

WENDELL BERRY'S IMAGINATION IN PLACE

WENDELL BERRY'S IMAGINATION IN PLACE: AFFECTION, COMMUNITY, AND
LITERATURE

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Wendell Berry's idea of a healthy community and his understanding of membership is embodied in his fiction. The imagined community of Port William is neither an ideal blueprint for instantiating a new form of collective life in modern society, nor is it a nostalgic recreation of lost rural communities for representing an alternative culture. Berry's imagination—both the creative process and its material products—is a funding current for both analyzing North American democracy and its failings as well as cultivating pluralities of communities that address these inadequacies. The form and discipline of Berry's imaginative engagement with the particularities of his place uncovers the divine creativity operating in it; his fictional writing incarnates his conception and experience of this divine presence as God's kenotic love. The upshot is not a simplistic return to traditional life but rather an affectionate and self-effacing approach to nature that converges with God's manner of creating and relating to the world as it is conceived within the Christian tradition. Berry's moral imagination emerges from a cultural approach to Christianity that engenders people who seek out those aspects of society and moments in life that are struggles—for justice, happiness, reconciliation—in order to incarnate a loving openness to others that does not re-inscribe further failures of Western consumer culture and political economy.

Berry's imagined community educates the affections in order to transform the way in which we relate to one another and treat the environment. His fiction is an education in being at home in the world as it is where we find it. Rather than theorizing the structure of a locally adapted community, or offering techniques for establishing the existence of such a community, Berry shows us how to live where we are through literary biography.

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Introduction

Imagination and The Idea of Community

“I’m not ever, in anything I’ve written, trying to say exactly how anything ought to be done. I mean, I don’t have a program.”

—Wendell Berry¹

Berry’s interpretation of St. Paul’s claim—that “we are members of one another”—shifts the “we” from “Christian institutions” to “the whole Creation.”² For Berry, this perspective on membership

...is the meaning of ecology. Whether we know it or not, whether we want to be or not, we are members of one another: humans (ourselves and our enemies), earthworms, whales, snakes, squirrels, trees, topsoil, flowers, weeds, germs, hills, rivers, swifts, and stones—all of “us.”³

Though Berry does not let Christian institutions constrain his understanding of “membership,” he nevertheless employs theological language to describe it as the community of creation. In other words, Berry frequently discusses the importance of community without conflating it with the church and yet avails himself of its language to describe membership. Instead of investigating “membership” through Christian academic activities such as church history, theology, or biblical criticism or through social scientific categories such as anthropology, ethnography, or sociology, Berry approaches it by the “work of imagination.”⁴ Membership exceeds institutional and religious belonging but is not explainable by mechanistic biological preferences or social conditioning. Membership as the community of creation refers to both the physical and practical

¹ Morris Allen Grubbs, ed., *Conversations with Wendell Berry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 111.

² Grubbs, *Conversations*, 23.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

aspects of social life as well as the divine source of all being. It is the faculty of imagination by which Berry understands the human and divine nature of community.

According to Berry, the deficiencies of modern life—its industrial economy, divisive social order, and perfunctory legislation—are the result of a failure of imagination. The constructive upshot of his social criticism is the claim that cultivating a vigorous relationship with nature would redress many of his grievances against American culture. Robust communities enable affinities with all their inhabitants and acknowledge the variety of dependencies that condition not only their existence but also the flourishing of every individual inhabitant. Berry is ambivalent about the effect of organized religion on communities but maintains a cautious need for religious motivation for ordering community to the extent that it preserves a self-conscious relation with the divine. When asked whether community requires religious belief, Berry responds, “Probably.” Community is either “some kind of an authentic religious impulse working to authorize right behavior, or reason alone.”⁵ Put more strongly, to apprehend membership with the faculty of imagination is to perceive the participation of all communities—including those outside institutional Christianity—in divine life.⁶ Berry describes membership bluntly: “It seems to me that we belong to each other and to God.”⁷ This belonging is Berry’s “idea of community;” and, again, Berry registers this idea in an ambivalent tone because its truth

⁵ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 139

⁶ Putting “imagination” and “reason” as opposing faculties in this way is misleading. Berry does not divide the mind into discrete parts. “The faculties of the mind—reason, memory, feeling, intuition, imagination, and the rest—are not distinct from one another. Though some may be favored over others and some ignored, none functions alone.” The point, more precisely, is that imagination and reason, in this case, function together in what Berry is calling an “authentic religious impulse.” He speaks about the latter as distinct from “reason” only in the sense that rationality is often separated from imagination, and the knowledge derived from this detachment is specialized. Wendell Berry, “It All Turns on Affection,” Jefferson Lectures, National Endowment for the Humanities. John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Washington, D.C. April 23, 2012. n.p.

⁷ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 107.

cannot be accounted for or even spoken of without reference to the eternal, which cannot be empirically verified or straightforwardly represented.⁸

This dissertation argues against interpreting the function of Berry's imagined Port William community as embodying a social life determined by institutionalization and enculturation. It is not self-evident that a fictional community possesses the capacity to address

⁸ That is to say, Berry's idea of community—membership—is revealed dramatically. Burley Coulter is the pivotal character for illuminating the meaning of membership, but does so through conversation. In "The Wild Birds," Burley tells Wheeler, "The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but who knows it and who don't." *Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 136-137. On the one hand, Berry is using Burley to supersede Paul; Berry admits that the term 'membership' is "borrowed from St. Paul, whom I don't always approve of" and given to Burley who "takes that verse and carries it on to where I want it." Grubbs, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 137. Berry suggests that perhaps "Burley improved on St. Paul" but only insofar as Burley is "telling a more comprehensive truth. All of us humans and all the creatures are, in fact, members of one another, whether we know it or not. St. Paul's beautiful metaphor is right; it only needs to be more inclusive." Grubbs, *Conversations*, 206-207. This 'more comprehensive truth' refers neither to merely the biological nature of the world—that we all consist of the same 'stuff'—nor to a bland liberal egalitarianism that incorporates religious beliefs of which St. Paul and Christianity name but one system among many. Burley is not 'more comprehensive' insofar as the meaning of his 'membership' is received from something other than the body of Christ; it is not. Berry blames Paul for institutionalizing Jesus' teachings into a sectional and exclusionary order, which is what Burley resists. On the other hand, though his 'supersession' remains within the Christian tradition, Burley's more inclusive membership does not incorporate others in the mode of anonymous Christianity. This mode, generally attributed to Karl Rahner and sanctioned by Vatican II, posits a pre-conceptual awareness of God's grace mediated by Christ to articulate the unity of creation. Non-Christians accept this grace when they love their neighbor even if they do not 'know it.' See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968). For an assessment of Rahner and those who oppose him, see Gavin D'Costa, "Karl Rahner's Anonymous Christian – A Reappraisal," *Modern Theology* 1, no. 2 (1985): 131-48. See also Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 167-180. D'Acosta argues that Rahner is not triumphalistic nor anthropocentric but open to inter-religious dialogue that opens up possibilities in Christianity that forestalls future institutional closures. It is this kind of dialogue that Burley participates in, i.e., his dramatic role or dialogue participation discloses what it means to be a member of the community. Specifically, Burley characterizes the wayward quality of Port Williams' love. Burley is uncontrollable and unpredictable because he is prone to wandering; he rambles in the woods for days at a time, during which he fishes, hunts squirrels, and sometimes partakes in dancing and drinking. He frustrates many of his friends and family, especially Wheeler who is "committed to considerations of order, regularity, and merit." Fritz Oehlschlaeger, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 144. And yet Burley's love is the most capacious; to Wheeler he says, "I ain't saying we don't have to know what we ought to have been and ought to be, but we oughtn't to let that stand between us. That ain't the way we are." *The Wild Birds*, 136. It is the wandering, undomesticated, wayward fellow who is most prepared to accept people as they are and the world as it is. His presence is an affront to Wheeler who serves and protects the order and permanence of the community against the external forces that threaten its endurance. Burley confronts Wheeler, who thinks that the character of the community prevails in spite of members such as Burley rather than because of him. But it is Burley's love that tells us something about the character of the love that sustains and animates the universe. Oehlschlaeger describes this kind of love as "the ability to go on in time without needing to fix a difference... that cannot be undone" *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 136. Forgiveness, compassion, and friendship are the practices or movements of this love in time and space, which are different than imposing institutional projects or suggestion a sentimental natural religion. For Berry, truth is revealed dialogically; in this case, Burley's insight of community as membership emerges in his conversation with Wheeler.

existing problems the resolution of which, Berry says, are actual communities. If changing the organization, financial management, and eating habits of social life mitigates destructive and exploitative habits, then why not exclusively analyze the status and potential of communities in the world? Perhaps Berry is unaware of any communities good enough to rectify modernity's mistakes, which have become so pervasive that virtuousness in the modern world is unviable. If this is indeed the case, then Berry writes fiction to imagine a pattern or community in speech that can be used as a blueprint for instantiating new forms of collective life. Or perhaps Berry laments the irrevocable loss of rural early-to-mid twentieth-century communities of which he is one of the last remnants and offers a public memory with enough verisimilitude to capture its distinctive possibility for an alternative culture. In either case, the imaginative nature of Port William presents a problem of application; that is, the problem with using imagination to design alternative modes of being in these ways is that it ignores the fundamental difference between fiction and reality. Either it represents a potential solution or an illusion; its significance, then, lies not in itself but in the theory that bridges it to the world. In both of these interpretations, the function of Port William is to present readers with a refuge with which Berry protects himself and his followers from disintegrating forces.

The point of departure for my study is the rejection of reading Berry's Port William community—or any of his comments and arguments concerning membership—as either idealistic or nostalgic. Berry's work includes an incisive critical assessment of agrarian communities of old, and he has explicitly disavowed the desire to return to them. The “stable, locally adapted” community Berry envisions “hasn't existed in America yet.”⁹ Berry's vision, therefore, requires imagination; however, imagination as Berry understands it does not produce

⁹ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 102.

“illusions,” “copies of reality,” or “artificiality.”¹⁰ Thus, instead of construing Port William as either artificial or a copy of reality, I read it as a parable, i.e., its expression is meaningful for understanding the human experience of reality despite its self-consciously fictive stance, which is a requisite form for conveying imagination. Read as a series of parables, the Port William stories both embody communal life as well as make visible Berry’s imaginative engagement with the world; both the form and content are significant for what is communicated.¹¹

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 31.

¹¹ By ‘parable’ I mean that Berry’s fiction reveals an insight into the world that could not be communicated in any other way than by the stories he tells. They are truthful in a way that is different than events that ‘actually happen,’ and yet they are not allegorical insofar as their truth cannot be abstracted from the words written. Port William is not an allegory for something else; it is the thing itself. Berry’s fiction is not a short-cut to attain a meaning or idea that overcomes the irrevocable limitation of language. Perhaps all fiction should be read this way; my intention here is to suggest that each of Berry’s fictional stories should be read on their own rather than interpreted according to their applicability or relevance for an agrarian political movement. I have decided to use the word ‘parable’—rather than allegory, for instance—as part of my argument that Berry’s fiction reveals truth dramatically. Allegory makes characters and narratives into ideas that are not themselves important but only important insofar as they represent something else. In other words, parables reveal the truth that cannot be determined or portrayed on other grounds. Annie Dillard uses ‘parable’ as a way to differentiate literature from journalism or memoir in a way that is similar to what I am suggesting. Commenting on the assumption that essays are the genre in which ideas are most sincerely proffered, Dillard says, “If you want to analyze society, people will listen to your data, but not your parables. Diane Johnson, reviewing [Norman Mailer’s] *The Executioner’s Song* for the *New York Review of Books*, wrote: ‘It is finally the fact that all this really happened that moves us most.’” *Living by Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 84. Fiction as parable in this sense is a metaphor meant to clarify the relationship between reality and imagination, but is not meant as a technical term or as a matrix that gives systematic structure to the relationship. Berry says, “In a sense, some things in my stories have happened before; in another sense, they never happened at all until I wrote them down: what’s written is something else. The story of ‘The Wild Birds’ [See fn. 8 above] never really happened, so far as I know.” Grubbs, *Conversations*, 46. Berry’s own use of the term reflects this sense when also speaking about historical events. John Swift, a silver miner who wandered into Kentucky in the eighteenth century, claimed to have found and lost a lode of silver in the Kentucky mountains. Because he did not know the area, his maps and directions to the legendary lode are useless, which has paradoxically kept the legend alive; people are apparently still looking for his cache of silver. A tributary in the Red River Gorge in Kentucky is named “Swift Camp Creek,” of which, according to Berry, there “could be no better parable of the white people’s entrance into Kentucky.” *The Unforeseen Wilderness* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1991), 10-11. The commemoration of the story reveals it as a kind of get-rich-quick scheme, but Berry sees its importance not in that it ‘really happened’ but in that it reveals something true about the way “white people” continue to relate to Kentucky land. Berry quotes from Bernard DeVoto’s *The Course of Empire* to describe the revolution that white Europeans brought to the First Nations people in America. DeVoto articulates colonialism not as a military expansion but as a “constantly expanding market,” in which “the industrial systems of Europe” now included First Nations. See, Bernard DeVoto, *The Course of Empire* (Boston: First Mariner Books, 1952), 91-92. In other words, empire disrupted ways of life and community by introducing the market as the context in which these peoples would understand their culture and land. Berry calls this a “commercial conquest” as a system of forcing dependency on an economic system that eliminates any other manner of being in the world. This conquest was not just an event confined in the past, but continues to determine life in American. Thus, Berry says, “This is not merely history. It is a parable.” *The Unsettling of America* (New York: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 5-6. Berry also describes his reasons why an old-fashioned grass scythe is better than a power scythe, which at first appeared to him as “an ideal solution,” as having “the force of a parable.” *The Gift of Good Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 171, 175. The differences

More specifically, Port William is the incarnation of Berry's "idea of the healthy community" insofar as it is the poetic embodiment of "an indispensable measure."¹² As an imagined narrative, it does not represent any past or present community, nor does it stand in for community as such; its meaning does not depend on its correspondence with an already-existing social structure or an "independent aesthetic judgment of value."¹³ Commenting on his short story "Fidelity," Berry says it is not merely "an illustration of an idea of community" but rather "a story that's informed by an idea of community."¹⁴ I take it that this could be said of all Berry's fiction; the relationship between Port William and Berry's idea of community is not representational or isomorphic. His stories should, therefore, not be read allegorically, translating the images into something that can be implemented.¹⁵

There are remainders to Berry's idea of the healthy community. Berry's literature speaks in images that are suggestive and descriptive but not systematic. One way of making the distinction between images that are 'illustrative of' and those that are 'informed by' an idea is to say that the former stand in for the idea while the latter stand for it; to stand for something is to

between two scythes are not just casual comparisons or even evaluative claims on scythes in general, but form a realization that has led Berry to see the world differently. The truth of these differences do not refer merely to scythes. Berry states that Harlan and Anna Hubbard lived by a "parable of drifting." *Harlan Hubbard: Life and Work* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 16. The couple did not just drift when they lived in their shantyboat, but also when they came ashore and settled; they lived by an intention that was limited by what was available at hand and free from certain social trends and expectations. For Berry, both the historical stories of white people in America as well as the grass scythe and the Hubbards all tell parables that analyze society. Each instance has a self-contained meaning as well as calls for an interpretive framework to draw out more meaning; these two 'meanings' are neither reducible to the other nor inseparable from one another. Put differently, the interpretive meaning—that the words and events mean more than they 'merely' say—concerns the significance of what is said. I distinguish this from allegory because what is significant for the former is not what the words symbolize or signify but in what they explain—or analyze—about society and the nature of reality. With respect to imagination, I use 'parable' as a way to describe the vision of the world that is registered in fiction, which can be nevertheless investigated and thereby reveal a vision of readers' manner of being in the world.

¹² Grubbs, *Conversations*, 102.

¹³ Fritz Oehlschlaeger, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁴ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 107.

¹⁵ Donald Secreast, for example, reads Berry's literature allegorically and criticizes it because its alleged "ideology neutralizes the art too often. Lovers of allegory will find a great deal to appreciate in [Jayber Crow]." See his review of *Jayber Crow* in *World and I* 15, no. 11 (2000): 249.

be representative as a measure for understanding and perceiving it in the world.¹⁶ Port William incarnates rather than illustrates the idea of community, providing the material for grasping the idea, making it tangible, without reducing it to an object lesson. Berry resists reducing “Fidelity” to a single theme or argument because it is “a story, and a story is always larger and more interesting than its theme.”¹⁷ Despite their fictional form, the Port William stories are themselves significant for understanding the nature and character of real human experience, which cannot be narrowed down to a principle or moral.

Either consciously or unconsciously, reading Berry’s stories for instruction often produces anxiety or disdain. Again, its imagined condition indicates either that it is outside history and therefore isolated from reality and experience, or that it is a way of preserving memories of the past and therefore contributes nothing in and of itself to present reality and experience. Unfriendly readers use this assumption to dismiss Berry’s literature as altogether uninformative; sympathetic readers bestow on it a relevance that is exterior to the text itself—on some other referent point beyond literature and imagination.

The fictive nature of Port William directs some readers to interpret the function of Berry’s ‘idea of a healthy community’ for the good life as an ideal. Modern life, according to J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens, is bereft of meaning. Berry’s “coherent vision for life”

¹⁶ This is John Gibson’s way of articulating the distinction: “An image (in words, paint, or whatever) can ‘stand for’ reality without depicting it. One way in which this can happen... is that it can perform a certain function—namely, that of being *representative* rather than representational. That is, it can embody reality by grounding a certain purchase on it, not by standing *in* for some other thing but by standing *for* it, in the sense that the narrative marks the moment of cultural production through which an aspect of our world is given form, shape, sense, and thus offers the lens through which we can see it. It becomes a standard for how that aspect of the world is understood, grasped, seen.” *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72-73 (original italics). I interpret Berry’s phraseology of ‘standing by’ as reflecting Gibson’s sense of ‘standing for’ insofar as both are ways of articulating the fundamental relationship between language and life without being idealistic.

¹⁷ Berry, *Conversations*, 107.

provides meaning via a path to “health in the midst of disease.”¹⁸ Though they contend that Berry is not a “sociopolitical hyper-idealist” and that the “path to health is not utopian” they nevertheless argue that Berry’s vision has a “guiding ideal,” which they define in terms of their own “eschatological hope.”¹⁹ Health, in this eschatological framework, is not a condition but an “aspiration for the world as it should be.”²⁰ Port William is the depiction of Bonzo and Stevens’s hope because of its continuing practices of hospitality. The ethical implications, then, are for readers to “carry out the vision of hospitality” in Port William and ask “how it can be practiced in Darfur, Kosovo, Myanmar, Beirut, or the inner cities of America.”²¹ Berry’s vision generally and Port William specifically are religious fantasies of the good, and, by virtue of needing to be ‘carried out’ and ‘practiced,’ are detached from the modern world. In short, his vision and moral imagination are insufficiently incarnated and require something—a theory or external agent—to bring them to bear on reality.²²

Kimberly K. Smith also draws on Berry for a “moral vision” that consists in instructions for living a “meaningful life” in the midst of “deadly perils” and “unimagined possibilities.”²³ To achieve the good life is to cultivate the virtues of America’s political tradition of democratic agrarianism. Berry’s social criticism and agrarian philosophy contribute to her political scheme; however, his literature compromises the structural integrity of this scheme—the “consistency and clarity” of her political system—because it leads readers to the obscurity of the “particularity,

¹⁸ J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens, *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of life: A Reader’s Guide* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 23, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28n. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32, 142.

²² Elsewhere, Bonzo suggests that Port William’s eating practices illustrate his own “hope” of gardening in a way that contributes to the future life of his son and community. Matt Bonzo, “And For This Food, We Give Thanks,” *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 48-49.

²³ Kimberly K. Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), ix.

contingency, and mystery of human experience.”²⁴ Fiction, then, offers only “elaborations of social and moral theories,” the primary concept of which is grace as Berry’s “new moral ideal.”²⁵ Port William functions as a detailed illustration of Berry’s political vision for an “ideal republic.”²⁶ According to Smith, Berry’s literature is utopian: it depicts an ideal that is ‘no place’ in order “to stimulate our political imaginations by offering alternative visions of the good life, and to provide a critical standard against which our current social relations can be measured.”²⁷ Smith recapitulates Bonzo and Stevens: while the latter claim that Berry’s literature is apolitical insofar as its implications in ‘Darfur’ are not clear, the former claims that it is irreligious insofar as its ‘grace’ is stripped of ‘mystery’ and confined within her philosophical system. Simply put, idealistic readings of Berry’s literature neutralize his political and religious import.

Those who interpret Berry’s ‘idealism’ as incipient and see in it the potential to be politically practical ground it in political philosophy. Patrick J. Deneen undertakes this task, arguing that Berry’s “ideal, that human creatures thrive only when they live with, not against, nature” places him within a democratic political tradition that is an alternative to the liberal tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and others.²⁸ Berry’s emphasis on community and nature as central forces for ordering political life makes him a “Kentucky Aristotelian,” by which Deneen means that Berry’s standard for human practices is nature and that he argues against the prevailing liberal notion that an economy driven by self-interest rightly determines the arrangement of public life—acceptable governance, institutional and private financial practices, and so on.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁵ Ibid., 175.

²⁶ Smith construes Berry’s political vision as constructing such an “ideal republic” in “Wendell Berry’s Political Vision,” in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 50.

²⁷ Kimberly K. Smith, “Wendell Berry’s Feminist Agrarianism,” *Women’s Studies* 30, no. 5 (2001): 629.

²⁸ Patrick J. Deneen, “Wendell Berry and Democratic Self-Governance,” *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 75.

²⁹ Patrick J. Deneen, “Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought,” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 304ff.

Notwithstanding his claim that Berry “forcefully rejects” the liberal conception of “humans as *choosers*,”³⁰ Deneen maintains that Berry’s contribution to political thought is his description of “a true form of liberty” developing “from proper choices within properly understood limits.”³¹

Making Berry’s ‘idealism’ politically relevant in this way cannot but fail. Eric T. Freyfogle also sees in Berry a “moral vision” that, if implemented, would radically alter the current configuration of national politics.³² Because this vision remains an ideal, however, Freyfogle declares that Berry’s work itself only offers an ethic of “individual reform” requiring “the political realm” to make the systemic and structural changes necessary for this ethic to become public policy.³³ Fiction obstructs Berry’s political applicability; Port Williams’s leaders and central characters “remain outsiders” to politics as they “stand back and do nothing while industrial capitalism drags down their town.”³⁴ Freyfogle interprets the self-governance Deneen lauds in Berry as “deep-seated individualism,” a withdrawal from the mechanisms that shape and enforce the changes Berry demands.³⁵ Deneen is conspicuously reticent about Berry’s fiction; if Berry’s ‘ideal’ is narrowly connected to politics on the strength of its relation to political philosophy, then how does his literature fit in this relationship? As long as Berry’s work bears an integral ‘moral vision’ in need of application, Freyfogle’s criticisms cannot be gainsaid: Berry “dreams of a new order,” is not “realistic” enough, uses “dated images,” and lacks “effective ways” to achieve his fantasized political order.³⁶ Imagination, regarded as idealism, is an embarrassment to political thought and action—it has no inherent purchase on reality.

³⁰ Deneen, “Self-Governance,” 79.

³¹ Deneen, “Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought,” 312.

³² Eric T. Freyfogle, “Wendell Berry and the Limits of Populism,” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 173.

³³ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 190, 182-83.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 185, 190, 188.

Mark Shiffman, perhaps recognizing the inevitability of Freyfogle's proclamation of Berry's irrelevance for politics, argues that Berry's literature is a passage to classical forms of political philosophy. Echoing Deneen, Shiffman also connects Berry to Aristotle; however, Shiffman argues that Berry's literature is the means by which he "goes about recovering" the power of an Aristotelian economic vision "to illuminate our condition."³⁷ Put simply, Berry's fiction "communicates and nurtures in the most effective way possible the vision that restores us to what Aristotle understands as the starting points of political philosophy," even though the horizon of Berry's vision "stops almost entirely short of politics."³⁸ It is effective precisely because its fictional quality can articulate insights into the metaphysical reality of love and mystery while preserving family and community as institutions that give these insights "actual existence."³⁹ In other words, literature can be relevant as long as it remains in the realm of unreality; when its meaning becomes too concrete, too connected to 'actual existence' qua literature, it becomes ineffective for describing the fundamental reality that should animate politics and economics. Shiffman derides Berry's novel *Remembering*, for example, because its "message resides too much on the surface; it is something of a tract in fictional form."⁴⁰ Besides offering a bewildering assessment of *Remembering*, which is singular among Berry's novels for its mythopoeic style and depth, Shiffman judges the novel according to its ability to point to social institutions that make its imagined quality a reality. Put as a response to Freyfogle, literature is effective for politics precisely because it cultivates a vision of the good detached from 'actual existence' and can inspire people to enter the political realm where the real, difficult

³⁷ Mark Shiffman, "The Rediscovery of *Oikonomia*," *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 152.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

work of reform can be accomplished. Imagination may participate in a divine, fundamental reality, but its incarnation ultimately requires the aid of political philosophy.

