which assigns the scene a religious connotation. An individual being held like a baby by a preacher calls to mind the holding of a baby or adult by their parents or members of a congregation as he or she is baptized. The hands that hold the poetic subject are made of light, which can be both blinding and purifying. Although the etymology of the word baptism associates it with water and it is most commonly associated with the Christian water-based baptism, it is also a term that is applied to other rites of initiation. The

reference to the single star alludes to the star of Bethlehem, which, according to Christian tradition, led the magi to Jesus after his birth. However, immediately following this allusion to traditional Christianity is a contrasting reference to “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” the nursery rhyme and lullaby. The original “how I wonder what you are” is replaced in the poem by “that just happens / to be where you are” (l. 9-10). Although the poem is not in couplets like “Twinkle Twinkle,” it nonetheless is a clear reference with a similarly simple rhythm. Oliver’s version of the lullaby unsettles the star’s traditional significance in its traditional Christian context by relocating it into uncertainty. The allusions to Christian baptism and the star of Bethlehem are quickly disconnected from their traditional connotations and claimed as part of a newly created rite of initiation in the natural world.

In “The Fish” (*American Primitive* 56), Mary Oliver depicts another version of baptism, or transformation through nature, which is more clearly related to the Christian water-based sacrament, but remains an initiation between the human and nature outside of any institution. “The Fish” alludes to other Christian doctrine through its imagery of the fish as Christ symbol, the re-enactment of communion, and the reference to resurrection. The baptism in “The Fish” occurs from the inside of the human’s body and creates a communion between the human and nature that recalls the communion created by the Eucharist. Even though the human catches the fish and acts as predator, this is depicted as part of life’s cycle instead of a violation: “In a number of poems this embrace takes the form of rituals of ‘communion’ that celebrate the interpenetration of the human and the natural through imaging the actual eating of animals” (Bonds 10). Oliver’s poems accept that death is necessary for survival and, although this is usually depicted through predation between animals, in “The Fish,” the poetic subject and the fish are spiritually and physically interconnected.

When animals are eaten in Oliver’s poems, as is illustrated in “The Fish,” it is done with reflection and reverence, because it represents not just a physical nourishment, but a spiritual union with nature:

The first fish  
I ever caught  
would not lie down  
quiet in the pail  
but flailed and sucked  
at the burning  
amazement of the air

and died  
in the slow pouring off  
of rainbows. (l. 1-10)

The relationship between the fish and the speaker alludes to traditional religious rites, but does not use words such as “baptism” or “communion.” However, at the beginning of the poem, the fish is referred to as “The first fish” (l. 1), which implies it is an original fish, or symbol of new life. The fish as Christ-symbol also reinforces the concept of the original fish being a part of God’s creation of the Earth in Genesis. This first line of the poem foreshadows the importance of the fish, and the fish as religious symbol becomes clear as the poem progresses. In the second line, the fish is declared to be the first to be caught by the speaker, which signals another beginning in the form of an exchange between the human and nature. The fish does not go willingly into this exchange and fights for its life as it flails and sucks for air. Despite this painful death, the upheaval from water to land is given a spiritual undertone when the fish’s exposure to air is described as “burning / amazement” (l. 6-7). Like the light of the star in “Why I Wake Early,” the air in “The Fish” is sensually astonishing and represents a miraculous beginning of a transformation. That the body of the fish slowly pours off rainbows represents its slow detachment from the water, as the reflection of light off its moist body decreases the longer it is out of water. The relationship between the poetic subject and the fish is not without struggle, but the energy that the fish expends in fighting for its life represents the impact of its union on the speaker. The fish’s association with Christ emphasizes the gravity of the exchange between the natural world and the poetic subject, but ensures that the focus remains on their transaction rather than abstract concepts of God or the divine.

Even though the fish dies at the hands of the human, its body remains a participant in the poetic subject’s spiritual transformation. The unification of the two bodies is reinforced by the poem’s single stanza form as the death of the fish leads directly into the human’s transformative experience:

Later  
I opened his body and separated  
the flesh from the bones  
and ate him. Now the sea  
is in me: I am the fish, the fish  
glitters in me; we are  
risen, tangled together, certain to fall

back to the sea. Out of pain,  
and pain, and more pain  
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished  
by the mystery. (l. 10-20)

The fish has already moved from water to air and life to death, but it undergoes further change at the hands of the speaker who opens and separates its body. The eating of the fish is more ritual than a meal. Diane Bonds identifies this ritualistic element in Oliver's "Hunter's Moon—Eating the Bear" (*Twelve Moons* 50), where she refers to the poem as prayer: "Her prayer is a verbal ritual in which she accomplishes the incorporation of which she speaks by speaking it. That is, eating the bear is an act of spiritual nourishment which makes the prayer—the poem—possible" (Bonds 10). It is when the human eats the fish that the body of the fish and the body of the speaker become one, just as the body of Christ becomes a part of those who accept and ingest the Eucharist. The eating of the fish becomes a rite of initiation for both participants and the imagery of the water as source of transformation, like the Christian-based baptism, surrounds them, but is a reformed tradition based in nature.

In "The Fish," the allusion to the Eucharist and baptism represent a similar union with God, but because they are claimed and reformed by the natural world and the human, these rites do not include a god-figure. Baptism is a ritual that is seen "to transmit grace to the believer, resulting in true communion with Jesus Christ" (Harris 3). By baptism, "a person is said to be made a member of the mystical body of Christ and a partaker of divine nature" and sins are "totally uprooted and obliterated" (Harris 4). Although doctrine differs between Catholic and Protestant traditions, whether or not the Eucharist is symbolic of Christ's body or an actual transubstantiation is not important in "The Fish" because the union of the fish and the speaker occurs in a physical *and* symbolic way. The fish is "in" the speaker physically, but the two also become one in a figurative way as the speaker describes them both as "risen, tangled together, certain to fall / back to the sea" (l. 16). Being risen connotes a resurrection, but, for the fish, this is only symbolic because the speaker's body has consumed it. Having the fish be both literally and figuratively in the human points at the divisions that doctrine can cause and how they can impede personal spiritual union.

In both "Why I Wake Early" and "The Fish," rites similar to baptism and the Eucharist take place between the human and nature, without participation or approval from God. Spiritual transformation occurs in the natural world, without promise of God's blessing: "The deepest form of rapture in Oliver's poetry is discovered in noting

and freely moving forward into a bodily or material communion with others, and these others—what I shall call ‘the least of these’—are creatures of the wood and sea, the birds of the air, the plants of the fields, the trees of the deep forest” (Davis 615). Interconnection is created through the physical contact between Oliver’s poetic subject and the natural world and from this initial creation of mutuality, transformation takes place, as the human is initiated by the natural world into a spirituality that does not require overseeing by God.

The spiritual community between the human and nature in Mary Oliver’s poetry does not always involve a ritualistic initiation, but is sometimes based on a direct dialogic exchange. In Mary Oliver’s “Straight Talk from Fox” (*Red Bird* 11), the fox is the spiritual messenger who speaks directly to the poetic subject and the reader. Similar to the initial struggle between the poetic subject and the fish in “The Fish,” the fox in “Straight Talk” becomes impatient with the human’s easy distraction. The fox, compared to the human, sees life as straightforward and is more aware of the ebb and flow of the human’s spiritual journey, and that the human is so quickly discouraged. Even though the community between the natural world and the human can lead to spiritual awakening, “The Fox” recognizes that their community is not always a perfect, harmonious union, but that this can still impart learning to the human.

In “Straight Talk” the fox’s spiritual message is delivered in an informal manner, which reinforces the necessity of intuitive language in creating spiritual community between the human and nature. The informal language of the fox is delivered through the technical aspects of the poem such as line breaks, grammar, and punctuation, in a stream-of-consciousness style. The poem manages to mimic the quick pace of thought that a fox might have as well as the level of excited enchantment he feels when describing the beauty in nature. Although the style and pace of the fox’s talk is different from the typical human speaker’s voice in Oliver’s poetry, its straightforwardness and rapidity manages to convey spiritual wisdom and instruction:

Listen says fox it is music to run  
Over the hills to lick  
Dew from the leaves to nose along  
The edges of the ponds to smell the fat  
Ducks in their bright feathers but  
Far out, safe in their rafts of  
Sleep. (l. 1-7)

The nature of the fox's spiritual message is striking in its attention to the sensual and material and very different from what he characterizes as elements of the human's world. The natural world represents pleasures that are foreign to the human, but are used to represent the spiritual by the fox. The world that the fox experiences is not only the world of a predator but of an animal that observes on a micro-level as opposed to the human world that is elevated from nature's inner workings. Rather than describing the warmth of the sun or the coolness of a breeze, the fox is so close to nature that he relishes the dew on the leaves and the smell of ducks. To smell the fat of the ducks is a sensual experience that the human will never experience due to a lack of predatory and hunting instincts. However, having the fox share this side of nature invites the human into this other world despite their differences and establishes the basis upon which the human's spiritual transformation should occur.

The fox describes death that he inflicts on other animals as beautiful, which creates a conflict for the human who can understand the concept of the beauty of the cycle of life, but remains so far removed from the necessary deaths in nature. For the fox, death of another animal is sweet to him and he describes his pleasure derived from his portion of the natural world's bounty:

It is like

Music to visit the orchard, to find

The vole sucking the sweet of the apple, or the

Rabbit with his fast-beating heart. Death itself

Is a music. Nobody has ever come close to

Writing it down, awake or in a dream. It cannot

Be told. It is flesh and bones

Changing shape and with good cause, mercy

Is a little child beside such an invention. (l. 7-15)

Death is described as a music that involves both auditory and gustatory elements. Characterizing death in nature as music implies that it represents a harmonious balance, wherein the sound of the lives around the fox are used in tracking his prey. The actions of the vole and the rabbit's heartbeat all represent a continuation of life for the fox, which comes at the cost of the other animals' lives. It is this necessary give and take that composes the music of nature. In many of Oliver's poems, her speaker creates a tension between the inability of words to express the lives of nature and the obvious attempt to do so in the form of the poem. Describing death in the natural world as music depicts it as something more than cruel slaughter and points out, to the human subject,

that it is a beautiful exchange that also contributes to the continuance of life. The fox's description of death is used to invite the human to acknowledge the natural world's difference as well as being able to see beauty in the most unfamiliar. As part of the human's spiritual instruction, the fox asks her to undergo a perspective shift that will bring them closer, but not take for granted their differences.

The fox in "Straight Talk" is unforgiving of the human's tendency to formalism and dependence on language and sees both as ways of inhibiting spiritual awakening. However, the physical and sensual experience of the fox is recreated in the words of the poem in an attempt to communicate with the human. The music and sensual elements of the death that the fox describes represents the spirit of his message, which is a combination of that which is described and that which can only be seen or felt. Although the fox does not believe that the music of death can be written down, its description of the sensual experience of hunting does, nonetheless, becomes translated in the language of the poem, which serves as an interconnection between the wild of nature and the human world.

Death, for the fox's prey, is not called a resurrection but is referred to as a "changing shape" (l. 14), which indicates that the natural world undergoes rebirth without reference to religious tradition or God. The lives of the voles and rabbit will be transformed into the life of the fox, which is a process that is sanctified by the fox, not God. The fox's message is not explicitly spiritual but the concept of bodies being sacrificed and transformed within a community represents the mutuality and interdependence of holistic flourishing. Even though "Straight Talk" implies a resurrection of bodies, the transformation takes place within the body of a fox, which distinguishes the spiritual change in the poem from the traditional religious doctrine. The fox even compares his taking of lives to the "little child" (l. 15) of mercy. Salvation and mercy, those qualities that are traditionally assigned to an authoritarian God to be administered to the human, are terms that do not retain meaning in the life and death transactions that occur in the natural world. In a world based on survival, salvation does not exist. The fox's instruction is in nature's holism, with particular attention given to how its physical actions, such as killing, create spiritual meaning in their contribution to the continuance of life.

The fox's message to the human is that spiritual transformation occurs through full physical immersion in the world, but believes that the human may be too self-conscious to allow a personal rebirth. The fox turns his criticism away from the

inadequacy of the human's language to the endless introspection that inhibits spiritual immersion in the natural world:

It is  
Music to wander the black back roads  
Outside of town no one awake or wondering  
If anything miraculous is ever going to  
Happen, totally dumb to the fact of every  
Moment's miracle. Don't think I haven't  
Peeked into windows. I see you in all your seasons  
Making love, arguing, talking about God  
As if he were an idea instead of the grass,  
Instead of the stars, the rabbit caught  
In one good teeth-whacking hit and brought  
Home to the den. (l. 15-26)

The fox contrasts the ebb and flow of human life with the physical activities in the natural world and becomes discouraged by the human's need to self-reflect and dwell in the abstract, when the spiritual is characterized as residing in the material. The fox criticizes the formalism of the human world that disconnects the spiritual from the material and contemplates a God that transcends the earthly. The fox suggests that God is, in fact, the natural world as opposed to any other definition the human attempts to give to Him. The fox's pointing to the natural world as God suggests that he is offering the physical world as a replacement for the promise of the divine and transcendent. For the human, God has become not a sacred image, but an image constructed out of language and the imagination. For the fox, God does not have to exist or be meditated on because all of the spiritual significance of life is visible in nature's daily exchanges. The fox talks to the human in order to communicate the significance of the natural world, but he criticizes the way that the human's spiritual experience is inhibited by language and abstract concepts.

In the final lines of the poem, the fox dismisses the human and feels certain that she will never be able to grasp the spiritual significance of the natural world because the human is too preoccupied by abstract concepts of the divine, instead of grasping the divine that is visible in the earthly. The fox judges human life harshly and devalues it as being too self-conscious:

What I am, and I know it, is  
Responsible, joyful, thankful. I would not

Give my life for a thousand of yours. (l. 26-8)

The fox is certain of the value of his own life without needing reinforcement from abstract concepts. The fox achieves his sense of certainty through activity and exchange with other bodies in the natural world while the human only engages in activities that are framed by self-reflection. The fox rejects traditional religious concepts of God and does not believe in mercy, but he still identifies the spiritual in his life as predator, participating in the musical harmony of nature's deaths and feasts. The fox invites the human into his sensual world in nature, but gives up based on distaste for the human's lack of engagement with the earthly. Instead of actively exchanging with nature, the human is depicted as being limited to interpersonal relationships, which remain confined to the limitations of language and self-reflection. "Straight Talk" does not depict a harmonious community between the human and nature, but it does demonstrate how the natural world becomes its own spiritual landscape, free from formal concepts of God or traditional religious influence.

In "The Teachers" (*Red Bird* 27), the human speaker of the poem attempts to interpret nature's spiritual message, but this exercise creates a tension between her reliance on language and the necessary relinquishment of it in favour of sensual experience. The speaker of the poem engages in a sensual or bodily conversation with the natural world:

Owl in the black morning,  
    mockingbird in the burning  
        slants of the sunny afternoon  
            declare so simply  
  
to the world  
    everything I have tried but still  
        haven't been able  
            to put into words,  
  
so I do not go  
    far from that school  
        with its star-bright  
            or blue ceiling,  
  
and I listen to those teachers,

and others too—

the wind in the trees

and the water waves— (l. 1-16)

The poetic subject's awareness of and engagement with the natural world is established at the beginning of the poem as she is within it, like the owl and mockingbird, from the early morning into the afternoon. From within the natural world, the speaker understands its language, which is different from her own and characterized by simplicity and firmness of statement. The poetic subject is unable to translate the natural world's declarations precisely into language, but this does not discourage her describing her experience of it. This tension between the inadequacy of language and the human's drive to nonetheless attempt a portrayal is expressed in the poem when the speaker states her conundrum: "I have tried but still / haven't been able / to put into words" (l. 6-8). Even though the speaker is aware that her attempts to articulate nature through language are never adequate, it is the only way to save herself from losing touch with the spiritual. Just as Mary Oliver's lyric subject explores its position in order to unsettle authority, so too does the poetic subject who dwells in nature understand that its spiritual element is to be experienced and explored rather than defined. Nature's spiritual influence awakens and stimulates the human into engaging with it physically as well as with language, but neither of these engagements will ever adequately capture nature's meaning.

