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A Study of the Concept of Death in Mary Oliver's Selected Poems in the Light of George Bataille's Theory of General Economy

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Abstract: The American ecopoet, Mary Oliver (1935 – 2019) has never been read in the light of the concepts the French philosopher, George Bataille (1897 – 1962) introduced into the world of philosophy and literature even though the enterprise could be abundantly rewarding. Bataille poses the question of general economy as opposed to particular economy. The latter is narrow, rational, self-centered and pivoting around gathering and storage, while the former takes the whole sphere of life into account and concentrates on excess of energy, expenditure, universal wisdom which is far broader and more inclusive, sacrifice and permanence of the sum total of energy available in the living sphere as well as that of the living matter. Oliver, the poet, uses none of the philosopher's terms, but the scenes she describes in her own poetic style and the language and discourse she uses concerning death reveal the same position and point of view as those of Bataille. That is the gap the present qualitative, library-based study tries to cover at least partially and in particular with regard to the question of death which with the help of an Oliverian stance and in the light of such Bataillean concepts as general economy, excess and expenditure, can turn into a moment of rebirth, vital to the health and a proper functioning of the whole universal system. This two-fold approach will hopefully contribute to both Oliver studies and to the body of research, done on Bataille.

Keywords: Bataille; Death; Expenditure; General Economy; Oliver.

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1. Introduction

The popular American ecopoet, Mary Oliver (1935 – 2019) won many important literary prizes during her lifetime, including the Pulitzer Prize (1984), the National Book Award (1992), the London Literary Award (1998) and the Shelley Memorial Award (1969 – 1970). She was also a prolific poet and writer and gave the world a considerable part of its literary treasure of whose human depth and subtlety it would boast including *A Thousand Mornings* (2012), *Dog Songs* (2013), *Blue Horses* (2014), *Felicity* (2015) and *Devotions* (2017) to mention only a few instances. In line with her poetic career, she also wrote three books in prose; *Rules for the Dance* (1998) and *A Poetry Handbook* (1994) which deal directly with the art of poetry in a lucid language, giving directions to novices and apprentices to the poetic career and laying down the foundations of a theoretical knowledge vital to the craft, as well as *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings* (2004) which related to poetry as it is, it includes a much broader span and scope in human life and its relation to nature.

As a poet "born and not made in school" (Oliver, 1994: 1), Mary Oliver shows, to a surprising degree, the power that Mariana Rosa (2017) has called "bridging the opposites" (Rosa, 2013: 17) in reconciling numerous elements that apparently fly in the face of each other, the most important being life and death. As Sandip Kumar Mishra (2016) puts it, Oliver's poems are exact reports of "environmental issues in literature" (Mishra, 2016: 163) which simultaneously struggle to be "a critique of anthropocentrism" (Moore, 2017: 22) and the road map to the solution of some ancient and, at the same time, universal questions that human beings have been asking since ancient times, and thus Oliver joining the power of philosophy with that of literature has secured her place among the composers of "best new poetry" (Lund, 2017).

As an ecopoet, Mary Oliver was primarily concerned with nature, poetry, the place and position of man in the natural environment and how the two, that is man and nature are interacting, and indeed, what man has made of nature and of himself. But her relation to nature and poetry is manifold and complicated; far from a simple light touch upon the natural elements, it goes deep down the nature of being, death, transience and change to include deep philosophical concerns that have always interested man and have overloaded him with an array of unanswered questions. Oliver's complex handling of the question allows her, on the one hand, to appear as a fully-fledged American observer of the natural world of wonders around her, and on the other, as a universal sufferer, capable of speaking for man, feasting at the universal table of joys and pleasures that

nature provides, and at the same time, sympathizing with the universal observer that undergoes the omnipresent pain and loss which leads to the inevitable moment of death. She tries to find a deep answer to the abstract question of death through her simple, concrete, and everyday observations of the little, particular movements and changes, and that is what makes it possible for her to have invisible, strong connections even with a philosopher like George Bataille (1897 – 1962), so remote from her, not only in time and place, but also in viewpoint and stance. Thus how she is benefited by the introduction of Bataille's general economy and how her concrete language can exemplify and clarify Bataille's philosophy are among the questions this research poses and tries to answer

Bataille, the creator of the notions of excess, expenditure and general economy, fed on other resources and was nourished in a milieu far different from that of Oliver. However, the depth of concern and the deep resemblance of questions and problems make him a great source of illumination, especially when it comes to the question of death in Oliver.

2. Analysis

2.1 Bataille and the Notion of General Economy

In his works, Bataille is concerned with two radically different views of economy. One is the view of an average man working hard "to change an automobile tire, open an abscess or plough a vineyard" (Bataille, 1997: 182). While such particular actions are by no means "separate from the rest of the world" or free from the general circulation of economic energy, the average man, absorbed in his petty, utility-based concerns, imagines that "they were" (ibid). The other is the Bataillean view, that is, the theory of general ecoomy which takes the whole movement of economy into consideration. The two views, that is, the particular, "restrictive economy" and the "general economy" views are hardly compatible. And "changing from the perspective of *restrictive* economy to those of *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking – and of ethics" (ibid, 186).