The judgment of ‘effectiveness’ influences some literary analysis intent on validating Berry’s literature as instruction. Michael R. Stevens sees in Berry’s poem “Against the War in Vietnam” a “constructive ideal,” a vision of peace that can be embodied.⁴¹ This vision amounts to finding “a quiet piece of land someplace [to] spend the rest of my life in peace.”⁴² Stevens reads Berry’s short story, “Making it Home,” against this ideal vision. Berry is at fault, according to Stevens, when the transition from war to peace is not difficult enough; the end of “Making it Home,” in which a wounded soldier returns to his home place, is “a bit pat; peace is achieved with stunning quickness.”⁴³ Stevens’s reductive reading of Berry’s work is predetermined by his own conception of peace as the absence of war rather than as naming practices and modes of being that negotiate the constant presence of violence. Without such an ideal, “Making it Home,” for example, is the drama of a man struggling to return to a flourishing condition of personhood with wounds that cannot be either ignored or fully healed. David Crowe’s analysis of “Making it Home” recognizes it as a “parable” of this psychological negotiation with damaged subjectivity.⁴⁴ To Crowe, the story itself is meaningful for understanding human experience; it does not need to relate to or be used by an external ‘arena’ for it to be practical.

Alternatively, that Port William is imagined signals to other readers that the absence of such communities in America requires a recovery of what has been historically lost in the

⁴¹ Michael R. Stevens, “Living Peace in the Shadow of War: Wendell Berry’s Dogged Pacifism,” *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 110.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 106. Stevens is quoting Lt. Dick Winters in “Day of Days,” *Band of Brothers*, DVD, written by John Orloff, directed by Richard Loncraine (HBO Home Video, 2002).

⁴³ Stevens, “Living Peace,” 121.

⁴⁴ David Crowe, “Hemingway’s Nick and Wendell Berry’s Art,” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 199. Crowe’s otherwise excellent essay suggests that Berry, in “Making it Home,” is helping his readers “understand... a hatred of the ineluctably strange.” *Ibid.*, 199. I find no evidence throughout Berry’s corpus that would demonstrate such a ‘hatred.’

progressive movement of modernity. In this view, Berry's fiction is a declension narrative, dramatizing the downward movement of history through characters that embody loss. Jack Hicks summarizes this narrative: Wendell Berry's "view of man is as a distinctly flawed being fallen from natural wholeness. A ruined forest kingdom lies faintly in the background of Berry's work, idyllic and edenic, a prelapsarian, preagrarian world of unspoiled nature."⁴⁵ Port William, in this interpretation, is not the delineation of an ahistorical utopia but the culmination of the best practices and forms of life of the past. Richard Gamble, for instance, repudiates idealizations of Port William, suggesting instead that Berry's artistic gift is his "ability to make loss visible."⁴⁶ However, Gamble is not satisfied with reading Berry as cataloging the experience of loss or exploring the aspects of human nature that make forms of life vulnerable to social change; instead, Gamble—citing *Remembering* specifically—argues that Berry's literature is a "recovery" of what has been lost.⁴⁷ Berry cherishes "the remnants and ruins" of a former way of life and "labors to recover the wisdom" of things once known "as a matter of course."⁴⁸ Berry's fiction both "gathers up the pieces of a way of life" to create a public memory as ballast to modern educational models that all fail "to restore the old norm."⁴⁹ Protecting patterns of succession and establishing foundational narratives are paramount to preserving and enacting historical models of community in spite of changing social conditions.

Memory is undoubtedly important for Berry's imagination; however, the nostalgic program of recovery Gamble outlines accentuates the role of the will in memory. That is, remembering and forgetting are construed as options; being in community depends on choosing

⁴⁵ Jack Hicks, "Wendell Berry's Husband to the World: *A Place on Earth*," *Wendell Berry*, ed. Paul Merchant (Lewiston: Confluence Press, Inc., 1991), 119.

⁴⁶ Richard Gamble, "An Education for Membership: Wendell Berry on Schools and Communities," *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 33.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29. Specifically, Gamble highlights two losses: education no longer happens within local communities, and students are no longer taught, among other things, to be satisfied with who they are and their home place.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37, 38.

the right memories. John Leax insists that imagining “Port William as an ideal world or an agrarian paradise to be somehow established in suburban America is to misunderstand it entirely.”⁵⁰ The suffering endured by members in Port William is part of their life together, which is shaped in terms of the world as it is rather than as it should be; however, the primary activity is “their choosing in the present” the communal narratives.⁵¹ *Remembering* is a story of recovery because the protagonist, Andy, succeeds in his “task... to choose” communal over personal memory.⁵² Of course, Leax notes, memory can fail and be lost; imagination, in the face of such loss, must construct new narratives that can be chosen. These imagined accounts of communal life “cannot have the life-giving vitality of a story handed down by constant telling and retelling” but nevertheless facilitate “a new and chosen [world] coming into being.”⁵³ Hope springs from these narratives, not as optimism but as an “expectation” that the time coming into being through making the right decisions “opens us to a new future.”⁵⁴ Memory understood as the storage of available resources for how best to proceed into the future perceives the movement of history as controllable. It assumes that forgetting or bad memory are vices out of which people can will themselves. It also regards imagination as merely a deficient faculty of memory—a poor stand-in to be used only when memory fails.

Read as retrieval, Berry’s fiction effectively provides memories for readers but is doomed to the same irrelevancy as idealistic expositions. Nathan Schlueter argues that “Berry’s fiction

⁵⁰ John Leax, “Memory and Hope in the World of Port William,” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 70. Also, Barkley Thompson’s Christian study of *Remembering* stresses “the imperative to decide whether or not to live in light of the eschatological vision.” “Eschatological Moments in the Theology of Josiah Royce and the Novels of Wendell Berry,” *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 45.

⁵³ Leax, “Memory and Hope,” 71.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

becomes memory itself.”⁵⁵ Literature is a passage to political transformation not by leading to political philosophy but by connecting readers to their forgotten history. *Remembering*, for example, provides a “poetic vision that corrects and heals the escapist desires” of modern life; it is a vision that “is present to actual memory” of older generations but otherwise unavailable to the “younger generation whose memories are marred.”⁵⁶ Sensing the specter of the ‘apolitical’ argument, Schlueter is embarrassed by Berry’s incongruence with political forms—“Berry’s imagination seems to point to a vision of rational anarchy”⁵⁷—and roots the import of Berry’s vision in the *telos* of history: Eden. Schlueter admits that, because Berry lacks a “positive vision of formal mediating institutions” and is “incomplete” without the “original sin narrative,” Berry’s imagination forms his best memories into an aesthetic that mediates perfection.⁵⁸ Schlueter’s presentation of Berry’s ‘Edenic imagination’ is nostalgia at its most extreme; Berry’s imagination provides visions of “perfect peace,” “perfect justice,” and “perfect union” to restrain war, politics, and marriage.⁵⁹ Schlueter’s nostalgia is ultimately the same as Schiffman’s idealism; both attempt to recuperate the relevance of Berry’s fiction for politics by bridging its relationship to institutions after conceding the presence of a fundamental break between imagination and political thought. Their respective readings of *Remembering* illuminate their differences and similarities: Schiffman dismisses *Remembering* as too historical and insufficiently

⁵⁵ Nathan Schlueter, “The Integral Imagination of Wendell Berry,” *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 227.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 231, 228. That is to say, Schlueter is suggesting that Berry shapes his memories of the best aspects of the past into a vision that takes the role “formal mediating institutions” should play in forming social and political life. Furthermore, this vision is insufficient for such a role, he accuses, because it lacks an adequate sense for the fallen nature of humanity and therefore cannot but fail to bring about the moral perfection of readers that Schlueter claims Berry is attempting to achieve. Perhaps Berry’s best response to the alleged lack of the “original sin narrative” comes from one of his Sabbath poems: “...Have I gauged exactly/ enough the weights of sin?... If I’m a theologian/ I am one to the extent I have learned to duck/ when the small, haughty doctrines fly overhead,/ dropping their loads of whitewash at random/ on the faces of those who look toward Heaven.” *Leavings* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 114.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

metaphysical; Schlueter praises *Remembering* for its representation of the best human actions without being idyllic; both agree that Berry's imagination is at its best when it is purified from the messiness and compromises that characterize modern social life; both agree that imagination is disconnected from reality.

The lack of an obvious and inherent relation to institutions is also an anxiety for some Christian readers who find Berry's community to be instructive for ecclesial and theological thought and practice. These readers agree with Bonzo and Stevens's view that Port William constitutes an eschatological vision; they interpret Berry's language of "community" and "farm" as "church." Eugene Peterson explicitly admits, "Whenever Berry writes the world 'farm,' I substitute 'parish': the sentence works for me every time."⁶⁰ Richard P. Church reads "the vision of [fictional characters] Wheeler and Henry as models for the church [which] is by analogy in lieu of an account thereof" and then faults Berry's lack of an "expansive vision of Christianity" for disregarding "church practices" that are "nonnegotiable."⁶¹ The "marginal" placement of the church in community is therefore disconcerting; Kyle Childress resents the church as a "pale, fading reflection of the larger community" and instead wants churches to be "the very ground of community, that define, build and embody a common life" to which "wider society" might conform.⁶² Foisting an eschatology and ecclesiology on Berry is perhaps intended to extricate his view of creation from secular or idolatrous interpretations. Richard Pevear's analysis of Berry

⁶⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 131.

⁶¹ Richard P. Church, "Of the Good That Has Been Possible in This World," *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, ed. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 69n. 48.

⁶² Kyle Childress, "Proper Work: Wendell Berry and the Practice of Ministry" *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, ed. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 79. Philip A. Muntzel is another Christian author nervous of edges; he objects to Berry's characterization as a "marginal Christian," opposing expositions that suggest, "his theology of love is marginal." Muntzel's Christian virtues require centers: "The love at the center of this theology makes Christian hopefulness viable." Muntzel, "Embedded Hopefulness: Wendell Berry and Saint Thomas Aquinas on Christian Hope," *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, ed. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 201.

represents this threatening charge of idolatry from which ‘eschatological’ interpretations attempt to save Berry. Pevear argues that Berry’s religious vision is rooted in a “Stoic deification of Nature” that “dispenses with the entire Judeo-Christian tradition, not only its ‘teachings’ but its deepest motives.”⁶³ On the one hand, it is not self-evident that, as Philip Muntzel suggests, Berry’s reference to “heavenly” things is “eschatological.”⁶⁴ On the other hand, it is also not self-evident that, without an institutionalized religion and dogmatic theology, Berry’s religious language lacks meaning.⁶⁵

In Berry’s work, church is not particularly important for experiencing the divine; however, his poetic, religious language for describing ordinary life communicates its non-institutional openness to transcendence. Though it occurs outside ‘formal mediating institutions,’ divine experience is still mediated. The language used to describe this experience is not dogmatic but pertains to a theology understood as the Christian community’s self-articulation. Berry implies that Port William is a “Bible based culture,” but the meaning of its life—its drama and language—is incarnated in its stories.⁶⁶ Divine experience is dramatized through conversations and actions in the community’s relationships; Berry uses religious language in this context both to give it narrative complexity as well as to expand the range and depth of these terms. Simply put, Berry’s literature does not illustrate Christian ideas; his theological language, used in an imaginative context, changes the possible meaning of concepts that use the same words. It is not the case, therefore, that Berry uses terms such as ‘community’ and ‘mystery’ to make a religion of his ideologies.⁶⁷ Instead, one understands these terms differently after reading Berry’s novels,

⁶³ Richard Pevear, “On the Prose of Wendell Berry,” *The Hudson Review* 35, no. 2 (1982): 344, 345.

⁶⁴ Muntzel, “Embedded Hopefulness,” 200.

⁶⁵ According to Pevear, Berry “frequently speaks of ‘mystery’ and ‘transcendence,’ of sacraments and rituals, of community and spirituality, though none of these words can have any meaning for him.” Pevear, “Wendell Berry’s Prose,” 345.

⁶⁶ See Grubbs, *Conversations*, 128.

⁶⁷ Berry “has a case to make, which he argues from his own emotions, selecting words that sound ‘good’ or seem to

which affects both how one thinks about their use in religious contexts as well as how one experiences the world by describing or narrating one's life through them.

In short, literature is the place Berry elucidates the meaning of certain words to open up possibilities for experiencing reality—both in its visible and obscure manifestations. Paul Merchant counters Pevear's indictment on Berry's language, discerning that in Berry's writing

...themes and concepts ('tradition,' 'memory,' 'marriage,' 'culture') recur in new contexts, with their meanings enhanced... This process of defining terms, freshening and clarifying them, showing both their root significance and their metaphoric potential, is basic to Berry's craft, and may perhaps also be a stimulus to his imagination."⁶⁸

To read Berry's literature as an exploration of human experiences of reality, and investigation of the capacity of language to articulate it, is to perceive its practicality. Idealistic and nostalgic schemas elide the practical value of fiction; using Berry for displaying or persuading religious and political commitments predetermined on other grounds mold his particularity into a system. Put simply, these readings put him to use; they treat Berry as raw material, whose worth is determined by that which it can be made to produce.

Against didactic and exploitative renderings of Berry, I am interested in the experience of reading his novels. Bill McKibben's experience reading Berry "is a little like reading the Gospels."⁶⁹ L. Roger Owens's experience reading Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter* transformed it

support him regardless of their own context. That is, he makes a 'religion' of his cause—a reversal not uncommon in this age of ideologies." Pevear, "Wendell Berry's Prose," 346. Even friendly interpreters of Berry surmise ideologies and subsequently feel obliged to reconcile them with his art, which inevitably result in allegorical readings of his work. A review in *Publishers Weekly* proposes that though *Jayber Crow* is "freighted with ideas and ideology" Berry nonetheless "manages to project such warmth and luminosity." *Publishers Weekly* 241, no. 31 (July 31, 2000): 68. Nancy Barta-Smith takes this suggestion as her point of departure, examining the "connections between Berry's narrative and his essays," which amounts to Berry using literature to "fictionalize" his "ecological philosophy." Barta-Smith, "Nurturing the Earth: Mixing Metaphors in Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy," *Literature, Writing, and the Natural World*, ed. James Guignard and T.P. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 48.

⁶⁸ Paul Merchant, "Introduction," *Wendell Berry*, ed. Paul Merchant (Lewiston: Confluence Press, Inc., 1991), 3. Merchant perhaps unhelpfully sees this process as a "development," which suggests a forward movement of progress that negates previous instantiations or meanings.

⁶⁹ Bill McKibben, "A Citizen of the Real World," *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 116. McKibben rejects dismissing Berry as "nostalgic or sentimental" because

into his own “*lectio divina*, ‘sacred reading.’”⁷⁰ McKibben and Owens describe the experience of Berry’s fiction as “doing religious work,” in part because, for Berry, writing is “doing religious work” on himself.⁷¹ Arguments and propositions neither facilitate nor become the ultimate aim of these experiences; their affections are informed through imagination. Religious work, for Berry, is not necessarily or most importantly something that is willed; according to Berry, “Jesus... had some strong reservations about the efficacy of the human will.”⁷² Rather, Berry says that writing fiction is the result of both inspiration and fascination: “I wrote what came to me. The will was in the workmanship... [which] involves fascination... I was irresistibly attracted to it.”⁷³ He writes primarily to attempt a life, one locally adapted to his place through farming and writing; advocacy is secondary, sublimated into his art and present only in complex and indirect forms. Berry’s fiction brings readers into the “atmosphere and living tissue”⁷⁴ of this life, not to replicate but to share his struggles and satisfactions—to indicate the public or shared meaning of his life’s work of local adaptation. McKibben and Owens encounter Berry’s affection and fascination—formed by his will into an art that enables its communication—and experience an insight of their own, a recognition of truth. Imagination is the faculty of the mind’s affection

he is “in fact... one of our most realistic writers, the least prone to the delusion that a way of life dependent on short-term exploitation of the soil and one’s fellow man can be durable or satisfying.” Furthermore, according to McKibben, the effect of this realism is indicated through one’s desires: “You cannot read his words without wishing in some corner of your heart to be a small farmer in a working community.” McKibben, “Wendell Berry,” *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, ed. Bill McKibben (New York: Library of America, 2008), 504. Rebecca Solnit is an example of someone who dismisses Berry for having “arcadian nostalgia.” Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 53. McKibben calls this an indulgence of “drive-by dissing” of Berry’s “insistence on strong communities. Yet she understands, at some deep level, the pleasures of the plural and the communal: Her essay on architect and planner Teddy Cruz centers on the need to increase urban density, hence gregariousness, and is as nostalgic as anything Berry ever wrote (nostalgia being defined as the desire for something that works better than the sterile American present).” Bill McKibben, “Book Review: Storming the Gates of Paradise,” *L.A. Times*, 17 June 2008. Available at: <http://www.latimes.com/features/books/la-bk-mckibben17jun17,0,3719640.story>.

⁷⁰ L. Roger Owens, “Let the Place Judge: Healing the Division between Theology and Practice,” *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, ed. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 222.

⁷¹ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 129.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

⁷⁴ Shiffman, “Rediscovery of Oikonomia,” 161.

and fascination; it is an engagement with the material reality at hand without perceiving worth entirely determined by history (nostalgia) or entirely isolated from it (idealism). Fiction is a medium for imagination that communicates the depth and complexity of human experiences that are temporal yet reveal the eternal. It tells stories that both say what they mean and yet can mean more than they say.

In this dissertation I argue that Berry's understanding of imagination as a dispossessive, particularizing force is central to his community- and character-based ethics, primarily articulated as fidelity to place. Berry's imagination, analyzed through the Port William community, embodies both the healing and disruptive experiences of fidelity to place. Affection—the attraction and commitment to both creation and creator—is the motive force of fidelity to place, but it is neither purely stabilizing nor revolutionary for institutional religion and politics. Berry's emphasis on affection is his inquiry into the quality and form of modern experiences of belonging—to other people, to nature, to communities, to culture. The work of imagination informs the affections, changing modes of attachment based on newly understood characteristics, needs, and interests of specific others—including both human and non-human beings. In short, Berry's imagination is fundamental to his work of local adaptation. Difference and insight is experienced in the imagination; it is through the faculty of imagination that humans experience their openness to transcendence—the otherness both present in and beyond created material. Imagination as local adaptation is pertinent to social orders and theological ethics that are preoccupied with the outward forms of communal virtues (practices, social tasks, institutional affiliation, preservation) insofar as it facilitates continuous experiences with that which exceeds superficial visibility, necessitating ongoing negotiations and revisions according to what has been left unaccounted in preexisting structures of moral formation. In addition to its

disruptive capacity, imagination also foregrounds the importance of experience for the moral life; fidelity to place is as much about cultivating healthy modes of being—psychologically, emotionally, and physically—as it is about supplanting capitalist consumer habits with a household economy. Through imagination humans experience the true, good, and beautiful aspects of the world, have their affections shaped by that experience, and thereby receive these qualities into their souls. This process is what Berry means by the health or wholeness that comes from local adaptation. A healthy mode of being is constitutive of a life lived in community and ordered by fidelity to place—a life of interdependency with the community, its outsiders and alienated members, and the wilderness and divinity that provide its sustenance. As Berry puts it, through imagination one “belongs to the world of love, which is a world of living creatures, natural orders and cycles, many small, fragile lights in the dark.”⁷⁵

In the first chapter, I argue that Berry’s imagination is the work of local adaptation. Imagination is practical; it is used to join oneself to the world. How desires relate to place is the driving question of local adaptation: one either adapts oneself to the particular lives and contours of one’s neighbourhood and heritage or exploits them for individual self-fulfillment. Berry joins

⁷⁵ Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1995), 103. Norman Wirzba has developed the theological and ecological importance of thinking ourselves as creatures. See *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Both Wirzba’s and my own reflection on creation and being creatures draws from Rowan Williams, “On Being Creatures,” *On Christian Theology* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 63-78. I take these reflections to bear on Berry’s imagination and artistic writing rather than his agrarianism, which has been covered well by Wirzba and others. Williams has written on the relationship between the artist and her art, which has influenced my reading of Berry. Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2006). “But it may well be that the practice of art assists us in making sense of what theologians, Christians in particular, claim to be the fundamental framework for ‘reading’ the world. Briefly, the Christian theologian says that God is, of his nature, ‘generative’—that the notion of a solitary or inactive deity is incompatible with what God shows of God in the world and its history. ... Thus what theology might have to say to the artist is not exactly that human creativity imitates divine but almost the opposite of this—that divine creativity is not capable of imitation; it is uniquely itself, a creation from nothing that realizes not an immanent potential in the maker but a pure desire for life and joy in what is freely made. It is the limit case of labour for the good of what is made. But though divine creation cannot be imitated, what it does is to define the nature of a love that is involved in making. ... Human making seeks to echo, necessarily imperfectly, the character of God’s love as shown in making and becoming incarnate.” *Grace and Necessity*, 158, 164, 165.

himself to the world in both farming and writing through fascination and affection.⁷⁶ However, local adaptation is not a one-time event or achievement; Berry is haunted by the possibility that his efforts of adaptation through affection are exploitative. I suggest that Berry's reading of William Carlos Williams is helpful for understanding Berry's own continual negotiation of his fidelity to place. Williams clarifies for Berry the imagination's irrevocable condition of failure and betrayal. He also demonstrates ways to adapt despite the risks of exploitation. This chapter outlines the way in which literature connects Berry to the world and how Berry's own literature as a tool of local adaptation connects readers to the world. Specifically, Berry's incarnational interpretation of Williams's manifesto, 'no ideas but in things,' provides the methodology by which I read Berry's literature as an insight into creation. Though Berry does not give a system by which one can become locally adapted, he exemplifies the struggle of adaptation in his fidelity to place by giving flesh to the idea that humans are creatures. That is, his literature performs his affectionate relation to the world through its language and experience. The quality of that belonging is judged according to the orienting end of his desires, which is either self-love and results in exploitation or is God's pleasure in creation and results in an alignment of affection thereof.

The second chapter argues that Berry discerns God's pleasure in creation through the affection and desires exhibited in two friends from his childhood, Nick and Aunt Georgie. With respect to "the idea of a healthy community," chapter one defines Berry's incarnational meaning of "idea," and chapter two defines the cultural form and practices of "a healthy community." This chapter outlines Berry's understanding of community: its disorders, the social and personal effects of these disorders, its potential for renewal, how it might be renewed, and the social and personal effects of this renewal. Part of the contribution of this chapter to the overall argument

⁷⁶ See Grubbs, *Conversations*, 129.

that Berry's community is neither an ideal nor nostalgic is that he gets his understanding from a cultural artifact that speaks to the present—*King Lear*—and is thus not nostalgic, and from the actual experience of real, wounded relationships and is thus not idealistic. The predominant dereliction of American imagination is its desire for a “freedom from drudgery.” By focusing on inordinate desires, I argue that the disordered soul is the principal problem he addresses. Also, that he discusses community and soul in the civil rights context indicates that these concerns are political for him. At issue for Berry is not foremost a social structure but a relational understanding of humanity. Community is not an end in itself; returning to the human condition, away from a life reduced to self-interest, depends on both community and wilderness. Wilderness is renewed through death and loss, which provides the pattern for humanity's renewal. What is needed is a restoration of the desire to work, which is the opposite motive force of that which is fragmenting humanity and society. Berry learns his affection and pleasure from Nick; his desires do not originate in himself and are not uniquely his own. These desires call him to work and to a way of farming that embody this love. Put simply, community is participation in creation as interlocking, interdependent relations; Berry discovers this sense of community through relationships with those who have suffered and been exploited by agrarian communities of the past. Accordingly, Berry does not apprehend membership and community in strictly behavioral terms, which would be inadequate to address our estrangement from one another and our unhealthy inward lives. Membership implicates a psychology—an order of the soul—that specifically addresses issues of satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness.

In the third chapter I argue that Berry develops a narrative style—what I call first-person retrospective reflection—that embodies the struggle of the community to include its wayward members. This chapter outlines the art of Berry's imagination, the way he forms the particularity

of his subjects into something that is communicable to a general audience. By focusing on tragedy as a form of literature that affects the reader, I analyze the relationship between the experience of literature and its style. Berry's style itself communicates his idea of the healthy community through the form of his stories. Berry's tragic imagination is the failure and betrayal that conditions all his literature; because he cannot completely represent a subject, his writing remains incomplete. His style attests this incompleteness; his narrative voice communicates both in what it does and does not say. It is an art of self-effacing or dispossessive adaptation, telling stories determined by characters rather than the author. This, of course, is not entirely possible, but the defeat is part of the communication of self-effacement; the work of art is not itself to be imitated or replicated. The aim of his literature is not to be an ethical guidebook, offering sets of rules or guidelines to follow. Instead, I suggest that Berry draws on the parable of the lost sheep as the paradigmatic tragic narrative, which constitutes his imagination as a rite of companionship rather than a vision of totalized inclusion or an assertion of authority over marginal members. Berry's style counters modern literary tendencies to use racial wounds—namely, the injustices and exploitation of non-white American experience—to authenticate fiction. These proclivities ignore the particular place and time of the author, attempting a colonial transcendence of boundaries by expropriating the voice of a racialized other. I analyze four of Berry's stories, arguing that he changes his point of view to search for a way to evaluate the community from the perspective of the lost without colonizing that position.

