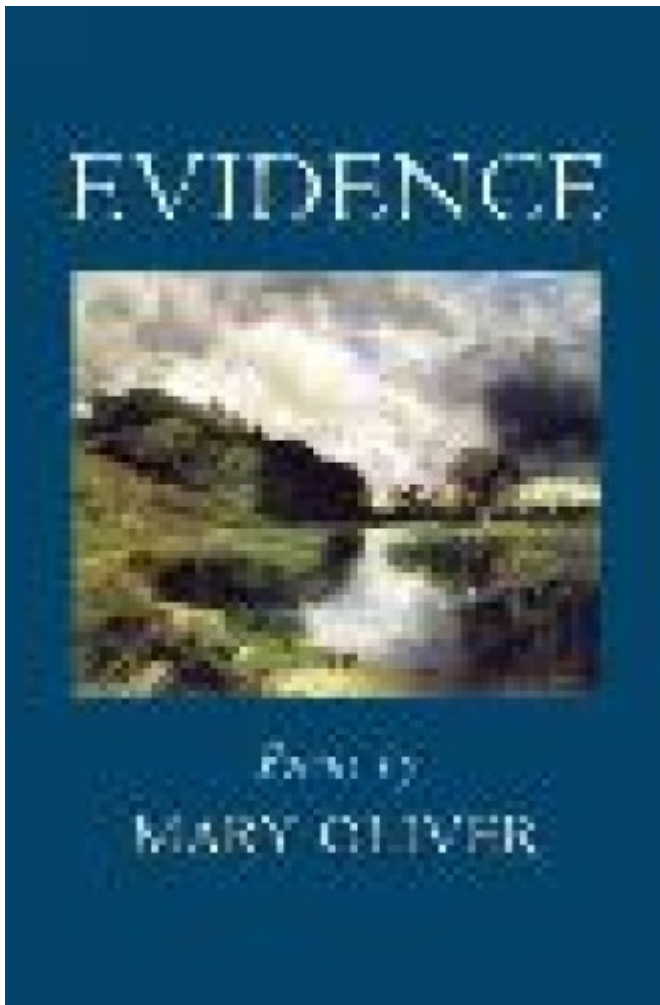


Evidence: Poems/God Particles: Poems

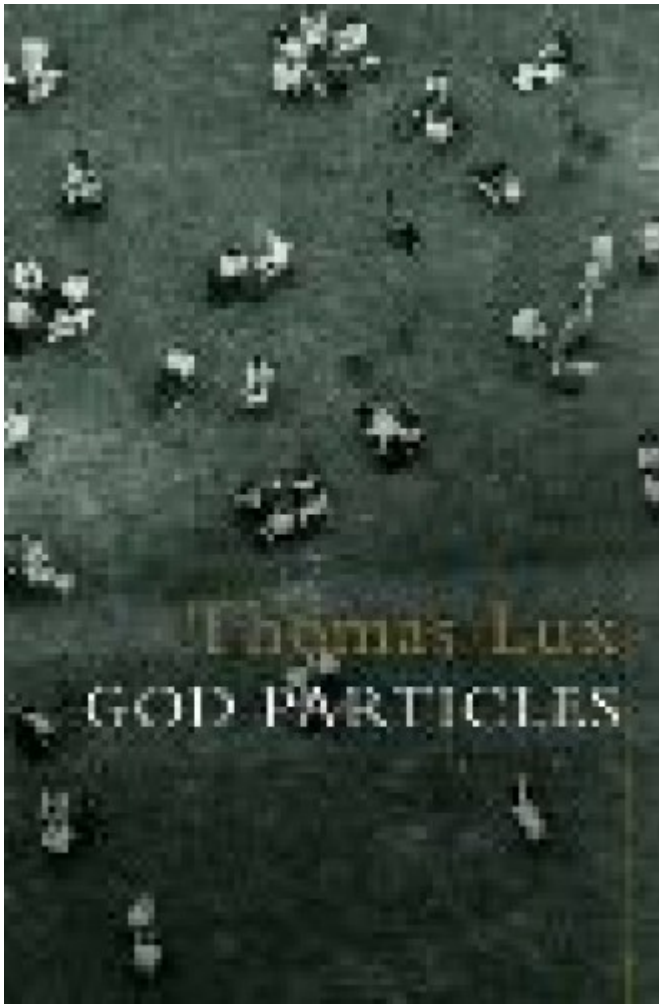
reviewed by [Jeff Gundy](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Evidence: Poems

Mary Oliver
Beacon



God Particles: Poems

Thomas Lux
Houghton Mifflin

Not so long ago, the standard view was that American poetry had been thoroughly secularized by the great modernist poets, especially Wallace Stevens (who at least worried about the absence of God) and William Carlos Williams (who seemed unaware that anyone thought about God at all). But that has changed. Today many poets who claim some variety of faith have reappeared in the poetry establishment, and many others contend openly with religious issues and questions, even if their own beliefs are equivocal.