In the second half of the poem, the speaker describes how she learns to relinquish the pursuit of formal language, if only briefly, in order to listen to the language of nature. This listening to nature makes the poetic subject feel a part of spiritual experience in community with the natural world:

for they are what lead me

from the dryness of self

where I labor

with the mind-steps of language—

lonely, as we all are

in the singular,

I listen hard

to the exuberances

of the mockingbird and the owl,  
the waves and the wind.

And then, like peace after perfect speech,  
such stillness. (l. 17-28)

Listening to the natural world saves the poetic subject from the introversion that self-reflection requires. The poetic subject does not dismiss all language, but that which is restricted by “mind-steps” (l. 20), or formalism. However, the staggered indentation of the poem’s stanzas appear to be their own steps of language, which illustrates how difficult it is for the human to escape form and structure. Even though the speaker of the poem listens to nature, formalism is maintained in the structure of the poem, which demonstrates a visible structure very different from the liberal verse of the fox. In “Straight Talk,” the form of the poem, as narrated by the fox, is much less structured, and its line breaks have more to do with keeping a pace than with the action and experience described in each line. In “The Teachers,” the speaker interprets nature’s lesson and finds that it defies formal language. However, the perfect speech of nature does not replace the human’s use of poetic language as a way of exploring the spiritual in nature.

Nature teaches the speaker by inviting her away from self-interest, towards a sensual immersion in the natural world that results in a feeling of community. The speaker is led away from the lonely singularity of introspection into a world of engagement with, and attention to, nature. Being surrounded by and hearing the “exuberances” (l. 24) of nature gives the speaker a sense of company and immersion in community, creating distance from the restricted self. The sense of peace felt by the speaker is associated with what she considers to be the “perfect speech” (l. 27) of nature, which differs from her own language. Nature’s form of language cannot be translated by the human, but can be experienced through sensual immersion. However, the community between the poetic subject and nature is not without tension as the human’s language will always be a filter between herself and the purely physical world of nature, but without which poetry would not exist. The inadequacy of words is reinforced in the final line of the poem, when language is stopped in order to allow for the “peace after perfect speech” (l. 27). The last word of the poem, “stillness” (l. 28), embodies the tension between the inadequacy of language and its necessity to the human’s expression of spiritual experience. In “The Teachers,” the poetic subject’s experience of nature’s peaceful stillness is reformed through human language, which,

although inadequate as a true depiction of nature, portrays the individual's personal spiritual experience.

Mary Oliver's spiritualized nature is different from that of the American Romantics because it allows more uncertainty regarding God's location, which allows the human to engage more fully with the natural world as source of spiritual revelation. Intuitive religion, under which spiritualized nature is legitimized in Oliver's work, creates mutuality between the human, nature, and God, which, in order to function, must be free from institutionalism and hierarchy. Intuitive religion involves elements of the sacred and a belief in God but if it does employ a reference to traditional religious doctrine, it is within a natural world context where its meaning is appropriated by mutuality with nature. The community or spiritual network that an intuitive religion allows depends on dialogue and physical exchange between the human and nature. In Mary Oliver's poetry, formal language and formal religion are used in fragments in order to create new, unrestricted models of both. The human in Oliver's poetry will always be faced with the necessity and inadequacy of language, but this only encourages a closer attention to the world of nature that is a model of unselfconscious spiritual activity.

Mary Oliver inherits her intuitive religion and spiritualized nature from the American Romantics, but her version consistently alludes to the Christian tradition while maintaining distance from its institutionalism. Oliver's intuitive religion, which creates mutuality between the human, nature, and God is an updated version of Emerson's Over-soul, which serves as an interconnection between all beings. This interconnectivity encourages intimacy with God, but does not create a singular dependence on Him because His mastery is unsettled and equally distributed between all human and non-human bodies. God is a partner in spiritual experience, but oftentimes the natural world is the source and focus of the human's spiritual awakening. Spiritualized nature, like intuitive religion, does not eliminate a belief in God, but is able to initiate the human into spiritual awakening without requiring His blessing or supervision. When spiritualized nature converses with the human in Oliver's poem, the image of God recedes or disappears in order to highlight and foster the independence and self-reliance of the human and the natural world. Intuitive religion depends on a spiritualized vision of nature to replace the exclusivity of institutional religion. Reclaiming the sacred from the institution enables a subjective spiritual experience and accessibility of the divine in the earthly. The anti-institutional religion that Oliver inherits from the American Romantics also represents an ethic of flourishing that is

based on mutuality. Intuitive religion and spiritualized nature interconnect the physical and spiritual, requires sensual engagement, and exalts the earthly and communal, which are all key elements in flourishing. However, this intuitive and naturalized religion is one side of the spiritual paradox in Oliver's poetry that can also use tradition explicitly and turn to God for approval. Chapter Three illustrates the other side of Mary Oliver's productive spiritual paradox, which involves nature as a moralized landscape inscribed with a codified belief system and traditional representations of the divine as mother and father figures.

## Chapter Three

### Spiritual Flourishing in Mary Oliver's Poetry

Mary Oliver's use of productive paradox is illustrated in her giving the natural world a morally pedagogical function as well as depicting traditional representations of the divine. Oliver's more traditional characterizations of the divine create a contrast with her intuitive religion and naturalized spirituality and, even though *Thirst* (2006) is Oliver's most explicitly Christian collection, it does not mark a conversion, but is a part of the paradox of the traditional and conventional that exists throughout Oliver's oeuvre. Nature's pedagogical function is revealed in Oliver's moralized landscape, a medieval concept that has been used in studies on Romantic nature and its didactic purpose and which I will adapt in relation to Oliver's poetry. Within a moralized landscape the human's and nature's actions are analogies for moral behavior and represent a system of belief, or doctrine, that denotes what is considered to represent the good of the whole, as opposed to being an opportunity for subjective interpretation and spiritual experience. In Oliver's moralized landscape poems, individual sacrifice, for the good of others, is the moral message that nature symbolizes. The human subject in Oliver's poems also becomes a part of the moralized landscape when she intervenes and rescues animals. Oliver's moralized landscape references the Christic concept of sacrifice and the parable of the Good Samaritan, but these allusions are not constrained by orthodoxy and can be used out of context to illuminate the human's relationship with the natural world. Mary Oliver's moralized landscape has a clear pedagogic function that illustrates the practice of virtue in nature.

Mary Oliver also explores traditional representations of God, which differ from those in which the divine third term remains unnamed and undefined while the human and nature have a spiritual dialogue. Oliver has written a small number of poems that feature a divine female figure, along the lines of a Mother Nature, or earth mother, but the poems represent an inability or reluctance to envision the divine female as a creator God or master. Oliver also depicts God in the image of the patriarchal Lord of the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, her depiction of God the Father is paradoxical in that the human has an intimate and dialogical relationship with Him, but He also remains hierarchically above the poetic subject, making him both a father figure and benevolent master. In examining Oliver's female and male representations of the divine, I will use Whitman's "As I Ebb'd" and Wordsworth's *The Excursion* as Romantic points of comparison for Oliver's paradoxical depictions of God. Like Oliver's

paradoxical poetical framework, her religious model is not a singular one, the doctrinal and theological in her poetry is a part of her exploration of different subject positions, which creates an ethic of mutuality and inclusion.

### **Nature as Moralized Landscape**

In a moralized landscape, nature is a reflection and representation of a system of beliefs, or doctrine, and the physical world provides moral and spiritual analogy in order to serve a pedagogic function for the human. The idea of moralized landscape is a medieval concept used by M.H. Abrams in *The Correspondent Breeze* (1984) in his consideration of the origins and influence of the Romantic lyric and by Jonathan Bate in his *Romantic Ecology* (1991). Abrams' *paysage moralisé* is based on "two collateral and pervasive concepts in medieval and Renaissance philosophy" (Abrams *CB* 85). The first concept in Abrams' moralized landscape is "the doctrine that God has supplemented the Holy Scriptures with the *liber creaturarum*, so that objects of nature [...] show forth the attributes and providence of their Author" (Abrams *CB* 85). The second concept, which is, according to Abrams, "of independent philosophic origin [...], is that the divine Architect has designed the universe analogically, relating the physical, moral, and spiritual realms by an elaborate system of correspondences" (*CB* 85). The moralized landscape is not a strictly Judeo-Christian one, but the idea of nature as a scriptural supplement, which is known as the "Other Book of God" (Mann x), or "the book of nature,"<sup>19</sup> is a specifically Christian concept. A moralized landscape, as framed by Abrams, is a landscape that can be interpreted according to moral or spiritual codes and can be a supplement to Judeo-Christian doctrine, as well as more general spiritual and moral philosophy. Therefore, Abrams' definition is a broad one that, although historically linked to the Christian concept of nature theology, is not limited to a single religion, but does refer to a moral belief system.

In Mary Oliver's poetry, creating a moralized landscape is a way to be pedagogical without requiring institutional sanction and formality. However, according to Abrams, the moralized landscape in poetry is traditionally represented through formal and structured poetic language and form, which are associated with institutionalism and inheritance instead of a subjective experience. Abrams uses the term to introduce the concept of "a symbolic and analogical universe" (*CB* 85) that he attributes to the seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century poets, which is a concept that he does *not*

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<sup>19</sup> The term, "book of nature," is attributed to Augustine, but was popularized in the eighteenth century (van Berkel and Vanderjagt ix).

consider to be a precursor to the “free flow of consciousness, the interweaving of thought, feeling, and perceptual detail, and the easy naturalness of the speaking voice which characterize the Romantic lyric” (Abrams 88). Abrams’s list of Romantic lyric elements describes a philosophy based on a sense of personal freedom, spontaneity, and informality, which are all characteristic of the intuitive religion of the American Romantics and Mary Oliver. However, Oliver’s moralized landscape is not “depersonalized” (Abrams *CB* 88), or formed out of “heightened and stylized” (Abrams *CB* 88) language. Even if a moralized landscape does not derive from a traditional religion, it nonetheless carries connotations of structure and institutionalism because it represents a clear system of beliefs.

The moralized landscape has a pedagogical intent and although it refers to a system of belief, it does not have to be explicitly religious. Jonathan Bate, in his study of Wordsworth and the Romantic tradition, refers to the moral of landscape, a concept that he derives from John Ruskin’s chapter of the same name in *Modern Painters* (1843), to refer to the project of infusing the spiritual into nature. According to Bate, Ruskin’s analysis “puts God back into nature, in defiance of the tendency of his age, which [...] he took to be the substitution of the material for the spiritual – of watercress for divinities – and the relegation of God to a ‘dim, slightly credited animation in the natural object’” (Bate 78). Like Abrams, Bate grounds his concept of moralized landscape in medieval philosophy, but Bate explores how the theory *does* apply to the Romantics because his conceptualization of the term is less restrictive. Bate differentiates his concept of the moral of landscape by stating that it does not indicate a necessary identification of God in the landscape, but can be an identification of “an instinctive sense of divine presence” (77) in the landscape. Bate does not associate the concept of a moralized landscape with Christian doctrine, but believes that it is a more general representation of concepts of the sacred. Bate’s Romantic version of the moralized landscape intertwines the spiritual with the natural world and becomes “a program for education into ecological consciousness” (84). This program of education, or pedagogical intent, is comparable to an institutional religious belief system, but does not relate to the worship of a Lord God, which, as a result, provides an accessible spiritual landscape as well as encourages environmental conservation.

In Mary Oliver’s poetry, the moralized landscape is a substitute for formal religion, in that it represents a clear moral system which is made visible in the natural world, as opposed to being outlined in scripture. Bate’s moralized landscape consists of two main elements, which relate to nature being a necessary part of one’s spiritual

development as well as it being a substitute for God. The first element is based on “the Wordsworthian ‘philosophy’ of the ‘one life’ and the ‘active universe [wherein] there is animation in and unity between all things, and [...] nature is accordingly entitled to moral consideration” (*Romantic Ecology* 66). Nature is not just an example of morality, but should also be treated morally by the human. The second aspect of Bate’s moralized landscape is that it represents a stability of faith (Bate *RE* 73) that has replaced “the old religious certainties” (Bate *RE* 73), which include a conceptualization of God the Father and Savior. Bate uses Ruskin’s study to emphasize that the Romantic landscape, though it did reflect belief, “is a matter not of doctrinal nicety but of contemplating the lilies of the field” (81). The Romantic moral of landscape is not a strict reinforcement of traditional religious doctrine, but does use the structured belief system of religion as a moral model that reinforces the ethical treatment of nature, which is a spiritual source. Mary Oliver’s moralized landscape is like the Romantic moral of landscape that Bate outlines, as both encourage environmental consciousness, as well as use Christianity as a moral reference without promoting an institutionalized religion.

Mary Oliver’s moralized landscape represents a moral pedagogy in which sacrifice and intervention are taught to the human through the natural world’s physical activity as analogy for good works. Sacrifice and intervention become a version of doctrine in that they form a belief system that is advocated in Oliver’s work through her more didactic poems. Oliver’s doctrine is not restricted to an adherence to a specific religious tradition, but when she describes sacrifice and intervention, they allude to Christ’s crucifixion, the story of the Good Samaritan, and other Gospel stories. In Oliver’s poetry, sacrifice is shown to be an integral part of the continuance of the whole of nature, but its reference to traditional Christianity makes the physical actions in the natural world an analogy for moral behavior and, therefore, a pedagogical tool.

In the Christian tradition, sacrifice is a significant value and stories of martyrdom have permeated the Christian consciousness. Sacrifice is considered a “major structuring motif in most religions and in the religious life of Israel. We find it in the founding stories of Abraham; in the Christian understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus” (McNelly Kearns 13). Sacrifice, in the Christian tradition, relates not only to martyrdom, but also to general “self-denial” (Ketab 373), which is described by Ketab as “the readiness to give up something one cherishes, or to repress an urge to keep or go after something one really desires [...] for the sake of the well-being or better being of others” (Ketab 373). In many of Oliver’s poems, she features a natural

world that is ruthless and pays tribute to the terrible beauty of predatory animals. However, in her poems about the moral of landscape, Oliver illustrates how the cycle of life in nature, as seen from the perspective of prey or less visible life forms, represents a strong moral code wherein the individual must be willing to sacrifice herself for the good of the whole. Therefore, although Oliver's moralized landscape is not exclusively Christian, it uses Christic models of sacrifice and self-denial as examples of how an individual's actions will affect the well being of the whole.

The doctrine in Mary Oliver's moralized landscape is not exclusively Christian, but it does represent a moral belief system that is different from her intuitive religion that depends on the individual's subjective experience instead of nature's pedagogy to determine spiritual meaning. In Oliver's moralized landscape, nature teaches the human that individual sacrifice is necessary for the flourishing of the whole and that death is a necessary part of nature's cycle. However, it is the willingness with which death's victims approach their sacrifice that underlies its spiritual and communal significance. In many poems about death, the fear and agony of predation are replaced by a sense of willing sacrifice from the parts of nature that dissolve as participants in seasonal change or are consumed by predators. In "Beans" (*WIWE* 10), the poetic subject considers the ease with which nature makes a sacrifice of its life, which is part of its moral code:

They're not like peaches or squash.  
Plumpness isn't for them. They like  
being lean, as if for the narrow  
path. The beans themselves sit qui-  
etly inside their green pods. In-  
stinctively one picks with care,  
never tearing down the vine,  
never not noticing their crisp bod-  
ies, or feeling their willingness for  
the pot, for the fire.

I have thought sometimes that  
something—I can't name it—  
watches as I walk the rows accept-  
ing the gift of their lives to assist  
mine.

I know what you think: this is foolishness. They're only vegetables. Even the blossoms with which they begin are small and pale, hardly significant. Our hands, our minds, our feet hold more intelligence. With this I have no quarrel

But, what about virtue?