Chapter four analyzes three of Berry's novels in light of the previous three chapters. Specifically, I demonstrate that in each story the drama follows imagination's movement of descent and ascent in Williams's pattern of local adaptation delineated in chapter one; the protagonist embodies the communal character of interdependence through work, satisfaction, and

shared wounds described in chapter two; the contingency and self-effacing service is enacted in the narrative voice argued in chapter three. The characters in each narrative embody different ways of belonging through local adaptation, although they all do so through affection in the condition of failure that leads to experiences of transcendence. Regret, sorrow, and despair in these novels clarify the emotional connections to community; they are vital experiences of fidelity to place that should not be ignored. I determine how each are poetically incarnated and argue that they form readers' affections. Berry's stories depict the way in which heartbreak and melancholy are neither impediments nor final determinants to fidelity to place; he presents the spiritual substance of attraction and belonging through experiences of descent. Familiarity to place and marriage are key tropes, which are not portrayed conventionally or treated superficially. Rather, their portrayal and treatment is given depth through poetic structures that expand the possible meaning and redemption of undergoing arduous circumstances. Each novel contains a vision of beauty that attracts the characters through descent into ascent; each is an ordinary vision transparent to the divine and draws the characters toward it. The experience of this attraction and drawing dramatizes the characters' ethics or orientation toward the good; it informs their virtues and character, which are not primarily understood through categories of choice or habit. What is significant is not what is seen as a visible alternative to modernity but in what is felt and undergone. This experience is what Berry's fiction can offer that his essays cannot.

Summarily stated, chapter one argues that imagination is central to an ethics of local adaptation oriented toward the common good or health of a community; chapter two reveals where and how Berry gets his idea of the healthy community; chapter three displays Berry's development of a technique by which he can satisfactorily communicate that idea of community;

and chapter four analyzes the incarnate life of the community through three characters and their affections. Port William's function is to dramatize an understanding of what it means to be a creature: a created being whose condition is one of fundamental dependence on both the rest of creation and the divine source of all being. Berry's literature embodies the virtues he argues are central for communal life not as ideals to strive for or as relics of the past to guard but rather as qualities to help us experience our reality as creatures—to clarify what we are experiencing in our quotidian routines.

Chapter 1

Ideas in Things

Say it! No ideas but in things. Mr.
 Paterson has gone away
 to rest and write. Inside the bus one sees
 his thoughts sitting and standing. His
 thoughts alight and scatter....

—*Paterson*, Book One¹

The extremes of reality and imagination, with the limits of human experience, are never pure. And so there is always some risk of betrayal. It is possible to allow imagination to abuse reality; it is possible by imagination to violate a real intimacy.

—*Life is a Miracle*²

There is no ‘world of imagination’ as distinct from or opposed to the ‘real world.’ The imagination is in the world, is at work in it, is necessary to it, and is correctable by it. This correcting of imagination by experience is inescapable, necessary, and endless, as is the correcting of experience by imagination. This is the great general work of criticism to which we all are called.

—*Home Economics*³

Introduction

Many of Berry’s essays request—explicitly or implicitly—that imagination be taken seriously. He draws on poets and novelists in his agricultural, economic, religious, and political arguments, suggesting that imaginative works are a funding current for addressing the practical problems of modern life—loneliness, violence, divorce, abortion, poverty, political scandal, consumerism, pollution, and financial management. Berry refuses to succumb to the modern anxiety that writing, in Auden’s infamous phrase, “makes nothing happen.”⁴ Conceding to such agitation demarcates art from the “practical disciplines”—such as engineering and agriculture—

¹ Quoted in Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1970), 55

² Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1999), 85.

³ Berry, *Home Economics*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1987), 96.

⁴ Berry, *Standing by Words* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1983), 107.

which are equally divided from aesthetic consideration.⁵ Berry instead shares in the tradition of fiction writers who do not divide the appreciation of imagined worlds from formative experiences; literature serves a purpose.⁶ Imaginative literature, in Berry's words, "is a way to learn, know, celebrate, and remember the truth—or, as Yeats said, to 'Bring the soul of man to God.'" ⁷ Truth, for Berry, is the created world itself; its ordering patterns and movements that are not humanly determined. The source of this order is God the Creator: "the formative and quickening spirit... still immanent and at work" in the world, whose presence is "felt but not known."⁸ The purpose of Berry's fiction is to tell the truth, to flesh out his insights into the presence of the divine in the world.

God is in the detail. Imagination is the faculty that perceives singularity; it grasps qualities and depth of character.⁹ Its activity depends on contact with reality outside the imagining person. Imagination is distinct from fantasy; its operation requires an object with

⁵ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 5.

⁶ Literature is not neutral; it is used for different ends. I have in mind, for example, Augustine's criticism of the theatre. It is Varro's insight that cultural institutions form the beliefs of the people. Roman princes took advantage of this credulity, deceiving their subjects' sense of how gods relate to humans and one another. These rulers, then, are not "righteous princes but men like demons." Augustine, *City of God*, Edited and translated by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.32. That is, they persuade the people to "accept as true those things which they knew to be false: they have done this in order to bind men more tightly, as it were, in civil society, so that they might likewise possess them as subjects." (4.32) Deception is necessary to keep society going as it is, and the charisma of the theatre provides the requisite enchantment for keeping the people compliant. Kings need not care "how good their subjects are, but how docile" so that the people "applaud, not those who take counsel for their welfare, but those who are most lavish with pleasures." (2.20) Civil society—the language and institutions of public life—is arranged to accommodate the self-interest of the upper crust, maintaining a strict social hierarchy while perpetuating the appearance of potential social mobility and transformation. "The privatization of culture through the lavish entertainment and self-indulgence of the upper classes has altered popular cultural and social expectations, and as a result has devalued public discourse and public life." Robert Dodaro OSA, "Eloquent Lies, Just Wars, and the Politics of Persuasion: Reading *City of God* in a 'Postmodern' World," *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 123-124n.44. These engineered expectations are a kind of demonic possession: problematic influences that link desire and action through corrupted self-interest.

⁷ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 112.

⁸ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 4, 35.

⁹ "The business of the poet is to reach the intimate, that is ontological, sources of life which cannot be clearly apprehended in themselves by any concept, but which, once intuited, can be made accessible to all in symbolic and imaginative celebration." Thomas Merton, "The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir," *The Sewanee Review* 75, no. 2 (1967), 318. D.E. Richardson suggests that Berry "forces us to feel that the old rural popular world of the South is somehow inaccessible to a mature poetic imagination today" because he does not "relish his affinities with the urbanized world of country music, including a touch of maudlin self-pity." D.E. Richardson, review of *Sayings & Doings*, by Wendell Berry, *Sothern Review* 12 (October 1976): 883.

which it relates. Berry's writing imagines his small farming community in an abused part of America, imagining its invaluable particularity over-against the broken coherence of an American culture that derides its 'provinciality.' Reduction is the opposing force of imagination, condensing and quieting the innate vivacity of people and places into categories and types. Usually, reduction serves exploitation as part of the process of realizing an objective extrinsic to the subject in question and formulated prior to engaging it. Imagination is a "particularizing and a local force" that "shatters the frameworks" of reduction "by placing the world and its creatures within a context of sanctity in which their worth is absolute and incalculable."¹⁰ The infinite variety of life is the context of sanctity; discerning the individuality of things, their unique qualities, is seeing that "everything that lives is holy."¹¹ Put theologically, imagination perceives the world through "God's love for all things, for each thing for its own sake and not for its category."¹² Berry's fiction is his response to the "obligation to preserve God's pleasure in all things."¹³ Likeness to God—what it is that makes humans god-like or images of God—incorporates the pleasures of "our own lives, our own wakefulness in this world, and in the company of other people and other creatures."¹⁴ Pleasure is "affection in action;" it is incarnated.¹⁵ Berry's imaginative engagement with his place is the preservation of God's

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 32.

¹¹ William Blake, *Complete Writings*, 160. Quoted in Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 102. John Gatta reads the praise and meditation—and the absence of protest and persuasion—in Berry's poetry as a response to the sacramental quality of nature, one that cultivates a relationship with the landscape through imagination. John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and the Environment from the Puritans to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Harold K. Bush, Jr. follows Gatta's attempt to close the gap between the Romantics and ecopoets through their respective attempts to perceive transcendence through imagination; Bush suggests that Berry's poetic imagination is religious insofar as his poetry attempts to mend the gaps between "the natural and the supernatural, or between the past, present and future." Harold K. Bush, Jr., "Seeds of Hope, and the Survival of Creation" *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 304. "Selfless acts of love," such as the Samaritan's act in Jesus' parable, "are simultaneously embodied in the material world as well as imbued with the spiritual and eternal world." *Ibid.*, 313.

¹² Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 103.

¹³ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 139.

¹⁴ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 138.

¹⁵ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 136

pleasure; his writing incarnates this affection. Properly used, imagination is the activity of the soul's affectionate movement toward its transcendent source. Berry's writing is the continual enactment of aligning himself—his desires, hopes, and practices—with the pleasure, the otherness, of the life he discovers in creation. Its practicality for Berry's readers lies not in its ability to incite imitation; he is skeptical of followers and sycophants. Rather, the usefulness of his literature is its revelation of Berry's experience of being at home in the world; it gives 'home' and 'fidelity' a refreshing, particular meaning.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze Berry's argument for the importance and usefulness of imagination for addressing the issues of reduction and exploitation by detailing the activity of imaginative engagement as well as the nature of its results. It will provide an understanding of Berry's imaginative process and thereby give an interpretive framework for my subsequent analysis of his work. In short, I argue that Berry's analysis of William Carlos Williams's account of the poetic outlines the proclivities and labour of Berry's own imagination.¹⁶ More specifically, I suggest that Berry's interpretation and use of Williams

¹⁶ Berry's indebtedness to Williams contrasts him from, rather than relates him to, the romantic tradition. Eric Trethewey argues that Berry participates in the romantic tradition insofar as he finds "in nature not only the locus and subject matter of poems but also a philosophical grounding and a mode of figuration for the cultural value, the ethos, they articulate." "Politics, Nature, and Value in Wendell Berry's 'Art of the Commonplace,'" *Wendell Berry Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 77. This tradition begins with Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads and is distinguished by "regarding genuine experience of nature as a palliative to specific social and intellectual disorders brought about by an emerging industrial economy." (Ibid.) Trethewey uses Alfred North Whitehead's definition of nature poetry in the romantic tradition as a protest "on behalf of the organic view of nature, and also a protest against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter of fact." *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 138. Berry's agrarianism, according to Trethewey, shape and inform his conception of nature, and also has been in turn shaped and informed by his "imaginative imperatives." "Politics, Nature, and Value," 77. Despite Berry's trenchant criticisms of romanticism in general and specific romantic poets in particular, Trethewey is determined to keep Berry in the romantic tradition; he dismissively explains Berry's criticisms as "indebted to currently fashionable promodernist, antiromantic viewpoints in the air when he was a graduate student." Ibid., 86n 5. Moreover, according to Trethewey, his agrarianism corresponds to his romantic imagination, which makes him "faithful to William Carlos Williams's adjuration 'No ideas but in things.'" Ibid., 86n 6. Katey Castellano also reads Berry in line with Wordsworth and romanticism, suggesting that both have their own brand of agrarian idealism. Castellano, "Romantic Conservatism in Burke, Wordsworth, and Wendell Berry," *SubStance* 40, no. 2 (2011): 73-91. "Berry insists that the backwards look to a previous, less mechanized, simpler time... leads not just to an impossible desire for childhood, but to an intellectually fecund, organic connection with the earth." Ibid., 86. Castellano uses Michael Löwy's and Robert Sayre's definition of romantic thought, who see it

establishes the dilemma of writing poetry that is cognizant of the constant risk of exploiting its subject, which is managed by the struggle toward local adaptation; that becoming locally adapted includes adjusting ideas to things through local language and an artistic style that elevates these ideas above mere description; that poetry can be useful for the poet and reader in this local work insofar as it is connected to the creativity of creation, which is the active presence of the divine in the world; that this connection invokes multiple layers of meaning, as poetry is both inspired by something beyond the poet's consciousness and resonates with the reader's own experiences; that the structure of imaginative engagement is descent and ascent, which is a movement that confronts the despair of failure and the fragility of life rather than avoiding it; and that, therefore,

as “a critique of modernity, that is, of modern capitalist civilization, in the name of values and ideals drawn from the past (the precapitalist, premodern past).” *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 17. Berry labels Wordsworth's poem “Michael” a “sort of cultural watershed,” and appreciates “The Prelude” as revealing that Wordsworth's “affection and understanding are wholehearted,” because in these two poems shepherds “seem to offer his mind its most authentic means of apprehending places, both in their physical presence and in their ‘Genius.’” See *What Are People For?* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1990), 162; and *Standing by Words* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1983), 189. But these admirations for Wordsworth are exceptions; Wordsworth is an example of modern egotism that presumes the mind can be immediately fitted to the external world. Wordsworth is one of the figures Berry heavily criticizes in *Standing by Words*, which is mostly “a meditation on this essentially industrial dream of disembodied existence” paradigmatically expressed in Milton's Satan: “The mind is its own place.” Jason Peters “Education, Heresy, and the ‘Deadly Disease of the World,’” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, 261. Romantic nature poetry, according to Berry, is idealistic; generally speaking, it does not have a robust sense of the ways in which nature is mediated. The failure of this kind of poetry, this idealistic imagination, is a failure of justice. Its goal, as William Hazlitt said of Wordsworth, is “to owe nothing but to himself.” *The Spirit of the Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 133. Quoted in *Standing by Words*, 164. But such is the ambition of Milton's Satan; justice is determined by the given abilities and resources of the individual—i.e., it is replaced by power. Percy Shelley—Berry's bête noir and synecdoche for romantic poetry—appropriates this satanic, divisive power to poetry: “poetry is the power of the mind that enables it to escape the authority of a tyrannical God... [and] physical whereabouts.” *Standing by Words*, 167. One's place is tangential to the mind, whose primary activity is animating a continual waking dream. Shelley, though dividing imagination from reason, nevertheless wants “the work of ‘mechanists’ and ‘political economists’ to be ruled by ‘those first principles which belong to the imagination...’” *Standing by Words*, 168. Without any relationship between them, imagination has no bearing on the reason or guiding principles of mechanists and political economists. Shelley's divisive paradigm of thought fails to comprehend its implications on the mind of those he wants to control; if the poetic mind might be arrogant enough to ignore created order in favor of its own desires, then why might not the economic or scientific mind do the same? Shelley's ordering justice, without material mediation for correction and judgment, is idealistic. He does not know “whether he is in Paradise or only in Dreamland” nor can he tell the difference between “a triumph of imagination or an ‘escape from reality.’” *Standing by Words*, 169. Bifurcated from material reality and the good, one can attain no “seemly competences of whereabouts.” *Standing by Words*, 163. Put simply, the romantic mind does not generate virtues. Both Trethewey and Castellano see Berry's romantic heritage as central to his political import; however, Berry's criticism of Wordsworth and Shelley precludes this possibility as they understand it. Williams's emphasis on place as the ground underfoot and embodied ideas sets him apart from both Wordsworth and Shelley.

poetry can be therapeutic.¹⁷ Therapy for environmental destruction and cultural exploitation consists in adapting one's inner life to one's place. Neither Williams nor Berry has a program or prescription for how anyone can become locally rooted in a habitat; their writings offer a kind of therapy not a panacea. Instead, they incarnate in their writing the experiences of their struggles to adapt and preserve their places.¹⁸ Berry's reading and experience of Williams's poetry supplies the conditions in which one can see how his own literature presents an imaginative activity that opens up a non-categorical, non-competitive way of seeing the world.

¹⁷ That it is 'therapeutic' is partly meant to contrast Berry's and Williams's writing from the romantic tradition, which is used to illustrate how Berry is 'political' (see fn. 15 above). If one would like to call Berry's poetry 'political,' as Trethewey does, insofar as it articulates an "ethos," ("Politics, Nature, and Value," 84) then I do not see a hard and fast distinction between calling it 'therapeutic' or 'political'; however, if one would like to make a substantive connection between Berry and the Romantic, Burkean conservatism, as Castellano does, then the distinction is important. Berry's agrarianism is distinct from the Southern Agrarians, for example, insofar as he is performing local practices rather than advocating institutional policies. *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 40. Insofar as he advocates a "human economy," which is to "make one whole thing of ourselves and this world," his writing draws more from Williams than from the agrarians. "To make ourselves into a practical wholeness with the land under our feet is maybe not altogether possible... but, as a goal, it at least carries us beyond *hubris*." *Citizenship Papers* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 49. Unity with the 'land under our feet' reiterates Williams's desire to have understanding adhered to 'the ground underfoot.' The goal of which is not a political achievement—not a policy instituted—but a change in character, a conversion from *hubris*. I find 'therapy' to be a helpful metaphor for describing the experience or means of this change because it invokes an image of healing different than that of a panacea. 'Therapy' denotes something undergone, it is experienced through dialogue, and its upshot is an insight that leads to a changed life. It suggests that Berry is not offering something—a procedure or program—that can be simply applied to fix all the problems of modern life. See Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (New York: Other Press, 2003). For Lear, therapy is about clearing away blockages rather than imposing rigid frameworks on the mind that the unconscious will always break-through. I mention Lear in order to distinguish my use of 'therapy' from other conceptions that are deeply problematic. Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the therapist in the modern world, for example, is derisive: "Neither manager nor therapist, in their roles as manager and therapist do or are able to engage in moral debate. They are seen by themselves, and by those who see them with the same eyes as their own, as uncontested figures, who purport to restrict themselves to the realms in which rational agreement is possible – that is, of course from their point of view to the realm of fact, the realm of means, the realm of measurable effectiveness.... Thus the problem is not why the claims of psychoanalytic or behavioral therapies are not exposed as ill-founded; it is rather why, since they have been so adequately undermined, the practices of therapy continue for the most part as though nothing had happened." MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University Press, 1984), 30, 73-74.

¹⁸ Scott Slovic notes the importance of the act of writing for Berry's struggle; in Berry's essay "The Long-Legged House," the "process of observation... [is associated] explicitly with the act of writing, a connection manifested even in the way the prose of the essay changes, becoming more journal-like and immediate, at the point in the history when the author is finally making contact with the place." Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 13. Slovic's description of Berry's 'process' as a "gradual and almost linear progression" (12) is too uncomplicated and sequential to capture the returns, wounds, conversions, and repentance in Berry's struggle.

The Poet's Dilemma

Berry succinctly formulates his aim for both his writing and farming from the first: “to imagine and live out a decent and preserving relationship to the earth.”¹⁹ Because he unapologetically involves his life in realizing his purpose, he has been misinterpreted as offering himself as a constitutive measure for others. Bruce Bawer encapsulates the error in one impudent sentence:

Proprietor of a Kentucky farm that's been in his family for generations, Berry has produced an oeuvre (novels, short stories, nonfiction) whose central conviction is that the optimum lifestyle choice for *homo sapiens* is—ahem—running a farm that's been in your family for generations.²⁰

Berry explicitly denies ever recommending his own “lifestyle” to anyone.²¹ At the outset of his writing career, Berry recognizes the controversial nature of some claims; instead of propounding principles indicative of an “inflexible ideology”²² most clearly exemplified in his own mode of being, he adopts a cautious tone in his advocacy. His “commitment to the cause of peace,” for example, is spoken with “hesitance and with the greatest circumspection,” saying, “I should avoid any rhetoric that might lead me to offer myself as a model.”²³ There is danger in reading Berry as a special source, that he is differentiated from his audience in his ability to live out an ideal relationship with the earth. Approaching Berry’s work as such proceeds as “poet watchers” or “bird watchers” might approach their subjects; about this method Berry says, “Some essential things will not be revealed to them, because their interest is too direct.”²⁴ These watchers are preoccupied with the “the possibility that some truth could be said directly rather than by

¹⁹ Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969; repr., Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), 81.

²⁰ Bruce Bawer, “Civilized Pleasures,” *The Hudson Review* 59, no. 1 (2006): 143.

²¹ Wendell Berry, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Hudson Review* 59, no. 3 (2006): 525.

²² Bawer, “Civilized Pleasures,” 145.

²³ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 84.

²⁴ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 6.

parable.”²⁵ Berry’s writing is not “a seeking of self in words,” i.e., creating objects of art as a pilgrimage, seeking in them an end “as other people have gone to the world or to God—for a sense of their own reality.”²⁶ Berry’s intention to be carefully bonded to his place is his service to truth—his “secular pilgrimage”²⁷ to the world—the reality of which is communicated in parabolic terms.

Berry’s frequent imagery and phraseology of paradox throughout his writing express his sense of the need to speak in parables. He abides by Milton’s definition of freedom “in terms of responsibilities.”²⁸ Matthew 10:39 teaches him the prudence “of losing one’s life in order to find it.”²⁹ His poetry describes the constant speech of the Incarnate Word as “present / always, yet leaves no sign / but everything that is.”³⁰ Temporal reality “analogically” relates to eternity; or, as he admits more baldly, community is eternal.³¹ To be locally adapted is not stasis; “To stay at home is paradoxically to change, to move.”³² Each paradox warrants a thorough exploration for its role in Berry’s thought; however, there are two paradoxes—both of which come from the poetry of William Carlos Williams—that provide a framework in which the others can be

²⁵ Berry is quoting Galway Kinnell who yearns for a poem “free of narrative altogether,” which “would at least open the possibility that some truth could be said directly rather than by parable.” Berry reacts by asking two rhetorical questions Kinnell is not asked during the interview in which he expresses his fancy: “how this might be possible, and why it might be desirable.” *Standing by Words*, 17.

²⁶ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 7.

²⁷ Berry’s phrase “secular pilgrimage” refers to nature poetry that is “secular because it takes place outside of, or without reference to, the institutions of religion, and it does not seek any institutional shrine or holy place; it is in search of the world. But it is a pilgrimage nevertheless because it is a religious quest. It does not seek the world of inert materiality... it seeks the world of the creation, the created world in which the Creator, the formative and quickening spirit, is still immanent and at work.” “Secular Pilgrimage” in *Continuous Harmony*, 3-4. Berry uses the Christian language of “creation” and “Creator,” and his thought is sourced by the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition; however, he remains ‘secular’ in the sense that he is not affiliated with any church to which his work is in service or primarily refers.

²⁸ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 36.

²⁹ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 169.

³⁰ Berry, “Sabbath IX, 1999,” *Given* (San Francisco: Counterpoint, 2005), p. 78.

³¹ Morris Allen Grubbs, ed. *Conversations with Wendell Berry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 139. This is not to conflate ‘parable’ with ‘analogical,’ but only to suggest that Berry’s understanding of the analogical relationship between temporality and eternity is one paradox that entails communicating in parables; there are some things the truth of which cannot be directly communicated, hence the work of fiction.

³² Berry, *Standing by Words*, 88.

interpreted and Berry's 'sense of his own reality' can be understood. The first is from Williams's poem *Paterson*, Book One: "Say it! No ideas but in things."³³ The second is from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower": "Only the imagination is real!"³⁴ The material presence of ideas and the reality of imagination bespeak the complexity of belonging to a place on earth. That is, they bring to attention the physical effect of thoughts and the reality of things unseen.

Before examining these paradoxes, the predicament they confront should first be clarified. Berry's acceptance of having his "place as [his] fate" proposes a moral quandary, namely, "learning what to do with the subject" of his writing—his place—which is a veritable "undiscovered country."³⁵ To approach the new world as a conquistador cannot be avoided by simply deciding against it; exploitation and misuse are ever-present dangers, for one must use things. In order to use them well, Berry, like Williams, begins with close observation and a disciplined description of details. The difficulty of this task consists in the absence of a "settled, coherent culture" to constrain its scope and adjudicate its success (46). Moreover, the plethora of details lack any coherency or order in a nation whose general manner is one uncommitted to anything that cannot be transformed into legal tender. Williams dedicates his work as a poet and doctor to attend to the life of his native place, which is where he decides to live permanently. As a poet, this devotion specifically entails adequately accommodating all the local details in his language: "details of geography, of daily work, of local life and economy, and... the details of an imposed industrialism and its overwhelming power to uproot, alienate, and corrupt" (27). Though compelled to "find a language and an imaginative order" for these details by an urgency to forestall further "reduction of the country's original abundance to a sum of exploitable and

³³ Quoted in *Continuous Harmony*, 55.

³⁴ Wendell Berry, *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011), 143. Further citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

³⁵ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 140.

deteriorating ‘resources’ for industry,” the working condition of the search for language is “the risk of imperfection at best, at worst of failure” (38). Simply put, the task of the poet—to see, appreciate, and describe things adequately, and thereby use them well in poetry—hazards the danger it tries to stave off.

To avoid this peril by excluding local details altogether does not solve but repeats the problem. Literary critics embarrassed by particularity, like the gnostics of old, dismiss Williams as “mindless” for his interest in things. Poets Berry deems “specialized” are those who desire an imagination free from things—from any external reference point, or any relation to other experiences—and make the differentiation between “mind” and its “object” absolute.³⁶ Without any meaningful relationship with things, writers turn inward and use writing to vent their solitary complaints and cloistered escapades, thereby relinquishing any traction their words might have for illuminating their readers’ ordinary experiences. In other words, their ideas are absolute, generalized beyond contestation or conversation, because they distinguish themselves from anything held in common.³⁷ Two problems follow from this detachment: firstly, a poet’s subject is degraded to “‘subject matter’ or raw material, so that the subject exists for the poem’s sake... in the same way as industrial specialists see trees or ore-bearing rocks as raw material subjected to their manufactured end-products.”³⁸ Put to such an expedient practice, secondly, poems are so purely subjective that they have no purchase on the reader. The specialist poet is trapped in what Berry calls a “modern” loneliness: the despair in “having no hope that his general terms can communicate the particular burden of his experience.”³⁹ This poetry is caught in the solitude of

³⁶ Shelley is the poet who exemplifies this differentiation for Berry. Berry, *Standing By Words*, 171.