Particular or restrictive economy is rational, utility-based and always painfully conscious of the scarcity of resources. Every petty step in the limited world of particular economy is taken in the direction of "usefulness, production and conservation" (ibid, 169). The layman, mistakenly, sets and sees himself at the center of a universe where scarcity of the resources of nourishment and maintenance sets any individual in a constant, bloody struggle against any other. The topmost objective of a given individual in such a universe will be to obtain and acquire as much as possible, to accumulate and

conserve as much as the individual possibly could, to give out and spend as scarcely as possible, and to use all that is acquired in productive ways that are profitable to the self-centered individual who aims, ultimately at attainment of pleasure or "avoidance of pain" (Bataille, 1997: 169).

On the other hand, general economy adopts a top-down approach according to which the sun, the source of all heat and energy on the earth, bestows its gift free of charge and without expecting a return. The wind carries clouds here and there to help them bestow their life-giving rain, generously, asking for no price. Rivers flow to the benefit of all into the seas, and the seas are open to the requirements of all that feed and depend on them at the same time that they send their steam into the air free of charge. The iron principals of petty particular or restrictive economy do not apply to general economy. Scarcity of resources, spending miserly with a utilitarian view of reaping more return than the sum spent, maintenance of the organism and a profitable production are totally out of question.

Scarcity of resources is meaningless in general economy, because "on the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess" (Bataille, 1997: 185). There is much more energy in circulation at any moment, than the organisms need for maintenance or production which is a different form and a dispensable part, of maintenance.

> [T]he living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; .....if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growths, it must be spent (Bataille, 1997: 184).

Thus, in contrast to particular economy where the main question is how to take, absorb and conserve, in general economy the main question is how to spend and that is where the Bataillean notion of expenditure comes from.

> [T]he question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the *particular* living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself..... The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, [man's] sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement. (Bataille, 1997: 185).

The average man, surrounded by his day-to-day petty cares and absorbed in his particular economy of making a living, has not always been able to see how abundantly

and generously he is given wealth and energy without having to pay them back, let alone being aware of the fact that he has always received so much wealth and energy that he has had to waste, destroy or discharge part of it to no profitable use, in downright defeat of the basic principles of his petty economy. In Bataille's words,

> Minds accustomed to see the development of productive forces as the ideal end of activity refuse to recognize that energy, which constitutes wealth, must ultimately be spent lavishly (without return), and that a series of profitable operations has absolutely no other effect than the squandering of profits, (Bataille, 1997: 184).

However, disability or failure to understand, lack of awareness, recognition or attention, or turning away from the status quo that governs the world changes nothing. "Incomprehension does not change the final outcome in the slightest" (ibid, 185). Man has always, consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously, under the urging reality that dictates the free, excessive circulation and flow of energy, been spending considerable amounts of wealth and energy to no profitable use.

> Ancient societies found relief in festivals; some erected admirable monuments that had no useful purpose; we use the excess to multiply 'services' that make life smoother, and we are led to reabsorb part of it by increasing leisure time (ibid).

"Unproductive expenditures" are not limited to the instances exemplified above. In fact, in sharp contrast to man's constant care for profit, production and conservation, unproductive expenditures seem to plentifully abound, they always are there, and they are everywhere: "luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality) - all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves." (ibid, 169). At least, two other instances of unproductive expenditure should be added to the list: potlatch and sacrifice to explain which Bataille goes to great lengths.

Potlatch, as Bataille illustrates it, is the art or practice of receiving gifts and returning them with a surplus. It can take many different forms: from the practice of a merchant who distributed his merchandise as gifts among his peers and people, and was given back, without bargaining what was higher in value and considered only as a gift in return, to the practice of rivals who destroyed their property

Sacrifice is not only the antithesis of production, it also goes against conservation, profit, utility, receiving back what is spent and most importantly rationality in its narrow sense practiced in particular economy.

As a general rule, what is valued highly in particular economy and is invested with meaning and sense based on its principles, has little value, sense or meaning once considered with general economy in view. One such instance is death.

2.2 Death in Bataille's Theory of General Economy

To explain death and its vital role and also its meaning in the cosmic sphere of general economy, Bataille first starts by pondering the sun and the wealth and energy it bestows upon all for free. "Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy -wealth- without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving." (Bataille, 1988: 28).

"Solar radiation" according to Bataille, "results in a superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe" (ibid). However, before the individual organisms start spending or squandering the energy they receive from the sun, they make their maximum possible use if it for their growth. Naturally, growth cannot go on forever. It has a limit. And once the organism reaches the limit, it stars destroying the excess energy. "The real excess does not begin until the growth of the individual or group has reached its limits" (ibid).