Many of my favorite poets live somewhere in this broad territory, shy of being pigeonholed as “Christian writers” but filled with spiritual and theological curiosity. Somehow, the work of the most individualistic, iconoclastic, antiestablishment poets

often seems the most generous and inclusive. This is not new: Blake, Whitman and Thoreau, all decidedly unorthodox, were also all deeply engaged with religious questions and committed to envisioning a better social world.

These two collections reflect similar interests, though they occupy very different points on the poetry spectrum. Mary Oliver is a clear descendant of Thoreau, a plain-speaking observer and prophet of the world not made by humans, whose work has lately become more explicitly religious. Thomas Lux, on the other hand, is a poet of playful, sometimes startlingly discontinuous narratives. His adventures into language might have been written by the love child of Emily Dickinson and Oscar Wilde.

Oliver is one of the most beloved contemporary American poets, known for her luminously traced forays into the woods and fields around her beloved Provincetown. *Evidence*, her 19th book of poems, establishes her this-worldly spirituality in the first, brief poem, “Yellow,” with its “yellow finches bathing and singing.” Praise for the live things of the world and for their Maker is Oliver’s signature theme. It might wear thin, but her touch is almost always light. In one of the more explicitly religious poems, the long, meditative “At the River Clarion,” she begins by admitting “I don’t know who God is exactly” but quickly moves to stronger claims: “Said the river: I am part of holiness. / And I too, said the stone.” Oliver’s is no easy, sentimental animism, though: “If God exists he isn’t just butter and good luck,” she writes. “He’s also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke.”

Oliver’s faith, she suggests over and over, is based less in creeds and abstract language than in the intuitive realizations that immediate experience in the natural world offers. In “Spring,” she envisions faith as a personified “instructor” and says “We need no other.” But this faith provides no commandments, no lists of prohibitions and demands: “Guess what I am,” he asks, but when asked what he means, he answers only with silent presence. Still, the poem suddenly turns from doubt to joyful, confident action and praise: “And who else could this be, who goes off . . . / carrying his sandals, / and singing?”

Thomas Lux is also a veteran poet—*God Particles* is his 11th book. The curious juxtapositions and narrative leaps of his trademark homegrown surrealism can be found here, but the poems are also warm, often funny, and quite accessible to general readers. Lux’s interests and subjects veer unpredictably—“The Republic of Anesthesia” offers pointed social criticism, while a few pages later “Eyes Scooped

Out and Replaced by Hot Coals” proposes this rather severe punishment for anyone who turns 21 without reading *Moby-Dick*. Surely he can’t be serious? But what, Lux will have us consider, does it mean to be serious?

The many poems in *God Particles* on religious themes tend to be reckless and extravagant, yet strangely lucid; they challenge Christian conventions, sometimes stringently, yet also reveal a deep underlying tenderness and even an impulse toward praise. Like Oliver, Lux is skeptical of religion as a human construction. In the poem “Antinomianism,” he observes that “God’s expository writing lacks lucidity” and that God’s subjects tend to be “unprincipled imbeciles.” The satire here may be a little easy, but it is deft and quick enough to win me over.

Lux’s titles suggest the range of his interests and the variability of his tone: “Their Feet Shall Slide in Due Time,” “Jesus’ Baby Teeth,” “5,495” (the number of times, it’s said, that Jesus was whipped on the way to Calvary). In his offbeat “The Utopian Wars” he reports, with a nearly straight face, that the peace churches have taken up guerrilla warfare.

In the wonderful title poem, Lux turns visionary, imagining God exploding and raining down upon the whole planet until “Every human, every creature, rock, tomato on earth / is absorbing God!” Why would God do such a thing? Not out of guilt, Lux suggests, but out of weariness and an overwhelming mercy, “though we are unqualified / for even the crumb of a crumb.”

As a poet Lux seems both fearless, willing to take on the biggest, most troubling ideas, and filled with unexpected tenderness. In this he has more than a little in common with Mary Oliver, as different as their styles and sensibilities are—a fact that tempts me to suggest that they are both onto something about how God might want us to be.