³⁷ Berry points out that Shakespeare is “of course distinguished by his language, which is certainly his gift and love. But his language is, after all, the common tongue, to which his gift is uncommon grace and power; without his commonness we could neither recognize nor value his distinction.” *Standing by Words*, 9.

³⁸ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 29.

³⁹ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 31.

individuality. In want of any connection to the reader, these poems foist despair rather than invite dialogue or exchange. Thus, the specialist poet is unethically detached from the world and the reader; the world is exploited for what can be extracted and put to use, and language is used to “impose, rather than to elicit, the desired response” in the reader.⁴⁰ In short, specialized poetry imposes the poet’s imagination.

To forbear such exploitation, Williams’s mode of writing is local adaptation, i.e., making one’s place the “right context and measure of work” (33). Struggling to be “at home in the world,” given its precariousness, “requires a tremendous labor, an endurance of great fear.”⁴¹ Its motive force is affection for each unique, ordinary life and therefore desires to incorporate everything in writing while conceding the inability to do so.⁴² Instead of comprehensiveness or subjection, describing and ordering details characterize the activity of local adaptation. A “credible language” that enables adequate description does not trade in generalities and is not “merely ‘expressive’ or ‘articulate’... but also locally appropriate;” it is a language “native to its place,” and maintains “a distinct propriety between the language and its local subjects”⁴³ (40). The poetic language at Williams’s disposal is insufficient: the language of so-called high culture poetry is too general for helping his neighbors’ alienation “from their dwelling place and from one another” (47). Local speech is pertinent for communicating particularity to his general audience insofar as it gives “visibility and even prominence to certain local things that ‘standard’

⁴⁰ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 32.

⁴¹ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 36.

⁴² Berry suggests that Williams “had before him the example of Whitman and Whitman’s passion to include everything. But Williams also put before himself the inevitability that artists, and especially local artists, living at home, returning to the same places and people day after day, year after year, will be faced with circumstances and experiences that their art, as they have received or so far made it, cannot include.” *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 14.

⁴³ The so-called simplicity of Williams’s language is also a quality that literary critics cite as evidence of his “mindlessness.” Berry quotes Jean-Henri Fabre, a French entomologist Williams admired, in his defense: “Others again have reproached me with my style, which has not the solemnity, nay, better, the dryness of the schools. They fear lest a page that is read without fatigue should not always be the expression of the truth. Were I to take their word for it, we are profound only on condition of being obscure.” Jean-Henri Fabre, “The Harmas,” *The Life of the Fly* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920), 13-14. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 36.

speech would leave hidden” (41). The second issue—the disordered mass of local details—entails an art to structure language. Bringing particularities to the order and beauty of things—rather than using things to furnish his writing with beautiful things—is the aim of Williams’s poetry. A locally adapted form of art enables the communicability of the features local speech makes visible without reducing them to abstract generalities. It does so by imaginatively elevating the particulars “to an importance generally recognizable, first by the people of Paterson and then by readers elsewhere” (47). Williams’s poetry is the method by which he discovers a language to appropriately communicate the details of his place. It is Williams’s poetic work of local adaptation that gives Berry a way to speak about his singular experience while maintaining his place, not himself, as its horizon of meaning.

The Incarnation of Imagination

“No ideas but in things” is a manifesto of incarnation. Recall that the local details Williams describes are of both the destructive and ordinary variety. So too, his language to alleviate the estranged condition of his community must be “capacious enough to include ‘the anti-poetic’”⁴⁴ (47). Williams does not give sole prominence to the finest features of his neighborhood; he also wrestles with the worst. Williams’s poetry is dedicated to confronting his world as it is—not as it ideally should be in isolation from its insufficiencies. In short, he wants to tell the truth about its life—about its eccentricities, foibles, and elegance. The truth he serves is not that of “settled convention” or “empirical science,” which is “static, predictable, nailed down,” but rather his service consists in entering “the flux and diversity of the world and of our experience of it” (13). His poetry therefore does not order details through “settled categories, sortings, and abstractions of mind” (13). Williams is tackling the variability of life; he does not

⁴⁴ Williams aspires reconciliation between neighbors as well as an “imaginative reconciliation between ‘the people and the stones.’” Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 47.

definitively capture it. To be too conclusive would “subdue” the flux of particularities by replacing them with “general ideas” (48). It would treat details conventionally, transforming their particularities into an ideology, i.e., an exhaustive system of thought. On the contrary, Williams’s poetry bears witness to the ways in which the diverse individuality of ordinary things always breaks the hold language attempts to place on it. “No ideas but in things” speaks of “embodied ideas:” fleshing out aspects not easily perceived and not completely describable. Berry calls this paradox of ideas in things Williams’s manifesto because it features his obstinate refusal to espouse “ideas apart from things—disembodied ideas” (48). To use his poetry for disembodied ideas—for either ruminations and sensations disengaged from ordinary encounters or cloaking undignified details in universal merit—would not tell the truth; it would be an escape from the world as it is. The declaration is a pronouncement against the specialization of poetry, against the notion that the art of poetry—or imagination in general—makes nothing happen. According to Williams, telling the truth gives it flesh, and thereby enables it to act—to be useful. In Williams’s poetry, the incarnation of ideas is in the concretization of his relation to the people and customs of Paterson; it is the work of local adaptation. Williams uses poetry to cultivate and improve these relations. Poetry is his practice of settlement, which is a continual activity that changes him and, therefore, his community.

Berry mentions the poem, “A Negro Woman” as the paradigmatic example of incarnation in Williams’s work:

carrying a bunch of marigolds
 wrapped
 in an old newspaper;
 She carries them upright,
 bareheaded,
 the bulk
 of her thighs
 causing her to waddle

as she walks
 looking into
 the store window which she passes
 on her way.
 What is she
 but an ambassador
 from another world
 a world of pretty marigolds
 of two shades
 which she announces
 not knowing what she does
 other
 than walk the streets
 holding the flowers upright
 as a torch
 so early in the morning.⁴⁵

According to Berry, it is a “nearly perfect poem” (18). It is a work of imagination that goes further than realism; it is technically proficient and appropriately descriptive but it is also lit by Williams’s imagination, by his sense of the context of sanctity in which the woman’s worth surpasses—is not determined by—its presence in his poem. The elevated importance of the woman is neither unseemly nor abstract. That the woman is “a negro” is descriptive of an actual person; it does not “name her category” or make the “poem about ‘the race problem.’” In the poem, the “woman is herself, neither more nor less, made flesh in the poet’s vision and in ours” (51). The power of Williams’s imagination to present embodied ideas is “to see the unique, ordinary lives of his place in, so to speak, their glory” (16). The poem’s meaning cannot be explained, paraphrased, or otherwise separated from what it says. Its truth is incarnated; and yet, because it is about a human life, it does not say all there is to say about her. There is a reticence to say too much out of respect for the ‘flux and diversity’ of the subject. Williams’s discrimination of details communicates both the beauty of what he sees as well as his care.

⁴⁵ William Carlos Williams, “A Negro Woman,” *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, vol. II, 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1988), 287. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 15.

Embodied ideas, unlike abstract thoughts, are limited in their use. Williams's poetry is a performance of his local adaptation, which is "applicable elsewhere, not as prescription but as example" (47). Williams's example is treating people, places, and things without "dematerializing" them into "averages, statistics, and lists" (50). It is also his willingness to treat "the living world and its creatures" without reducing them to "quantities, rules, and cases" (51). Instead, Williams's framework is "appropriateness, beauty, and goodness"—the true, the beautiful, and the good—in which "thought is embodied in the arts" (52). The usefulness of such thought is not only to protect the details it discriminates, describes, and orders from being valued only in reference to monetary worth; it also enables the writer to emerge from the overwhelming number of particularities "as an agent and artist consciously and conscientiously whole" (40). Williams's gift is not just in his perspicacity to see the life of his place and the importance of considering its details within their local context, but also in his inclination to put himself in the place where "he could not help but" see and consider these truths (54). Williams's work is 'applicable elsewhere' because his imaginative framework and common cause with bodies and things can travel to other places. The wisdom he imparts to Berry is "To imagine, to speak of and for, the things, persons, and places by which we actually live," which makes poetry useful for breaking "the carapace of official identity and general ideas" (56). The wisdom of local adaptation is the paradox that the fluctuating and diverse truth of actual people, places and things limit what can be thought or said; the excesses of life are communicated in tacit measures. The language of imagination needs to bear an intimate relation with the things it delineates—it needs to be locally adapted yet generally recognizable.

The second vital paradox—"only the imagination is real"—conveys the manner in which imagination relates to things and how it divulges what it perceives. Not only ideas but also

imagination is “by definition embodied” (51). That is, “imagination [is] the power of making real—of formally realizing, in its momentary presence, without the intervention of ‘ideas’ or ‘fixed concepts,’ our actual experience” (115). It gives form to personal sentiments and impressions. In other words, it makes real the qualities of something—that which makes something valuable for its own sake not for the purpose to which it can be appropriated—that are lost “at the very breath of conquest.”⁴⁶ As noted above, this requires a language that both respects its subject and limits what can be said. It also requires a form; Williams eschews traditional forms of poetry—English prosody, for example—because he needs an order for what he wants to say that does not stand “obstructively between him and the experience” or “call for experience and materials unlike or not at all his own” (128). Imagination is incarnated within art through language and form; his commitment to local adaptation is his defense against the movement of imagination to use “preconceived or conventional forms that are imposed upon experience or upon the world” (129). This same commitment constrains ideas, which necessitates against an “anything goes” mentality as well as the cult of originality. Williams grapples with the difficulty of imagination; imagination as a force of local adaptation is historically and geographically contingent and willingly risks failure and betrayal.

Imagination as “real” is different from being “realistic” or the style of realism. It does not mirror or imitate nature; it must not “plagiarize nature,” producing art that replaces nature as the fundamental context for life (155). It manifests—it embodies—the nature, the qualities, of its subject. Put differently, it renders communicable essential yet concealed attributes. Alternatively stated, imagination makes sense of the sanctity of the context of that which it seeks to describe; it makes this sanctity communicable, visible to the reader. Again, the difference between imagination and art, for Williams, is not basic; language and form, as well as things, discipline

⁴⁶ Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 82.

imagination. And yet only imagination has the power to place “proper value upon experience and the objects of experience” (136). Imagination is the faculty that perceives, communicates, and embodies the holiness—the otherness, or singularity, or glory—of something or someone so that it can be made real to another person.

In addition to “A Negro Woman,” “Coda” from “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower”—a love poem—is an example of imagination’s embodiment, how it ‘makes real.’ In a love poem, Williams must say something simultaneously intimate to his wife and recognizable to anonymous readers. Berry praises Williams for finding a language that stays as close to the actual experience as possible. In this case, the experience is Williams’s memory of his marriage. Williams has aged, and reflects on the failures, confessions, and forgiveness of his marriage; however, Berry sees in the poem the author’s need for “a vision,” one that surpasses forgiveness and redeems his life through an “analogy by which light, imagination, and love triumph over death and destruction” (116). Berry affirms the achievement of this vision, though it materializes in difficulty: “Under duress of need and the stress of an established measure of speech, the power of imagination gives him his vision.”

For our wedding, too,
the light was wakened
and shone...⁴⁷

In this case, imagination is the knowledge of the experience that comes from attending to his wife and memory. The vision or image created in William’s love poem is a memory, but one illuminated by imagination.⁴⁸ It is not “realistic” in the sense that it is “a historical restoration or

⁴⁷ William Carlos Williams, “Coda” to “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, vol. II, 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1988), 336. Hereafter *CPII*. Quoted in *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 118.

⁴⁸ Berry illustrates this connection between memory and imagination in his account of a tree, which also anticipates the discussion of the relationship between temporality and eternity below: “In order to understand fully what a tree is, we must remember much of our experience with trees and much that we have heard and read about them. We destroy those memories by reducing trees to facts, by thinking of *tree* as a mere word, or by treating our memory of

a ‘period piece’” (118). Its vision connects imagination to love and light and can be experienced in reading it; it is thus made real: “presently experienced and fully known” (118). Berry sees in these words and form the incarnate meaning of Williams’s imagination; the sanctity of Williams’s marriage both has its intimacy preserved and yet is recognizable. It is an “eternal moment” (119), the imagination giving flesh to a new, fuller perception of his marriage at the end of his time on earth.

Connecting Reader and World; Temporal Experience and The Eternal Moment

Encountering an eternal moment is the moment of recognition, when the words reveal something true to the reader. It is when the reader is ‘moved,’ as it were. Berry argues against James Joyce’s assessment of the eternal moment as stasis, a condition of “aesthetic arrest.”⁴⁹ Instead, eternal moments are “relentlessly kinetic” as they “represent powerful realization[s]” that “carry us into another world” and “change our lives.”⁵⁰ Williams is, by his own account, especially interested in helping others experience such realizations. Between “the reader and his consciousness” is a “barrier” that prevents an “immediate contact with the world,” which prevents him from knowing himself.⁵¹ Humans as “eternal creatures” need to be awakened by imagination to the eternal moment not only to become “vitaly alive” but also to “be able to

trees as ‘cultural history.’ When we call a tree a tree, we are not isolated among words and facts but are at once in the company of the tree itself and surrounded by ancestral voices calling out to us all that trees have been and meant. This is simply the condition of being human in this world...” Berry, *Home Economics*, 80.

⁴⁹ Berry, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 57.

⁵⁰ Berry, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 58.

⁵¹ William Carlos Williams, “Spring and All” in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. I, 1909-1939, ed. A. Walton Fitz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), 177. Hereafter *CPI*. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 138. Berry has adopted this language of barrier in his own diagnosis of the modern condition. According to him, society is enclosed in what Berry calls a “mollusk-shell... lined on the inside with a nacreous layer that is opaque, rainbow-tinted, and an inch thick.” Instead of seeing the world as it is, the enclosure reflects back “the self-flattering outlines and the optimistic tints of our preconceptions of what the world is.” Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1991), 15-16. Furthermore, the “mollusk-shell” imagery seems to have come from Williams: “this featureless tribe that has the money now—staring into the atom, completely blind—without grace or pity, as if they were so many shellfish.” Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 176.

make valid choices about how to live, rather than submitting passively to our commercial degradation” (139). The ‘other world’ is the reader’s own imaginative life, fully awake to present reality. The experience is “fleeting,” though no less real for being fugitive (142). Williams is in accord with Coleridge and Blake for whom imagination perceives things “in their most real or eternal aspect,” because it is only by imagination that the “convergence of the eternal and the present” is recognized (143).⁵² The convergence is indicated in what Berry describes as the

⁵² Imagination, according to Coleridge, is the primary agent of perception: “The primary imagination I hold to be the living and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM... The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space.” Samuel Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (New York: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1956), 167. Berry seems to be thinking of Coleridge and imagination when he says, “The imagination is our way in to the divine Imagination, permitting us to see wholly—as whole and holy—what we perceive as scattered, as order what we perceive as random.” *Standing by Words*, 90. Imagination is not just reading the surface of things or fantasizing things free from their historical and material contingencies; it perceives connections and relationships insofar as it is “the faculty by which the multiform reality of the world is seen in relationship.” J. Robert Barth, S.J., “Theological Implications of Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination,” *Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination Today*, ed. Christine Gallant (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 11. It is distinguished from fancy, which, because it is an isolating faculty, can only aggregate images and words, the meaning of which remain isolated from those to which they are connected; “the links between [the images in a poem] are accidental, contribute nothing to the action... Pondering the links does not enrich the poem.” I.A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 79. Imagination engenders “consilience and reverberations,” such that “the more the image [given in a poem] is followed up, the more links of relevance between the units are discovered.” The reader’s own imagination is engaged as her “mind finds cross-connexion after cross-connexion” between the meanings of each word, and her consciousness is formed because she is not only aware of these connections but also discovers something she herself is making in her activity of reading (Ibid., 82-83). The difference between fancy and imagination is observable, i.e., there is a practical difference between these two habits of mind. The unified perspective of imagination is not outside of space and time—it is not meant to construct an image of unity and connection in order to regulate the world. Instead, imagination, insofar as it is the primary human perception that repeats the creativity of the divine, is therefore constitutive of the world and “in direct and truthful relation to the dynamic of matter and spirit in nature.” James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 340. This relationship between humanity, nature, and the divine is common to all; divine creativity is recapitulated in human imagination and is the basis for perceiving the world. Creativity, or the secondary imagination, is the ability to form images in words that indicate the human relation with the divine in nature. “Art embodies particular points of intersection between the imagination of the individual mind and that of the divine power.” Ibid., 348. What is produced, however, are symbols—images—that both embody an already-existing connection but are also new creations (i.e., not copies of nature). Poetry is “a manifestation of imagination in which the poet re-creates his experience in symbolic form.” Alan R. White, *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 46. Thus, poetry is not merely description of an event or quality; the experience will always exceed linguistic accounts. For Coleridge, art is symbolic rather than allegorical because “a symbol is what it represents, but an allegorical image or figure is a replaced identity on a corresponding basis of one to one.” Engell, *Creative Imagination*, 350. Poetry is a way of illuminating the experience for the reader in order to help illuminate the reader’s own experiences. Coleridge is interested in how art engages the reader because he is trying to “encourage and help his readers not merely to think different thoughts, that is to arrive at different conclusions, but to think differently—to think imaginally [sic] as well as abstractly—because it is only by imaginal [sic] thinking that the supernatural can be known.” Coleridge attempts to construct a method of thinking “that involves imagination, because it is only imagination... which is capable of grasping such fundamentals as polarity, interpenetration, and

‘glory’ of the negro woman, or, as he declares elsewhere, in the “interpenetration” of eternity and temporality that enables an eternal presence “in time, in flesh, wood, rock, water, and all the rest of it.”⁵³ Or, simply put, it is “making real to us the ordinary drama of our daily lives” (142). The eternal moment is a moment of clarity, the experience of an insight that breaks the hold of preconceptions.

Literature is a catalogue of these moments. “Poetry... is the means of giving to realizations of the fleeting eternal moment a kind of permanent presence” (143). Works of imagination connect life and imagination; they are “reminders of an indispensable possibility, a wakefulness” intrinsic to our being as eternal creatures (143). At issue is the place of ordinary life in cultural reflections on the highest qualities of being. Does the materiality of reality shroud or disclose its nature? Berry learns from Williams that a devotion to things—to the material details of people, places, artifacts, objects, and creatures—in their irrepressible and unclassifiable particularity will reveal something beautiful, true, and good. Imagination gives these things “dignity,” “usefulness,” “truth,” and “beauty;” however, by virtue of its “independent existence,” the world sometimes resists being made into art, while other times it may be “persuaded, within limits, within measure, to submit” (147). Williams’s poetry reflects this tension between its language and the excessive nature of reality; it is when this tension is most clearly visible—as Berry sees it in “A Negro Woman” and “Coda”—that its truth, its eternal moment, is revealed.

real symbolism.” James S. Cutsinger, *The Form of Transformed Vision: Coleridge and the Knowledge of God* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), x-xi. Or, as Gregory Leadbetter puts it, “Coleridge’s poetics seek to reproduce... in his readers” his own “fascination with the transnatural [supra-religious, transgressive spirituality],” which had put “him into creative contact with an order greater than he can consciously comprehend.” *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 14.

⁵³ Berry, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 140. “I believe, like Williams, in the eternal moment, partly because I believe that eternity is as much a condition of reality as is time, partly because I don’t believe that the temporal duration of the present moment is measurable. I also believe that there is a ‘contact between life and imagination’ that is not only ‘essential to freedom,’ but is indispensable to human life.” Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 142.

Williams uses poetry to both belong to his place, and also to help his readers belong to their places and to experience their own eternal moments. Experiences he confronts, for example, in his writing are encounters with ‘the pure products of America [going] crazy.’⁵⁴ His therapy for this derangement—to wit, endless consumption and greed—is art. More specifically, imagination’s ability to transcend memories and facts, to see beyond what is visibly revealed, offers the possibility of completeness, i.e., an antidote to the insatiable hunger evinced in unimpeded consumption and the abuse of anything that can be metamorphosed into cash. As Berry summarizes the equation, “If we are complete, then we don’t have to be limitlessly greedy—and forever disappointed” (151). Art, then, is not escape from the fundamental lack in modern life. Art does not “distract us from the bitterness of life” but instead, as Williams says, “demonstrates the importance of personality, by showing the individual, depressed before it that his life is valuable.”⁵⁵ Williams’s art is useful for rearranging the relationship between humans and world: the world does not depend on humans to give it purpose; humans do not see the world as their possession. Poetry clarifies the reader to herself; its function is to reveal to her that her nature as an eternal creature carries with it the possibility of completeness through imagination rather than avarice. By such clarification and revelation it is a remedy to, not a diversion from, the deracinated state of affairs in America.

And yet, because it accepts its limitation, a work of imagination is always incomplete. Berry maintains that, given his resistance to ‘fixed ideas’ and given forms, Williams does not work from a theory of art but instead is “working all his life toward an *ars poetica*” (131). This ‘working toward’ indicates a fundamental incompleteness; it is a corollary to allowing things to limit ideas. It is the approach that prevents imagination from becoming fantasy. Art that

⁵⁴ Williams, poem XVIII in *Spring and All*, CPI, 217. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 23.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Spring and All*, CPI, 194. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 151.

reinforces the barrier between the ‘reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world’ is that which is “dulled by a trite formality,” keeping the reader and artist alike from awaking to the reality of “both present circumstances and the work that must be done” (139). Imagination, operating aright, arouses the somnambulist. It does so, not because it is free from the “difficult truths of our lives,” functioning as either an ideal world of escape or rose-tinted glasses through which to see our own (154). Instead, it supplants the barrier; Williams says art can “stand between man and nature as saints once stood between man and the sky...”⁵⁶ A work of art is not a barrier to the world as are illusion, fantasy, or imitation; it is a part of the world itself. Its fragmentary nature reflects its characteristic as an artifact—a created thing that is contingent and broken just like everything and everyone else. Literature is therefore a point of contact with the world. If it does imitate something, then it is not the appearance of life but “the liveliness of life itself” (159). It is part of the “creativity of nature;”⁵⁷ its practical and ethical dimension is its ability to “place us imaginatively... in our lives and in our local whereabouts” (155). Put differently, its creativity is its power to align readers with creation, with the creative presence within nature, as opposed to the superficial forces of destruction.

Poetic Meaning and Awakening

Through poetry, Williams is thus able to be in conversation with his place and his readers. Its creaturely nature empowers this dual mode of communication. Berry attributes this

⁵⁶ Williams, *CPI*, 199. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 154. This is also consonant with Coleridge’s understanding of art and criticism: “Art for Coleridge is or should be a mediator between humankind and nature; as our faculties in experiencing reality should be ordered and work together according to their relative worth and dignity, so in producing and in criticizing art, the same should hold true.” James Engell, “*Biographia Literaria*,” *Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68.

⁵⁷ As Coleridge puts it, “The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poetry and Verse of Coleridge*, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Modern Library, 1951), 263. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 154.

power specifically to Williams's sense of rhythm. Williams's poems have a regularity—a beat or tempo—that is unlike that of “a clock or metronome or engine” (102). They strive for what Berry calls a creaturely rhythm, which is less rigid, controlled, or straightforward. Thus, a poem's tone or mood denoted by its rhythm will reflect its contingent and created nature. A human heart is an example of creaturely rhythm; it does not “beat with the invariable rhythm of a clock” but responds to the body's condition, which in turn responds to “its constantly changing life within the contexts of place and events.” In short, the heart “is a *responsive* organ” (102). Williams incorporates natural flows and patterns, ordering its content in a creaturely way—i.e., purposefully but not intransigently. The rhythm itself, like the heart, is responsive to the rhythms of its circumstances; it does not just impose structure but also relates to other movements. As Williams takes it upon himself to echo the life pulse of his place, the poem's “rhythm may activate in the minds of poet and reader the sense or memory of those external rhythms and resonate with them” (104). Rhythm connects poet, place, and reader.

Rhythm, accordingly, partly makes it possible for a poem to mean more than it says; inspiration is another reason for this possibility. Perhaps this could be more strongly stated: rhythm is ‘breathed into’ or inspirited in the poet in the form of words. Neither Williams nor Berry has a theory or explanation of inspiration; the purpose for discussing it—and why I suggest it might relate to rhythm—is to account for a poem's ability to put seemingly indescribable experiences and qualities into words. In a letter written to Denise Levertov, Williams says, “After all a poem is made up not of the things of which it speaks directly but of things which it cannot identify and yet yearns to know.”⁵⁸ Levertov responds in a commentary on one of Williams's poems: because the poem suggests “a poetics inseparable from the rest of

⁵⁸ William Carlos Williams, *The Letters of Denise Levertov and Williams Carlos Williams*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1998), 8. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 63.

human experience” it “expresses and defines the nature of humanness; and in so doing arrives at the edge of the world, where all is unknown, undefined, the abyss of the gods.”⁵⁹ Berry calls a poem’s activity that enacts Williams’s ‘yearning’ and Levertov’s ‘arrival’ its “prayer-like reaching beyond” itself (64). The ‘beyond’ is the presence in the poem of something beyond that which the author consciously put in it. It is the transcendent, or genius, or Creator that sources all being. Art “worthy of the name” reaches for a truth that is “suggestable [sic] but not realizable” and that cannot be “verified by facts or corroborated by experimentation” (64). Poetry, for Williams, is the activity of reaching out and the experience of contact with that which cannot be spoken of or known directly.