Factors that limit the growth of an organism vary in number. The natural internal or genetic factors play a role, but there are also external factors. "The immediate limitation, for each individual or each group, is given by the other individuals or other groups" (ibid). One decisive factor that changes the game is that the overall space available to the totality of the organisms on the earth is always the same. Similar to the energy itself, it does not increase or decrease. Only the occupants change, while the space is always the same size and volume. "The terrestrial sphere (to be exact, the *biosphere*) which corresponds to the space available to life, is the only real limit" (ibid). Given that pressure on the biosphere is not always the same and based on what Bataille says, it is not difficult to imagine that the number of occupants at any moment might differ. At times and due to the intervention of a variety of factors, it is possible to view moments when there is plenty of room and also moments when the space reaches its limits. "The *individual* or group can be reduced to another individual or another group, but the total volume of living nature is not changed." (Bataille, 1988: 28)

Pressure as one of the "laws of general economy" (ibid) to Bataille signifies the number of living organisms as distributed over the unchanging available space for life on the globe, and as pointed out before, a variety of factors might shift the balance or introduce an increase or decrease in the pressure. One such factor is death.

> Besides the external action of life (climatic or volcanic phenomena), the unevenness of pressure in living matter continually makes available to growth the place left vacant by death. It is not a new space, and if one considers life as a whole, there is not really growth but maintenance of volume in general. In other words, the possible growth is reduced to compensation for the destructions that are brought about (Bataille, 1988: 31).

Viewed from a particular economic standpoint, death is the end. The micro cosmology of the rational individual with the individual himself at the center, the scarcity of resources as the surrounding milieu and atmosphere, and the petty self-centered and covetous desire for satiation and sustenance as the farthest limits that the individual attempts could hope to concentrate on, yield no better rewards. An average individual gets hungry and thirsty due to the unfailable demands of his instincts. He is also driven by his sexual desire as well as his fear of dangers posed by others. He can see or think little beyond the immediate, material requirements he needs for survival, and death will present little less to him: loss of life, loss of hope, loss of power and of position; it means loss of control over the most immediate organs he livered by and had indisputable access to his body members, hand, legs, eyes and all. Hence the unfathomable dread.

However, from a general economic point of view, death is the origin and harbinger of life. It is the pre-requisite without which no life could ever be possible, because without its determining power, the total sphere of life would be occupied to its limits by living matter, of whatsoever kinds, while the pressure would be topmost, and a stable monotony would rule forever with no possibility for the new generations to come and go, one after the other. Death has numerous servants, carrying out its decrees. Eating of one species by another or one individual living being by another is only one.

> Eating brings death, but in an accidental form. *Of all conceivable luxuries, death, in its fatal and inexorable form, is undoubtedly the most costly*……death distributes the passage of the generations over time. It constantly leaves the necessary room for the coming of the newborn, and we are wrong to curse *the one without whom we would not exist* (Bataille, 1988, Emphasis in original).

It is a clear, simple truth, darkened only because the typical living individual caught within the limiting atmosphere of self-centeredness can hardly change positions and see what goes on from a general economic point of view instead of the narrow, limited or particular economic one. In fact, death is loss, defeat and annihilation to the one eaten, while it is gaining, victory, energy, sustenance and life to the one that eats. To the

individual caught within the torrents of particular, petty economy and seeing things bottom-up, death is the end which brings about the final loss, the helpless, desperate occasion of being destroyed beyond any hope. However, to the one who watches the scene top-down, from the general economic viewpoint, it is only death to one individual or species, and life to numerous others that follow one after another. Life is not lost. Death does not take life away. It takes life only to give it elsewhere. What death does is to give the greatest possible amount and quality of life to the maximum number of beings that could ever boast of carrying the essence of life.

To do so, it cannot keep a fixed, limited number of living things forever. It should, rather, give one generation the utmost possible share of life they could possibly have, and then take them away to clear the space for a new one whose members display the top-most energy, hope and zest for life, and give them enough time so that they wear their zest and energy away and get ready to give their place to a still newer generation. This way, the biosphere, that is the space available for life to exist, is alternately emptied and filled without its ever being vacant because members of a given generation do not leave the scene all at once. They rather, leave one by one or only in very small groups, each leaving the scene at a particular moment, so that the whole generation leaves during a span, prolonged for a while, rather than at an abrupt moment, meanwhile, the members of the new generation fill up the space slowly and gradually and along a temporal continuum. They do not appear on the scene all at once, even though they might belong to the same generation. That is why the scene is never vacant, never empty, never without the song and music of life. The sea of life has its ebb and flow. It is constantly renewed, the older giving their place to the younger, and the younger waiting for the moment they should play their part of giving the opportunity to newcomers to take their place, while the see, as a whole, is constantly there, never undergoing radical changes.

And in this, death is committed to the blindness of justice. It serves nature as an obedient soldier, devoted to its duty. It never takes away a living being before the natural fragility of its structure prepares it for its ultimate fall, or before the natural forces outside prove to be more powerful and therefore deserving the space of life more than it. Death does not discriminate. It gives every individual its due; both when the living being has a right to live and when another proves to deserve the right still more. Particular economics of individuals matter little to death. What seems to really matter to it, is the general economy of energy circulation, excess and expenditure which it distributes among all without discrimination.