The moralized landscape in "Beans" calls popular belief systems into question that value intelligence and rationality instead of goodness. The speaker of the poem describes the beans as having intention and agency, which destabilizes the conceptualization of nature as unconscious and inferior to the human. The speaker does not attempt to speak for the beans, but does decode their moral message; they have chosen humility, leanness, and "the narrow / path" (l. 3-4) in their vocation of service to others. The beans' pursuit is sacrifice, which does not connote narrowness as a negative limitation, but a moral commitment to their ecosystem and community. The path of the beans alludes to the life-path of individuals who choose a religious vocation, such as the priesthood, which requires the sacrifice of self-indulgence in order to serve a higher spiritual cause. The religious or monastic life is narrow in that it has a clear, unwavering focus, which also tends to the ascetic, rather than one of "plumpness" (l. 2), or extravagance. That the beans "sit qui- / etly inside their green pods" (l. 4-5) reinforces their monastic and meditative occupation, as their silent confinement recalls the vows of silence undertaken in the cells of monasteries and convents. The form of the poem mimics the "the narrow / path" (l. 3-4), with its short lines that break in the middle of words, as though the poem were trying to squeeze into its own invisible narrow boundaries on the page. Breaking words such as "qui- / etly" (l. 4-5), "In- / stinctively" (l. 5-6), and "bod- / ies" (l. 8-9) forces a reading of the poem that does not allow fluidity, but creates a sense of the focused rigidity of the beans' moral purpose. The sacrifice of the beans connotes discipline and devotion and the abrupt line breaks demonstrate the systematic nature of the beans' moral discipline.

The speaker's devotion to the beans' vocation is itself a part of the moralized landscape, as it illustrates sympathy for the natural world, which relates to the human's moral treatment of nature. Not only does the speaker acknowledge the importance of the beans as food, but she also takes great physical care with them, demonstrating

reverence for their spiritual vocation. The human who “picks with care, / never tearing down the fine vine / never not noticing” (l. 6), imitates the intent and focus of the beans with her own meditative approach to gardening and food. In the second stanza, the speaker expresses gratitude for the beans, who give “the gift of their lives to assist” (l. 14) hers. The speaker has not just a physical experience with the beans but a highly sensual one as their color and feeling are described. Their “green” (l. 5) bodies are “crisp” (l. 8) and the speaker feels their “willingness” (l. 9), which connotes both their spiritual intention as well as their ripeness. The beans serve as an example of martyrdom for the good of others and are a moral model for the human who mimics their intention. The poem’s moral landscape is made of the martyrdom of beans, which results in the poetic subject’s reverence and careful treatment of nature, which recalls the natural world’s didactic purpose that Jonathan Bate describes in his discussion of the moral of landscape.

The speaker’s description of the beans consists of simple and informal language, which disconnects the moral code of the beans from the formality of institutional religion without diminishing the spiritual significance of the legumes. Part of the informal nature of the poem comes from framing the sacrifice of the beans in relation to food, making it a concept that the reader can relate to, which is conducive to turning the moralized landscape into a didactic purpose. In the first stanza, the poetic subject assigns the beans agency and senses their “willingness” (l. 9) for the fire and refers to the offering of their lives as a “gift” (l. 14). The first stanza, which alludes to the monastic life of religious devotees, emphasizes the spiritual significance of the beans as moral models. Even though the speaker acknowledges her own hyperbole and anthropomorphizing of the beans, she does not deny the importance of nature as a moralized landscape: “I know what you think: this is fool- / ishness. They’re only vegetables” (l. 16-7). The speaker justifies her exaggeration by using the description of the beans as martyrs to distinguish between what is “sig- / nificant” (l. 19-20), “intelligence” (l. 21), and “virtue” (l. 23). The poetic subject’s rhetorical devices are implemented in order to create a new value system based on goodness as opposed to amoral rationality. The worth of the beans, without this new moral value system, would be immeasurable to the human who does not rate sacrifice and humility as being useful or advantageous. “Beans” dismantles the traditional hierarchy between the human and the natural world by assigning nature’s non-sentient minutiae great spiritual significance and agency. In “Beans,” the poetic subject uses an accessible image of beans as food, but uses this to create a new value system that becomes a higher moral code.

The moralized landscape that is created between the human and the beans causes two spiritual revelations in the poetic subject. The first spiritual revelation is an acceptance of death's necessity in the natural world and the significance that each life holds in the whole ecosystem. The moral in this revelation is not only one of sacrifice, but also of each body's significance, no matter how seemingly trivial they are within the human's intelligence-based value-system. The lean body of the bean is used to represent the entirety of death's cycle as it begins as fresh and "crisp" (l. 8), but is destined to be cooked in a pot, where crispness will signal their being "done" or "burnt to a crisp." The word "crisp" (l. 8) embodies the beans' entire life-cycle, as the same word represents their beginning and end, which represents their interconnectedness and the necessary end to life being death. The natural world's cyclical changes are framed through a moral code in "Beans," wherein one life is willingly given for another. The beans "gift [...] their lives" (l. 14) to assist the life of the poetic subject not just as food, but also as a moral model with a didactic purpose. From the pod to the pot, embodied words describe the beans and the materiality of language in the poem, which reminds us to "never *not* notic[e]" (my emphasis l. 8) anything because everything is interconnected. The importance of noticing is illustrated as the poetic subject realizes the implications of the sacrifice of the beans in her own nourishment, but is further emphasized in the noticing or paying attention to the language of the poem and how it embodies the moral creed of the bean.

The second spiritual revelation that takes place in "Beans" is the interconnection between the human and the natural world and that the two can share a moral code. The poem opens with a sense of communion between the poetic subject and the beans, as she recognizes their intention and agency as well as their connection to her own life. To have a *sense* of a closeness or spiritual connection to the beans is illogical, a concept that is addressed by J. Scott Bryson who states that Oliver recognizes "that personification can create only 'a sense' of an operating will, and that actually understanding the workings of the Other's mind is 'impossible logically'" (*West Side* 91). Union with nature and intimacy is therefore impossible, but Oliver does create a vision or ideal of intimacy similar to Buber's mutuality, which will not result in a union, but does result in expanding sympathies and an inclusive relationship. The poetic subject's awareness of the beans heightens as she feels both reverence and tenderness for them as she picks them gently from the vine. When the poetic subject walks through the rows of beans, feeling them as she goes, the *sense* of connection and intimacy between the poetic subject and beans is created. The connection between the human

and natural world occurs when the human comes to understand and share, with the reader, the moral code of nature, which is elucidated through allusions to their purpose as being similar to having a religious vocation. In “Beans,” the interconnectivity between the poetic subject and the natural world acknowledges the difference and boundaries between the two by defining the beans as food and differentiating between their divergent value systems, which are either based on intelligence or virtue. However, these differences are not limiting, but represent the human’s expanding sympathy for nature as a moral model and a fellow life form within the earthly community.

An omniscient third party overlooks the moralized landscape in “Beans,” which alludes to traditional representations of God without subscribing to a specific theology. The god-figure in “Beans” only “watches” (l. 13) over the rows of the beans, which implies that the third term remains at a distance from the activity of the world, but does not diminish its omniscience and elevated status. A tension arises over this third party because it is described with an indefinite adverb and pronoun; the “sometimes” (l. 11) and the “something” (l. 12) both enact the poetic subject’s inability to be certain of what she is referring to. This uncertainty is consistent with Oliver’s intuitive religion, wherein the concept of God can be explored, but it occurs alongside the moral concept of sacrifice. God, in Oliver’s poetry, is not always named, but this act of *not* naming, or “—I can’t name it—” (l. 12), separated by dashes, is both connected to the human through its spiritual presence in the world, but is also distinct and separate from the earthly due to its immateriality and unnameability. The presence of an undefined third term creates an ambiguous theology, but it does not change the spiritual and moral significance of the beans’ sacrifice. The poetic subject resists conjuring a conventional representation of a Lord God who might detract from the beans’ martyrdom and, instead, maintains a focus on the doctrine of the moralized landscape.

In the final line of the poem, the poetic subject includes the reader in a conversation about the beans’ sacrifice, which reinforces the universality of nature’s moral creed. The reader becomes a part of a dialogic relationship with the poetic subject who asks, “[b]ut, what about virtue?” (l. 23). The speaker asks the reader to consider a new value system, wherein the rational is replaced by the moral and, according to the moralized landscape in “Beans,” nature achieves a new level of significance through virtuous action. Through anthropomorphosis and allusion to traditional religious devotion, the poetic subject turns the beans into an accessible moral model. In a moralized landscape, the natural world represents a moral creed that

substitutes for the institutional religious doctrine, but remains a pedagogical system of belief.

In “Goldenrod, Late Fall” (*WIWE* 62), by contrast, the moralized landscape is explicitly grounded in the Christian tradition, which associates the doctrine of sacrifice in the poem with institutional ritual. In this poem, the goldenrod is not being used as food or fuel for other bodies, but its death is part of a larger seasonal change, which establishes a communal significance to the sacrifice, which is signaled by parts of nature gathering like a church congregation. Even with this broadened ecological focus occurring in the poem, the religious significance of the goldenrod’s death becomes more clearly linked to religious ritual, which reinforces the concept of nature’s moral didacticism. The goldenrod’s sacrifice, perhaps because it does not have a pragmatic use like the beans, is described as celebratory and ritualistic, as it becomes an offering as part of a whole seasonal transformation and, despite its lack of consequence for the human, the goldenrod’s sacrifice is a moral analogy that can be applied to the human’s own sense of devotion to community:

This morning the goldenrod are all wearing  
their golden shirts  
fresh from heaven’s soft wash in the chill night.  
So it must be a celebration.  
And here comes the wind, so many swinging wings!  
Has he been invited, or is he the intruder?  
Invited, whisper the golden pebbles of the weeds,  
as they begin to fall  
  
over the ground. Well, you would think the little murmurs  
of the broken blossoms would have said  
otherwise, but no. So I sit down among them to  
think about it while all around me the crumbling  
goes on. The weeds let down their seedy faces  
cheerfully, which is the part I like best, and certainly  
  
it is as good as a book for learning from. You would think  
they were just going for a small sleep. You would think  
they couldn’t wait, it was going to be  
that snug and even, as all their lives were, full of

excitation. You would think

it was a voyage just beginning, and no darkness anywhere,  
but tinged with all necessary instruction, and light,

and all were shriven, as all the round world is,  
and so it wasn't anything but easy to fall, to whisper

*Good Night.*

From the beginning of "Goldenrod," religious allusions are made that are not necessarily related to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but do represent general religious conventions, such as the belief in the afterlife and the ascension of the soul. The doctrine of the afterlife teaches that there is life after death, but each religion's belief system presents its own version of how one gains access to the afterlife and what it will entail. In "Goldenrod," the concept of "heaven" (l. 3) suggests that the afterlife is a reward, which is why the poem celebrates the death of the goldenrod rather than mourns it. That the shirts of the goldenrod are "fresh from heaven's wash" (l. 3) foreshadows that their death is not simply a departure from the natural world, but is also a beginning of an afterlife. The doctrine of the afterlife is supported by the physical action of the wind by releasing the goldenrod into its next life throughout a larger body of nature. The wind is described as being an ethereal body that has "so many swinging wings!" (l. 5), which, alongside the golden rod's heavenly garb, refer to the wings of angels. The poetic subject, who is a spectator instead of a participant in the ritual, questions whether or not the wind is "invited, or is he the intruder?" (l. 6). To the human witness, the role of each body and element has not yet been decoded and the wind is, initially, an ambiguous figure that may represent both life and death. The otherworldly quality of the landscape continues to foreshadow sacrifice and the afterlife as the "gold pebbles of the weeds" (l. 7) whisper to the speaker that the wind is, in fact invited to this "celebration" (l. 4), or ritualistic offering, of both life and death. The first stanza of the poem, then, establishes a celebratory tone and foreshadows the goldenrod's afterlife, which is a religious convention that is analogized in nature's seasonal transformations.

The poem's belief in an afterlife and the value of sacrifice simultaneously establish their spiritual and ecological significances. As previously stated, the death of the goldenrod is foreshadowed by the image of the wind as angel of both life and death. The wind is a participant in the celebratory sacrifice because it is responsible for the dissemination of the goldenrod's seeds, which will complete the plant's life cycle.

However, as an angelic figure, the wind is also the messenger of the goldenrod's death. The wind as winged angel creates an interconnection between the concept of the divine's hand in sending an individual to the afterlife with the ecological dependence that plants have on the elements for survival. The moralized landscape of "Goldenrod" maintains a connection to ecological processes, but these transactions between wind and weed also become a didactic exchange, wherein the reader is shown how nature's system of continuation of life works. "Goldenrod" provides another example of Bate's moralized landscape, which assigns nature a pedagogic function that does not have to be grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition, or related to its representations of a Lord God.

For a sacrifice to be a moral gesture, it must be done willingly and the goldenrod reassures the reader that the celebration is choreographed, or part of a sanctioned ritual. That the goldenrod "fall" (l. 8) over the ground does not signal defeat or subordination, but is a well-timed gesture that will be followed by a sweep from the swinging wings of the wind. The falling goldenrod is a gesture similar to bowing down in humility, rather than standing upright, attempting to defy the wind's force. In "Goldenrod," death is characterized as a joyful sacrifice because it signals the beginning of a "voyage" (l. 20) instead of the end of life. Even though the death of the goldenrod is described as a physical breaking down as "they begin to fall over the ground" (l. 8-9), covering the earth in "broken blossoms" (l. 10), the dismemberment signals circulation instead of defeat. The falling and breaking of bodies is a literal spreading of energy as its "golden pebbles" (l. 7), or seeds must crumble in order to be spread by the awaiting wind. The death of the goldenrod is presented as a willing, celebratory sacrifice that contributes to the good of the whole ecosystem as well as results in a heavenly and ecological afterlife for the plant.

At the end of the poem, the goldenrod's death becomes an analogy for the religious concept of the afterlife, which creates spiritual meaning outside of the context of institutional religion, while still alluding to the Christian tradition. The crumbling of the goldenrod's bodies is contextualized within the Christian tradition, when the plant is referred to as being "shriven, as all the round world is" (l. 22). The reference to the world's roundness both reminds the reader that the lives of the goldenrod are grounded in the earthly as well as indicates an all-encompassing inclusion. When the goldenrod are described as being "shriven" (l. 22), it indicates that they have been forgiven as part of their passage into the afterlife, but also that they were, before their absolution, considered sinners, which alludes to the Christian belief in original sin. This depiction

of the goldenrod as guilty or weakened in their earthly state, in contrast with the absolution they receive in the afterlife, on the one hand denies Grace Jantzen's feminist theological belief that one's earthly state should be valued instead of simply awaiting rescue. However, because the sacrifice of the goldenrod enriches life on earth, to view them as descendents of original sin does not alter the value of the present. Therefore, the poem reconceptualizes traditional Christian absolution, wherein it becomes a ritual that has ecological as well as spiritual significance. In the Catholic Church "confession is a sacrament and ritual" (Todd 39) and forgiveness is "a transaction involving confession of the sin to a representative of the Church and where absolution [is] dependent on the fulfilling of penance set by that representative" (Carmichael 44). In the Protestant faith, confession remains a necessary act of contrition, but, unlike the Catholic tradition, does not require a mediator, but is a "democratized" (Hymer 47) act that can involve a "mutual sharing" or "general confession" (Hymer 47), which bypasses the need for a priest to listen to the confession and grant absolution. In "Goldenrod," the absolution of the plants is communal and, although it is ritualistic, is in keeping with the Protestant form of contrition, which involves a direct address to God. Although the poem describes an ecological renewal, it is framed in religious ritual, which emphasizes the gravity of the life and death of nature.

Absolution, in "Goldenrod" thus alludes to traditional Christian doctrine, but the concept remains codified in the natural world, which maintains the interconnection between the goldenrod's ecological and spiritual significance. The goldenrod is absolved as well as "all the round world" (l. 22), which expands the spiritual meaning of absolution into the ecological and its impact on the whole of nature. The voluntary death of the goldenrod takes place in high spirits as the plants "let down their seedy faces / cheerfully" (l. 13-4), knowing that not only will they receive an afterlife, but this afterlife will be reflected in the continuation of other lives in their environment. The goldenrod is described as only "going for a small sleep" (l. 16), which is "snug" (l. 18) and without "darkness anywhere" (l. 20). The death of the goldenrod is illuminated by the promise of rebirth in the afterlife, as well as being physically transformed and guided by the sun's rays, which have a role in the ecological life cycle of the plant. The poetic subject dispels any melancholy associations with death as the goldenrod are "tinged with all necessary instruction, and light" (l. 21), which is another ambiguous reference to both doctrine and ecology as the plants are both blessed and sun-soaked. In "Goldenrod," the moralized landscape does not position a belief in ecological renewal as being mutually exclusive of a belief in the concept of an afterlife. Applying a moral

dimension to nature gives it a didactic function that grounds the religious and doctrinal in the earthly, which also makes it a model of inclusion and mutuality between seemingly different worlds.