Poetry is valuable as a practice of engaging the transcendent source of reality in order to counteract the tendency of knowledge to become ‘fixed ideas’ and the rhythms of life to become routinized and ironclad. It fills concepts with new life, countervailing the entropy of thought.⁶⁰ As Berry says, “like prayer, it grants a necessary amplitude to our nature and experience” (64). Again, the partial nature of a poem’s creaturely status is neither problematic nor a hindrance to its communicability. Rather, it must express itself in language—which, of course, is a limitation as an inherently “reductive medium”—and therefore admits the opacity of articulating experiences of transcendence into its form. Neither the world nor its source of being can be captured in words, but to the extent that a poem indicates this complexity of human experience in a world suffused with divinity it is a tangible part of both creation and creativity. In short,

⁵⁹ Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 265. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 64.

⁶⁰ The phrase “entropy of thought” is Jonathan Lear’s. Though he is speaking about psychoanalysis, his sense of the decline of ideas into tag lines and forms into conventions is fitting: “The terms with which we communicate, no matter what they are... tend to lose their vibrancy as they are passed along in the community. This is the entropy of thought: whatever life the concepts might have had when they are first being applied in vivid psychoanalytic contexts tends to get drained out of them, and they get turned more and more into slogans. Eventually, the terms get used in place of thinking rather than as an expression of it.” Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (New York: Other Press, 2003), 34.

incompleteness and limitation is the form of communicating the experience of excess in the world.⁶¹

And yet, the meaning of a poem, like any work of literature, is not outside the text. By virtue of its creaturely nature as part of the world, its meaning is embodied in itself as it would not be if it were fantasy, illusion, or imitation. Berry elucidates the multiple layers of meaning in Williams' poetry:

I have said that Williams' poems mean what they say, and that what they say is the only way of saying what they mean. I have said also that they engage in a sort of conversation with the details of local life and circumstances, which implies that they may mean more than they say, as they are enlarged by connections that radiate from them. And now I have added the thought, Williams' thought, that they may be further enlarged by gestures or reachings-out toward a reality that they cannot directly express (65).

A poem speaks for itself, speaks with another, and speaks to divinity. It means what it says, more than it can say, and more than the author originally intended it to mean. Despite the depth and range of poems, "their meaning is incarnate in what the poet has imagined and made" (119).

Berry apprehends Williams's sense of meaning as "simply what is recognized in a poem as true."

A person does not need to be an expert to understand poetry; a poem's significance is not "something remote or mute" that consequently must be "probed out by analysis or explanation" (161). Williams does not write for literary critics or academics, but rather first for his neighbors and then to a general audience, who are addressed as non-specialists. Recognizing truth is an experience, one that does not depend on technical expertise. Again, its partiality as something created communicates an inherent instability that draws the reader's attention not only to what is said but also to the depth and resonances of its sense. Meaning is not reduced to the definition of words. A poem's meaning is its embodiment, in language and form, of the experience of 'the

⁶¹ "Beyond any earthly reason we experience beauty in excess of use, justice in excess of anger, mercy in excess of justice, love in excess of deserving or fulfillment. We have known evil beyond imagining and seemingly beyond intention. We have known compassion and forgiveness beyond measure." Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 100

abyss of the gods' that engendered its production. A poem's capacity to 'move' readers does not depend on its ability to represent reality. Rather, the experience of recognizing a poem's truth depends on the both the reader's and poet's willingness to be receptive and responsive—their stance of openness to 'wakefulness.' The recognition of truth awakens, clarifies, and reveals an aspect or experience of the world present in the writing itself.

Descent and Ascent: The Structure of Reaching Out

The structure of Williams's imaginative movement is descent and ascent. Williams writes in Book Two of *Paterson*,

The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned⁶²

Williams's movement of descent is two-fold. Descent is a matter of propriety, describing enough particularity to communicate authentic knowledge without becoming insignificant; but it is also the natural tendency of life towards degeneration. Its first slant is toward the ground underfoot. It is an external descent of thoughts and language to gain a close proximity with the objects and events they denote. Berry insists that this does not undermine Blake's view of imagination—who thinks that the arts are "our way of conversing with Paradise"—because what is known "of Paradise we learn here, by looking, by vision, by imagination, and both Paradise and the ground underfoot are always beyond the perfect grasp of our arts, as of our sciences" (147-48). What makes the meaning of literature recognizable or communicable is not a language of ascent to ideals but descent to objects.

The second decline is toward despair; it is an internal descent. As indicated above, Williams does not shy away from difficulty but in fact embraces it as the condition of his mode

⁶² William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 78. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 81.

of being as a poet committed to his specific ground underfoot. His refusal to join the literary “exodus to Europe” is seen as cowardly by some,⁶³ however, Berry notices that, despite his resolute devotion to his place, Williams feels somewhat vexed about his decision. Berry reiterates a section from Williams’s *The Descent of Winter*, in which he verbalizes his discomfiture and outlines the movement from fidelity to despair:

Why should I move from this place
 where I was born? knowing
 how futile would be the search
 for you in the multiplicity
 of your debacle. The world spreads
 for me like a flower opening—and
 will close for me as might a rose—

wither and fall to the ground
 and rot and be drawn up
 into a flower again. But you
 never wither—but blossom
 all about me. In that I forget
 myself perpetually—in your
 composition and decomposition
 I find my
 despair!⁶⁴

His affection for the details of his place and his urgent desire to protect them are both sources of enjoyment and suffering, requiring a ‘tremendous labor’ and ‘endurance of great fear.’ The seemingly limitless possibilities of inspiration in travel are quickly depleted; the travel writer must be on the move, but “with familiarity a place becomes to the imagination inexhaustible” (143). The author’s ‘self-forgetting’ is the kenotic movement of emptying himself of determinative purposes to which the world must be conformed; it allows the needs and demands of the place to overwhelm his self-interest. The author’s affectionate familiarity compels him to

⁶³ “Williams did not join the exodus to Europe... because he didn’t have the nerve to leave home.” Bruce Bawer, “The Poetic Legacy of William Carlos Williams,” *The New Criterion* (September 1988): 15. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 27.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Paterson*, 5. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 28.

compose poetry about his place, to invest its details with an order and beauty of art, knowing all the while that this is to put those very details at risk. Yet without art, an extraneous culture undermines the livelihood of the place. Despair resides in both composition and decomposition. The dual aspects of descent, then, are of one movement; part of his motion towards the ground under his feet is his downward spiral of despair.

Descent qualifies ascent; it both permits and entitles the reach beyond material reality. Descent—in both senses—is inescapable in a fidelity to place. In “Descent,” Williams asserts, “the acute but frail genius of the place must penetrate” both the land’s “unrelated culture stuccoed upon it” and “aesthetic adhesions.” To have “understanding on the ground”—rather than on superfluous conventions—one must “come from under and through a dead layer.”⁶⁵ Searching and revering the genius of a place—its spirit or inner presence of divine being—is a movement of defeat and despair. But it is also an ascent to “new places”—to the possibilities of a less-destructive and enjoyable life in a place (120). The imagination “may show us Hell” but also shows “beyond Hell, the beckoning light, to be reached even by descent” (120). “The descent beckons / as the ascent beckoned”—it is one beckoning, one movement toward the place in good faith and affection; it is despair and hope, sorrow and joy. The paradox of ascent in descent recognizes time and eternity, visible and invisible reality. Berry recalls again “the Negro woman with her luminous bouquet”: by encountering her with openness to the genius of the place, rather than a closure to the possibility of ordinary glory, “we are wakened and attracted” (120). The woman is a moment of an imagination’s “truest manifestation” and she becomes an emissary of the world of imagination. She incarnates an eternal moment; her presence in the poem serves as a reminder of the kind of perception of the world possible to all humans. In short, she embodies Williams’s wakefulness—his clarity and awareness—of a present moment. She offers an

⁶⁵ Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, epigraph.

experience of Williams's awakening, an example of the true, good, and beautiful in the world.

Berry formulates the awakening experience of poetry through Williams's images and words:

By imagination we discover 'the secret of that form // interknit with the unfathomable ground / where we walk daily...' ⁶⁶ By imagination even the descent into old age, even defeat, 'opens' a world, 'a place / formerly / unsuspected,' and so is 'a reversal / of despair.' ⁶⁷ The 'greater' world of imagination enlivens our sense of the world 'we share with the / rose in bloom,' so that the rose's scent may 'startle us anew.' ⁶⁸ It is ever opposed to 'the null / [that] defeats it all.' ⁶⁹

Imagination is an exchange of pain and relief. It is the attention to place whose objective is not primarily to be verisimilar, but to be therapeutic for the deracinated loneliness of our times.

Conclusion: Poetic Therapy

Both Williams and Berry face the failure of American culture to be sufficiently local.

This cultural failure is the country's ruination. Berry summarizes the calamity at stake in the negligence:

Without such rootedness in locality, considerately adapted to local conditions, we get what we now have got: a country half destroyed, toxic, eroded, and in every way abused; a deluded people tricked out in gauds without traditions of any kind to give them character; a politics of expediency dictated by the wealthy; a disintegrating economy founded upon fantasy, fraud, and ecological ruin (176).

Williams addresses the problem by saying that poetry is a way to 'imagine the ground underfoot.' Imagination is not fantasy or imitation; it is a faculty that is both receptive and creative. It is both the knowledge of things in their truest, eternal sense as well as a force that incarnates this knowledge in words. Poetry is Williams's language of imagination, the primary form of which is the ordinary speech of people in a so-called provincial community.

⁶⁶ Williams, "The Cure," *CPII*, 67-68.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Paterson*, 96-97.

⁶⁸ Williams, "Shadows," *CPII*, 309-310.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Paterson*, 95. Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 142.

Imaginative engagement with ordinary life through local speech in poetry is a movement toward the source of creation. For Williams, experiencing the transcendent present in time is an ‘eternal moment,’ the recognition of the reality of the real, which is to say the reality of his place amplified by imagination. Another way Williams articulates this relationship between time and eternity is by using Alexander Pope’s phrase of consulting “the Genius of the Place in all,” which is the “guardian spirit or as the mostly invisible order or whole to which the place belongs.”⁷⁰ The work of local adaptation is the conversation between imagination and the guardian spirit or invisible order of a place; it is the work of creativity and receptivity. Poetry should facilitate this conversation and awaken both poet and reader to the union of imagination and its transcendent source, which is mediated by earthly things such as poetry. Berry construes this relationship in theological language, interpreting the conversation or contact between creatures and the Creator through the activity of creativity. This conversation names the soul’s movement toward God. Following Williams, faith is a “motivating force,” (159) the liveliness or creativity of life, rather than an inner state of piety. The work of imagination in poetry is therefore affection in action: it is a creative and generative force to know the complexity of reality and bringing that knowledge into being through speech in the beauty and order of art.

To tell the truth, to be in service to the presence of the creator in creation, is to imagine the ground underfoot. The ground, the world itself, contains within it the source of truth. In Williams’s locution, one must “have the feet of his understanding on the ground” to speak the truth.⁷¹ This relationship between things and divinity is told in parabolic terms; poetry is the only language in which Williams can talk about it (144). Even the most capacious language is inadequate for capturing the entirety of life in a small town in New Jersey. Williams’s poetry is

⁷⁰ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 156-157.

⁷¹ Williams “The Descent.” Quoted in Berry, *Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, epigraph.

useful, not only as a means of self-expression, but also as a tool for becoming locally adapted—for imagining the ground underfoot. Local adaptation is an unending task; none of Williams’s poems is “a point at which he [can] come to rest” (169). Imagination’s kinetic ‘reaching out’ in descent and ascent is constant, but it is also therapeutic: it awakens the poet to the “false and truly belittling transcendence” of relating to a place as “owner, or as knower, confident of one’s own history and of one’s own importance.”⁷² It reconciles ‘the people and the stones,’ contributing a knowledge of the place that “provides an imaginative access” to what is unknown; the place is not a kind of book that can be read directly but “a kind of palimpsest scrawled over with the comings and goings of people, the erasure of time already in process even as the marks of passage are put down.”⁷³ There is a necessary incompleteness and complexity to Williams’s writing that discloses the transient yet intimate nature of creaturely life.

Berry himself experienced the therapy of Williams’s poetry. In 1957, Berry was lonely because of the distress and invigoration of settling in the ‘undiscovered country’ of his homeland without a literary tradition to which he could submit. One of the poets he read at this time was William Carlos Williams, whose poems “set me free in my own life and my own place as no other books could have.” They gave Berry a “delight and hopefulness” that relieved his feelings of “solitude.”⁷⁴ In 1962, Berry again became “deeply depressed” at the life of his writing career. Berry describes the therapeutic experience of riding a bus through New Jersey, thinking of Williams:

I was between places, uprooted, alien in that place, deeply depressed. And then I suddenly thought of Williams—all those lovely poems that had grown out of and so heartily savored the life of such places as I saw—and I felt wonderfully comforted and relieved. Life was possible there after all! I had known it for years! And though I never

⁷² Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 24.

⁷³ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 185.

⁷⁴ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 141-142.

found a place to live in New Jersey, Williams's poems have helped to satisfy me of the possibility of life wherever I have lived.⁷⁵

Despite claims to the contrary, Berry explicitly rejects the need to be in a rural place for the possibility of a flourishing life. Williams's poetry helps Berry cope with the place where he is and the world as it is rather than incur a guilt for not being somewhere else or for not transforming the world into something else. Poetic therapy is local adaptation; a poem's usefulness consists in its capacity to help someone belong to a place.

The bulk of this chapter has outlined how Berry sees Williams using poetry to belong to Paterson; however, Berry's own experience demonstrates its usefulness for a reader. It awakens in Berry, through the experience of relief, the awareness of his 'present circumstances' and 'the work that must be done.' Williams's 'eternal moment' in which he is "clearly and intensely aware of what he is seeing" clarifies Berry's "eternal moment of his own contact with the world" (141). Local adaptation is "the unceasing labor of keeping responsibly conscious of where" one is; according to Williams, "a man has not meaningfully arrived in his place in body until he has arrived in spirit as well, and that the consummation of arrival is identification."⁷⁶ It may be a process of 'identification,' but local adaptation "is as far as possible from... 'identity crisis'" (9). It does not concentrate on purely subjective search for self but on "relations to one's place (native or chosen), to its natural and human neighborhood, to its mystery and sanctity" (9). To locally adapt one's inner life, in addition to one's work habits and economic practices, is both "necessary" and never "finished or finishable" (9). Berry uses his writing to adapt, to arrive in body and spirit, to his place and preserve himself in the midst of despair and defeat. Thus he does not see his writing "as an end in itself": it is neither 'art for art's sake' nor does it create artifacts as the culmination of his fidelity to place. Berry does not imitate Williams but is influenced by

⁷⁵ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 56.

⁷⁶ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 55.

him; he inherits Williams's convictions and anxieties. Williams's writing imputes to Berry the sense of writing as an "effort to belong authentically where my life [has] put me" (9).

I interpret Berry's writing within the framework of his reading and experience of William Carlos Williams's poetry. Berry's indebtedness to Williams makes this methodology apposite to the analysis of his (Berry's) writing. Berry admits, "At times the usefulness of [Williams's] work has been made so vivid to me that what I know of him has become part of what I know of myself."⁷⁷ Williams's work is useful for Berry not because its language and form are suitable for Berry's place; it does not offer a recipe, but a parabolic incarnation. It is "useful and sustaining as evidence, even as a history, of Williams's lifelong effort to come to terms with, to imagine, and to be of use to his native and chosen place" (11). So too, Berry's work is not a program to follow, or a model to imitate, or a set of moral instructions. His writing evinces a struggle to belong, to maintain a fidelity to place. The stories he tells, particularly the Port William narratives upon which I will focus, are parables of his effort to pierce the shallow culture and exploitative economy that cloak his native land so that its genius can be revealed and clarified. As parables they are akin to Williams's poetry, which is "the life force, not a 'creative act' but one of the acts of the creation, a part of the sum of

All that which makes the pear ripen
or the poet's line
come true!⁷⁸

Creating is part of worship, "aligning oneself with the creation and drawing on its energy." Thus aligned, "living as a creature within the creation... one's life passes through the world as a

⁷⁷ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 56.

⁷⁸ William Carlos Williams, "Deep Religious Faith," *CPII*, 262. Quoted in Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 57.

creative force or agent, like a stream of water.”⁷⁹ Alternately stated, Berry’s work retells this parable of local adaptation: being fully human is like being a stream of water.⁸⁰

Though Berry focuses on Williams’s poetry, much of his indebtedness can be seen in Berry’s fiction. The Port William stories manifest a poetic, embodied imagination; they move in descent and speak in paradox. In my analysis, I do not suggest final readings or proffer explanations or extract ethical principles; my attempt is to say what they reveal about Berry’s struggle to become locally adapted, and what that in turn clarifies to this reader about the character of creation. The meaning of many of Berry’s novels is, in that sense, the same as the meaning he finds in “A Negro Woman”—“After you have read it, you know something beautiful and consoling that you did not know before” (18). This knowledge is not inert, it is not a piece of information you did not previously possess; it is the experience of insight. It is the experience of having something about yourself as a creature revealed to you. Reading Berry’s work is often equivalent to his own experience reading Williams. It will not give the necessary steps to become locally adapted, but, as an example of the struggle of local adaptation, it embodies the idea that to be human is to live as a creature in creation.

⁷⁹ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 35-36.

⁸⁰ As Berry says of the Red River Gorge: “And so in the aspect of the river, in any of its moods, there is always a residual mystery. In its being it is too small and too large, too complex and too simple, too powerful and too delicate, too transient and too ancient and durable ever to be comprehended within the limits of a human life.” *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 5-6.

Chapter 2

“Is Man No More Than This?”

The story of race is also the story of place.... Thus our lives, even if one day freed from racial calculations, suffer right now from a less helpful freedom, freedom from the ground, the dirt, landscapes, and animals, from life collaborative with the rhythms of God’s other creatures and from the possibilities of imagining a joining to other peoples exactly in and through joining their lives on the ground.

—Willie James Jennings¹

What is enacted in history *is* the divine life, but living in its other, realizing its ‘interest’ in its other. If, in simple terms, this is how God is, this is how God’s creation also is, its very otherness to God the occasion of something like *work*, in the transformation of the contingent not out of its contingency but into the quest for a convergence always ‘real’ and always elusive.

—Rowan Williams²

Life as a miracle is a gift to be accepted. Its acceptance implicates us in gratitude, and in a responsibility of care that is fearful, difficult, and yet pleasing. This is the only antidote I know to the ideas of life as commodity, as property, or as subject.

—Wendell Berry³

Introduction

According to Berry, the human condition in modern culture is trapped in a self-made reduction. We are caught between dehumanizing pride and despair and have forgotten about the perpetual need for—even the ability to bring about—correction and reorientation. The conceptual net in which we are entangled is the idea that “self-fulfillment” is achieved through division from others. To put it in Shakespearean terms, we are a society of individuals who echo Coriolanus’s claim to be the “author of himself.”⁴ To “find yourself,” or “find out who you really are,” consists in articulating an identity separate from the cultural and physical landscapes in

¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 289-290.

² Rowan Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics: reflections in the wake of Gillian Rose,” *Wrestling With Angels*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 72.

³ Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 184.

⁴ Berry, *Home Economics*, 114.

which you live. Rather than understanding one's humanity through metaphors of radical return or relational renewal, "the self's search for self" is fulfilled in one's autonomy. That is, the self can be relieved of dependencies in order to discover itself with "indifference to the opinions and feelings of other people."⁵ Moreover, just as people and places block self-fulfillment, so too work denies a person's true potential. All the necessary work for living—the so-called "drudgery" of caretaking, cleaning, growing, fixing, raising, feeding—obstructs the actualization of ambitions. Transformation is not construed as the work of becoming reoriented away from hubris; we have lost the idea that redemption from selfishness happens through returning to nature and renewing relationships. We now believe that technology alone can save us. Technology's promise of "labor-saving" offers redemption from drudgery and thus enables "spiritual and cultural pursuits."⁶ The aversion to getting one's hands dirty assumes that "in every drudge there is an artist or a tycoon yearning to breathe free."⁷ Modern modes of self-determined identity and the concomitant autonomous realization of desires reduce us to lonely selves, willing the alienation of relationships perceived as threats to the fulfillment of self-interest. Summarily stated, we are deluded into thinking that we are threatened by anything outside our control, thus we delude ourselves into thinking that change or redemption occurs within a life independent of others and nature.

Autonomy, however, is a fantasy. The idea that the self can be discovered independent of relationships engenders carelessness or indifference to existing relationships. According to Berry, self-determination is a superstitious or "mythic" condition rather than a human condition in which "there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence."⁸ In

⁵ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 111.

⁶ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 111.

⁷ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 110.

⁸ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 111.

other words, a flawed understanding of independence simply places a person within a series of irresponsible dependences. Farmers have become dependent on agribusiness corporations—a relationship in which the latter predominately benefits.⁹ Irresponsibility or the lack of obligation and care occurs in any relationship in which one is dependent on another for one's own flourishing at the expense of the other's well-being. Marriages, friendships, and economies are all susceptible to an inappropriate dependency on people, places, or resources as raw material for personal fulfillment. Self-determined persons are ostensibly independent from the obstacles to ambition and happiness; however, they are merely blind to the way in which their success depends on abandoning the interests of others to whom they are bonded. In short, the self-discovered person is a colonial self—one whose self-interest is exploitative.

What is needed is the wisdom and experience “available only to those in immediate free contact with the earth.”¹⁰ To consider oneself above the necessity of labor is to be blinded by “presuppositions and prejudices” that prevent “the possibility of intimate knowledge of the land.”¹¹ Berry describes the form of this blindness in various ways: we are “blind to everything outside an account book”;¹² “For we have given up/ Our sight to those in power/ And to machines, and now/ Are blind to all the world”;¹³ we are “blind and deaf to [our] province.”¹⁴ All of which, however, are symptomatic of superciliousness—the presumptuous claim of some to be higher than those who work. There have been those assigned to labor as a result of the imperious demands by self-interested authorities, some of whom have seen what the master is blind to,

⁹ Berry, *Home Economics*, 176.

¹⁰ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 103.

¹¹ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 105.

¹² Wendell Berry, *Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky's Red River Gorge* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1991), 15.

¹³ Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 125.

¹⁴ Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969; repr., Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), 163.

namely, an intimate knowledge of the land.¹⁵ Berry admits his wounds of blindness and inordinate desires. He tells the story of his great-grandfather's violent sale of a slave to a man, Captain Jenkins, who is publically romanticized in histories of the South as chivalrous and brave. He also narrates his friendship with two African-Americans from his childhood, the memories of whom facilitate a reckoning with the wounds he inherits from both his family history and culture. Berry's life undergoes a pattern of return and renewal, mediated by those who have suffered his own blindness, self-interestedness, and irresponsible dependency. That is, the black servants and friends of his life help him out of a life defined by a civilization whose culture is window-dressing for the narcissistic and exploitative pursuit of self-fulfillment. These friends are the guides of his life's movement, which is simultaneously physical and spiritual and consists of "communal rites of passage that turn us toward the wilderness and bring us home again."¹⁶

An intimate knowledge of creation mediates the return to humanity. For Berry it is not simply enough that we need each other—irresponsible, colonial dependencies can be described

¹⁵ The kind of knowledge derived from working the land—in this case, farming—will undoubtedly be determined in part by the various social conditions in which it takes place. One of the major shifts colonialism enacts is a change in the understanding of landscape and animals, which became understood primarily within an economic matrix rather than as part and parcel of communal life or religious identity. In other words, the land itself has been changed prior to the practices that get one's hands dirty; colonialism is the disruption of a spatial logic in which knowledge and identity are received from the land. See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, especially the first two chapters. This disruption will not be overcome simply in the practices of farming—either done by choice or by force. Berry is not advocating that farming is a panacea, or that it is somehow a form of resistance free from the wounds of racism. Rather, he is arguing that the desire to be 'above work' has its roots in colonialism—in the very inception of racism—and that to address these wounds requires one to begin where these problems also began: human relations with nature. Farming, for Berry, is one example—one suggestion—of a possible starting point, rather than an end, for imagining intimacy with nature and others given the violence and inordinate desires that construct life in America. Berry describes literary scenes and relationships that "testify... to the value of what might be called the underview, the ground-level perspective of those at the bottom of the social structure." *Hidden Wound*, 103. Berry's articulation of the 'hidden wound' resonates with what Walter Mignolo calls the "colonial wound": "Coloniality names the experiences and the views of the world and history of those whom Fanon called *les damnés de la terre* ('the wretched of the earth,' those who have been, and continue to be, subjected to the standards of modernity). The wretched are defined by the *colonial wound*, and the colonial wound, physical and/or psychological, is a consequence of *racism*..." Mignolo also diagnoses the problem in terms of a "blindness," namely "toward histories and experiences lying outside the local history of Western Christianity... [and this blindness] has been and continues to be a trademark of intellectual history and its ethical, political, and economic consequences." Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 8.