2.3 Death in Mary Oliver

Not surprisingly, Oliver's poetry has been the subject of numerous scholarly researches, with the question of death, and automatically that of life forming a remarkable fraction; none with the slightest reference to Bataille or Bataillean ideas though.

In an article entitled "Nature, Death, and the soul in the poetry of Mary Oliver", Collen Farrell (2019) argues that nature, "the mysteries of death and the nature of the soul" are at the center of the Oliverian poetic world. He examines two poems by Oliver in particular, namely *The Rabbit* and *Bone* with considerable toil and concentration on details, and comes out with the conclusion that Oliver's "caring for patients, especially in their final days" as reflected back in her poetry have an unfailing hint at her firm belief in the existence of the soul which does not die with the departure of the body.

It should be added immediately here that nothing of Farrell's discovery is at stake in Oliver. Reading of Oliver's poems in the light of Bataillean principles shows no evidenced cleft or division of any sort between the corporeal world of the body and an alleged ethereal world to which the soul must belong. What is most obviously observed in Oliver is the eternal maintenance of matter circulating permanently, of life being bestowed and taken, than bestowed upon another and retaken to be given still to a third party.

In this regard, Rachel Toalson's view point is far closer to the one cultivates in the present study. In an article entitled "Mary Oliver: The Poetry that Examines Life and Death", Toalson (2024) emphasizes the maintenance of our aesthetic experience, quite similar to the maintenance of corporeal existence pondered in Oliver's poetry. "Oliver uses the natural world to remind us", Toalson writes "that even though the flowers pass away, we can still fine the happiness of having watched them bloom." To show what happens to our bodies after death: "We would break apart, back into the natural world, and our essence travels on, climbing a hill, still entombed in nature." (Toalson, 2024:3). What Toalson does is a vindication of the Oliverian ways recourse to no theory in Particular, let alone that of Bataille. Furthermore, Toalson's emphasis is on the poetic imagery created by Oliver, and it is in passing if she hints at the maintenance of the corporeal world, at all.

A number of studies of Oliver have turned to such questions as influence and similarity, and a frequent name to be heard is that of Rumi. One such study is Henry Oliver's 2024 article, "Is Mary Oliver a Good Poet", in which he is at great pains to show how Oliver can still be a good poet in spite of her being "not New Age". (Oliver, 2024: 2) He boils Mary Oliver's works down to "the Americanisation of a Rumiesque tradition"

(ibid: 5) and justifies her spirituality not as a religious cult with a divine origin, but a "post-war, secular spiritual- nature culture". (ibid) Oliver, the poet frequently quotes Rumi to confirm the claim of (influence and to reveal the origins of some of her finest images and ideas. And Oliver, the researcher, gets close to the objectives of the present study in as far as he discovers a secular spirituality, which has little to do with the other world, the sky or the supernatural Death or life is not a primary concern to him, and no survival of the soul after the decomposition of the body is implied. So far, so good!

Most studies have focused on Mary Oliver as an ecopoet, and environmental concerns seem to have the upper hand in directing research on Oliver. No surprise! Mary Oliver is, first and foremost, an ecopoet, in deed and it might an ecopoet is exhausted and justice is done to recognize her due place. The problem is that in such studies death and by implication, life are brought into the fore only in relation, and as secondary, to environmental concerns, if at all; while death is an existential and deep philosophical environmental issue.

An example is Mariwan Hasans (2024), "Environmental Awareness in the Selected Poems of Mary Oliver: An Eco- Critical Approach" in which he tries to show "how her poetry acts as a medium for actively exploring and articulating environmental awareness" (Hasan, 2024: 1). a number of poems by Oliver to find out what in relation to nature the poet was particularly obsessed with and to discover what Oliver wanted her reader to know and to do with regard to the fragile environmental conditions all around the world. Little attention is paid to death in this article in which didacticism and consciousness rising are top concerns.

Another example is: An Eco critical Study of Mary Oliver's Poetry" by Tabarak Sadiq and Shireen Shihab Hamad (2023). They also lay emphasis on "environmental awareness" and consciousness rising as Mariwan Hasan does. However, they turn to the question of "reuniting with nature" which they believe can be achieved through literature and, in particular, Mary Oliver's ecopoetry. It is an important question to answer since they believe that:

> The loss of interconnectedness, unity and harmony between nature and man has been one of the most significant consequences of the industrial revolution and technological advancement in modern times. (Sadiq and Hamad, 2023: 2)

Their faith in the power of poetry to solve the problem is unshakeable, but they rarely refer to the issue of life or death in Oliver except in passing and implicitly. Nothing in the article connects the topic with philosophy, let alone that of Bataille.