The poem's religious doctrine develops a specifically Christian meaning in its combination of sacrifice, the afterlife, absolution, and the concept of a divine third term. The poem also makes reference to the Bible by equating the instructional value of nature with that of the sacred text, which reinforces the idea of nature as a system of belief or doctrine. The cheerfulness with which the goldenrod approaches death is, as stated in the poem, "as good as any book for learning from" (l. 15). The reference to the "[good] book" (l. 15) and the ability to read it in the landscape illustrates how the natural world is, in a Christian context, not just material, but can be an analogy for moral behavior and the divine. The goldenrod becomes "the Book of Nature" (van Berkel and Vanderjagt ix) and although this is not a direct translation or representation of the Bible, the moralized landscape creates a form of parable.

"Goldenrod" has a divine third term that acts as a participant in the doctrinal instruction of the poem, which is a version of the Catholic belief in the necessity of having an authoritative figure, whether it be a priest or Lord God, as an instructor. The involvement of a third term is only alluded to in the second to last stanza of the poem when the goldenrod is described as being "tinged with all necessary instruction, and light" (l. 21). The source of the goldenrod's education and direction is unclear, but that it is accompanied by a sense of illumination as well as absolution implies a divine influence. In "Beans," the unnamed third term oversees the earthly, but in "Goldenrod," the mythic third term, although more implicit and therefore distanced from the earthly, is depicted as having the power to grant absolution. The inclusion of a third term as the bestower of forgiveness or absolution gives the doctrine in "Goldenrod" a stronger association with the Catholic tradition than most of Oliver's poems.

The doctrine of the poem is expressed through the dialogue and contact between the poetic subject, the natural world, and the reader, which reinforces the necessity of dissemination of a moral message that contributes to the poem's didacticism. The first exchange between the goldenrod and the poetic subject is when the plant whispers to the speaker that the wind is an "[i]nvited" (l. 7) participant in the seasonal ritual. From this whisper, it is clear that the poetic subject is somehow a part of, if only an audience or witness to, the "celebration" (l. 4) in the natural world. The poetic subject's sharing of the goldenrod's experience is also demonstrated in her physical closeness to the plant as she sits "down among them" (l. 11), herself becoming a body in nature. The poetic

subject can hear the “little murmurs / of the broken blossoms” (l. 9-10), which also illustrates her sensitivity to their experience, implying a growing sympathy for nature’s otherness. This understanding of the goldenrod’s physical deterioration as well as its spiritual significance indicates an intimacy and understanding that the human poetic subject gains through dialogue, observation and physical contact with nature.

The didacticism of the moralized landscape in “Goldenrod” is extended to the reader when the poetic subject changes the address of the poem from the first to second person, creating an inclusive dialogue. The change from “I” to “you” appears in a repetitive form as the speaker states, four times throughout the poem, “you would think” (l. 9, 15, 16, 19). The statement is an invitation to the reader to enter into a conversation with the poetic subject and to participate in the goldenrod’s ritual. By engaging the reader in a dialogue, the poetic subject also gains the opportunity to persuade the reader of the spiritual and ecological implications of the goldenrod’s sacrifice. By addressing “you” repeatedly, the poetic subject invites the reader into the poem, using it as a morally pedagogical format. The dialogue of the poem extends further when the goldenrod whispers “*Good Night*” (l. 24), which, unlike their earlier vocalization, is distinguished by italics. The italicization has a two-fold effect, as it both emphasizes the ambiguity of who is speaking the words as well as suggests that the words are spoken in chorus by all three participants in the celebration: the goldenrod, the poetic subject, and the reader. The goldenrod and the poetic subject have established a reciprocal relationship in their physical proximity with one another and the reader, who has also become a witness of nature’s ritual, becomes a participant in a chorus. The poetic subject’s and the reader’s speaking or reading of the final line, in chorus, mimics the obedience and willingness of the goldenrod, which echoes the pedagogical function of the moralized landscape.

“Beans” and “Goldenrod” both create moralized landscape, giving nature a didactic function that imparts the importance of sacrifice in the continuation of the natural world as well as into the afterlife. Religious conventions such as sacrifice, absolution, resurrection, the after-life, and God, or the divine third term, although recontextualized outside of a religious institution, are all used as pedagogical tools in the human’s learning. Such allusions in both poems create a moral didacticism that is applicable to all, as opposed to promoting the subjectivity of intuitive religion. Mary Oliver’s moralized landscape, which has both spiritual and ecological significance, presents another ambiguity in her poetry, as her belief system is reinforced by the conventions of traditional religious doctrine, but can also be applied to an education in

ecological interconnectedness. Recontextualizing traditional religious doctrine in the natural world is not, in Oliver's poetry, a subversion of tradition, but is, in part, an attempt to update its relevance in a world where the human impact on the environment is undeniable and an appeal to the spiritual may inspire great sympathy in the human. Oliver, as poet, becomes a version of the unnamed third term in the two poems, as she transmits a moral system of belief that reinforces the interconnectedness of nature and the spiritual to her reader. The mastery of the poet over the reader is not something that Oliver examines, choosing rather to refer to her relationship with the reader as a "pact" (*WH* 24), which implies mutuality instead of hierarchy. The sacrifice of the beans and the goldenrod are framed in a way that instructs the reader in the interdependence in the natural world, as well as a system of spiritual beliefs, which, although more orthodox than her intuitive religion, remain grounded in the material world. The doctrine in "Beans" and "Goldenrod" represents an ecological and spiritual version of what Mary Oliver's poetry suggests is the "greater good" through their moralized landscapes.

Mary Oliver's poems also illustrate how the human can become a participant in a moralized landscape, not just through dialogue and education, but also through ethical action, which is depicted in poems wherein a human subject intervenes in the natural world and rescues an animal. Mary Oliver's human subject usually remains an observer of nature's violence, but there are instances when the poetic subject registers an opportunity to save a life and takes action, no matter how much exertion and interference it requires. The interventions in Oliver's poetry do not involve thwarting natural predators, but liberating animals from the suffering that is, most often, inflicted on them by the human world. To intervene is to exercise power, but, in Mary Oliver's poems, the human does so ethically in a manner that does not result in exploitative mastery of nature, but represents the morally didactic function of the natural world.

One subject of such intervention in Oliver's poetry is the sea turtle which is a symbol of the double nature of Mary Oliver's moralized landscape, interconnecting the earthly and its spiritual meaning. Not only is the turtle known for its longevity in the natural world, but also, in Eastern traditions, the shell is a symbol of heaven and the underside is a symbol of earth.<sup>20</sup> According to Adelaide S. Hall, the tortoise is a symbol of divination "because it carries a mystic tablet on [its] back" (27). Turtles embody a poignant symbolism because they "remind us that the way to heaven is through the

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<sup>20</sup> T. Volker states that "[a]ccording to the Taoists [the tortoise represents] the terrestrial" (37). However, the terrestrial is considered an eternal principle, which makes the turtle an "emblem of longevity" (37).

earth...We must see the connection to all things. Just as the turtle cannot separate itself from its shell, neither can we separate ourselves from what we do to the earth” (Andrews 366). In order to honor the spiritual significance and longevity of the turtle, its rescue in Oliver’s various poems always emphasizes the exertion required as well as the great sense of victory that the intervention results in. Oliver’s poetic subject is so often a passive observer in the natural landscape, which makes her poems about the struggle of rescues unique within her oeuvre and they imply that the human’s intervention in nature should only be under exceptional circumstances. The turtle is often the rescued animal in Oliver’s poetry because saving it highlights that intervention in the otherness of nature requires an arduous boundary crossing.

The moralized landscape in Oliver’s poetry is not exclusively created by plants and animals, but also includes the ethical action or good deeds of her poetic subject as part of the pedagogy of her poems. In “Sometimes I Am Victorious and Even Beautiful” (*WDWK* 23), the speaker begins the poem by describing how she feels “victorious and even beautiful” (l. 1), which is not strictly an indulgence in the human subject’s feelings, but is a direct result of her intervention in the natural world:

Sometimes I am victorious and even beautiful—  
as when I go down to the pond in the half-light  
and wade out into the black water,  
where I unloop the taut lines from the willow stakes  
and bend to the weight  
and lift the trap from the water—not slowly and carefully  
as in ordinary work, but hard and fast—  
  
and open it,  
and stare down and see the turtle’s foot-wide mossy shell  
and he sees me  
and he thrashes  
  
and I gaze into his pink throat and haul him higher  
and he hisses, his eyes shine  
and the tongue wags in the gaping, beak-shaped mouth  
and I shake him from the trap, his thick head flashing,  
  
and he swims away

and I close the trap with the heels of my boots, and fling it  
into the bullbriar wracked and useless,

and the pink sun rises and sees me, by the black water,  
smiling,

washing my hands.

The intervention that takes place in “Sometimes” maintains the boundaries between the human subject and the turtle, but this does not inhibit the human from rescuing the turtle, which is a well-intentioned exertion of mastery over nature. The otherness of nature is clearly established through the turtle’s defensive resistance and reaction to its rescuer as it “thrashes” (l. 11) and “hisses” (l. 13) while his “tongue wags in the gaping, beak-shaped mouth” (l. 14). The poetic subject does not romanticize the animal and, rather than projecting an image of serene interconnection between the human and nature, the poetic subject embraces the otherness of the turtle. The poetic subject comes physically close to the natural world as she “wade[s] out into the black water” (l. 3) to make the rescue, and, although this is a crossing of boundaries from the human to the natural world, their differences do not become neutralized. There is no living in harmonious union between nature and the poetic subject as the turtle, still trying to protect itself, “swims away” (l. 16) from the human after it has been released from the trap. Even though the human intervenes in the natural world, the turtle’s defensiveness, as well as its escape from his rescuer, maintains a larger sense of the boundaries established between their different worlds.

“Sometimes” represents the human’s moral potential, but, by highlighting the cruelty of the human-set trap, suggests that intervention is not simply a physical challenge for the human, but is also a challenge to the human’s impulse to mastery and exploitation. The speaker’s ability to throw the trap so easily out of sight, “into the bullbriar wracked and useless” (l. 18), highlights how ineffective the trap can be when it is not set and employed by the human hand. Like the trap that is made harmless, a similar image of oppression is reversed in the poem, as the poetic subject’s boot, which connotes militancy and oppression (i.e. to be “under the boot” of an authoritative figure or organization), remains a symbol of power and strength, but one that is used in liberation instead of infliction. The turtle’s shell is “foot-wide” (l. 9), which measures the poetic subject’s ability to dominate the animal under her foot, but instead of holding the turtle down with her boot, she uses it to release the trap. “Sometimes” illustrates

how vulnerable nature is to human oppression, but it also exhibits how a single individual, who steps into the natural world and fights the human impulse to exploit, can defeat this oppression.

Like Oliver's poems about sacrifice, "Sometimes" makes allusions to the traditional Christian sacrament of baptism, but within the context of the natural world, which, like Oliver's other poems about moralized landscapes, serves as a way of reinforcing the necessity of interconnecting the physical and spiritual. However, the baptism in "Sometimes," despite its occurrence outside a religious institution, is created by an ethical action, as opposed to being something that happens intuitively. A baptism begins for the human when she steps into the pond to rescue the turtle and, for the turtle, a form of baptism occurs when it is released from the trap and its bodily movements and senses burst forth and he is free to swim away. In both of these baptisms, thresholds are crossed that allow, for the human, a new perspective and, for the turtle, a rebirth into a second chance at life. The poetic subject's boots are immersed in the pond and, also, at the end of the poem, the speaker washes her hands in the pond. Both acts of immersion in water refer to the Christian rite of washing the hands and feet. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples<sup>21</sup> as a gesture of humility before his crucifixion, which demonstrates his humility as well as sets an example of service for his disciples whom he instructs to "also [...] wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-7). The second Christian significance relates to the ritual of priests purifying their hands before administering the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist: "The object of washing is, first of all, cleanliness [...] The washing has also a spiritual meaning, and speaks to us of a pure heart cleansed from sin, with which the priest and people alike should approach the Holy Altar" (Wilson, H 44). The religious initiation that takes place in "Sometimes" does not happen within the institution of the Church, but is related to the ethical action that occurs in the natural world, which assigns the sacrament of baptism a spiritual and ecological significance.

The natural landscape in "Sometimes" continues to mix traditional religious conventions with the natural environment, as the sun appears as an omniscient god-figure. In the final lines of the poem, once the turtle has departed, "the pink sun rises and sees" (l. 19) the poetic subject "smiling, / washing [her] hands" (l. 20-1). The sun is the elevated observer, or third term, who oversees the poetic subject's hand washing and sense of victory. Even though the god-figure is transcendent, it is also a reflection of and correspondence with the material and earthly as its color is just like the "pink

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<sup>21</sup> John 13:1-20

throat”(l. 12) of the turtle. The glimpse into the pink throat of the turtle foreshadows the sun’s blessing and becomes a spiritual symbol. The pink of the turtle reflected in the pink of the sun represents the mutual reinforcement of the natural world’s connection to the transcendent and the transcendent’s grounding in the natural world. The sun may not be the traditional Christian representation of God, but it does represent the kind of blessing that might come from a fatherly or Lord God. This allusion to the sun as god-figure places the ethical action and moral of the poem in a sanctioned or authoritative context.

The ethical action of the poetic subject is illustrated not only in the act of rescuing the turtle, but also in her sympathetic response to the animal’s physical signals. Even though boundaries and difference are maintained between the poetic subject and the turtle, the human, who mirrors the turtle’s frantic action, displays evidence of a growing intersubjectivity and empathy for the turtle. The poem suggests that the landscape is dark and foreboding as the water in the pond is described as “black” (l. 3) and the trap is heavy and tightly tied, but these obstacles do not deter the human from crossing nature’s threshold. The turtle’s defensive thrashing and hissing further reinforce the difficulty that the landscape presents, but as the speaker stares into the animal’s mouth, her own actions begin to intensify. As the turtle “hisses, his eyes shine” (l. 13) and his “tongue wags in the gaping, beak-shaped mouth” (l. 14), the poetic subject responds with a “hard and fast” (l. 7) rescue and by using her boots to close the trap “and fling it” (l. 17) out of the scene. The poem demonstrates a shift from the human’s emotional reflection to a focus on her mirroring of nature’s physicality, which is evidence of her expanding sympathy for nature despite its otherness.

“Sometimes” includes the human in its moralized landscape, but the poetic subject earns this place through labor as well as a demonstration of a growing sense of sympathy for and intersubjectivity with the turtle. In Oliver’s poems about intuitive religion, spiritual initiation takes place between the human and nature, as the human observes nature and experiences it sensually, which becomes a subjective rite of spiritual passage. However, in “Sometimes,” a physical exchange characterizes the human’s initiation and she must work hard and sacrifice comfort in order to fulfill her spiritual rite, which is reinforced by the sun’s approving presence. The moralized landscape in “Sometimes” presents a belief system wherein the poetic subject is symbolically baptized as a result of rescue and intervention. The rites of spiritual

initiation in “Sometimes” remain unrestricted by adherence to a specific tradition, but they nonetheless use the Christian tradition as a symbolic point of reference.