¹⁶ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 104.

as such. What is needed is a community formed by its relation with both wilderness and tradition. Berry is a well-known advocate for community as a group of intimate relationships in which habits and desires are formed and shared among people—it is the commonality that disciplines and expresses personal and public life. However, he does not advocate community per se—community as salvation from suburban loneliness or as an assemblage of like-minded individuals. His vision of community includes a robust vision of creation that can be known and experienced yet not controlled or determined, the knowledge of which is central to the flourishing of relationships with interdependent interests. Comparatively stated, if community is a commonality that mediates between public and private life, then creation is an alien standard for community—providing the shape and measure for its affections and activities. Creation is the landscape, the place to which the community and its people belong. Unlike convictions, desires, and goods, creation is non-negotiable; it is simply given in rocks, streams, forests, and meadows, created by outside, invisible forces. To learn from creation is to work with and in it, to toil in its life and death, to live in accordance with its movements, to abide by its rules and behaviors.

This chapter argues that work on Berry's account is the function of communal restoration of personal health and loving relationships—that is, work renews humanity. To make this argument, several components will have to be connected to one another. First, we need an account of how Berry's understanding of community is a force of renewal, helping individuals negotiate damaged relationships and repent of inhuman behavior. Berry's analysis of the dramatic movement of *King Lear*, its pattern of exile and return, is experientially equivalent to his account of communal restoration. I begin, therefore, with a detailed account of his interpretation of Shakespeare's play, which is followed by an exposition of community in Berry's essays. This section will help show how, contrary to some interpreters, his delineation of

community is not the culmination of a successful social construction. Contextualizing the discussion in the civil rights struggle will further indicate that his description of community is no less political; indeed, its formation of intimacy through which interests and access to shared goods are re-conceived in relationships offer a genuine reproach to modern politics-as-statecraft.¹⁷ Secondly, it needs to be shown how this community grows out of and responds to creation. That is, there needs to be a recognition of how nature is the context for communal living. Wilderness in nature is a standard of behavior for communal emulation. Humans are creatures who learn about themselves and are fulfilled through relationships that take place within a particular landscape. The way people are able to relate in self-critical and restorative ways, thirdly, is working in that landscape as rituals of fidelity to place. As mentioned above, Berry himself undergoes renewal by learning about nature and work from people radically different from himself. Because my earlier claim that our ritual return to the human condition requires mediation is too general and abstract to be adequately illustrative of the form of Berry's community, I will use his relationships with specific friends to furnish the missing particularity.

Shared Wounds

Failure, Fidelity and King Lear

According to Wendell Berry, *King Lear* has an “immense teaching,” instructing its readers

¹⁷ The disappearance of farming communities and lack of concern for that disappearance is an example Alasdair MacIntyre gives to suggest that political society in “advanced Western modernity are oligarchies disguised as liberal democracies.” The loss of “the family or household farm” is also the loss of “a way of life the history of which has been integral to the history of the virtues from ancient times onwards.” At its best, good farming has “fostered virtues of independence, virtues of cooperation in contributing to larger human enterprises and virtues of regard for the relationship of human beings to land that has been entrusted to their care.” MacIntyre notes that Wendell Berry has offered “powerful statements” concerning the significance of the loss of this life and yet “these statements have had no effective political impact.” Alasdair MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” *The MacIntyre Reader* ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 237.

“what it means to be a servant. What loyalty means.”¹⁸ It is a story of failure, diminution, and the importance of facing death squarely, honestly. It is also a story that connects geography and morality, presenting the possibility of redemption within nature. The politics of the play is related to the theological—a king with an affliction in his soul corrupts his society; his self-restoration can rehabilitate public order. Berry puts it this way:

In the instituted life of a society ‘things fall apart’ because the people of power have grown selfish, cruel, and dishonest. The effect of this is centrifugal; the powerless and the disempowered are sent flying from their settled domestic life in to the wilderness or the world’s wildness—the state of nature. Thus deprived of civil society and exposed to the harshness of the natural world and its weather, they suffer correction, and their suffering eventually leads to a restoration of civility and order.¹⁹

Berry reads *King Lear* as a kind of trial or ecstatic experience of preparation for public life. He does not interpret it allegorically, but says that it is a story of human experience; its meaning is helpful for critical self-reflection.²⁰ The play forms responses to the following questions: “Do all human societies have in them the seeds of their failure? Are those seeds likely to be the selfishness and dishonesty of the dominant people? Does failure typically reduce the society, or persons in it to some version of the state of nature? And is there something possibly instructive and restorative in this reduction?”²¹ Reduction and failure as we see it in *King Lear* are somehow integral for Berry’s understanding of service and loyalty, which facilitates a personal and public return to the proper condition.

¹⁸ “A Conversation with Wendell Berry,” *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 219. As John Elder puts it, *King Lear* is one of the sources of Berry’s sense of tradition that has been “composted in the circumstances of his life and work” and “informs his work.” Berry’s discussions of *King Lear* and *The Odyssey* (which will be discussed below in chapter four) provide “a background for his own concerns for humility and for marital fidelity as a model for human relation with earth.” John Elder, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 53-54.

¹⁹ Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 141.

²⁰ Martin Lings argues that Lear represents “Everyman” and Cordelia represents “the Spirit”; Lear “banishes Paradise” by banishing Cordelia, the act of which is an allegory for “the Fall.” Martin Lings, *Shakespeare in the Light of Sacred Art* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 64. Berry says, “I am unwilling so to allegorize the play, but I think nevertheless that Lings has pointed us in the right direction. In disinheriting Cordelia... Lear has... estranged himself from goodness.” Berry, *Imagination*, 159.

²¹ Berry, *Imagination*, 141-142.

Lear is corrupted by a self-love that damages his relationships, most notably with Cordelia. He becomes inhuman in his selfishness, causing monstrous divisions. Edmund, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Gloucester, describes this broken condition: "...unnaturalness between the child and the parent; death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities; divisions in state, menaces and maledictions against king and nobles; needless diffidence's, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches..." (1.2.139-144).²² The abdication scene illustrates Lear's attempt at what Berry calls "early retirement." Lear wants the benefits of kingship without any of the required work or care. He fantasizes an escape from his natural limits presuming his mortal condition can be mastered.²³ That is, he attempts to grant himself a kind of salvation: enjoyment without responsibility, pleasure without suffering. His plan fails, however, in Cordelia's silence. Lear's self-love disables Cordelia's speech; she cannot articulate her true

²² Berry, *Imagination*, 158. His quotations of the play are from *King Lear* (Pelican Shakespeare), ed. Stephen Orgel (New York: Penguin Group, 1999). Italics will distinguish further quotations of the play found in Berry's text.

²³ Berry elsewhere says that *King Lear* is "about kindness, both in the usual sense, and in the sense of truth-to-kind, naturalness, or knowing the limits of our specifically *human* nature." According to Berry, Lear is "guilty of hubris or presumption, of treating life as knowable, predictable, and within his control." *Life Is A Miracle*, 4. Following Kathleen Raine and William Blake, to treat life as predictable and controllable in this way is to deny its holiness; that is, both life and holiness "can be known only by being experienced. To experience it is not to 'figure it out' or even understand it, but to suffer it and rejoice in it as it is." *Life Is a Miracle*, 8-9. Living fully is "participating fully in the succession of the generations, in death as well as in life. Some would say (and I am one of them) that we can live fully only by making ourselves as answerable to the claims of eternity as to those of time." *Life Is A Miracle*, 8. Lear's hubris is his attempt to control his life; he does not make himself answerable to—he frees himself from—the responsibility of caring for his country and for Cordelia. Dividing the kingdom and the subsequent banishment estranges him from a well-ordered succession of generations (a claim of time) and goodness (a claim of eternity). Moreover, he does this without regard for his natural condition as a human in the Chain of Being. The Chain of Being is the relational structure of the world, defining the way in which humanity is animal and divine, mortal and immortal; humans are between angels and animals, partaking of both and tempted towards each. Beings are not categorically distinct but interconnected—hence the metaphor of a chain—which means that its integrity depends on humanity remaining in their place. Aspiring autonomy threatens the order of creation. Ambitions to be more than human—what I am here referring to as Lear's attempt to 'master his mortality'—are attempts at elevation and progress, but are actually dehumanizing and destructive. Here, Berry follows Lings' analysis of *King Lear*, in that Britain "is no longer man's home but his exile" which is an "inversion of the natural order of things." Lings, *Shakespeare*, 64. According to Berry, Shakespeare understood the Chain of Being as "the order of the world"; the problem with Lear and the "villains" of the play "is that the human place in the order of things... is precisely and narrowly delimited, and it is precarious. To fall from one's rightful place, to become less than human, is not to become an animal; it is to become monstrous." *Imagination*, 143-145. Lear's desire to control his life exceeds his natural limits; it is desire for unbounded reason—a way of thinking unconditioned by place, seeing the outcome of actions before they are performed. But this kind of reason is the power of God humans cannot possess. The Fall is the desire to be godlike by misappropriating creation; the hubris to take for the self—sufficiency—what is supposed to be shared.

feelings within the parameters of the contest.²⁴ Lear's disinheritation of Cordelia is also a banishment of "the Spirit," and thus he has "estranged himself from goodness."²⁵ In other words, his mistreatment of Cordelia is an act of self-destruction; the loss of her love is the loss of a perspective on his life external to the struggle for power and authority. This alienating selfishness, or self-love, is the root of his madness; there is a rupture between Lear's selfish actions and his understanding of those actions as those of a loving father.²⁶ His desire to control the limitations of his humanity has created the incapacity to know himself and others. This incapacity is perpetuated and augmented by his damaged relationship with Cordelia and its entropic effects.

Lear also is exiled from the city. He, like Cordelia, is cast out into the "wildness of the natural world," where he undergoes a transformation.²⁷ Out in the wilderness, Lear suffers a "pitiless storm," which is nevertheless "not unkind."²⁸ As a result of this adversity, he becomes more compassionate and less self-interested. His emotional dynamics have changed, he feels as a

²⁴ Cordelia's "refusal to participate in the love contest is entirely proper. It is a refusal to falsify her love by indulging her father's frivolous abuse of his power, which she both disdains and fears." *Imagination*, 159. The contest evokes the drama of the trial scene in Mark's gospel. In Rowan Williams's account, the messianic secret is partly to keep people from describing Jesus in untruthful ways; he quotes Anita Mason's novelistic narration of Peter's confession, to whom Jesus says, "There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue." Anita Mason, *The Illusionist* (London: Abacus, 1983), 127. Quoted in Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 6. If Cordelia announces her love of Lear in the contest, then it will be a competing bid for economic gain. Her love is genuine and cannot be truthfully articulated because it will become part of her sisters' self-interested ingratiation.

²⁵ Berry, *Imagination*, 159. Again, Berry is drawing from Lings' interpretation here; however, Berry does not allegorize "the Spirit" to mean "the Holy Spirit." Rather, Lear's rejection of Cordelia makes her a "a stranger" to both Lear and his heart; he no longer knows himself or his love in terms of Cordelia's love, which is complete and genuine.

²⁶ I refer to Lear's selfishness and self-interest as self-love to emphasize the function of love in Berry's reading of the play as that which moves characters either toward or away from goodness. Berry describes selfishness as "self-complacency, self-indulgence, self-ignorance, the lack of critical self-knowledge." *Imagination*, 158. Lear's selfishness blinds him to Cordelia's love, which in turn blinds him to himself; his love that retreats from Cordelia moves further toward himself. When Lear finally sees Cordelia, he is "filled with love and wonder" and is no longer blinded by "his self-preoccupying pride, anger, outrage, guilt, grief, and despair." *Imagination*, 178. Cordelia "is good, and her understanding of her goodness is constant, profound, and absolutely assured." *Imagination*, 161. She is the character that clarifies the disguises and delusions of the other characters "by the measure of [her] transparency, clarity, and candor." *Imagination*, 162.

²⁷ Berry, *Imagination*, 159-160.

²⁸ Berry, *Imagination*, 164.

king who has become reduced to a human in his proper condition. He realizes that his desire to free himself from care was the beginning of his downfall. “Lear’s admission, ‘*O, I have ta’en / Too little care of this!*’ is the turning point of the story.”²⁹ The adversity of his reduction is useful for becoming more human. He realizes that his selfishness and aspiration to control what no human can master has destroyed him and those around him. Unfortunately, the turning point has little effect on Lear’s life—“worldly failure is fully assured; it is too late for worldly vindication.”³⁰

And yet Berry argues that the outcome is not inevitable. Berry refutes Stephen Orgel’s nihilistic interpretation of *King Lear*, which is as follows: “The world is an instrument of torture, and the only comfort is in the nothing, the never of death. The heroic vision of suffering, unredeemed and unmitigated.”³¹ There are moments in the play that support Orgel’s synopsis: Edmund’s order to kill Lear and Cordelia is rooted in the logic of inevitability as a “self-serving determinism,” seeing “*that men / Are as the time is.*”³² However, there are figures in the play that are not “as the time is;” the potential for redemption remains hopeful. Lear’s final speech is not only a wild expression of despair, but also a recovery of love and wonder. Just prior to his death, he is able to see Cordelia, who has remained loyal to him throughout the play, for the first time.³³

²⁹ Berry, *Imagination*, 165.

³⁰ Berry, *Imagination*, 168.

³¹ Berry, *Imagination*, 168.

³² Berry, *Imagination*, 173.

³³ The importance of recognition for Berry distinguishes him from the New Critics, with whom he nevertheless shares a common heritage in the Southern writers: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. On the one hand, he admits that as a writer “who came of age under the influence of the New Criticism are, within limits indebted to it.” *Citizenship Papers*, 157. On the other hand, Berry finds New Criticism limited insofar as its methodology treats texts “as literature,” i.e., having no “political or practical or economic” import; it questions “minutely how [a writer’s work] says what it says, while ignoring or dismissing the question of whether or not what it says is true” (Ibid.). In this sense, Berry’s reading is akin to Stanley Cavell’s, which is an attempt, in part, to reclaim the ordinary meaning of the play in its drama from its overly symbolic interpretations by New Critics. Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*” *Disowning Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 40. Paul Alpers—a significant interpreter for Cavell—underlines the importance of recognition as an ordinary experience that is nevertheless also morally significant. Alpers’ reading is helpful here because he does not interpret Lear’s final recognition of Cordelia as a “moral awareness,” which would make “his

Lear's affection for his daughter enables a "profound submission and relinquishment of his will."³⁴ He no longer yearns to impose his will on the world, finding the latter as uncontrollable as the storm on the heath. Lear now loves Cordelia on her terms—the terms of love—and thus is his humanity redeemed. Redemption, however, does not "come by way of an intercession from Heaven. It was earned, or lived out, or suffered out, in an unrelenting confrontation both with the unregenerate self, the self-covered self, and with the deliberate evil of others."³⁵ Shakespeare directs attention to Lear's and Cordelia's deaths, for which the perception of "another order" offers no relief. Lear is unable to see freely until he loses himself. The turning point in his reduction on the heath is fulfilled in his death. Lear can die fully human, though his recovery requires a painful "self-loss" that was nearly "too late."

According to Berry, Lear's redemption is nearly too late—rather than simply "too late"—because of the parallel story of Gloucester. Ultimately Gloucester's redemption illuminates Berry's ethics, clarifying his sense of how humans orient themselves. In this subplot, the reader sees an image of service and loyalty—of fidelity—that is instructive for understanding failure and restoration. Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, is Berry's paragon of faithfulness, who

suffering... a good." Paul J. Alpers, "King Lear and the Theory of the 'Sight Pattern,'" *In Defense of Reading*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), 152. Berry's indebtedness to New Criticism is shown in his reading of *King Lear* as a version of an "archetypal story," but his distinction is shown in his claim that it belongs to "human experience" rather than understanding. *Imagination*, 141.

³⁴ Berry, *Imagination*, 177.

³⁵ Berry, *Imagination*, 177-178. His reconciliation with Cordelia in prison is an important moment of repentance and forgiveness leading toward his eventual redemption. However, Lear's view of life with his beloved daughter sequestered away from the world is still within Lear's attempt to deny the human condition, to say that his affections and redemption can save him from suffering. Lear's perception of life as "God's spies" is too close to an "intercession from Heaven," an outside force of deliverance to keep the reader from confronting fully the pain of lost lives. Rowan Williams describes the imagery of Lear's perception as "a poignant picture of undramatic life" that is "free from intrigue and ambition" but will be "broken by the renewed violence of Lear's enemies." *Christ on Trial*, 108-109. The prison, then, is an escape from the world; Williams assumes that Lear's perception is outside the struggle to have self-interest determine life's outcomes. The danger that "localizing imagination must face is that of isolation... like Lear saying 'Let us away to prison'... seeks the enclosure of a place of *refuge*. But attachment to such a region of retreat can also be an abandonment, both of the larger world and of the other human beings who continue to inhabit it." John Elder, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 48-49.

maintains the possibility of love in Gloucester's life. Gloucester's hubris and despair, which reflects Lear's, prevents him from recognizing Edgar; through Edgar's love, Gloucester is able to renounce his ambition and selfish political machinations, and thus dies happy, his humanity restored. Edgar's loyalty is not heroic, but rather quite ordinary, and as such it does not compete in the world's contest of distinction and victory.³⁶ And so Edgar offers no "considerable practical success," he gives "no victory and achieves no restoration, as the world understands such things." He and Cordelia, with the other servants in *King Lear*, "stand by, suffering what they cannot help.... This assures only the survival in this world of faithfulness, compassion, and love." Fidelity offers no worldly success, but instead can restore the humanity of people reduced to monsters—faithful servants can "awaken [the inhuman] to love and save them from despair."³⁷

³⁶ Stanley Cavell, like Rowan Williams, shows how an overly dramatic sense of life causes a failure of perception, "convert[ing] the other into a character and make the world a stage for him." Stanley Cavell, "Prologue: The Avoidance of Love (The Abdication Scene)," *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 149. There is a "theatricality which theater such as *King Lear* is meant to overcome. The conditions of theater literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside—hiddenness, silence, isolation—hence make that existence plain.... [I]n giving us a place within which our hiddenness and silence and separation are accounted for, it gives us a chance to stop." *Ibid.*, 149-150. The ordinariness of life enables one to overcome the "avoidance of love," and the world of another is "accepted as the presentness of other minds not to be known but acknowledged." As readers of the play, we imitate Lear's 'avoidance of love' as a character in an ordinary context and become implicated in the tragedy. We see a father fail his daughter which gives us pause, one pregnant with the possibility to see our own failures, our own attempts to possess loved-ones and conscript them into characters that fulfill our own self-interested desires. Cavell's ordinary may offer a pause in "theatricalizing" relationships, however, it may be too ordinary. That is, it is too conventional to acknowledge its wider context. Is a contest of love ordinary? Is Lear's disinheritance and exile of Cordelia the result of common parental love? Is Lear and Cordelia's relationship best understood as one between a father and daughter—one that appears between *any* father and daughter? Cavell's treatment of *King Lear* flattens the complexity of the ordinary, abstracting each character from the rest of the world. Cavell argues that the ordinary is a moral perception, seeing others as they are present rather than as parts in a play I construct. And yet I don't think Cavell sees *King Lear* as it presents itself as a carefully and aesthetically arranged story. Cavell's *King Lear* is an ordinary soap opera, displaying the psychology between two people where all the rest of the world is irrelevant. Despite claims to the contrary, who speaks is unimportant—Lear speaks as a father and nothing else, and the same could be said for the speech of a doctor or a scientist in this scheme. The place in which conversations occur is a mere backdrop, window-dressing for the ordinary presence of people abstracted from any social or political context. The role of father over-determines Cavell's interpretation of Lear, whose speech and meaning is dictated by the interpreter, imposed by Cavell's authority. Perhaps, to amend my earlier comment, Cavell's ordinary is not ordinary enough, for there are always many motivations and reasons for saying the things we say, our place and context always inform our daily life in various ways.

³⁷ Berry, *Imagination*, 167-168.

Gloucester's repentance embodies a "ritual return to the human condition."³⁸ Despair consumes Gloucester after he is deluded into betraying Edgar and blinded by one of Lear's daughters and her husband. As a result, he is pushed out into the wild and determined to destroy himself on the Dover cliffs. Edgar, already exiled, meets his father on the heath disguised as a madman promising to lead the blind man to the cliff. In order to save his father, Edgar poetically describes the terrifying awe of the precipice from memory, deceiving his blind father by giving the impression that the two are standing on the verge of the abyss. Edgar knows that his father's pride, his unrestrained self-interest, has led to his suffering and caused his despair. "Gloucester's blindness is literally the result of the moral blindness of his pride, and it is symbolic of the spiritual blindness of his despair."³⁹ Gloucester casts himself down, only to be facedown on the ground his feet previously stood upon. Edgar pretends to be a stranger who witnessed the plummet. Though Gloucester still wishes he were dead, Edgar tells him the madman above who led him to the cliff was a "*fiend*" and that "*Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.*"⁴⁰ Edgar saves Gloucester from despair, inviting him out of a life reduced to self-determination and lost hope. Gloucester repents of his pride and renounces the temptation to die before the gods ordain his death. And so he is able to die a happy death, one congruous with his humanity "*Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief...*" rather than "the unhuman [sic] conditions of godly pride and fiendish despair." Berry calls Gloucester's transformation "a rite of death and rebirth": the failure of his attempt to control his life through unconstrained selfishness culminates in the reduction of his life—the loss of relationships, authority, sight—which is given back to him by an outcast "stranger." Gloucester has what one might call an elemental experience: throwing

³⁸ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 97-140.

³⁹ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 99.

⁴⁰ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 99.

himself upon the ground only to be given his life back, reordered, in its humble condition between the passionate extremes of grief and joy. It is a return to humanity, rescued from a life captured by the inhuman options of god and fiend.

In *King Lear*, the reductionism of selfishness is an uncontrollably annihilating force. Edmund, seeking his father's ruin, deceives Gloucester into thinking Edgar plots his father's death. Edmund eschews human decency and instead submits to "*Nature*," which he understands as "exclusive self-interest."⁴¹ Reeling from the injustice of society to discriminate against illegitimate children, Edmund desires to possess that which has been denied him: "*Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.*"⁴² He has defined himself as "self-determined," at service only to the "law of nature" rather than the "filiality and love" of human nature.⁴³ The play on "nature" here is meant to be constructively confusing. Untamed nature—the pure state of nature—is sometimes thought of as the threat of lawless barbarity from which government and civil society save humanity. Edmund appears to reverse this political orientation, attempting to use the lack of custom and human law to achieve his own justice. Lear describes such self-interest as "*unnatural*," and is driven—like Gloucester and Edgar—into the wild as a result. Self-interest has become the custom of civil society, and both characters have been thrust out into the wilderness. Lear and Edgar, one disempowered by his selfishness, the other powerless because of his loyalty, meet under such circumstances. In a state of loss and despair, Lear asks Edgar, "*Is man no more than this?*"⁴⁴ His own failure to be "successfully selfish"—Lear's failure to "secure for himself his own wishes," and to "alone, save himself even from the weather"⁴⁵—affects his perception of Edgar, causing him to misread the world: "*Thou art the thing itself*;

⁴¹ Berry, *Imagination*, 163.

⁴² Berry, *Imagination*, 162.

⁴³ Berry, *Imagination*, 163.

⁴⁴ Berry, *Imagination*, 172.

⁴⁵ Berry, *Imagination*, 172.

*unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.*⁴⁶

Unmitigated self-interest is uncontrollable; the destruction of the innocent and the guilty is the “natural result of unnatural (that is, inhuman) behavior.”⁴⁷ There is no appropriately limited use of selfishness for achieving a greater good as Edmund finds out: “*Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature.*”⁴⁸ *King Lear* ends as a tragedy, the destruction of community as a result of disordered desires.

Wilderness is the place in which desires are reordered, though, again, this reordering does not achieve worldly success. Edgar’s description of the vista from atop Dover cliffs provides an image of the world for the blind Gloucester:

*The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down
Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice, and yond tall anchoring bark
Diminished to her cock—her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight*⁴⁹

For Berry, Edgar’s “view” is no quaint scene of a tourist standing on a car turnout; it cannot be captured on a postcard. The perception that nature is “scenic” is part of the inhuman sense of superiority, something to be viewed, not undergone. It is a reading of the world by people who fancy themselves above the need to submit to natural forces—both those that sustain health and limit human endeavor. It is the opposite of the vision Edgar offers, which is from memory, from his experience. His knowledge of the view from the cliffs is not just an abstract impression. He knows the view imaginatively, which is to say he knows it “intimately, particularly, precisely,

⁴⁶ Berry, *Imagination*, 172.

⁴⁷ Berry, *Imagination*, 175.

⁴⁸ Berry, *Imagination*, 175.

⁴⁹ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 98.

gratefully, reverently, and with affection.”⁵⁰ Edgar presents to his father a perspective of creation into which Gloucester loses himself, throwing his body into it as a final act of self-destruction. Of course, he merely tumbles to the ground, and yet he is renewed and given new life.

The state of nature—“wilderness or the world’s wildness”—in the play is a significant part of its “moral landscape.” It is where “the powerless and the disempowered... suffer correction, and their suffering eventually leads to a restoration of civility and order.”⁵¹ Edmund views the land only as material to possess; he relates to it as a matter of possession. As such, his perception estranges him from his father and brother, reducing nature to self-interest. Edgar views the land as the place of personal healing and restoring relationships. Wilderness is where one goes to be measured against creation to find the true human place within it and “thus be saved from both pride and despair.”⁵² The state of nature is “the context of our lives” from which we learn the order of our personal and public lives. It instructs us how to preserve our humanity after we have reduced ourselves to an unnatural taxonomy of gods and fiends.

Local Interdependence

Rather than being merely “a condition of physical proximity”—which is the condition of a crowd—a community “is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”⁵³ It is a commonwealth: “community is a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local

⁵⁰ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2000), 138.