As the last example, "Poetic Imagination in communion with Nature: A Case Study of Mary Oliver's Selected Poems" by Bazregarzadeh, et al. can be pointed out. It has in common with the previous two, and many more not mentioned here, the focus on nature, consciousness rising and the importance of Oliver as an ecopoet in doing so. What distinguishes the latter, however, is a dissection of poetic imagination, that of Oliver of course, and how it works "from the moment of direct sensual experience in Nature to the act of composition" (Bazregaraadeh, et al., 2021: 5). The topic by nature does not demand the handling of death, and as it was said before the majority of work on Oliver concentrate on ecocriticism, nature, environmental concerns and the separation of man from nature as a result of his destructive role. Instances of studies pondering death in Oliver form a much smaller fraction, and one related to Bataille of based on a Bataillean framework is practically non- existent. That is what this study is hopefully going to do for the first time.

Mary Oliver keeps a view on death surprisingly similar to that of Bataille. She tells us nothing about economy, particular economy or general economy as Bataille does, but the absence of such words is no reason to believe that the concept is also absent in Oliver's poetry. On the contrary, without feeling the need to go at length on such questions as general economy, circulation of energy, excess, expenditure or the space of life, Oliver seems to express the same philosophical concepts through the images she offers the reader in her poetry-images that carry with them, in addition to the conceptual power of the Bataillean contemplations, the heartfelt, unmediated experience as well as the sensual immediacy of the scenes that blur the boundary between life and death and unify the two in a moment of being. What follows is an examination of a few poems by Mary Oliver in which she puts forward a view of death, quite similar to that of Bataille's concept of death within the framework of general economy, even though Oliver makes little use of the same literature, angles, examples or keywords.

2.3.1 Night Herons

"Night Herons" which appeared in one of Mary Oliver's collections of poetry, entitled *Red Bird* (2008) is a typical poem in which death is, at least, one of the more important axes of Oliver's short but deep contemplation. It is Oliverean in many respects. It is short and concise; it is a typical ecopoem filled with nature imagery and glittering everywhere with

the typical Oliverean sense of optimism and hope, despite obvious obstacles; it does not enjoy classical rhyme or rhythm, and to mention only one more Oliverean characteristic, it displays abundant use of run-on lines. The poem reads:

Some herons were fishing in the robes
of the night

and that was the end of them as far as
we know, though, what do we know
except that death

and a low hour of the water's body
and the fish, I suppose were full

is so everywhere and so entire
pummeling and felling or sometimes,
like this, appearing

of fish happiness in those transparent
inches even as, over and over, the
beaks jacked down

through such a thin door, one stab, and
you're through! And what then?
Why, then it was almost morning

and the narrow bodies were lifted
with every quick sally

and one by one the birds opened their
wings and flew.

It is a short, narrative poem, telling so briefly a common, everyday story form wild life that gets retold, times and again, in the natural practice of all those forms of life that struggle for survival and that following their most natural instincts might search for something to live by. In the meantime, their satisfaction and satiation might bring death upon many others. Thus, the story is a common, hackneyed one, worn out not only on earth, but also in our minds, due to its myriads of times of occurrence.

To Mary Oliver, however, it is a totally different story. To borrow a term from Bataille, in the "biosphere" or "life space" (1988: 28) represented here by "the water's body", an indefinite number of fish are swimming their lives or living their swims. Whatever the case, one thing is obvious: "the fish … [are] full of fish happiness". That is not because they are invulnerable or because some powers or spells have guaranteed their life or health or security. Nothing of the kind exists. They are prone to all sorts of danger and death that their life span has always threatened them with. With the passage of each moment "over and over/ the [herons'] beaks jack down/ and the narrow/ bodies [of fish are] lifted/ with every quick sally/ and that [is] the end of them", that is of the fish. Nevertheless, they are "full of fish happiness" living their lives to the end and enjoying the state of affairs, as it is, to the full.

It is possible for the reader to know how the fish feel and how the herons do, only through the perceptions of the speaker. However, it seems that there are three different ways of looking at the same phenomenon here: 1. the way the fish might look at their death brought upon them by the herons which might or might not confirm the narrow, particular point of rational, petty economy; 2. the way the herons might see and assess the scene which might illustrate a joyful occasion of triumph, gain, satiation and renewal of life, and finally, 3. the way the speaker interprets the scene which is cleft into two opposing angles of particular economy and general economy, overshadowed by undying echoes that cast doubt over all sorts of knowledge.

All that the speaker knows is that the night herons are taking advantage of the darkness and, under the cover of night, or as Oliver *puts* it, "in the robes/ of the night" are catching fish. To them, it is the dark night that promises a bright "morning" in which "one by one/ [they] open/ their wings/ and [fly]". Again, to the knowledge of the speaker, the dark, physical and natural night, is also an existential night to the fish when death puts an end to them: "that was the end of them/… one stab and you're through". The fish cannot see the light of the day. Death wraps them in its everlasting cover of non-existence. That is all that the speaker's petty knowledge of particular economy can yield. However, the tickling of general economy goes on and the deeper sense of non-knowledge wraps up all in darkness. The general space of life is never vacant. It never goes without its living occupants. Death to fish is life to night herons and the function of death is both to clear space for the coming generations of fish and to nourish the existing generation of herons and thereby to guarantee life over and over again. Still, it seems that the speaker reserves the doubt as the lack of knowledge does not let her to stick to any particular viewpoint with certainty "and that was the end of them/ as far as we know –/ though, what do we know/ except that death/ is so everywhere and so entire".