In “How Turtles Come to Spend the Winter in the Aquarium, Then are Flown South and Released Into the Sea” (*Truro Bear* 2008), another turtle is the beneficiary of a human intervention, but, unlike “Sometimes,” the rescue in this poem involves both Buddhist and Christian references, demonstrating an inclusive religious awareness that informs the poem’s depiction of intervention:

Somewhere down beach, in the morning, at water’s edge, I found  
a sea turtle,  
its huge head a smoldering apricot, its shell streaming with sea-  
weed,  
its eyes closed, its flippers motionless.  
When I bent down, it moved a little.  
When I picked it up, it sighed.  
Was it forty pounds, or fifty pounds, or a hundred?  
Was it two miles back to the car?  
We walked a little while, and then we rested, and then we walked on  
I walked with my mouth open, my heart roared.  
The eyes opened, I don’t know what they thought.  
Sometimes the flippers swam at the air.  
Sometimes the eyes closed.  
I couldn’t walk anymore, and then walked some more  
while it turned into granite, or cement, but with that apricot-  
colored head,  
that stillness, that Buddha-like patience, that cold-shocked  
but slowly beating heart.  
Finally, we reached the car.  
The afternoon is the other part of this story.  
Have you ever found something beautiful, and maybe just in  
time?  
How such a challenge can fill you!  
Jesus could walk over the water.  
I had to walk ankle-deep in the sand, and I did it.  
My bones didn’t quite snap.  
Come on in, and see me smile.

I probably won't stop for hours.

Already, in the warmth, the turtle has raised its head, is looking  
around.

Today, who could deny it, I am an important person.

The turtle is referred to as having "Buddha-like patience" (l. 18), as it is being carried by the poetic subject who is physically strained under its weight. The turtle, with its "apricot- / colored head" (l. 18-9), evokes an image of the saffron-colored robes of Buddhist monks and its stillness mimics the motionlessness of meditation. Like the goldenrod, the turtle becomes the image of a religious devotee, which links the spiritual to the natural world. In the second section of the poem, Christian allusion is made as the speaker compares her own walking "ankle-deep in the sand" (l. 26) to one of Christ's miracles: "Jesus could walk over water" (l. 25). Like "Sometimes," "How Turtles" teaches the reader that spiritual reward does not come easily and that a challenge, which, in Oliver's poems, involves both fighting apathy and physically exerting one's self, "can fill you!" (l. 24), or provide spiritual nourishment. In "How Turtles," the poetic subject's reference to Christ's miracle does not inflate the accomplishment of the human, but highlights the significance of the turtle's life and the importance of saving it for both ecological and spiritual reward. Buddhist and Christian allusions are employed in "How Turtles" as a way of establishing the importance of the turtle beyond its ecological value and context. Including overt religious references in the poem also alludes to its moral message, as opposed to encouraging a strictly subjective or intuitive spiritual perspective.

Very early in "How Turtles," a dialogic relationship is established between the poetic subject and the reader, which endows the ethical action of the rescue with a pedagogic function concerning the value of intervention. The poem opens with the poetic subject telling her version of her intervention, but she soon asks questions of the speaker, which pertain to her own rescue of the turtle, as though the reader was there during the experience: "Was it forty pounds, or fifty pounds, or a hundred?" (l. 8). The range of weights offered in this question indicate that the experience is half-imagined when the human becomes immersed in the physicality of the turtle and loses her grasp on the quantifiable: "Was it two miles back to the car?" (l. 9). The speaker's questions not only represent a dialogue with the reader, but they also represent the poetic subject's immersion in an awareness of and interconnection with the turtle. When the first-person singular becomes plural it indicates the interconnection of the poetic subject, the turtle, and the reader, who is also included in the experience: "[w]e

walked a little while, and then we rested” (l. 10). After having described the toil involved in rescuing the turtle, the final line of the first section reinforces the union between the subject and the turtle, as well as the reader who becomes an invisible witness: “Finally, we reached the car” (l. 20).

Instead of romanticizing the interaction between the poetic subject and the turtle, the poem confronts the struggle involved in the rescue in order to illustrate that saving a single life in nature is an exceptional and heroic act. The significance of the turtle’s life is accentuated in the first half of the poem through the physical impact that the rescue has on the poetic subject. In “How Turtles,” it is not the turtle that thrashes and hisses, but the human whose mouth hangs open and whose “heart roar[s]” (l. 11), as she carries the turtle to her car and acts out the magnitude of this deed, which is embodied in the weight of the turtle’s life. The turtle, in contrast, remains still and its “flippers [are] motionless” (l. 5) and its body turns to “granite, or cement” (l. 16) as a defense while it is carried to the car. There is no sense of harmonious union between the human and nature because the turtle does not know that it is being rescued, but this does not diminish the satisfaction that the human gains through her intervention. Rescue, in Oliver’s poems, is not an exploitative or idealized attempt at union with nature, but is a physical struggle that causes the human to expand her sympathy and experience challenge that is motivated by selflessness.

The crossing of physical boundaries in “How Turtles” causes both the turtle and the human great discomfort, which reinforces the difference between the human and natural world, so as not to suggest that the human can have a simplistic identification with nature. The human’s good deed does not establish a claim of ownership over nature, but serves as a reminder of the boundaries that exist between the human and nature’s otherness. The poetic subject crosses into the natural world by carrying the turtle from the water’s edge and placing it in her car, but the turtle has, in fact, done its own boundary crossing, albeit involuntarily, as it appears, “its shell streaming with seaweed” (l. 2-3), at the “water’s edge” (l. 1), where it is collected by the human. For the turtle, being out of water causes it disorientation, which is indicated by the flailing of its “flippers [that] swam at the air” (l. 13) interspersed with moments of paralysis. The human’s decision to carry the turtle across boundaries becomes progressively more burdensome: “We walked a little while, and then we rested, and then we walked on / I walked with my mouth open, my heart roared” (l. 10-1). The carrying of the turtle nearly physically breaks the poetic subject, whose “bones didn’t quite snap” (l. 27) under its weight. However, the challenge of carrying the turtle foreshadows the sense

of reward that the human will achieve by the end of the poem. In “How Turtles,” crossing boundaries is not a fluid transition that results in harmonious union, nor does it attempt to neutralize the difference between the human and nature, but the physical exchange between the human and nature does illustrate that, in exceptional circumstances, boundaries can be surmounted as part of an ethical action as long as it does not lead to entitlement or exploitation.

As well as referencing religious figures such as Buddha and Jesus, “How Turtles” also alludes to baptism as religious initiation and rebirth for the human and turtle, both of which occur as a result of the poetic subject’s intervention. Although the turtle does not die, its health is ambiguous it slips in and out of consciousness and has a “slowly beating heart” (l. 19), which may be a sign of its decline, or the turtle’s naturally slow heart. The rebirth of the turtle begins in its human-steered transportation and is completed when it arrives at the aquarium, which acts as a form of womb-like incubator for the turtle during the winter months. Not only does the turtle’s immersion in the aquarium represent a rebirth, but so too does the turtle’s reconnection with its environment when, “in the warmth” (l. 30), of either the car or the aquarium, the turtle “raise[s] its head, is looking / around” (l. 30-1), as a sign of its reawakening. The human’s positive emotional experience is interconnected with the turtle’s rebirth as she refers to herself as “an important person” (l. 32) after the rescue and witnessing the turtle’s rebirth. The poem illustrates that ethical action is emotionally and spiritually rewarding and the feeling of importance that the poetic subject experiences is directly related to the importance of the turtle that she has saved.

The poetic subject refers to the poem as being a “story” (l. 21), which implies that it will have a concluding message or moral that can be shared through storytelling. The poem mythologizes the rescue of the turtle by highlighting the struggle it involves as well as making reference to Christ’s miracle of walking on water. The first story that the poem invokes is that of the Good Samaritan, a parable told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37). The story of the Good Samaritan describes how a traveler is beaten and robbed, but is ignored by various passers-by, including a priest, but is finally rescued by a Samaritan. The story is interpreted in different allegorical and ethical ways by different sects of Christianity, but is most popularly considered to be a lesson in the importance of treating everyone as a neighbor. Also, the Samaritan is a figure that represents a natural enemy instead of someone familiar, which highlights the difference, in “How Turtles,” between the human and nature and the boundaries between them that must be overcome in order to have the rescue take place. In the

context of the poem, nature, or the turtle, is positioned as the neighbor to the human and should be treated with the same level of care and generosity that one would give to a human neighbor. The poem, which features the poetic subject's arduous journey through sand, recalls another gospel story, wherein the beach invokes the desolation of the desert and the intensity of the rescue recalls the difficulties faced in its landscape. The biblical connotation of the desert is that it is a place of spiritual challenge and withdrawal, but is also a location of great transformation. For instance, the temptation of Christ<sup>22</sup> takes place in the desert and is also where Jesus feeds the masses by multiplying loaves of bread and fish for five thousand.<sup>23</sup> These biblical stories contradict any conceptualization of the desert as being barren as it becomes, in the Christian tradition, the terrain of spiritual triumph. "How Turtles" becomes a version of a biblical narrative, as the poetic subject performs her own miracle by contributing to the turtle's rebirth in desperate conditions. Invoking biblical stories reinforces the interconnection between historical Christianity and its reformulation and recontextualization in the moralized landscape of the poem.

Nature's inherent value makes it worthy of rescue and it is when the human identifies this value and finds the power to act ethically that she will experience a rite of spiritual awakening. Oliver's interest is not in sentimentalizing animals, but in celebrating the vitality of their lives, no matter how different they are from the human. Therefore, the intervention that takes place in Oliver's poems does not create a personal, or what might be deemed an anthropocentric "bond," between the human and nature, but serves a mutually beneficial purpose wherein the animal has its life extended and the human gains an understanding of the importance of each life and how nature is an analogy for rightful and good action. Mary Oliver's moralized landscape is not secular, but it does become a part of the natural world, as opposed to existing within the confines of a traditional religion. In alluding to the doctrine and sacrament of the Christian tradition, Oliver underlines the sanctity of her moral message without making it an exclusive message. Oliver's doctrine is both environmental and spiritual and although it is not a traditional representation of a religious creed, it nonetheless represents a system of belief that is based on sacrifice, the afterlife, a mythic third term, and intervention, or Good Samaritanism. Therefore, although some of Oliver's poetry represents an intuitive religion wherein the human being is meant to self-realize and come to a subjective spiritual awakening, the moralized landscape represents that which

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>23</sup> Mark 6:30-44

is considered to be a common good. Even though the moralized landscape serves a pedagogical function, it does not, in Oliver's poetry, turn into an oppressive and institutionalized force.

### **The Paradox of the Divine in Mary Oliver's Poetry**

In Mary Oliver's intuitive religious framework, God remains unnamable and external to the spiritual exchange that takes place between the human and nature, but her poetry creates a polysemous theological model that also includes traditional representations of the divine as parental figure and master. In Oliver's version of American Romantic intuitive religion, there is a belief in the existence of God, but its priority is to foster a subjective spiritual experience without supplication and formal ritual. In Oliver's traditional theological model, representations of the divine come in the form of either father or mother figures who are worshipped and to whom petition is made. These traditional god-figures represent religious and spiritual orthodoxy and authority wherein there is one omnipotent being that is considered the creator and source of spiritual illumination. Oliver's theology is grounded firmly in the earth, which results in a reflection of certain characteristics belonging to nature's cycle and system of exchange: "In the food chain, 'nature' teaches both hierarchy and mutuality" (Case-Winters 64). Nature illustrates that mastery is one part of mutuality in that it does characterize a kind of relationship between beings, but seldom remains fixed to the point of being generally destructive. One animal's mastery over another is part of the continuance of life. However, mastery as a more general concept, as it relates to the poetic subject and her relationship with God, is part of Oliver's theological exploration and critical poetical project. Oliver's traditional representations of a paternal God introduce the concept of hierarchy into her spirituality, which she takes as an opportunity to critique mastery and attempt to recontextualize and reconceptualize hierarchy in an ethic of mutuality that does not enforce a singular, privileged theology.

The spiritual and religious elements of Mary Oliver's poetry have received more attention since her publication of *Thirst* in 2006. Out of the forty three poems in the collection, fourteen refer to a "Lord," "God," or "He." Donna Seaman believes that as Oliver "writes of her grief after losing her longtime companion,<sup>24</sup> her poems gradually become overtly Christian" (39). *Thirst* is more explicitly Christian than her previous collections, but Oliver's earlier collections grapple with life's meaning and God's

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<sup>24</sup> *Thirst* was published after the death of Mary Oliver's life-partner Molly Malone Cook, to whom almost all of Oliver's collections are dedicated.

location and accessibility, but in these poems, the speaker turns to nature instead of scripture for guidance. Therefore, *Thirst* marks a slight change of tone, but it is also a continuation of the spiritual seeking that has always been on the forefront of Oliver's poems. In mourning and trying to come to terms with the death of a loved one, Oliver's poems seek a more traditional spiritual framework from those that apply to her poems that deal with the necessity of death in nature. Seaman describes Oliver's turn to overt Christianity as "a profound sea change navigated in pain and humility and culminating in a very moving declaration of faith" (39). In David C. Ward's review of *Thirst*, he refers to many of its poems as "prayers" (66) and acknowledges that she "appeals not just to God-in nature but to the sacrament of the Eucharist" (66). However, Ward believes that Oliver's collection lacks poignancy because the poems are "so personal" (66) and therefore lack the satisfaction for the reader that relational subjectivity creates: "she has jumped ahead to the conclusion, not crafted poems as vessels with which to express her faith to those who do not inhabit her parish" (67). However, despite the personal nature of *Thirst*, it is also the most traditional and orthodox in that it represents theological doctrine that is not simply intuited, subjectively, by an individual, but represents an ultimate, transcendent truth. Oliver's poetic subjects invoke traditional representations of God as a way of coping with loss, which does not make it a privileged approach in her spiritual spectrum. However, mother and father god-figures do fulfill a significant emotional need for the mourning poetic subject in *Thirst* as well as those poetic subjects in other collections that require a clear representation of a god-figure to reinforce their faith. Oliver's traditional representations of the divine are not diminished or diluted when compared to her intuitive religious poetry because both have equal value in fulfilling different needs of each poetic subject.

Despite the attention that *Thirst* has received for being overtly Christian, it is treated as a unique collection that does not represent the spirituality in the rest of her oeuvre, but this division misrepresents her Christian influence as exclusive to *Thirst* and the spirituality in her previous collections as non-traditional. Christianity is an aspect of Mary Oliver's work that had gone more or less unstudied until Thomas Mann's *God of Dirt*, which is a survey of the Christian allusions throughout the first twenty-years of Oliver's work. Mann "recognizes the tension between [the] spiritual and religious dimensions" (Mann xiii) in Oliver's poetry and suggests that interpreting nature as "the Other Book of God" (xiii) is one way of dealing with these tensions. However, the tension in Oliver's work is not about trying to retain the spiritual without any trace of the traditional or religious, but to use the traditional constructively in a new context that

is more interested in earthly relationships. Mann focuses on the scriptural allusions and religious symbolism in Oliver's landscape because references in her work to "God and Jesus [are] few and far between" (xiii). *God of Dirt* makes a large contribution to a religious study of Oliver's work by not taking her depictions of the natural world for granted in her "deceptively simple poems" (Bryson *West Side* 76). In Oliver's poetry, there is a risk of explaining everything in nature as an *alternative* to conventional faith, as opposed to there being a complex and ambivalent relationship between the unconventional and the traditional, which is what creates Oliver's productive paradox.

Searching within multiple spiritual models and being able to revise instead of exclude tradition characterize Oliver's spirituality but critics have often denied the traditional and orthodox in her poetry for fear of associating institutional and inflexible connotations with her work. However, Oliver's spirituality is exploratory and paradoxical and involves both the orthodox and the intuitive and unconventional. Todd Davis's "God's Body: Incarnation as Communion in the Poetry of Mary Oliver" relates Oliver's multifarious spirituality to her Romantic inheritance. Davis states that faith, in Oliver's poetry, is a "fusion of Transcendental, Buddhist, and Christian thought grounded firmly in the earth, which Oliver repeatedly avows is 'God's body'" (606). However, Davis, like Mann, is reluctant to unearth the conventional and formal elements of Oliver's religious framework, perhaps for fear of misrepresenting what is an inclusive spirituality. Davis states that Oliver's belief that everything possesses a soul as "perhaps Oliver's sole dogma or doctrine" (606). In the note to this statement, Davis clarifies his aversion to using the terms dogma or doctrine when describing Oliver's work because they raise "the specter of religious orthodoxy, of some kind of spiritual litmus test" (621) and "[d]ogma or doctrine sounds so stern, so rigid" (606). He goes on to say that binding Oliver's poetry to "religious institutions or to the representations of traditionally religious behaviors" (621) would fail her poetical and spiritual project. However, Oliver's approach to the traditional is not black and white, but, rather seeks a new way of interacting with it, which is the productivity of her paradoxical spirituality. Davis states that "the poet's desire is clearly not to appease some system of religious signification but to speak as plainly and as truthfully about her own spiritual experience of the world as she is capable" (621). Oliver's explicit employment of Christian reference should not be considered an appeasement, but an important part of her own spiritual project because Christianity is a part of her spiritual experience. This question of the traditionally Christian in Oliver's work is a similar issue for critics as her Romantic inheritance, which has been denied by some in order to avoid condemning

Oliver's poetry to irrelevance for the contemporary reader. Inheritance and tradition in Oliver's poetry should be treated as revelatory instead of limiting and as part of an inclusive religious framework as opposed to being an exclusive ideology.