⁵¹ Berry, *Imagination*, 141.

⁵² Berry *Unsettling America*, 99.

⁵³ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 61.

economy, and local nature.”⁵⁴ The significance of interdependence is hard to overstate. On the one hand, it indicates the interconnection of individuals for the functioning of day-to-day life—doctors, plumbers, and teachers all depend on one another for maintaining the ordinary continuance of health, infrastructure, and education. Insofar as these professions have become specialties whose relations are mediated solely monetarily, they remain divided within a community. The problem with specialization, for Berry, is not the importance of honing a craft for excellent performances, but rather the extent to which people isolate themselves within their own self-interest. On the other hand, the interdependence of Berry’s community members is one in which skills are developed to improve the common good rather than personal wealth and prestige.⁵⁵ In other words, virtues and interests are mutually formative—the mutuality of life constitutes the identity of the community. As virtues and interests change due to the transformation of members—for whatever reason—so too are the activities and desires of the community altered. The mental and spiritual effect of shared interests and a common good is the constitution and transformation of people by the behavior, affection, and well-being of others with whom they share their place.

Authentic communities are those that cultivate appropriate dependencies. Their common virtues—“trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion, and forgiveness”—discipline members to be respectful to and responsible for each other.⁵⁶ “Private life and public life, without the disciplines of community interest, necessarily gravitate toward competition and

⁵⁴ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community* (San Francisco: Pantheon Press, 1992), 120.

⁵⁵ Patrick Deneen makes this point, suggesting that Berry rejects the anthropology of classical liberalism in which “‘nature,’ including human nature, is hostile to the goods of human life,” and has as its “base assumption that all human motivation arises from self-interest,” which “further undermines the claims for a common good and rather privileges the priority of individual choice and economic growth.” Deneen, “Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought,” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 301-303.

⁵⁶ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 120.

exploitation.”⁵⁷ Modern “self-seekers” shirk the communal responsibility to share mutual interests and instead exploit relationships for self-realization—usually in the form of wealth and prestige. Public institutions—“the schools, governments and government agencies, the professions, the corporations.... [and] the churches”—facilitate this “liberation” of the self, shaping public life into unencumbered competition.⁵⁸ Ambitious, selfish desires are curbed by the intervention of communal interests. There is a sense in which Berry’s description of the intervening community indicates desire as something the public imputes to private life. That is, rather than finding an autonomous self, or establishing the self as its own author, individuals are constituted by desires and affections they have bought or by which they have been seduced. Individual dependency on the industrial economy—salespersons, advertisers, global culture industries—stimulates exploitative and competitive self-interest. The loyalty and affection of a community intervenes or mediates between the desires of public and private life. Without mediation between corporations and the individuals they capture, order and justice is gained by litigation by submitting to abstract generalized laws. To depend on the community to give individuals their interests, to have their desires formed by the loyalty and affection of others, is, by contrast, to order both the internal and public lives of people through trust, care, and intimacy. Justice, communally instantiated, is the appropriate dependency on others for mutual well-being and flourishing. The form of this dependency—the way in which community intervenes—is according to non-institutionalized wisdom taught through “stories and songs,” which are common practices that “enforce decency without litigation.”⁵⁹ Behavior is influenced culturally through the memories and experiences of all the members in the community.

⁵⁷ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 121.

⁵⁸ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 152.

⁵⁹ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 120.

Communities disintegrate when their members think their desires are controllable and self-determined. Such a mentality is manifested in relationships when the lives of others are perceived as knowable purely in terms of the self's desires.⁶⁰ The reduction of love to sexual desire, for example, is a result of the industrial economy, which articulates sex in terms of technique and sells it as entertainment. Marriages have deteriorated to the extent that love is not the practice of an erotic giving and receiving of one another in a socially constituted arrangement. Rather, marriage, like any other relationship without community, is dictated by emotion and the completion of self-interest. Marriage is the primary relationship through which community is understood. It is "the basic and central community tie; it begins and stands for the relation we have to family and to the larger circles of human association."⁶¹ The causes of disintegration for one are the same as for the other.

The failure of relationships, of community, is assured once self-interest is the primary motive for behavior and dependence. Selfishness cannot be controlled or limited by a perception of the end to which it is put, nor can the law forestall its destruction of all involved—the other and the self-seeker.⁶² Our divided society, like Lear's, is equally the result of the failure to be 'successfully selfish.' Not only has society been built on Edmund's desire to possess the land of others, but it has also established its freedom as "benefit without obligation" to those whose labor transforms the land into monetary value.⁶³ Simply stated, "benefit without obligation" is the irresponsible dependency upon which our economy and social arrangements are ordered—it is Lear's "early retirement" that we desire. Civil society has not imposed order on barbaric nature; instead, pride has disintegrated healthy connections between people and between humans

⁶⁰ It is also displayed socially when a community's economy is subject to national or global economies. See Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 126.

⁶¹ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 153.

⁶² Berry, *Imagination*, 167.

⁶³ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 159.

and the earth. Pride is the desire to possess the sources of life—both human and non-human—for the self. It is both a personal and social problem. It is not simply a sin that threatens the salvation of the soul.⁶⁴ Nor is it merely a motive for economic exploitation that can be solved through rearranging socio-political structures or imposing legislation. Internal disorder (pride) is inextricably linked to social disorder (exploitation).⁶⁵ Berry works out the political and moral seriousness of the relationship between the personal and the social in *The Hidden Wound*, arguing that both the destruction of nature and the abuse of African Americans stem from an internal disease, a disrupted psyche:

I wrote the book because it seemed to me that the psychic wound of racism had resulted inevitably in wounds in the land, the country itself. I believed then, and I believe more strongly now, that the root of our racial problem in America is not racism. The root is in our inordinate desire to be superior—not to some inferior or subject people, though this desire leads to the subjection of people—but to our condition. We wish to rise above the sweat and bother of taking care of anything—of ourselves, of each other, or of our country. We did not enslave African blacks because they were black, but because their labor promised to free us of the obligations of stewardship, and because they were unable to prevent us from enslaving them. They were economically valuable and militarily weak.⁶⁶

Racial reductionism and division of humanity is the result of the unnatural over-determination of self-interest.

⁶⁴ D.G. Hart suggests that Berry uses *King Lear* to “propose a different version of salvation than the one chiefly promulgated by the institutional church. Instead of regarding belonging to the body of Christ as at least one important manifestation of spiritual wholeness, Berry conceives of salvation as the solitary quest of the individual who leaves home to discover the truth of reality.” D.G. Hart, “Wendell Berry’s Unlikely Case for Conservative Christianity,” *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 131. Berry’s account of the drama in *King Lear*, its political themes, and its function as a landmark for culture to return to all dispute Hart’s oversimplified abridgement of Berry’s exposition.

⁶⁵ The moral and physical orders are not two orders but one: “We see the likelihood that our surroundings, from our clothes to our countryside, are the products of our inward life—our spirit, our vision—as much as they are products of nature and work.” *Unsettling America*, 11-12. The connection between natural and moral order is coextensive with the connection between mind and body the separation of which is a theological problem with destructive consequences. See Jason Peters, “Wendell Berry’s Vindication of the Flesh,” *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 317-332.

⁶⁶ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 112.

While we may be more ambivalent on the exact relationship between racism and slavery—which came first, and so on⁶⁷—Berry’s point is that there is a problematic sense of self, one that is economically motivated and desperate to be liberated from Adam’s curse, at the heart of racism. This diseased self, the white self, has exploited the work of those subsequently deemed inferior, thereby debasing their labor while simultaneously benefiting from it. Whiteness names the sense of superiority to the human condition as well as the system that economically degrades those who toil within that condition—in all its humility and difficulty. Berry is skeptical that governmental legislation can fix the problem because it cannot deal with people personally, only as abstract social groups—African Americans, Southerners, Immigrants, etc. Instead, Berry advocates a revolution in which the work of caretaking is not avoided but rather enacted, which will renew a sense of humanity properly within the terms of its relation to creation. Such a revolution cannot be imposed from the top, but emerges through the transformations that occur through the face-to-face relationships of people working together on and with the earth. In short, society needs communities of love that mediate intimate relationships. Berry learned about this need from his own close friends, which he describes in *The Hidden Wound*.

Restoring Infected Souls

⁶⁷ According to C. Eric Lincoln, for example, it is a “misconception” that racism is the “lingering memorabilia of the slavery... The truth is that slavery was merely the political institutionalization of a preexisting ideology. It was an existing racism that redefined Indians and Africans alike for ambitious economic and social convenience of Europeans bent on the maximization of a new world of opportunities they were unprepared to confront with their own labor.” C. Eric Lincoln, *Coming Through the Fire: Surviving Race and Place in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 132-133. Willie Jennings’ investigation into the theological mechanisms that make possible the redefinitions of both ‘Indians and Africans’ as well as their places as necessary for their identities suggests that slavery is more than ‘mere’ political institutionalization. See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, especially chapters one and two.

The Hidden Wound is a love story. Though it appears to be a book on race—indeed, it is an essay in which Berry makes claims and formulates arguments—it gives neither a theoretical nor a systematic account of race relations or racism. It is not a novel but a non-fiction graphic representation of friendships, describing relationships of intimate familiarity. The polemical context within which Berry portrays these relationships, however, is the public life of racial social problems. Because of the inflammatory nature of racism and civil rights, Berry witnesses several public discussions of these problems that he characterizes as self-righteous and generalizing. The love story Berry tells is neither romantic nor sentimental. It is the response of someone frustrated with a conversation that uses abstract language, one separated from lived experiences. He is unable to participate in these conversations at the time—not least because his southern drawl combined with his white skin led white protestors to identify him as a racist—and decides to contribute to the dialogue by writing his memory and testimony of two particular childhood friends. The impetus of Berry's thoughts is the lack of love in the conversation, or rather because the only love present seems to be varying forms of divisive and isolating self-love. At best, the conversation could only achieve an agreement of sorts, namely, on the “historical scheme of white guilt and black innocence, white victory and black defeat.” This achievement appears “hopeless” to Berry insofar as there is “no possibility of mutual recognition of a common humanity, or the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation, or the possibility of love.”⁶⁸ In other words, the conversation betrays a lack of community, the absence of a commonwealth, among the participants that could either sustain or be nurtured by them. Berry's friendships display a love that is personal yet tied to public life insofar as it is characterized by a desire that depends on and is responsible for others.

⁶⁸ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 110.

Berry attributes the divisive effect and lack of community to the “national” context of the discourse. Of course, one cannot talk about the development of a black studies program at a private university in 1968 without situating it within the broader civil rights movement in America, and perhaps the other worldwide protests as well. One would then acknowledge, indeed hope, that the local struggle could have a national, perhaps global, political effect of liberation. The problem, however, is the way the conversation construes the relationship between black and white Americans as historically divided between oppressed and oppressors. It is commonplace by now to say that white hegemony has institutionally excluded and legislatively discriminated against black folk. Legislation and institutions set the terms of engagement (oppressed/oppressor, innocent/guilty, defeat/victory), to which civil rights activists—both black and white—adhered. But this way of seeing and associating with others cannot make sense of Berry’s own relationships. His experience of white privilege is painful rather than triumphant—a pain different from that of his black contemporaries because self-inflicted. Language that brackets out the experience of lives and treats individuals or groups as merely ciphers for cultural forces ultimately benefits state apparatuses while it simultaneously hampers human relationships. As long as conversations are preoccupied with rearranging existing political arrangements at the expense of an attempt to mutually recognize a shared humanity, reconciliation, and friendship—love—will be out of the question.⁶⁹

Berry’s critique of politics and its limiting idiom for cross-cultural dialogue may seem questionable to urban liberal sensibilities. Twenty years after writing his book, Berry suggests that Jesse Jackson’s contention for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination is a

⁶⁹ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 110.

benchmark for the improvement of society.⁷⁰ But this version of the difficulty and overcoming of racism does not take into account the continual destruction of American soil that happens simultaneously with this kind of political improvement. State politics and legislation divide social problems into discrete issues in order to publicly address them as uncomplicated and unambiguous with equally straightforward solutions. Berry connects two specific social problems—the “psychic wound of racism” and “wounds in the land, the country itself”—to articulate their growing difficulty and the concomitant effect on human relationships.⁷¹

Berry sees racism as deeply connected to the human condition—one that cannot be solved by the superficial rearrangement of states of affairs. He is suspicious of discussing the matter without identifying the desires for ascendancy and fantasies of omnipotence hidden in the assumptions of the conversation. Put differently, both the aspiration to rise above the limitations of being human and the illusion that humans have the capability to overpower innate deficiencies are not confronted but ignored and therefore perpetuated by the belief that the executive branch and its ordinances can fix any situation. To keep articulations of the injustice of racism in the political realm—that is, within arguments about proper forms of statecraft—is to alienate the personal experiences of people who confront it daily, in its various manifestations. In order to address the problem of racism one must address its causal networks of human desire.

⁷⁰ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 111. The near-messianic rhetoric surrounding Barack Obama’s presidential win twenty years later confirms state politics as the popular measure for social progress. To prove that the democratic process is a movement of positive change, that it constitutes a just social order, one only need look at the black man in the white house. Limitation of or obstruction to the development of social justice can be located in the areas that vote according to religious or economic commitments. These areas are generally perceived to be rural populations, which is a result of organizing America into red and blue states. Within this political map, the difficulty of a social problem such as racism consists in persuading one to change one’s colours, as it were. Obama’s ability to gain rural support, something that neither Al Gore nor John Kerry could do, appears to overcome that difficulty. Indeed, some have claimed that racism is no longer a “main problem” in America. John McWhorter, “The End of Racism?” *Forbes.com*, November 5, 2008 Online: http://www.forbes.com/2008/11/05/obama-racism-president-oped-ex_jm_1105mcwhorter.html

⁷¹ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 112.

Berry never suggests that he is outside these tangled webs of desire. He does not offer his life or his relationships as ideologically exemplary, patterns that hover above the fray. Despite all its problems and difficulty, Berry does not excuse himself from the conversation to offer a new scheme to be instituted or sociopolitical arrangement to be implemented. He is neither a purist nor a sectarian. *The Hidden Wound* does not disregard the emotions and concerns of those he criticizes, but rather investigates of the environment of desire that besets human life. One of the experiences left unarticulated is the pain of racism on its beneficiaries, the pain of being socially pegged in the role of oppressor. Berry feels this pain and suggests that it is present within all white people. It is not just that white people suffer guilt from inheriting a social, political, and economic advantage. White experience in the face of black suffering was not simply one of victory, but itself a suffering—one that “involved loss and spiritual disfigurement” as well as “love.”⁷² Thus, Berry’s exploration of human desire is not an attempt to escape its hold on life but rather to acknowledge his place within this position of loss, deformity, and love.

Put differently, Berry believes that we share one another’s wounds. He accepts it to be true that humans always already begin as broken people, dehumanized both by being harmed as well as harming others. That white people share the wound of racism as an internal mirror of external suffering is Berry’s point of departure from his contemporary white civil rights activists. Though Berry equally wants justice, which would include political adjustments with regard to the civil rights of black citizens, he does not abide by the law of excluded middle—that whites are “absolutely guilty” and blacks are “absolutely innocent,” that history is configured as “white victory” and “black defeat,” or that society has only the two discontinuous roles of “oppressors” and “oppressed.” Berry does not diminish the extent of black suffering or claim that white people did not benefit from racism. Rather, he describes relationships that exceed the absolutely divided

⁷² Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 111.

scheme. The civil rights instance of excluded middle exhausts all relational possibilities, preventing the opportunity for white people to reflect on the diminution of their own humanity. A middle ground is required for mutual recognition and humanity, for the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. Berry says, “I would prefer to stay in the middle, not to avoid taking sides, but because I think the middle *is* a side, as well as the real location of the problem.”⁷³ The middle Berry witnesses is a place of loss and pain whereby one might acknowledge that life partakes of others’ wounds, that one’s own humanity is diminished by diminishing another. Within this place is the possibility of love.

Without a middle ground of this nature, no real change can occur. Berry describes the middle-less position as hopeless because the end to which actions are directed is one that maintains division and does not address the predominant American desire. Simply put, the aim of American imagination is “freedom from drudgery,” and the goal of America as a nation is to “work less.”⁷⁴ However, social prejudice is based on the contempt for work. Berry argues that “the freedom and prosperity of the people” and “the health of the land” are interrelated.⁷⁵ The desire to rise above the “sweat and bother” of taking care of the land is coextensive with the systematic exploitation of vulnerable social groups. A nation that commodifies relationships between social groups, dehumanizing the work that is “fundamental, necessary, inescapable, *and inferior*,” of those people deemed to be *ipso facto* subordinate, “has implanted in its own soul the infection of its ruin.”⁷⁶ American desires and goals are destined to ruin its people and the land. To address the injustices of social groups without recognizing its connection to the desires of the economic system that makes exploitation and contempt necessary leaves problematic

⁷³ Berry, *Home Economics*, 138.

⁷⁴ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 114.

⁷⁵ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 112.

⁷⁶ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 113. Berry’s analysis here applies to the male-female antagonism. See “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” *What Are People For?* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1990), 178-196.

conceptions of success intact. Liberation should not mean “freedom to exploit for economic result.” Liberty and success of this kind are fantasies: they exist only in the mind and for self-interest. The desire to work less and be free from drudgery is the beginning of racism as well as land degradation and pollution. Diversity is not a solution if it merely consists in setting the parameters in which all people become self-interested and destructively prodigal. Without changing the conception of success to include the health and well-being of human and non-human others as well as the ground on which we live, the only shift will be that the “aims and standards of the oppressors become the aims and standards of the oppressed.”⁷⁷ Such a shift would bring about a difference that makes no difference—hence, it is hopeless.

Berry participates in creating a middle ground through his experience of pain and love. Through his friendships that go beyond what is allowed by the terms set by either the civil rights language he hears or his racist heritage, Berry learns a different aim and standard for his life. The end to which love works, its hope, includes more than a lover’s self-interest or her beloved. Berry has his love, his affection, for the earth educated through the pleasure and satisfactions of a friend who has been forcibly excluded from the economic “opportunity” to dominate. Accordingly, he discovers that the love of the earth is part of the love in friendship, that the two loves sustain and nurture one another. Remembering his friendships is a painful experience, not only because of the guilt and compassion Berry has for the suffering of his friends, but also because his loyalty leads him to become somewhat detached from the institutions that gave his life meaning—family, culture, and religion. It is the pain of acknowledging an incomplete humanity, of not knowing what desires to trust.

Berry’s central concern—what makes *The Hidden Wound* a love story—is with the restoration of the soul. That it is not a book about race or racism per se but an essay that contains

⁷⁷ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 115.

a series of reflections means that it does not fit either within a conversation overly determined by opposition or with the solutions offered by law or governmental positions. Nor do these reflections describe an existential environment that corresponds with any group principles or institutional structure—the church, the state, the civil rights movement, or slavery. Berry diagnoses the wounds of racism as the diminishment of humanity, which is both physical and spiritual and related to both culture and religion. Remembering the lives of others and the extent of their influence is not so much an attempt at suturing social divisions at the national level as it is a way of understanding the difficulty of struggling with the hidden barriers between our relationships. Analyzing the damaged condition of humanity through his experience with the perspectives of others describes the wounds in both the soul and the land. His criticisms of the preoccupation with governmental legislation, institutional structure, and ideology are not meant as a withdrawal from these problems. He attends to his memories and the affectionate voices therein rather than the estranged complaints based on fantasies of success so as to order the soul according to a beloved community in which legislation, structure and principles will be more just because they will incorporate and care for others. Berry's friendships witness the beloved community, which informs the soul's proper origin and end.

World of Love

Before I move on to describe and analyze Berry's atoning relationship between soul and creation, I want to address the danger of reading Berry's argument for personal and social change as a call for people to leave the city to farm in the country. How can it be, we might wonder, that the country, the very place where slavery was most visibly and violently enacted, offers a solution to the "racial problem in America"? Berry does not suggest as much, but instead says

that the “answer to our race problem, as to many others, would be a restoration of our communities—it being understood that a community, properly speaking cannot exclude or mistreat any of its members.”⁷⁸ Not only do human communities need restoration but also communities of “the water, earth, and air, the plants and animals, all the creatures with whom our local life is shared.”⁷⁹ In other words, community offers a solution to the extent that it is a commonwealth—“a place, a resource, and an economy”—and thereby it addresses all the members and their variety of needs: “practical as well as social and spiritual,” including “the need to need one another.”⁸⁰ Between the lonely individual and the nationwide government is the local community. Looking at Gloucester’s transformative moment, one sees a communal act, performed by both a father and son whose meaning is understood in traditional terms.⁸¹ Gloucester’s renewal is neither strictly private nor public, though it changes both his personal relationships and his loyalties to the state. It is a communal enactment, an “eloquent ritual,” wherein relationships, creation, and tradition are interdependent. Berry’s advocacy of the restoration of community as a response to the damages of racism is not bound to farming practices per se, but rather to the intimacy of a world of love—“a world of living creatures, natural orders and cycles, many small, fragile lights in the dark.”⁸² The world of love is represented by and preserves individual connections through “family members, neighbors, and friends.”⁸³ Community is not an end in itself but fosters an environment of healing and flourishing to the extent that it can be recognized as a world of love.

⁷⁸ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 135.

⁷⁹ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 129.

⁸⁰ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 135.

⁸¹ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 101.

⁸² Berry, *Another Turn*, 103.

⁸³ Berry, *Another Turn*, 101.

In short, communal life, the shared life of interdependent forces in creation, is human life.⁸⁴ Berry's suggestion that "freedom, dignity, health, mutual help and affection, undestructive pleasure, and the rest"—that is, the solution to the "racial problem"—is in the restoration of communities, however, seems unrealistic and unhelpful to our modern cynicism. Even Berry's followers are skeptical of such a seemingly glib response. Lauren Winner is a paradigmatic voice in this regard, one who celebrates Berry's vision of community but charges him with "harboring a certain romanticism."⁸⁵ The accusation comes at the end of her review of *Hannah Coulter*, a novel that concludes with an image of return that recalls Gloucester's restoration. Winner, having read "The Body and the Earth," is united with Berry's emphasis on the importance of relationships that labor together as opposed to those that turn narcissistically inward, using the other as a means to fulfill and pleasure the self. The love that sustains marriage and community, personal and public relationships, is "a room, a place, a habitation." It is not the "romantic" love of Hollywood.⁸⁶ Berry's alleged "romanticism" is not in the suggestion that love is the foundation of community, but rather that people can be made whole in communal enactments of return. Indeed, it is suggested that Berry is imagining the possibility of return based on an idealized vision of the world rather than on the world we have: for most of us there is no community left to facilitate return. Despite repeatedly declaring the decline of communities and the desperate need for restoration, Berry, Winner contends, is not pessimistic enough. The problem for Winner is not the possibility of love, but the possibility of Berry's community. The hope for return and healing is not viable because community is in irrevocable decline. Winner's cynicism leaves her in the company of those left wondering "how someone who doesn't farm

⁸⁴ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 129.

⁸⁵ Lauren F. Winner, "Inhabiting Love," review of *Hannah Coulter* by Wendell Berry, *Image* 45 (2005): 120.

⁸⁶ Winner, "Inhabiting Love," 119.

land in Kentucky that his family has owned forever can go about living Berry's robust and exciting vision of community."⁸⁷

The mistake Winner exemplifies is interpreting Berry as an advocate of agrarian life because it establishes a community of love. Winner latches on to the spatial metaphors Berry uses to describe love—as a room—which she then applies to the community, assuming that his vision of community constitutes the social parameters in which love flourishes. Furthermore, work is important to the extent that it names the activities of seeking out and edifying the community. Ethics and moral development, then, are important insofar as they are able to train members to be continuously faithful to their community and bring others into that membership. Berry's vision of community, in this account, rests on the ability to maintain its social space; faithfulness depends on continuous, visible performances of the work that constitutes the community. Because Berry's description of the agricultural practices of members in the imagined community of Port William, the setting of *Hannah Coulter*, is so specific, Winner is doubtful that one can live out his vision of community without the social conditions he illustrates. Winner interprets Berry as merely advocating a series of social performances, a set of practices, which require people to leave the city in order to farm. This is a mistaken reading of Berry.⁸⁸

Berry's sense of the relationship between work and love is complex. It is not that a person must first establish the social conditions that then enable one to love others, nor is it that

⁸⁷ Winner, "Inhabiting Love," 120.

⁸⁸ "I am not suggesting, of course, that everybody ought to be a farmer or a forester. Heaven forbid! I am suggesting that most people now are living on the far side of a broken connection, and that this is potentially catastrophic." *Citizenship Papers*, 48. "Though agrarianism proposes that everybody has agrarian responsibilities, it does not propose that everybody should be a farmer or that we do not need cities... Agrarians would insist only that any manufacturing enterprise should be formed and scaled to fit the local landscape, the local ecosystem, and the local community, and that it should be locally owned and employ local people. They would insist, in other words, that the shop or factory owner should not be an outsider, but rather a sharer in the fate of the place and its community." *Citizenship Papers*, 121.

one learns how to love prior to and separate from others, building up the community based on an abstractly perfected mode of relationship. One learns to love through relating to others in one's community. The love on which Berry's vision of community rests is worked out, performed, in and through the various modes in which people relate to others. The tasks in which people labour together simply name the ways people relate and transform as a result of those relations with others and the earth. One need not know how to farm in order to live out a vision of relationships in which one learns about the desires, frustrations, satisfactions, struggles, and happiness of others.