Maybe, this sense of doubt and lack of knowledge can be linked to the speaker's confusion as she observes the happiness of fish and their full enjoyment of life in spite if the fact that they clearly see how the herons catch them one by one "in those transparent inches". The transparency and clarity of the watery space of life makes it possible for them to see what is going on and what might happen to each one of them next, but still, they are not scared away and they do not give up their natural pleasure as they live their full lives. This might raise the question in the mind of the speaker: Do the fish know something we human beings are unaware of? Does death signify something quite different to them from what it does to us? Do they see how death is the harbinger, creator and source of life? Do they expect their lives to go on, this time in a different form, in the bodies of herons? Do they see the mechanism of general economy at work? Or is it still a knowledge beyond what we might have that keeps them so calm and tranquil?

Whatsoever the case and whatever the possible answer might be, one thing is clear: death to Oliver signifies something quite similar to the way Bataille imagines in the light of his theory of general economy.

2.3.2 Night and the River

A similar poem in the *Red Bird*, entitled "Night and the River" echoes much the same understanding of death and the scene of deep doubt, cast over the whole question. The poem reads:

I have seen the great feet
Leaping
Into the river

and I have seen moonlight
milky
Along the long muzzle

and I have seen the body
of something
scaled and wonderful

slumped in the sudden fire of its mouth,
and I could not tell
which fit me

more comfortably, the power,
or the powerlessness;
neither would have me

entirely; I was divided,
consumed,
By sympathy,

pity, admiration,
After a while
it was done,

the fish had vanished, the bear
Lumped away
to the green shore

and into the trees. And then there was
this story.
It followed me home
and entered my house –
A difficult guest
With a single tune

which it hums all day and through the night–
slowly or brisky,
It doesn't matter,

It sounds like a river leaping and falling;
It sounds like a body
falling apart. (Oliver 2008: 15-16)

The situation here, is surprisingly similar to the one in the previous ecopoem by Oliver which was briefly analyzed: The space of life occupied by the living creatures in a river. The living creatures in the focus are fish, on the one hand and another living creature that depends on them for survival at the same time that destroys and devours them, this time a bear, rather than the night herons; the time when the incidents happen is a moonlit night, "I have seen moonlight/ milky/ on the long muzzle"; what happens to the fish is sudden death, falling abruptly and powerfully, but most naturally, "and I have seen the body/ of something/ scaled and wonderful/ slumped in the sudden fire of its mouth"; the powerful harbinger of death walks away when the task is done: in the previous poem "one by one/ the birds/ opened their wings/ and flew" (Oliver, 2008: 33) and here "the bear/ lump[s] away/ to the green shore/ and into the trees", and finally the scene, what happens and the observations and contemplations leave the poet with an array of mixed feelings and heavy doubts as to the nature of life and death and also the limitations of human knowledge: "and I could not tell/ which fit me/ more comfortably, the power,/ or the powerlessness;/ neither would have me/ entirely; I was divided/ consumed/ by sympathy,/ pity, admiration" (Oliver, 2008: 15).

Death, the main question in these poems, falls against a background of hope, optimism and utmost beauty. Beauty of the night, the moonlight, of the "wonderful, scaled" and "narrow bodies" of the fish, of grandeur with which the "great feet" of the bear "leap/ into the river" and the herons "open their wings" and fly away, of the certainty and satisfaction which "the bear/ lump[s] away", of "the green shore", and of

"the trees", all and each one contribute to the creation of an atmosphere which looks nothing like the terrible black figure with the bony face of a skeleton, holding a sharp sythe in his reckless hands to cut the green life out of the victim's body. It looks nothing like such a frightening view which suits the petty outlook of one looking from a particular economic viewpoint. Even the fish, some of which, and only some, of which fall victims to death, look nothing like victims. They are not frightened. They are not scared away. They do not corner themselves to sadness or depression. They are, to the last moment of their life and to the top-most degree "full/ of fish happiness" (Oliver, 2008: 32). Ture that the abrupt, jack-like beak of the herons or the fire of the bears' muzzle and mouth put an end to them and "they vanish", but that is only a passing moment followed by a "but" that puts the whole thing in a new perspective to which death is the harbinger and source of life.