Part of Mary Oliver's exploratory and inclusive spirituality is demonstrated in her representations of God as both paternal and maternal. However, Oliver has only published a very small number of poems that depict the divine as female, which may indicate a deeper comfort or familiarity in depicting a version of the Judeo-Christian God, or an amorphous and unnamable divine figure. Mary Oliver has published many collections with Beacon Press, a Unitarian press, and continues to publish poems in Christian magazines, such as *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* and although Oliver does not write about her own religious upbringing or beliefs in interviews and essays, her involvement in Christian publications indicates a level of interest and comfort with the religion. Just as Oliver resists gendering her poetic subject, she rarely genders her divine figures female, but does not hesitate to depict animals in nature as female. The traditional concept of Mother Nature "began as deification, typically benign and organic. It gradually evolved into a more metaphor-like meaning ... [and] was forced into the Western dualistic model with notions of wild-domestic, human-animal, nature-culture, good-evil, wilderness-civilization" (Jelinski 276). Mother Nature is a counter-cultural figure that represents spiritual wildness or disorder, as opposed to the Lord Father of Christianity who represents the order of institutionalism and civilization. The concept of Mother Nature, based on the Western dualistic model presented by Jelinski, is also associated with the animal instead of the human, which again serves to relegate the female from society and culture. However, Oliver's conceptualizations of a divine Mother Nature resist traditional depictions of the earth as female being more than simply a mute womb, but they do not represent Her as being a creator God. Oliver's female divine reinforces the importance of mothering, but does not break new ground in making Mother Nature a creator-god.

In order to give a complete sense of how the concept of a female divine nature is developed in Mary Oliver's poetry, it is useful to examine how female nature is characterized in her poems, which is, most often, as mother and sister figures. Oliver typically characterizes the animals in her landscape as male, but when she does refer to a creature as female, it is accompanied by conceptions of sisterhood, birth, and motherhood. The characterization of nature as motherly, which is an image that the human can relate to, creates a deeper sense of closeness and understanding between the poetic subject and the female animals in Oliver's poems. This is not to say that female

nature allows a union and community with the human—the boundaries of nature still exist, but the poetic subject is more comfortable crossing these boundaries and seeking comfort from nature’s mothers because they appear as universally nurturing figures. When Oliver genders her nature as female, it is in order to express a reverence for motherhood and a desire for closeness to nature, but when she represents the divine as female, she produces a passive figure that is only a partial participant, or witness in creation and reproduction.

In contrast with Oliver’s ambivalent depictions of the divine female, her description of female animals on the earth is a straightforward one in which they are mothers and sisters that often are symbols of fertility and natality. In “A Meeting” (*AP* 63), the poetic subject describes a deer giving birth, but the act is extended into an image of how the deer later mothers the fawn, which is another aspect of life that the poetic subject deems worthy of wonderment and admiration:

She steps into the dark swamp  
where the long wait ends.

The secret slippery package  
drops to the weeds.

The first half of the poem describes the birth and how the mother “tongues” (l. 5) her baby clean, which maintains a focus on the physical aspect of giving birth. However, it is not simply the sensuality of the birth that is in the interest of the poetic subject, but also their familial relationship, which she observes during her later encounter with the mother and child, when the fawn is described as “the most beautiful woman / I have ever seen” (l. 15-6). The impact of seeing the fawn and her “child leap[ing] among the flowers” (l. 17) causes the poetic subject to yearn for her own rebirth and second chance at life where she could be “utterly / wild.” (l. 21-2), but also under the vigilant watch of a protective mother-figure. In this poem, the speaker does not cross boundaries and achieve intimate connection with nature, but her observation of birth and the doe and fawn together has a great emotional impact on the poetic subject. Mary Oliver describes a similar emotional reaction to motherhood in her essay called “Swoon” (*WH* 82), where she observes a mother house spider, whose reproduction is described as “the mystery and enterprise for which she lives—the egg sacs and the young spiders” (87). Oliver observes the spider in a rented house and fears that it will be swept away by the owners when they return: “Should I attempt to move her, therefore? And if so, to what place? ... Could I move the egg sacs without harming

them, and the web intact to hold them?” (89). This dilemma creates a contrast with the energetic interventions in Oliver’s moralized landscapes, demonstrating that rescue must be measured and weighed before being enacted because the human hand can do more damage than good. However, Oliver does leave “explicit and stern instructions to the cleaners [who] were to scrub the house—but to stay out of [the spider’s] stairwell altogether” (89). As illustrated in the first section of this chapter, Oliver’s interventions are not reserved for female or mother-animals, but the process of the spider’s reproduction captures her emotion and fascination, which causes her to make the only intervention she can without doing damage. The mother spider’s reproduction and motherhood is foreign to Oliver, but it nonetheless enralls her. This fascination with the physicality of reproduction and the concept of nature also entices Oliver in her essay wherein she describes suckling a mother cat in “Staying Alive” (*BP* 65). As discussed in Chapter One, this suckling is an exceptional boundary crossing in Oliver’s poetry, but that it involves the poetic subject seeking the comfort of a mothering experience corresponds with her other poems about desiring union with female nature.

Turtles are described in Oliver’s essays and poems as being mothers and sisters that, in her essays, become a part of her family, but in her poems remain other, which distinguishes her poetry as representing the ideal relationship of mutuality between the human and nature that is perhaps unachievable by the constantly searching and masterly poet. In “Sister Turtle” (*WH* 14), Oliver describes her own appetite and her “wild body, with the inherited devotions of curiosity and respect” (20), as she describes her taking thirteen of twenty-seven turtle eggs home with her to scramble for a meal: “I ate them all, with attention, whimsy, devotion, and respect” (22). Oliver justifies this taking from nature by considering herself a part of the earth’s cyclical reproduction. There is an assumption, in this essay, that within the earth, Oliver is a member of its family and that she is the sister to the turtle. In Oliver’s essays, when she writes as herself, the poet, there is a tendency to describe her attempts at union with nature in an unapologetic way, which turns the essay into a form of field journal wherein she reveals the study and mastery of nature behind the poetry. In her fieldwork she collects notes for poems and does research in the natural world. In Oliver’s poetry, Oliver uses her “formal voice” (*WH* 24), to distance her own life from the verse and where an ideal relationship between the human and nature is depicted, where mutuality, instead of mastery, can take place. In Oliver’s essays she *claims* or *takes* her inheritance from the family of nature, but in her poems, the poetic subject allows *nature* to announce the human’s place in the “family of things” (“Wild Geese” *DW* 14).

Despite the claiming of her experience in nature that Oliver describes in her essays, she also shows an intense regard for its bodies as being both physical and scientific as well as symbolic of the spiritual. The turtle's eggs enthrall Oliver as they are both physically intricate and representative of natality: "the little fertility knot, the bud of the new turtle, was no more apparent than it is in a fertile chicken's egg" (22). In "The Turtle" (*DW* 57-8), the poetic subject observes the turtle's egg-laying with reverence as she describes the "patience [and] fortitude" (l. 11) with which the animal completes "what she was born to do" (l. 13). This statement about the turtle's life purpose is ambiguous because it refers to both the turtle's mothering as well as its contribution to the continuation of the wholeness of the ecosystem. Throughout Oliver's poetry, mother animals receive special reverence and are assigned an added level of responsibility that extends beyond reproduction and into the role of nurturer. When the divine is characterized as female in Oliver's poetry, it is similarly divided between being a nurturer and being universally responsible, but does not embody the tension between the conventional and traditional that forms Oliver's unconventional intuitive religion.

Oliver rarely depicts the divine third term as female and, although many of her poems represent the tension between unconventional and traditional spirituality, Oliver's Mother Nature struggles to achieve a powerful position and is most often a passive figure of backdrop to nature's activity. The poems that will be discussed in this section represent a small number of Oliver's poems, two of which are from *Twelve Moons* (1979), which is very early in Oliver's career. However, they represent one aspect of Oliver's multifarious spirituality and polysemous model of God, as well as serve as evidence of the beginning of what becomes a more complex and paradoxical exploration of God, which continues to develop across Mary Oliver's oeuvre. In Oliver's poems about Mother Nature, she is a supernatural or sacred figure, but she does not achieve mastery or the power of creation. "Flower Moon –How She Travels" (*TM* 11) depicts a Mother Nature figure who is a partial participant in creation, but does not actively create anything:

She moves only by night and on a south wind.

The wild ducks are her envoys,

flying ahead,

scouting the ponds, summoning

turtles and dragonflies out of the beds  
of roots and mud.

The wagon she hauls with her  
is full of new leaves

which she sprinkles over the trees as she passes, crying out  
the words necessary to birth;

and small fish  
she shakes into ditches and streams;

and once I saw her  
lift from her wagon the Flower Moon,

round and full and milk-white  
as a woman's breast,

and she kissed it,  
she sang to it,

she tossed it high above the trees, then gave  
another to the shining river.

Mother Nature is depicted as a coordinator or mediator of life, as opposed to being the Creator. For instance, even though she is said to speak the words that are “necessary to birth” (l. 10), she must precede this with a sprinkling of already formed leaves, which makes her act of creation more ceremonial than participatory. Mother Nature is not a mute womb, but nor is she the law-creating patriarchal God figure of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Her sprinkling of leaves, followed by coaxing words make her act appear superficial and reminiscent of spell-casting, rather than a powerful act of making life. Giving Mother Nature a creative voice grants her a more traditional and patriarchal power because “Christian tradition and Western culture are founded on the conception of the ‘female’ category, as encompassing the pre-linguistic, bodily experience of maternal unity. This is repressed in favor of ‘The Law-of-the-Father’, which represents language and culture formation” (Samuelsson 76). Although it is a female god who is

the creator in Oliver's poem, she does not have a womb, nor does she inhabit the role of creation from an entirely transcendent position, like the Judeo-Christian God: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Even though Mother Nature is depicted as being a divine figure in "Flower Moon," she does not have god-like power, but, rather, is shown to be a helper or assistant in creation.

Near the end of the poem, Mother Nature becomes involved in activities that are vaguely maternal, but they form an unsettled version of mothering that is both animal and human, which is another evasion of granting the divine female any mastery. Mother Nature plays the role of nurturer when she takes the moon from her wagon and treats it like a child whom she tucks in and wishes goodnight. Mother Nature continues to behave like a parent to the moon that she "kissed" (l. 17) and "sang" (l. 18) to, but there is no indication that Mother nature is, in fact, the mother to the moon, but is more like a caretaker who delivers the moon to its home. Images of female fertility are not assigned to Mother Nature, but are associated with the moon-child, which is "round and full and milk-white / as a woman's breast" (l. 15-6). That the moon becomes the female fertility symbol instead of Mother Nature is another example of the female divine's distance from creation. Mother Nature is further distanced from the act of creation and maternity when she "toss[es]" (l. 19) the moon into the air. This release of the child into the sky is similar to the detachment that takes place between mother animals and their offspring in the wild. In order for all members of a family to survive, animals must learn to fend for themselves and become independent of their parents. However, in the natural world, this detachment must sometimes be forced, with animals, such as bears, having to drive off their older cubs in preparation for new ones. Mother Nature's throwing the moon away which, along with her infertility, further disconnects the divine female from creating life and mothering. Mother Nature is desexualized by not being given a womb or fertile body, and she completely detaches from any traditional associations with motherhood when she tosses the moon away from her, which is the final symbol of her relinquishment of power.

Oliver's reluctance to assign the female divine any mothering qualities or reproductive abilities may represent an anxiety over turning nature, and the female, into a mute womb. Due to Oliver's depictions of animals giving birth and mothering, she does not illustrate, what Ellen Cronan Rose refers to as, "reproductive anxiety" (77). However, Oliver's Mother Nature does not embody the traditional "procreative capacities" (Cronan Rose 78) that are associated with the female body. For Oliver, reproduction is a physical and scientific event in nature, but she limits this to the natural

world and does not create an image of a divine creation, which would be a transcendent and non-physical act. Although Mary Oliver depicts animals as fertile and nurturing, she desexualizes the female divine, which results in a “demothering” (Shiva 18), or removal of her procreative abilities. Therefore, although mothering is a quality that is greatly admired in Oliver’s other poems, she does not create a use for it in divine creation. In “Flower Moon,” Mother Nature is unable to create through reproduction, which indirectly reinforces the traditional conceptualization of creation as only occurring through the words spoken by a Judeo-Christian Lord God. Due to Oliver’s praise for mothering and nurturing in earthly nature, her non-mothering Mother Nature is representative of a desexualized divine because Oliver considers divine creation to be different from physical reproduction, which contradicts her usual interconnection between the spiritual and the earthly.

In “Sleeping in the Forest” (*TM* 3), Mother Nature is depicted as a nurturer, but remains distant from reproduction and is depicted as being only a surface on which creation takes place, without being actively engaged with it. The poetic subject describes her return to Mother Nature, who is only a symbol of the subject’s original source of life. Because Mother Nature is only symbolically involved in the creation of life and reproduction, she is a passive presence in the background of life taking place:

I thought the earth  
Remembered me, she  
Took me back so tenderly, arranging  
Her dark skirts, her pockets  
Full of lichens and seeds. I slept  
As never before, a stone  
On the riverbed, nothing  
Between me and the white fire of the stars  
But my thoughts, and they floated  
Light as moths among the branches  
Of the perfect trees. All night  
I heard the small kingdoms breathing  
Around me, the insects, and the birds  
Who do their work in the darkness. All night  
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling  
With a luminous doom. By morning  
I had vanished at least a dozen times

Into something better.

The relationship between Mother Nature and the poetic subject is ambiguous in “Sleeping in the Forest” because, although the speaker does fall asleep in the earth’s skirts, she only *thinks* that the earth remembers her, which implies that they are estranged. The uncertainty about the earth’s memory of the speaker suggests that their familial relationship may be false and that the speaker uses the natural world as a surrogate mother. The body of Nature becomes like that of a female body, dressed in feminine skirts on which the poetic subject can rest like a child, where she is treated “so tenderly” (l. 3). Mother Nature represents a familiar comfort for the poetic subject, but whether or not they have an original interconnection or bond is unlikely, in particular, because, as the poem progresses, Nature is only the background for activity and creation.

Oliver’s Mother Nature in “Sleeping in the Forest” is a body that can be used in the poetic subject’s spiritual transformations, which makes it a sacred space, but nature does not represent a singular divine body. In Nature’s body, the lichens, a symbiotic or composite organism, and the seeds all contribute to different reproductions and interconnections that are not portrayed as being dependent on a single God or Mother Nature-figure for life. The concept of this interconnected or mutual creativity is explored in Sallie McFague’s *The Body of God*, wherein she describes how the earth is a metaphor for God’s body, but that this does not have to be represented by the womb as site for creation, but by the interconnection of all bodies, beyond sexualization, under a transcendent God: “To know God in this model is to contemplate, reflect on, the multitude of bodies in all their diversity that mediate, incarnate, the divine” (155). McFague’s is a feminist theological study that uses the earth as metaphor for God’s body, which avoids depicting God as a dominating other. Paradoxically, locating God in the earth creates the potential for the human to experience mutuality with God, but still maintains His otherness. McFague’s metaphor is useful when considering Oliver’s embodied Mother Nature because although she lacks the god-like ability to create and reproduce, she nonetheless serves as a sacred space in which all of life’s interconnections are made.

