"Love for the Earth and Love for You":
Christian Nature Spirituality in Mary Oliver's *Thirst*

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I. Introduction

In the epigraph to *Thirst*, Mary Oliver introduces a passage from a mystical writing called *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. There are two hermits, Abba Lot and Abba Joseph. The former is a typical person practicing religion by following rules. Abba Lot explains to Abba Joseph what he regularly does and asks, "What else can I do?" which is reminiscent of the young rich man who comes to Jesus with a similar question. Abba Joseph "stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'if you will, you can become all flame.'" In this story, Abba Joseph is Oliver, who gives advice to contemporary readers who are similar to Abba Lot. The advice of Abba Joseph and Oliver is that we need to be purified and emptied in our pursuit of transcending our egocentric self and be consumed by fire. This transformation allows for a radical change of life from

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religiosity to spirituality. Oliver confesses that “the most serious inquiry of [her] life” results in “the recognition of the spiritual side of the world” and “the condition of [her] own spiritual state” (WH 102). She goes on to clarify her remarks: “I am not talking about having faith necessarily, although one hopes to. What I mean by spirituality is not theology, but attitude” (102). Here, Oliver uses “spiritual” and “spirituality” interchangeably and understands them as a constituting attitude as opposed to reason-oriented theology. Just as Abba Joseph qualifies his advice with a conditional clause “[i]f you will,” so Oliver emphasizes an individual’s choice by defining spirituality as an attitude. Although she admits that “having [religious] faith is not her major concern, Oliver expresses her hope to have faith. More importantly, whether Oliver has faith or not, Thirst reveals her strong subscription to Christian spirituality. Abiding by the biblical two-fold commandments of love of God and neighbor, Oliver demonstrates her allegiance to the core of Christian spirituality in her “love for the earth and love for [God]” (Thirst 69). Including nature in the category of neighbors, Oliver opens the way for Christian nature spirituality, in which love is the greatest moral imperative. In Thirst, Oliver places morality at the center of her Christian nature spirituality by linking love of God and nature and a thirst for goodness.

Oliver’s stance toward God and nature in Thirst echoes that of a Christian ecotheologian’s nature spirituality in many ways. Nature spirituality, which often is an expression of pantheism, equates God with nature and focuses on the immanence of deity in nature. In contrast, Christian nature spirituality expresses panentheism, a view in which God is both immanent in nature and yet transcendent of it. Christian nature spirituality is a way of relating to nature by way of the biblical commandment to love one’s neighbor. In Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature (1997), Sallie McFague, a contemporary eminent ecotheologian, proposes Christian nature spirituality for our ecologically endangered world. Calling for a paradigm shift in our consciousness, she contends that “Christian practice, loving God and neighbor

as subjects, as worthy of our love in and for themselves, should be extended to nature” (1; italics in the original). As opposed to the “subject-object model of Western culture,” McFague claims, “a Christian nature spirituality should be based on a subject-subjects model of being, knowing, and doing” (2). This subject-subjects model is an ecological one (3). When we understand McFague’s main points as proposing an ecological relationship among God, human beings, and nature, we can see a strong affinity between Oliver’s poetry project and McFague’s agenda for Christian nature spirituality. That is the first common feature.

Oliver sometimes equates God and nature in her poetry (The Leaf and the Cloud 10), but in Thirst she follows the traditional Christian tenets of belief: God as the Creator and nature as His creature. As a fellow creature, nature finds a special home in Oliver’s poetry and life. She expresses her basic stance toward nature: “When I write about nature directly, or refer to it, . . . I don’t mean nature as ornamental, however scalloped and glowing it may be. I don’t mean nature as useful to man if that possibility of utility takes from an object its own inherent value. Or, even, diminishes it” (WH 101). This acknowledgement of nature’s own inherent value is to realize nature’s subjecthood. Oliver treats nature as an equal to herself as sister and brother, which reminds us of Francis of Assisi, a medieval Christian mystic. Oliver’s ecological attitude toward nature agrees with McFague’s Christian nature spirituality. Secondly, as Oliver defines spirituality as an attitude and, by implication, encourages readers’ change of attitude, McFague calls for “a change in attitude, of sensibility, toward nature—thinking differently about it” (2). Thirdly, both emphasize paying attention to nature. It is well-known that one of Oliver’s favorite phrases is “paying attention.” For her, “[t]he real prayers are not the words, but the attention that comes first” (NSP II 15). Likewise, McFague writes, “To really love nature (and not just ourselves in nature or nature as useful to us—even its use as a pathway to God), we must pay attention to it. Love and knowledge go together” (SN2 29; italics in the