Death of the fish, some fish indeed, not all at once, is life not only to the other fish, that is those that survive the abrupt attack of the night herons or the bear; it is also life to the bear and the night herons and of course, equilibrium and guarantee of maintenance to the space of life with the totality of its living occupants. With the everyday and omnipresent experience of death that the night herons and the bear bring upon the fish, the ecosystem does not die. Rather, it is charged with fresh blood necessary to the renewal and sustenance of the living space, and not only to the existent and coming generations of the bear and the night herons, but also to the existent and coming generations of the fish. Without the purging power of death, to the fish – a small fraction of the living creatures – it would be impossible to guarantee the survival of the bear and the herons, at the same time that it would be impossible to free enough room in the living space that could guarantee the survival of the other fish and their future generations through giving them a higher chance and a greater share of the food, mating chance, avoidance of exposure to death, and the total, physical space of life essential to the survival. In brief, death of the fish is not the end of life or death of the living creatures. On the contrary, it is life to the whole ecosystem through which it runs, ever and always like the blood upon which the life of the living space depends.

In perfect harmony with Bataille's theory of general economy, the water which is the source of all life and energy is given to its occupying creatures generously and for free. On the other hand, the fish are given to the herons and the bear for free, and the sun shines upon all for free and giving them, in abundance, all that they need for their life and existence.

In these Oliverean poems, as in the Bataillean theory of general economy, energy is always and everywhere in excess. The river has too much energy to stay motionless. It flows down to spend its excess energy and that for free. It accommodates not only the fish, but also all its other occupants for free, and whatever it is on which the fish dwell including the algae and small living creatures eaten by the fish.

Likewise, the moonlight is free. The moon shines incessantly, without asking the fish, the herons, the bear, the river or the human observer of all this for any return. The moon makes the water transparent for the fish to enjoy their "fish happiness" to the full. On the other hand, the free moonlight which the moon emits, gives the herons and the bear the opportunity to catch the fish and feed on them. The moon also bestows its light freely on the human speaker and observer of the scene to not only enjoy the beauty but also to acquire wisdom and the deep insight to the nature of life and death. The sky gives its enormous space to the herons for free to fly in after they have had their full of the fish, "the tress and the green shore" open their arms to the bear for free so that it can enjoy its satiated moments, and finally nature, God or whatever unknown source, has given the human observer her eyes to observe, her legs to walk away home and her brain to contemplate all this for free, without the slightest expectation of return.

A close similarity, even identity, thus runs between Oliver, the American contemporary poet and Batailles, the ages-old French philosopher.

2.3.3 Lingering in Happiness

In another slim volume entitled *Why I Wake Early* (2004), Mary Oliver seems to restate the same viewpoint about death in many different poems and using a variety of images and ways of expression. One such poem entitled "Lingering in Happiness" reads:

> After rain after many days without rain, it stays cool, private and cleansed,
> under the trees, and the dampness there, married now to gravity, falls branch
> to branch, leaf to leaf, down to the ground
>
> where it will disappear–but not, of course, vanish except to our eyes. The roots
> of the oaks will have their share, and the white threads of the grasses, and the
> cushion of moss; a few drops, round as pearls, will enter the mole's tunnel;
>
> and soon so many small stones, buried for a thousand years, will feel
> themselves being touched. (Oliver, 2004: 75)

This time and in this poem, the same universal question of death, not as annihilation or nothingness, but as a change of course, is posed and pondered as an entrance to a new

stage in the ever-lasting, ever-running course of living and bestowing life on, or transferring it to, others. This time, it is not the intense shade of struggle for survival that paints the background of the scene, but an inevitable interconnectedness among the occupants of the living space that serves as the roadmap for the narration of death as the inevitable source of life. No night herons appear on the scene to seemingly put an end to the lives of the fish with their quick, powerful beaks, nor any splendid slouching of a bear that has to eat its full of the fish and triumphantly goes away that, raises the question of death, here. The story, deeply the same though, takes a different appearance.

In this poem, raindrops tell the story of what is death on the face of it, but is life and nourishment, deep down. Here too, as elsewhere in Mary Oliver, the world is a circular one in which opposites turn to each other and depend on each other for their very possibility of existence; bears and fish, fish and herons, seeds and earth, raindrops and roots, life and death and many others. And here too, as elsewhere in Oliver, what from a narrow point of view seems to be lifeless and dead, is in reality full of life and exuberance.

"The roots of the oaks", "the white threads of the grasses", the cushion of moss" and above "so many small stones all (Oliver, 2004: 71), buried for thousand years" are only a few examples of what might seem dead to our eyes, while in reality they are major elements in the living sphere.

This time, it is not the slim, glittering bodies of the fish that to the partial and far-less-than-perfect knowledge of us disappear in the seemingly bottomless trap holes of death disguised as the beaks of herons or mouth and muzzle of a bear, but drops of rain that in the powerful, inevitable hands of "gravity" are pulled down. Gravity however is far from harsh or violent. The raindrops and dampness do not fall victims to it; rather, they are "married to gravity" (ibid). Gravity does not pull them down in an abrupt, harsh manner or all at once. Rather, it does its work calmly, quietly and gradually so that they "fall [ ] branch to branch, leaf to leaf, down to the ground" (ibid). Gravity does to the end what it should do to the dampness but as a kind, soft-hearted spouse rather than a cruel, hard-hearted enemy.