Mother Nature becomes a surrogate mother to whom the speaker can turn for a sense of comfort, but she is not a divine power. Mastery, in this poem, belongs to the poetic subject who takes the initiative in creating her own transformation and transcendence. The two poems from Oliver’s early collection both demonstrate an inability to represent the female divine as creator, which may indicate an uneasiness

with breaking from the patriarchal Judeo-Christian theological tradition. Even in Oliver's 2009 collection, *Red Bird*, nature, as a divine female figure, still does not participate in creation, but she does adopt protective qualities that are more god-like.

In "Ocean" (*RB* 15), the ocean is depicted as a god-like figure to whom the poetic subject defers, but, much like in Oliver's earlier poems about Mother Nature, the ocean is not a creator god. Even though the female divine is anthropomorphized, she remains disconnected from metaphors of the human body and procreation. The body of water in "Ocean" is gendered female, but unlike the earth in "Sleeping in the Forest," the ocean is a singular figure that transcends interconnection and community:

I am in love with Ocean  
lifting her thousands of white hats  
in the chop of the storm,  
or lying smooth and blue, the  
loveliest bed in the world.  
in the personal life, there is  
  
always grief more than enough,  
a heart-load for each one of us  
on the dusty road. I suppose  
there is a reason for this, so I will be  
patient, acquiescent. But I will live  
nowhere except here, by Ocean, trusting  
equally in all the blast and welcome  
of her sorrowless, salt self.

Even though Ocean is a capitalized noun and is depicted as omnipotent, the poetic subject feels a sense of intimacy and familiarity with the female divine figure. To begin, she states that she is "in love with Ocean" (l. 1), which establishes an affectionate intimacy between herself and the natural world. The body of water is referred to as "Ocean" instead of "the Ocean," which implies that the noun for the element is also its proper noun, or given name, which reinforces the familiarity between the poetic subject and the natural world. Similar to Oliver's intuitive religion, the poetic subject in "Ocean" uses informal language to address the divine. The poetic subject also refers to Ocean as being like the "loveliest bed in the world" (l. 5), which associates the image of Ocean with home, comfort, and the familiar, but not with any maternal symbols. There is a sense of relationship that builds between the ocean and the poetic subject

that, according to the tradition of God being hierarchically superior to the human, is an unconventional portrayal: “God has become an unattainable Other to ‘believe in’, to rely on, to hope for. Instead, the notion of God could be the designation of being in a relationship, animated by mutuality, between human and human or human and nature. God is among us, and can be nowhere else” (Samuelsson 76). Samuelsson’s conceptualization of being in relationship with God is a feminist theological approach based on mutuality and a belief that the human state is not subordinate to the afterlife and does not depend on God as redeemer. This philosophy also echoes Martin Buber’s mutuality between the human and God wherein they are able to have a relationship while God retains his otherness without being an oppressive master. In “Ocean,” the poetic subject describes the familiar and comfortable relationship that she has with Ocean, which is balanced with the speaker’s reverence for the divine figure as powerful and majestic.

Oliver’s “Ocean” represents a different spiritual tension than that of Whitman’s “As I Ebb’d” (*Leave of Grass* 281), which creates an unsettled location of mastery between the divine as mother, father, as well as the unknown. In contrast, mastery is clearly located in “Ocean,” but that the ocean is female and a natural element creates an unconventional, but not conflicted representation of the divine. “Ocean” acknowledges life’s difficulties, but does so with a level of acceptance that suffering serves a purpose for the individual. Oliver’s speaker resolves to be “patient [and] acquiescent” (l. 11) in the face of life’s difficulty, but to seek comfort and reassurance in the company of the ocean that represents infallible strength. Whitman’s speaker, on the other hand, feels an antagonism between himself and the ocean and his concept of life is conflated with the image of the ocean. Whitman’s poem describes the ocean in contrast with the earth as father, with whom the subject desires closeness: “I throw myself upon your breast my father, / I cling to you so that you cannot unloose me” (*Leaves of Grass* 283, 40), while his image of the ocean is described as being like a “fierce old mother” (283, 50). According to M. Jimmie Killingsworth, it is in “As I Ebb’d” that Whitman approaches “the attitude that drives people to call upon a heavenly God” (51-2), where he “calls out to nature (as a surrogate mother and father) [and] to God (the ultimate Audience)” (Killingsworth 52). According to Killingsworth’s reading, the ocean and the earth may be representations of the divine, but God is a figure that exists above these physical elements. The vision of ocean mother and earth father does not have to exclude the existence of a single transcendent God and, in fact, can be representations and different incarnations of God. However, these differing representations of the divine create an

ambiguity and questioning that is much different from the idealized relationship that Oliver's speaker has with Ocean as singular divine mother.

For both Oliver and Whitman, the shoreline represents confrontation of the divine and the material world, and the manner in which each poet describes their experience at the water's edge characterizes the nature of their different versions of faith. In Oliver's poem, Ocean's strength is acknowledged, but is never considered a threat. The ocean's "chop of the storm" (l. 3) is made amiable and familiar through its accompanying "thousands of white hats" (l. 2). In the second stanza, the "blast" (l. 13) of the ocean is equated with enthusiasm and "welcome" (l. 13), as opposed to being a threatening gesture. Oliver's poetic subject feels assurance and trust being "by Ocean" (l. 12), and her faith is mirrored in the ocean's "sorrowless, salt self" (l. 14), which has all the toughness of a seasoned sailor. Whitman's poetic subject is less certain of where his faith is centered and his questioning and seeking mimics the ebb and flow of the ocean: "Whitman finds alternating comfort and frustration in the dual possibilities of fusion and rejection held out as promise and threat by this untranslatable figure of power" (Wartofsky 202). However, as stated above, Whitman's poetic subject ends the poem with an unclear image of God: "You up there walking or sitting, / Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet" (284, 70). Whitman's sense of the divine in "As I Ebb'd" is closer to the intuitive religious model than Oliver's more traditional representation of the divine in "Ocean." Even though Oliver's ocean is not a soft and gentle mother, she is a symbol of strength and represents succor, which instills unflinching and, literally, immovable faith in the poetic subject who will stay "nowhere except [...] by Ocean" (l. 12). Oliver's poetic subject has faith in the ocean as divine guardian while Whitman's intuitive exploration of traditional representations of the divine unsettle his faith.

"Ocean" ends with the poetic subject's certainty and faith in the divine that intuitive religion, inherently, does not provide because it places more importance on process and seeking. In an intuitive religion, there is belief in God, but it is not narrowed or shaped into recognizable and familial figures. Oliver's ocean takes on a traditional representation of the divine as female figure, which results in a spiritual satisfaction that is derived from the familiar and known, as opposed to that which is based on individual feeling and exploration, which is subject to change and transformation. The singular divine figure in "Ocean" receives unquestioned loyalty, which is unusual in Mary Oliver's oeuvre where questions and seeking are a part of so many of its spiritual revelations. Although the poetic subject does not achieve an

explanation for life's difficulties in "Ocean," a sense of dependence and respite is established in Ocean as divine mother.

Mary Oliver's traditional representations of God also come in the form of father figures. The fatherly incarnations of God in Oliver's work, which allude to the Judeo-Christian Father, are in some ways a stark contrast with her depictions of the divine as female. The incarnations of a divine mother in Oliver's poetry, unlike those of the father, remain separate from institutional religion. However, the representations of the divine as mother and father figures both represent an ultimate truth that can be depended on without need for exploration. Although Oliver's father Lord is grounded in the Christian tradition, He is similar to her representations of the divine as female, or mother, because both representations turn the divine into an anthropomorphized and familiar figure. "What I Said at Her Service" (*Thirst* 19) is one of Oliver's shortest poems, but it serves as an appropriate introduction to her depictions of God as Lord and Father and the poetic subject's paradoxical relationship with Him:

When we pray to love God perfectly,  
Surely we do not mean only.

(Lord, see how well I have done.)

"What I Said" establishes a student to teacher relationship between the poetic subject and the Lord, but this is not without affection and informality, which is characteristic of a familial relationship. The poem begins with a dialogic voice that refers to "we" instead of "I," which invites the reader into the philosophical conversation or dilemma that the speaker introduces about how to love God. The poetic subject suggests that while "we" must love God, this should not be an exclusive love. An individual must be generous with his or her love and must love others in the same way that one loves God. In both cases, the poetic subject confirms her deferential role in relation to God, by turning to Him and seeking approval or validation of the lesson that she has learned. That the speaker's address to God is in brackets implies that it is an aside or a private utterance between herself and the Lord, which confirms their intimacy. Besides this sense of familiarity between the subject and the Lord, it becomes clear that even though the speaker has learned that love should be shared, she still turns to God for reassurance, which reinforces His singular importance and hierarchical position. This paradoxical depiction of God as father and benevolent master is characteristic of Oliver's representations of the divine as male.

In “Coming to God: First Days” (*Thirst* 23), the poetic subject undergoes an enthusiastic conversion to a traditional faith, but the conventions of the institutionalized Christian tradition do not impede the speaker’s sense of intimacy with the Lord:

Lord, what shall I do that I  
can’t quiet myself?  
Here is the bread, and  
here is the cup, and  
I can’t quiet myself.

To enter the language of transformation!  
To learn the importance of stillness,  
with one’s hands folded!

When will my eyes of rejoicing turn peaceful?  
When will my joyful feet grow still?  
When will my heart stop its prancing  
as over the summer grass?

Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake.  
I would climb the highest tree  
to be that much closer

Lord, I will learn also to kneel down  
into the world of the invisible,  
the inscrutable and the everlasting.  
Then I will move not more than the leaves of a tree  
on a day of no wind  
bathed in light,  
like the wanderer who has come home at last  
and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things;  
every motion; even words.

In “Coming to God,” the poetic subject’s relationship with the Lord is confessional, which places her in the traditional role of supplicant who would go before a priest or God. The speaker begins by addressing the Lord, with Christian allusion to the “bread”(l. 3) and “the cup” (l. 4), or the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ. The

allusion to Christian tradition is reinforced in the second stanza when the speaker refers to the “language of transformation” (l. 6) in which she enters through the Eucharist. Introducing the notion of transformation alludes not only to the transfiguration of the body of Christ in the bread and wine, but also to the speaker’s own initiation into a formal faith. For the speaker, participating in the ritual of the Eucharist signals a time of meditative silence, or prayer: “To learn the importance of stillness, / with one’s hands folded!” (l. 7-8). The silence of prayer is counter-intuitive for the speaker who must suppress spiritual excitement and joy. Even though the poem contains the speaker’s admission of only a mild inadequacy, it remains confessional and establishes the poetic subject’s aspirations to a traditional faith and its conventions.

Unlike Oliver’s intuitive religious poems, in “Coming to God” the poetic subject’s worship of the Lord is the primary focus instead of the poetic subject’s spiritual and sensual experience of the natural world. It is not until the final line of the third stanza that a reference is made to nature, but even this uses the natural world as a metaphor, as opposed to representing an actual landscape that the poetic subject is immersed in: “When will my heart stop its prancing / as over the summer grass?” (l. 11-2). In the following two references to nature in the poem, the natural world provides objects in hypothetical scenarios of worship. The poetic subject offers to “climb the highest tree” (l. 14) and “move no more than the leaves of a tree / on a day of no wind” (l. 19-20) as ways of demonstrating her praise for and faith in the Lord. The natural world is framed as a measure for spiritual commitment, as the speaker uses the grass and trees as a guide for her faith, but not as a source or symbol of the divine. The natural world, in “Coming to God,” becomes a prop in the speaker’s address to the Lord instead of a holy symbol, which marks a major shift from Oliver’s intuitive religious poems, wherein the human’s spiritual experience is derived from spiritualized nature, in which God may or may not be a partner.

“Coming to God” represents a dramatic shift in Mary Oliver’s poetry from instinctual and physical spirituality towards a restrained and concentrated stillness that is associated with traditional forms of inward prayer wherein the individual supplicates God in an internal address. The speaker suggests that she would exhibit physical praise for God, if that was what required: “Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake. / I would climb the highest tree / to be that much closer” (l. 13-5), but she does not engage in these activities. Physical expressions of gratitude are typical in Oliver’s secular poems wherein the poetic subject will burst forth into nature as a gesture of praise. In “Peonies” (*BI* 36-7), the speaker is overcome with her adoration

for the natural word and asks the reader, “Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden, / and softly, / and exclaiming of their dearness, / fill your arms with the white and pink flowers” (l. 29-32). Even when Oliver’s speaker is more subdued about her praise and appreciation for the world, she still explores and expresses this through physicality and sensuality. In “Snowy Night” (*WDWK* 65-6), the speaker, when confronted with the beauty of nature, “just stood there, listening and holding out / [her] hands to the soft glitter” (l. 28-9). As the speaker of “Something” (*WIWE* 38-9) says, “sometimes I am that madcap person clapping my hand and singing; / and sometimes I am that quiet person down on my knees” (l. 39-40). The speaker of “Coming to God,” besides offering physical expressions of praise, is also willing to be disciplined in her devotion: “Lord, I will learn also to kneel down / ... / Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree / on a day with no wind” (l. 16, 19-20). The poem represents a more conventional concept of spiritual praise, as silence and stillness are depicted as accomplishments. In “Coming to God,” discipline and silent worship are so highly valued that “every motion; even words” (l. 23-4) are referred to as “unnecessary things” (l. 23) that are not required in one’s relationship with God. The final words of the poem, “unnecessary things” (l. 23) encapsulate Oliver’s use of productive paradox by describing language’s inadequacy with words. Silence and devotion are highly valued in “Coming to God,” but language is itself a form of productive paradox that represents its own activity within one’s prayer.

Part of the poem’s closure, wherein words and motions are abandoned, is associated with the image of a wanderer returning home, which represents the self-reflexivity of Oliver’s poetry and her inheritance of the Romantic poetic tradition. The poetic subject, in “Coming to God,” refers to herself as being “like the wanderer” (l. 22), which invokes Wordsworth’s wanderer in *The Excursion* (1814). *The Excursion* is marked as the beginning of what is referred to as “late Wordsworth” (Hickey 3), considered by some critics to be the beginning of a decline in his poetry. That Oliver should reference this long, highly criticized and often neglected work by a Romantic author whom she admires greatly is a deliberate way of marking a distinct move towards a conventional, or orthodox faith within her poem, which references Wordsworth’s own transformation. According to critics, *The Excursion* represents “[t]he poet’s betrayal of possible sublimity” (Hickey 4) and the “loss of poetic vision [and] loss of political vision” (Hickey 4). This, however, is not what Oliver’s invocation of Wordsworth, or his wanderer, suggests. Instead, Oliver uses the image of wanderer as symbol of return and settlement. While Wordsworth’s poems were said to

be losing poetic and political vision, critics also believe that *The Excursion* represents an “increasingly orthodox tone” (Moore 188) in which Wordsworth’s wanderer emphasizes the importance of “Faith” (l. 994). This capitalized “Faith,” is counterbalanced by a less conventional, more subjective, and mystical approach to religion. The wanderer describes himself as “Self-taught, as of a dreamer in the woods; / Who to the model of his own pure heart / Shaped his belief, as grace divine inspired, / And human reason dictated with awe” (l. 409-12). The wanderer embodies a paradox of conventional belief and subjective, or intuitive faith, but Oliver grounds her wanderer in a conversion or submission to the patience and discipline of traditional faith and depicts the wanderer as one who “kneels in peace, [who is] done with all unnecessary things” (l. 23). Oliver’s wanderer finishes his or her journey in order to enter into an orthodox and conventional faith, which echoes the self-reflexive element of *The Excursion*, wherein Wordsworth represents himself as converting to a more settled life or vision.

The image of a wanderer is a significant motif for the Romantics and is used as a self-reflexive symbol of the poet. According to Bartholomew Ryan, “the Romantic poets consider themselves wanderers of the world and of the spirit [...] sacrificing happiness and security, and choosing instead the path of discovery in the endless search for truth” (221). This idea of the Romantic poet as wanderer echoes Mary Oliver’s version of intuitive religion, where endlessly seeking and questing is part of the individual’s spiritual journey. However, Oliver has her wanderer “come home at last” (l. 22), which marks a significant transformation and desire for security in a traditional faith. The triumph of Oliver’s wanderer is not the defiance of homely comforts, but the return to his or her origin that is motivated by a newfound sense of traditional religious faith. Wordsworth’s wanderer creates a paradox for Oliver’s representation of her own wanderer, as his can be interpreted as both orthodox and subversive. However, Oliver’s poem may also be read as a continuation of Wordsworth’s poem, as she calls the wanderer into her poem as a figure who has finally settled into a faith that requires stillness.

Oliver’s version of the wanderer, like Wordsworth’s, exists in the context of grief and dealing with loss, as Wordsworth’s wanderer tells the tale of Margaret’s loss and decline and Oliver’s wanderer is depicted in *Thirst*, which deals extensively with mourning. In *The Excursion*, the Wanderer recounts the story of Margaret, who loses her husband, child and then dies herself. The Wanderer’s message is one that deals with death and grief and how it relates to faith, or, to be more precise, an orthodox “Faith” (l. 994). “Coming to God” is in the collection in which Oliver deals explicitly with the

loss of her life partner, Molly Malone Cook. Therefore, both poets use the image of the wanderer, Wordsworth more explicitly than Oliver, as a symbol of religious wisdom in the context of loss. However, that Oliver has her wanderer return home indicates that personal comfort can only be derived from religious grounding in a stable tradition, as opposed to an endless seeking that leaves the individual without orthodox spiritual reference.

“Thirst” (*Thirst* 69) embodies the paradox of Mary Oliver’s traditional and intuitive religion because it positions God as master as well as assigning nature a primary role in her spiritual instruction. Like “Coming to God,” “Thirst” depicts the poetic subject as a student of God, but nature is an integral part of the human’s spiritual experience. However, this influence of and engagement with the natural world does not affect or dilute God’s authoritative position over the individual’s spiritual experience. Like most of Oliver’s poems about a fatherly God, her poetic subject is humble in confessing that she has a great deal to learn, but is always willing to persist:

Another morning and I wake with thirst  
for the goodness I do not have. I walk  
out to the pond and all the way God has  
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,  
I was never a quick scholar but sulked  
and hunched over my books past the  
hour and the bell; grant me, in your  
mercy, a little more time. Love for the  
earth and love for you are having such a  
long conversation in my heart. Who  
knows what will finally happen or  
where I will be sent, yet already I have  
given a great many things away, expect-  
ing to be told to pack nothing, except the  
prayers which, with this thirst, I am  
slowly learning.

The poem opens with the poetic subject’s confession of spiritual inadequacy, which echoes the self-reflexive voice of Oliver’s poetic subject who writes endlessly without ever feeling like she has mastered language. In both cases, there is a sense of relinquishment of mastery and acceptance, but, at the same time, each poetic subject commits to the process of learning, even if it will never be satisfied. The title of the

poem embodies the desire in all of Oliver's poetic subjects to endlessly seek despite their understanding that what they learn will come from the search as opposed to finding answers or closure. The speaker of "Thirst" emphasizes that her inadequacy is ongoing, as it is "Another morning" (*Thirst* l. 1) in which she faces her lack of "goodness" (l. 2). However, she asks for "a little more time" (l. 6) and acknowledges that her learning is taking place "slowly" (l. 16). The poetic subject accepts what might be considered disadvantages or frustration, such as her perpetual thirst and slow learning, as part of an embrace of the imperfections of the human condition. Therefore, even though God is addressed as the authoritative teacher, value still remains in the earthly and its necessary examples of trial and flaws. Like Oliver's depiction of poetry, spiritual awakening is considered a life-long process rather than something cumulative that amounts to a sense of completion. In fact, the poetic subject even states that she expects to take her learning and her thirst with her into the afterlife.

God's role as teacher is emphasized by the poetic subject's reference to her learning and scholarly abilities under His tutelage. The subject refers to what God has given as "lessons" (l. 4) and states that she was never a "quick scholar" (l. 5). However, that which may be important in a classroom, such as quickness and efficiency, is not important in one's spiritual learning, which, in "Thirst," is framed as a journey. God, in "Thirst" is a traditional representation of the Lord as father figure or teacher, but this does not eliminate the poetic subject's autonomy. The Lord provides spiritual lessons along the human's path and she can seek to recognize them or not. Therefore, the authoritative Lord God in "Thirst" is not an enforcer or controller, but a father figure who provides guidance to individuals with their own free will.

In contrast with Mary Oliver's intuitive religion and spiritualized nature, which both nurture subjective religious experience, some of her poems moralize nature, giving the natural world a pedagogical function. Other poems explore traditional representations of the divine, which result in passive divine female figures, or a masterly father God. Oliver's moralized landscape represents a belief system that is illustrated in nature's physical activity or behavior, which serve as a moral analogy for the virtues of sacrifice and intervention. The pedagogy in the moralized landscape involves the natural world and the human, but also alludes to the omniscience and blessing of a divine third term that approves the earthly moral code. Although critics have been leery of labeling Oliver's poetry as doctrinal, or dogmatic, for fear of limiting its meaning, the traditional and conventional do contribute to her spiritual vision and should not be denied for fear of their having singular connotations. The traditional in

Oliver's poetry is contextualized within a larger paradoxical framework that does not privilege hierarchy and institutionalism, but allows it a place of influence as well as making it a space for transformation. Even though Oliver depicts God as unnamed and unformed in her intuitive religious poems, she also ventures to describe the Lord as being like a father and a benevolent master when her poetic subject needs succor. In Oliver's poems about the divine as female, Mother Nature is only a passive participant in or backdrop to creation and reproduction, but does not hold any mastery. Oliver's representations of God the Father, which is an engagement with Christian tradition, does not signal a privileging of the patriarchal, but employs it as a symbol of the unflinching and dependable in times of disorientation, such as death. Investigating and utilizing the traditional and the morally pedagogical does not render Mary Oliver's spirituality unusable to contemporary readers who may not believe in institutional religion, or God, but instead creates a productive paradox that challenges the reader to reconceptualize traditional spirituality that is not constrained by orthodoxy. The productive paradox enables Mary Oliver to explore the ethic of mutuality and its necessary inclusion that brings together seemingly incompatible elements in her work such as orthodoxy and intuitive religion as well as a moralized landscape and spiritualized nature, which all contribute to a growing subjectivity that builds on inheritance and expands into new conceptualizations of the relationship between the human, nature, and God.

## Conclusion

### The *Evidence* of Flourishing

Mary Oliver published a collection of poetry called *Evidence* in 2009, which is a unique title in her oeuvre because it suggests that the collection represents a confirmation of something. In contrast with *Evidence, What Do We Know* (2002) asks a question and connotes self-deprecation and *Why I Wake Early* (2004) makes a statement, but one that represents the singular “I.” *Evidence* presents itself as a testimony or a statement on the unmistakable. The title of *Evidence* also suggests an implicit follow-up to *Thirst* (2006), as its testimony may be that which quenches the insatiable feeling or dissatisfaction implicit in *Thirst*’s title. The collection’s epigraph is a quote taken from Kierkegaard: “We create ourselves by our choices.” This quotation reinforces the testimonial nature of the concept of *Evidence* by reinforcing the belief that each individual can be masterly and claim authoritative knowledge. However, *Evidence* does not represent a new direction for Oliver, as the title poem of the collection, “Evidence” (43), plays with the idea of testimony and certainty by suggesting that evidence is in fact a form of acceptance and relinquishment—that all the evidence one requires is part of the visible world and the rest is unknowable: “Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable” (l. 22). *Evidence* is a collection about paying attention to everything in life, all of which is a testimony to the beauty and complexity of the earthly and the transcendent.

Oliver’s provocative title, then, does not represent a new philosophy of certainty but is part of a clarification of her poetic and spiritual project’s productive paradox. In 2010, she published a collection of poems called *Swan*, which, at first glance, is a return to her strictly descriptive titles, but “swan” is a word that represents its own paradox. Swan, besides being a kind of water bird, is a verb that means to “move about freely in an (apparently) aimless way” (“swan” OED online), as well as being used in American slang wherein “I swan” means “I declare: often in exclamatory asseveration. I swan to man, [is] a mitigated form of I swear to God” (“swan” OED online). The word “swan” embodies a paradox in which it means both to be aimless as well as to declare something emphatically. Therefore, *Swan* may appear to be a straightforward and descriptive title, as it apparently refers to the image of a swan on its cover, but it is, in fact, another version of *Evidence* because its title allows a more contradictory and exploratory interpretation.

The image of the swan is used in other work by Oliver to embody the paradox of poetry. Besides naming her 2010 collection after the bird, “The Swan” is also the title of an essay about writing poetry which is followed by a poem of the same title in Oliver’s *Winter Hours* (1999). The essay called “The Swan” describes the main criteria for every poem and states that each poem “must have a genuine body, it must have sincere energy, and it must have a spiritual purpose” (24). Oliver then goes on to use her poem, called “The Swan,” as a poem that accomplishes “what it set out to do” (26). In her essay on poetry, “The Swan,” Oliver does not refer to the Romantic tradition, but an allusion to it does surface in her poem as a reference to William Blake and the Romantic pursuit “of paradise” (l. 26), which describes the poet’s neglect of the natural world while he seeks transcendence. While William Blake is pursuing transcendence, Mrs. Blake watches the swan appear on the water as a “ship, filled / with white flowers” (l. 5-6), but having reflected on the swan states, “I miss my husband’s company— / he is so often / in paradise” (l. 25-7). The poem highlights the paradox of Romantic transcendentalism, wherein the poet may overlook the splendor of the natural world in search of “the path to heaven / [that] doesn’t lie down in flat miles. / It’s in the imagination” (l. 28-30). The swan in Oliver’s essay and poem represents the paradox of her own work and the work of her Romantic forerunners where an earthly body in nature, like the swan, also represents the transcendent and the imaginative, which is the power of the poem.

The symbol of the swan as paradox carries forward into Oliver’s *Swan*, wherein the poet writes about observing the natural world in such poems as “The Sweetness of Dogs (Fifteen)” (23) and “Bird in a Pepper Tree” (24), but is also self-reflexive about her own poetical project and the work that it requires, which is a pursuit, like that of Blake, that takes time away from being in nature. In *Swan*, the poet’s voice comes through in poems such as “The Poet Is Told to Fill Up More Pages” (55) and “Trying to Be Thoughtful in the First Brights of Dawn” (48). In “What Can I Say” (1) the poet’s reflection on her own career captures the productive paradox that has always motivated her work. She begins by saying, “What can I say that I have not said before? / So I’ll say it again. / The leaf has a song in it” (l. 1-3). The poet confronts the tirelessness of the poet’s search for an adequate expression of the natural world’s spiritual significance and although she recognizes that she will never be satisfied by her own project, she persists. In the final lines of the poem, the poet reflects on her own message: “I am of years lived, so far, seventy-four, / and the leaf is singing still” (l. 14-5). This line of the poem captures the mutuality between the poet and the natural world, wherein

differences are not resolved, but a relationship is formed and is that which spurs Oliver's productive paradox.

To define Mary Oliver's poetical project and spirituality as paradoxical does not mean that her message is vague. When framed by the concept of flourishing, Oliver's paradox is a productive one that does not strive for a singular subject position or theology, but accepts that searching is more valuable than certainty. Oliver's project is simultaneously humble and ambitious as she relinquishes the need to solve any of life's questions, but, at the same time, sets out to teach and reveal spirituality to her reader. It is in this larger paradox that Oliver's productivity is evident in her reluctance to provide any form of answer or solution results in a continual search that she shares with her reader, which is evidence of Oliver's reader-author pact.

The concept of flourishing encompasses the productive paradox of Oliver's work and is a relevant framework for elucidating her Romantic inheritance and her contemporary relevance. Flourishing is a term that is relevant in feminist theology, ecological feminism, deep ecology and can also be used in the study of contemporary ecopoetry. Flourishing synthesizes the human's relationship with the natural world along with an awareness of a divine third term, which is something that may have been marginalized in ecocritical studies of poetry in order to avoid a traditional model of mastery. However, mastery is something that is part of Oliver's productive paradox because it can take on a plurality and change locations, which ultimately transforms it into mutuality, wherein difference and boundaries are nurtured as part of expanding subjectivities. Studies of Oliver's work that refer to her as an ecopoet are those that encompass the more comprehensive reading of her work, perhaps because it is a relatively young term that has yet to acquire a strict definition. The ecopoem, although it may connote an ecocentrism, is flexible and best able to handle Oliver's paradoxical poetry. Flourishing, as a term used in the study of the ecopoem, with its feminist theological grounding, provides a new term to be applied to ecopoetry that accounts for the mutuality between the human, nature, and God.

Throughout this thesis, I have illuminated Mary Oliver's exploring lyric subject and her spirituality through her Romantic inheritance. This in-depth examination of Oliver's Romantic inheritance is something that has, until now, only been brushed over by critics. Oliver's singular and dialogic lyric voice that unsettles mastery is something that is also evident in Romantic poems such as "Song of Myself" and "Frost at Midnight," wherein relational subjectivity and transactions shape the poetic subject. Oliver's poems also take after the American Romantic tradition in their intuitive

religion which creates a sharp contrast with her traditional depictions of the divine as being like a father-figure. What is of particular interest when comparing these two forms of spirituality is that both occur within the same collection, *Thirst*. Even though *Thirst* is considered explicitly Christian, it nonetheless preserves an element of questioning and the intuitive and anti-institutional religious spirit, inherited from the American Romantics. The same is true of Oliver's exploring lyric voice which is also evident across collections wherein it explores the singular and the dialogic. Oliver's poetry represents a flourishing that is based on the importance of the present and the earthly and the destabilization of hierarchy, as well as an emphasis on the body, community, and self-directedness—all of which illustrate Oliver's connection to the contemporary ideals of feminist theology, ecological feminism, and deep ecology. However, all of Oliver's elements of flourishing also connect her to the Romantic tradition, which maintained its own productivity through paradoxical literary and spiritual frameworks.

The critical study of Mary Oliver's work has a lot of catching up to do with the prolific writer, and my study of her productive paradox is the groundwork for further exploration into how her poetry of flourishing extends into other literary and spiritual influences. Romanticism is the greatest literary influence on Oliver's work, but she also recognizes traditional Chinese poets, as well as Rumi, and Hafiz of Shariz,<sup>25</sup> all of whom represent different spiritual subjectivities and terms. Buddhism, for instance, is another religious influence in Oliver's poetry that should be explored alongside her Christian content, which would be another example of the inherent difference within mutuality. This thesis has examined Mary Oliver's work in order to address those features of her poetry that have, to date, been denied, overlooked, or taken for granted. In recognizing Oliver's traditional inheritance, I have also demonstrated how it is a part of a larger exploration, which does not dilute or diminish the traditional, but reconceptualizes it within a contemporary context wherein the human seeks closeness with nature, but is also aware that a union may be unethical and exploitative. Oliver's contemporary reframing of the traditional also deals with the human who seeks closeness with God, but feels a need to question and search instead of subscribing to any institutional dogma. The questioning and seeking that Mary Oliver's poetic subject undertakes is part of a flourishing that does not undermine the singular authoritative subjectivity of the lyric, but gives it room to expand its sympathies.

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<sup>25</sup> These three poets are mentioned separately throughout Oliver's oeuvre, but are all three referred to in "Of Time" from *Swan* (2010).

Oliver's ambivalent treatment of the traditional does not render her poetry irrelevant for the contemporary reader, but makes it more representative of a contemporary consciousness. The mutuality of flourishing, for instance, embodies Oliver's contemporary relevance, as it is compatible with feminist theological, ecological feminist, and deep ecological philosophy. As well as relating to contemporary ecological and feminist theory, Oliver's Christian and Romantic influence represent common influences in Western society that are also a part of her readers' consciousness. However, Oliver treats the new and the old with sensitivity as she gains subjectivities from both, from which she creates a dynamic synthesis that represents ambivalence instead of indoctrination. This thesis has sought to elucidate Oliver's Romantic and Christian inheritance, a large part of both having been denied by critics in order to avoid placing limitations on Oliver's poetry. However, through the framework of flourishing and its inherent mutuality, I have demonstrated that Oliver's poetry represents a productive paradox in which the apparently contradictory can have a relationship that does not have to be resolved, but can relate in ambivalence and paradox.

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