The central element on focus being dampness, the real question to ask seems to be this: Is it death that the dampness experiences or a new stage in the long, circular course of life? "The dampness", doubtlessly "disappears", but does it also "vanish"? To "our eyes", yes. The dampness both disappears and vanishes to our eyes which do not see beyond the superficial touch of the earth. Our eyes, limited to the partial sight of a small fraction of what in fact goes on in the universe, cannot see beyond the falling,

disappearing and vanishing of the drops in the seemingly dead ground which displays no sign of life, partly because the life we are looking for is going on underneath the ground, visible to other eyes, but certainly not to ours with the defective share of insight that is less than enough to having a comprehensive knowledge.

The knowledge we have of the universe, the living sphere and the realm of death is certainly far from perfect, because it relies heavily on the rationality associated closely to the particular economy with the "self" at its center and the five senses, including our sense of sight, as the only reliable sources of information on which such a knowledge can rationally depend. In other words, the sources of data collection we use to form our images of the universe are limited to a narrowness quite close to total ignorance. They stand as bases of our knowledge and hence the shaky foundations on which the resulting pseudo-knowledge of ours build themselves. The dampness and the raindrops disappear, vanish and die "as far as we know-/ though what do we know" (Oliver 2008: 33) chained tightly to the particular economy through our self-centered rationality and bound strictly to the narrow passage of our limited sight. We can hardly see that "the dampness" only "disappears – but [it does] not, of course vanish" (Oliver, 2004: 75). If it vanishes, it does so only "to our eyes" (ibid). How about the eyes of the others?

To numerous eyes of the others, the dampness does not certainly vanish. And what counts for the big difference between the particular economy and the Bataillean notion of general economy is the mere consideration of "the others" into account. In the particular economy where the rational concept of death puts an end to the life of an individual, the individual is mistakenly equated to the world. The narrow, rational and self-centered point of view reduces the whole world to the borders of the individual's existence. And therefore, death as an end to the life of the individual is set as equal to the end of the universe. On the contrary, the general economy by shunning the narrow borders of the self and shifting the focus, allows for the existence of the others to also be recognized: Other lives, other selves, other fears, other hopes and other eyes. To the eyes of "the roots of the oaks…, the white threads of the grasses…, the cushion of moss…, the mole" and above all "so many small stones, buried for a thousand years" (Oliver, 2004: 75) the dampness does not vanish. Its very disappearance to our eyes is its appearance and introduction to all these that are not us or part of us, but each an entity to be recognized in its place. The disappearance and vanishing of the dampness which are interpreted, to us, as its death, are translated to the others and to eyes of the others as the power and pre-requisite of life, even as the very life they have been impatiently waiting for "for a thousand years" (ibid).

Closely associated with Oliver's understanding of death withing a Bataillean framework of general economy, is the notion of cycle – a circular movement realizing itself in the shape of stages that lead and turn to each other. The opening line of the poem, here, reads: "After rain after many days without rain" (Oliver, 2004: 75) and introduces the notion of circularity and circulation. The line depicts three stages following each other and leading to each other in a cycle. First, "many days without rain" are experienced, then, it rains for a span of time whose duration remains unidentified in the poem even though "the dampness" and the "cool" and "cleansed" air suggest that it has been raining long enough to make a change. And after that, the rain stops and this leads to the repetition and restoration of the previous situation. It is tempting to suggest, here, that some hint at the notion of incarnation is at stake both in Oliver's theory of death and Bataille's general economy, even though to totally equate it with the classical concept is far from accurate. Bataille's emphasis on the sun as an enormous source of energy expenditure, the living creatures as absorbents and receivers of energy, and their being turned into sources of expenditure of the excess energy that they have received, can likewise hint at the same notion of circularity as a fundamental building block of the theory of general economy.

3. Conclusion

It is not likely that the American ecopoet, Mary Oliver was influenced by the French philosopher, George Bataille, in her carrier. There is little evidence to support the claim if at all, and still, a deep range of similarity in thought and outlook binds the two together, making it abundantly rewarding to take the plunge to look at one in the light of the other and to extend one's ideas to account for the other's range of interests. That the two share few, if any common terminology in giving expression to their ideas is no hindrance to seeing the undercurrent of stance concerning the major questions of life and death.

Death, for instance, receives a similar - one could even say identical- treatment in both the philosopher and the poet, in spite of the difference in language and literature. Bataille poses the question of general economy as opposed to particular economy which is narrow, rational, self-centered and pivoting around gathering and storage, while the former takes the whole sphere of life into account and concentrates on excess of energy, expenditure, universal wisdom which is far broader and more inclusive, sacrifice and permanence of the sum total of energy available in the living sphere as well as that of the living matter. Oliver, the poet, uses none of the philosopher's terms, but the scenes she describes in her own poetic style and the language and discourse she uses concerning death reveal the same position and point of view as those of Bataille.

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