Berry is not simply an advocate of rural communities as the social form that answers America's problems. He is an advocate of rural communities because rural life is threatened by external predation and internal disaffection, and these are the kinds of places where he learned how to think of himself, others, and the country differently and more constructively than in urban centers. Those cities are also under threat from many anti-community forces that undermine all communities, rural and urban, and those in between. It is in his own particular community that he has seen a vision of creation, which enables and attends transformation out of destructive and violent ways of living. The possibility of a renewed sense of self and creation is not in the retreat to a remote location, purified from the problems of pride and despair. Both America's problems and answers are equally present in the city and the country. Simply stated, Berry defends his community because it is his home, his place on earth. Berry is more an advocate of the relational form than of the general social structure—the institutions, governance, infrastructure, recreational and commercial practices—of community. Put better, the social form of the community is the enactment of a relational consciousness, a mode of being that understands the self in terms of productive and healthy dependencies. In short, Berry is an advocate of beloved

communities, wherever they are. And yet, again, they are not simply ends in themselves. The transformations and renewals of relationships consist in the community's ability to understand and engage with its natural context. That is, returning to the human condition, away from a life reduced to self-interest, depends on both community and wilderness.

Life is Holy

Unforeseen Wilderness

Nature, wilderness, creation, and the world are not isolated estates that relate to one another. They are distinct but not separate aspects of the whole. At times Berry uses these terms interchangeably, indicating that the distinctions are not categorical. Nature is “in a sense, the sum of the changes made by all the various creatures and natural forces in their intricate actions and influences upon each other and upon their places.”⁸⁹ These natural sources of life can be domestic (farm) or wild (forest). Wilderness is neither a place of potential development nor one of aesthetic beauty to gaze upon. Rather, it names “the natural forces within the climate and within the soil that have never in any meaningful sense been controlled or conquered.”⁹⁰ The world is that which is outside civilization, beyond what has enclosed humanity.⁹¹ In the best sense, it is “the world as made, approved, loved, sustained, and finally to be redeemed by God.”⁹² Creation is a theological term, referring to the whole of existence as it is ordered and sustained by the creator.⁹³ It is “one continuous fabric comprehending simultaneously what we mean by ‘spirit’ and what we mean by ‘matter.’”⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Berry, *Home Economics*, 7

⁹⁰ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 100.

⁹¹ Berry, *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 15-16. Berry also calls this “universe,” *ibid.*, 37.

⁹² Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 135.

⁹³ Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 273.

⁹⁴ Berry, *Another Turn*, 91.

Wilderness as “pure nature” is important for Berry’s moral landscape as a structure outside of civilization and instituted social life. It is neither arbitrarily willed nor able to be conscripted into a human enterprise. It is the uncontrolled, unconquered part of nature that is the “unmediated presence of the earth.”⁹⁵ It is the world encountered without any human façade of civilization; not seen through binoculars, car or plane windows, camera lenses, slides, or postcards. It can be encountered anywhere: “wilderness can occupy corners of factory grounds and city lots—places where nature is given a free hand, where no human work is done, where people go only as guests. These places function... as sacred groves—places we respect and leave alone... because we do not [understand well what goes on there]”⁹⁶ and yet “all wilderness are one.”⁹⁷ If it can be said that Berry has a metaphysic, then it is his understanding of wilderness. It is the nature of the place in which a community lives, the larger reality that encompasses life and gives order to its commitments. Berry doesn’t use wilderness as justification for his advocacy; he submits the shape and action of his advocacy to the judgment of wilderness. Indeed, he refrains from “using” wilderness at all, lest it become another humanly contrived standard to institute in society. Rather, wilderness is the non-useful or unproductive aspect of community. It is a measure against which human activity and obligations are judged yet remains a standard outside of current states of affairs. Because it cannot be controlled or fully understood, adaptation to it does not generate bland uniformity or aspire to homogeneity. It is not produced by human will.

⁹⁵ Wendell Berry, *Harlan Hubbard Life and Work* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 8.

⁹⁶ Berry, *Home Economics*, 17.

⁹⁷ Berry, *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 37. For an account of Berry’s “phenomenology” of wilderness and his experience as indicating the religious and existential meaning of places see Mark R. Wynn, *Faith and Place: An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). See especially chapter seven, “The Religious Significance of Some Built and Natural Environments,” 173-205. “Berry’s relationship to this place is reminiscent of inter-personal relationships – the place demands respect, and it draws him dialogically into a deeper encounter with itself. The woods also exercise a narratively mediated agency: Berry’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours here are all shaped by his knowledge of its history. And although the place does not bear the stamp of his concerns, in the way that his everyday environment does, it impinges profoundly upon his sense of himself.” *Faith and Place*, 179.

In the face of wilderness, human behavior and meaning are not self-determined but rather open to critique and defense, understanding and misunderstanding. The change and transformation Berry advocates for public and private life through community is not insisted upon with reference only to his will. He suggests a reality prior to his thoughts and desires, prior to his commitments and advocacy, the character of which is offered in his description of wilderness as dispossessed of human self-interest.⁹⁸

All of which is to say that the instruction we receive from nature on how to be human comes from outside ourselves, beyond our control and decisions. Reception, however, is not passive. The solution to inhumanity is not a denigrating self-effacement, which is just another “kind of self-indulgence.”⁹⁹ To lose all interest in oneself is suicide, which is an absolute estrangement from all relationships. Such misanthropic self-annihilation is unhelpful because it tears apart relationships with others who depend on and love that person. Gloucester’s desire for self-destruction alienates him from Edgar as he becomes self-centered in his despair. Berry describes the paradox of Gloucester’s attempted suicide as both an attempt to control his life and give up on it—to control life by giving up on it.¹⁰⁰ Because life is not something over which one has control it is not a possession, and thus life is something we cannot completely abandon. To be human does not require annihilating self-denial. There is a certain amount of self-interest that is simply part of our human nature. “After all, we value this passing work of nature... because

⁹⁸ The possibility of recognizing activity between different groups in different places can be seen in Berry’s travels to other farms and conversations with other farmers across the world. Wilderness does not overcome difference, interpretation, or change but allows the possibility of recognition that is the basis for dialogue and relationships. See “An Agricultural Journey in Peru,” in *The Gift of Good Land*, 3-46; and “Tuscany,” in *Citizenship Papers*, 175-180.

⁹⁹ Berry, *Another Turn*, 78. In what appears to be a contradictory claim, Berry suggests that the photographer who enters the wild “in search of what he does not expect and cannot anticipate” exhibits a “profound humility, for he has effaced himself.” *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 27. The important difference is between humble self-effacement and self-indulgent effacement. The photographer effaces himself in order to learn from his place without expectation or demand; the indulgent effacer denies that there is a self that can learn.

¹⁰⁰ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 9.

we need it and love it and want it for a home.”¹⁰¹ We both depend on a wild world we did not make and are joined to it by our own nature. We retain our agency; we still act in ways that we intend to benefit ourselves. Our need and use of nature is not denied and the responsibility of caretaking remains.

And yet the instruction we are given is that loss precedes renewal. There needs to be a loss of the inhuman self in order to return to our proper human selves. The death or loss Berry points out is metaphorical—Gloucester intends literally to kill himself but is transformed through a metaphorical death. The death that enables life in nature, however, is literal: “This year’s leaves decay and enter the intricate life of the soil, which assures that there will be more leaves another year. It is this pattern and only this—not any that we may conceivably invent—that we must imitate and enter into if we are to live in the world without destroying it.”¹⁰² Death and loss, for Berry, is not for annihilating self-effacement but for renewal. “In order for the renewal to take place, the old must be not forgotten but relinquished; in order to become what we may be, we must cease to be as we are; in order to have life we must lose it.”¹⁰³ Our self-interest must not be condemned entirely but limited by its relationships to others and its place. Here we are given an image of what responsible dependency looks like: when we become humble, generous, and courageous we can relate to wilderness on its terms, both in awe and love, losing the lives aspired to in pride and finding them as they are.¹⁰⁴ Our relationships with each other should follow this pattern: subordinating ourselves to—and yet retaining our agency within—the interlinking system of creation.

¹⁰¹ Berry, *Home Economics*, 147.

¹⁰² Berry, *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 20.

¹⁰³ Berry, *Home Economics*, 153.

¹⁰⁴ Berry, *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 67.

The Infinite Centers of Creation

Berry uses the metaphor of atonement—which he understands as at-one-ment—as the image for the interlinking activity of creation.¹⁰⁵ The expression of a life lost in order to gain it is biblical, which Berry interprets through his experience with nature. For example, Berry deplores preachers who promulgate conceptions of salvation that separate body and spirit, detaching atonement from moral concerns.¹⁰⁶ The concept of finding life only after it has been lost as the properly human place within creation is ethical, which applies to both body and spirit.¹⁰⁷ In short, a life found in losing it is more like a decaying leaf on a forest floor than a disembodied soul rising to heaven: one is an analogue of resurrection; the other is no resurrection at all.¹⁰⁸ When the body is sacrificed, when life is literally lost for the sake of the soul, it is not because it is destroyed in exchange for salvation. Rather, martyrs who “truly respect and revere the life of the earth and its Creator” refuse to serve those who treat life as something to control, as unholy.¹⁰⁹ The interlinking system can be summed up in William Blake’s comment that “everything that lives is holy.”¹¹⁰ That is, life is not something to control—as Gloucester and Lear have it—but is a miracle. To treat it otherwise is to “enslave it, make property of it, and put it up for sale.”¹¹¹ Preachers who separate salvation from the form of creaturely life abandon that life; they do not produce humanity but masters. To live with a conscious sense of atonement as responsible interdependency, as emulating forms of life that have been gained by being lost, forms us as

¹⁰⁵ “When the metaphor of atonement ceases to live in our consciousness, we lose the means of relationship.” *Continuous Harmony*, 156.

¹⁰⁶ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 108.

¹⁰⁸ Norman Wirzba reveals the mystical nature of a life that, in dying to self, finds its pattern in the soul. “If mystics are those who seek to take up the divine pattern of life within their own, then the giving away of one’s life will become a defining feature of mystical practice. According to Berry, we have a concrete model to learn from: the soil’s fertility.” Norman Wirzba, “The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life” *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 267.

¹⁰⁹ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 108.

¹¹⁰ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 98.

¹¹¹ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 7.

living souls—“that is, as creatures of God, members of the holy community of Creation.”¹¹²

Atonement is this membership, which is not separated from the moral obligation to learn “how best to live on earth, among one’s fellow creatures.”¹¹³

Atonement is expressed in a series of analogies involving community and creation and God. Berry’s picture of salvation is not a lonely soul resting in heaven after death, but neither is it an institutional membership in a body politic that disregards the health of the soul. In Winner’s understanding of community, atonement can be achieved through participating in social construction. Simply doing the right things together, relating to each other through tasks and practices, would be enough. For Berry, “goodness, wisdom, happiness, even physical comfort, are not institutional conditions.” A person can be “happy only in doing well what is in his power, and in being reconciled to what is not.”¹¹⁴ Ethics is not only “doing well,” it is also being ‘at-one-d,’ if you will, with that which is beyond control—namely the wilderness of creation. Both morality and reconciliation, or atonement, are emulative: we act how we see others act and we love and desire how we see others love and desire. The latter may be less obvious, so Berry describes atonement as imagining relationships of love.¹¹⁵ It is an

expansive metaphor of farming and marriage and worship. A man planting a crop is like a man making love to his wife, and vice versa: he is a husband or a husbandman. A man praying is like a lover, or he is like a plant in a field waiting for rain. As husbandman, a man is both the steward and the likeness of God, the greater husbandman. God is the

¹¹² Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 106.

¹¹³ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 17.

¹¹⁴ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 160.

¹¹⁵ James Alison, who has argued that atonement is not something to understand but rather something experienced, has influenced my reading of atonement in Berry. “The movement is from creation to us becoming participants in creation by our being enabled to live as if death were not. This is the *priestly* pattern of atonement; and it is the priestly pattern that Jesus had the genius to combine with the ethical, bringing together the ancient liturgical formula, the prophecies, the hopes of fulfillment of the anointed one, the true high priest who would come and create a new temple, the true shepherd of the sheep who would come to create a new temple – fulfilling those, and revealing what it meant in terms of ethical terms: the overcoming of our tendency to sacrifice each other so as to survive. That is the world, which thanks to him, we inhabit... What is *difficult* for us is not grasping the theory, but starting to try and *imagine* the love that is behind that.” James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (London: Continuum, 2006), 66-67.

lover of the world and its faithful husband. Jesus is a bridegroom. And he is a planter; his words are seeds. God is a shepherd and we are his sheep. And so on.¹¹⁶

Moral obligations and proper behavior follow from these relationships in which love is imagined in terms of other relationships. Social practices of the community are not separate from either the inward lives of the members or the “sustaining mysteries and powers of the creation.”¹¹⁷ One learns how to love creation by loving one’s spouse, one learns how to tend one’s land by studying the natural process of the forests. Atonement is a “conscious and careful recognition of the interdependence between ourselves and nature.”¹¹⁸ One does not stand outside “the closed system of our experience” to see and control the ordering of analogies.¹¹⁹ We are to see the world as a system of “interlocking lives” in which we look upon “each creature as living and moving always at the center—one of the infinite number of centers—of an arrangement of processes ... by which the creation saves itself from death.”¹²⁰ Though happiness, goodness, and the rest are not guaranteed within this system, it comprises a world of love in which members are offered both health and justice by learning about the interlocking lives of creation.

Our current condition, however, is the failure of this interlinking system. The failure is a result of damaged relationships, which are corrupted when people relate competitively rather than interdependently. In short, the corruption of one relationship damages another within an interlinking system. Berry suggests that white men on the frontier in American history had a corrupted relationship with the land and thus damaged their relations with women, exploiting both. Farms and families were exhausted by men “interested in both mainly for what they would

¹¹⁶ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 152-153.

¹¹⁷ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 153.

¹¹⁸ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 208.

¹¹⁹ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 154.

¹²⁰ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 47.

produce, crops and dollars, labor and sons.”¹²¹ Such a relationship is concomitant with the autonomous “self-seeking” person, whose self-interest competes with the well-being of his/her surroundings.¹²² Modern marriages can also be an example of damaged relationships. Insofar as marriage names a relationship of emotion—committed only to respect, romance, and understanding—its flourishing will be determined in isolation from the flourishing of its place. Competitive self-interest drives marriages from the community to wherever success can be found, its good defined by ambition rather than its relationships. “Upward mobility” breaks connections that hinder ambition and success, allowing people to leave communities and others behind in the name of promotion. However, without these connections, these relationships, marriages lack the resources necessary for sustenance. Marriage is also a practical relationship, which means it must make a household—an economy. To do so it “must make a place for itself in the world and in the community.”¹²³ The good of the marriage, its best interest, is interdependent with its community. Marriage is one part of the interlinking system, which depends on community goods and relations, which in turn depends on creation. To be sustainable, a marriage makes a place within this system, within its economic arrangement of exchange and mutual development. Relational bonds discipline ambition and desire, freeing people from exploiting each other and their environment.

Berry is able to see both the damaged condition of human relationships as well as the bonds of healthy interdependency because he first looks to the movement of creation to learn about the bonds of its interlinking system. He shows us that the root of our damaged

¹²¹ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 155.

¹²² This competition between self-interest and the love of others echoes Lear’s relationship with Cordelia. That the lack of discipline is a virtue shows “wishful thinking, and it invites calamity, for the human place in the order of things, the human limits, the human tragedy remain the same. It seems altogether possible, as a final example, that for various reasons the forms of marriage will change. But this does not promise a new age of benefit without obligation—which, I am afraid, is what many people mean by freedom.” Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 159.

¹²³ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 155.

relationships is our “degrading and obscuring” connection to the land, which we view as “merchandise and ourselves as its traveling salesmen.”¹²⁴ The problem is further complicated by a disordered perception of the goods of relationships as competitive. That is, damaged relationships with the land affect how one understands oneself in relation to another, corrupting the very sense of a non-competitive relationship. Because we moderns no longer have a love for the land that is shaped by knowing our place in the world’s interlinking system, our very sense of love has been corrupted. Thus, just because we feel “in love” with someone does not necessarily make it a relationship in which both people flourish through an appropriate interdependency—we could be in love with someone in terms of narcissistic self-discovery rather than in terms of mutual well-being. Healing comes through a community that includes its members in their broken condition, accepting them and making them whole through emulating the activity and patterns in creation. The discipline and affection of the community rooted to its place, serving the needs of the entire community rather than competing for distinction, transforms “self-seekers” into people who come to know themselves through servitude and humility. Community here is not a truncation of personal love, suggesting that one’s involvement in and acceptance by the community negates the importance of feeling in love, of intimate relationships. Again, happiness is not an institutional condition; therefore, intimacy remains central to a good life. The point here is that love is not private or solely determined by interior conditions. Love for another is informed by the community, which has its practices and desires formed by creation. To love well, to know oneself, and to be happy follows from a reconnection to creation.

The Form and Act of Love

¹²⁴ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 154-155.

To reconnect with creation requires repentance, the kind we see enacted by Gloucester, who asks forgiveness for his prideful control over life. It is a communal activity. Berry spells out this process in Andy Catlett's transformation in *Remembering*.¹²⁵ Andy loses his hand in a farming accident, which causes him to fall into a similar kind of despair as Gloucester's blinding grief. Andy is emotionally and physically alienated from his wife and community—he is “numb with exile.”¹²⁶ Also his despair, like Gloucester's, comes from a failed attempt to control the vicissitudes of life. He is obsessed with his former life, the one he had before a harvesting machine deformed his body, and now he wanders alone “out of control” two thousand miles from home (28). He is without faith and trust, standing on the edge of a “bottomless and forever dark” world, and with “no more intention than any other creature or object that is falling” (28). He has isolated himself, which has disordered his desire. Between him and his wife, Flora, is an “abyss” of distrust. He desires beautiful women “apart from anything that he knows,” letting them “disembody him” (77). His desires are tied to no place; indeed, they happen in an airport, the great abstraction “where no face is open to another” (78). He becomes aware of his abstract desires on an airplane, during the announcement of emergency procedures in the event of a crash. He imagines himself crashing down and longs to be at home, with familiar people and landscapes. That is, Andy's imagined fall into a lonely death has transformed his desire and reconnected him to the particularity of his place on earth: “There comes over Andy a longing

¹²⁵ Though I emphasize here the resonances *Remembering* has with *King Lear*, it also “is a retelling of Dante's epic of spiritual dismemberment and healing.” Carl D. Esbjornson, “*Remembering* and Home Defense,” *Wendell Berry* (Lewiston: Confluence, 1991), 156. Esbjornson tracks Andy's return home through Dante's movement through the afterlife. See also Nathan W. Schlueter, “Healing the Hidden Wound: The Theology of the Body in Wendell Berry's *Remembering*,” *Communio* 36, no. 3 (2009): 510-533; Dominic Manganiello, “Dante and Wendell Berry's Modern Book of Memory,” *Memory and Medievalism* *Memory and Medievalism*, vol. 15 of *Studies of Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 115-125; and Dominic Manganiello, “Dante, e poi Dante: T.S. Eliot, Wendell Berry and Europe's Epic,” *T.S. Eliot, Dante, and the Idea of Europe*, ed. Paul Douglass (Montreal: McGill University, 2011), 175-194.

¹²⁶ Wendell Berry, *Remembering* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988; repr., Berkeley: Counter Point, 2008), 18. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

never to travel again except on foot, to restore the country to its shape and distance, its smells and looks and feels and sounds” (87).

Earlier, Flora tells Andy he needs forgiveness. He needs to repent his lonely desires in order to return, to have his relationships with others restored and be made whole as a living soul. However, it isn't until after his place returns to his mind that he is able to forgive himself and ask Flora for forgiveness. When he knows his place “as his tongue knows the inside of his mouth,” he recommits himself to it, trusting it to give him his rightful desires. Trust is a way to find life by losing it; it is “simply to give oneself” (91). He regains his life after imagining its destruction—its mortal fall into estrangement and disembodiment—and it is his only because he is now willing to give himself away knowing that “once given, the self cannot be taken back” (92). He returns home, more careful and patient than before he left, and asks Flora for forgiveness. He is re-membered to the community, reconnected with “those who have brought him here and who remain... in the place itself and in his flesh” (97). Wandering in his own home he is no longer grieved by the failure to control his life and feels blessed. His life is more than what can be taken away in death or disfigurement; it is more than the bare evidence of its existence—his life is a miracle.

But Andy's story does not end here. Though Berry recalls Gloucester's story in *Remembering*, it is not an exact parallel to *King Lear*. For Andy, it is not nature but industrial technology that precipitates a metaphoric plunge into death. The abyss into which he casts himself is the result of an abstraction from creation; the voice that describes its dreadful condition is disembodied. Furthermore, it appears, based on the account I have given above, that Andy's exile and return are undergone alone—I have not mentioned the litany of voices and memories that shapes Andy's transformation. Thus far, there has been no clear guide, only

Andy—traveling alone, returning home alone. His conversion, his penitential return to his responsible dependences, might be interpreted as a solitary undertaking—an internal turning of the soul. One can point to his embodied relationships that enable his memory as indications of the communal nature of his transformation. However, the guide that appears at the end of the story, after it seems to be over, is central for Andy’s change.

After he returns home, Andy falls asleep. He dreams that he is in a hellish darkness, enveloped in the “sounds of crying and of tearing asunder” (100). He cannot see or remember anything and is “a nothing possessed of a terrible self-knowledge.” He is touched by a figure “outside his hopeless dark sleep,” and his “form shivers” and is made “whole.” The shiver stays within Andy’s body, as he “expects to die, and yet he lives” (102). He gets up off the ground and sees the place changed, the figure walking away from him. This figure is “a man, dark as shadow.” The “dark man” who touched Andy and “looked at him face-to-face” now guides him through the altered landscape. Berry describes Andy’s travel from darkness to light, from hell to paradise, led by the “dark man” who shows Andy the resurrected creation. He sees a vision of a complete membership that includes his people, their place, and the song of love “in which they live and move” (102). He has come to them “by a change of sight,” able to see them because the dark man has pointed them out and led him to them. But now the dark man indicates that Andy must leave, he desires to leave, in order to help his community as it is with what he has. Now he has “the restored right hand of his joy” which he offers back to his community. The dark man has guided Andy through darkness into the light of creation towards his salvation, his restoration with himself and his community. The final image of resurrection and wholeness, Andy’s healing, only comes after his intimate, transformative encounter with the dark man. The dark man reshapes Andy’s form and sight, thereby giving him new life.

Who is this dark man? Berry never identifies him, though one can guess. Perhaps he is a guide like Dante's Virgil, an outsider who leads a lost man through an inferno to be made whole again in love. Perhaps it is a Christ-figure who is the agent of the resurrection of all creation and remains shrouded to indicate Berry's ambivalence towards Christianity.¹²⁷ Perhaps. I do not wish to deny any of this, but I want to argue the possibility of reading the text more literally—it is a man who is dark, who has dark flesh. The dark man recalls Edgar. Berry describes an intimate relationship with a dark man, whose knowledge of creation is not determined by metaphors of possession but enjoyment. In short, Berry's Edgar is a dark man, a black guide. Berry learns that his place is a site of transformation rather than material for potential development and is thus important for his identity. Like Andy, Berry suggests that white people have a hollow identity, a nothing possessed of a terrible self-knowledge, that could be restored by "recognizing physical landmarks, by connecting itself responsibly to practical circumstances; it would learn to stay put in the body to which it belongs and in the place to which preference or history or accident has brought it; it would, in short, find itself in finding its work."¹²⁸ Like Gloucester and Andy, Berry tells us that the search for ourselves must be mediated—we need a guide who is outside our sleep and fantasies and can restore in us a desire to work. Berry's ethics of work are "forms and acts of love,"¹²⁹ the incarnation and "health of love,"¹³⁰ which makes us whole—that is, human. His view of work is not vindicated by abstract arguments or theories of agency and action but by lives to whom he is a friend. And so now I turn in the final section of this chapter to the dark figures described in *The Hidden Wound*, who instruct Berry's account of work as individual healing and unifying love, which he learned through friendship.

¹²⁷ Phillip J. Donnelly, "Biblical Convocation in Wendell Berry's Remembering," *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 275-296.

¹²⁸ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 111.

¹²⁹ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 139.

¹³⁰ Berry, *Unsettling America*, 132.

Face-to-Face

Work, Pleasure, and the Willing Loss of Comfort

Berry, like many others, inherited a consciousness encumbered by racism. He was born into and grew up with a disorder both present in and concealed by his family. Berry's grandparents owned slaves, a fact that was never denied but passed on through stories meant to hide the horror of slavery. More specifically, the neutral language used to describe events of the past, the offhand way of recounting the family's participation in slavery, constitutes a conspicuous silence within Berry from a time prior to his birth. The silence is the absence of self-reflection on traumatic experiences, emotions carefully left unarticulated in order to hide the truth within the "patterns of reminding" that circulate familial memories.¹³¹ Berry's intention is not to fill this silence with his own words and experience, but rather to argue that, in so far as this silence is an affliction present in society at large, white people cannot grant themselves the privilege of having the capacity to speak that which it leaves unsaid.¹³² It marks a coextensive wound in the minds, one that cannot be cured by reporting all the ways in which black people have been exploited and the benefits white people cumulatively accrued. In Berry's account, white people share the wound of racism as an internal mirror of external suffering. The pathos of narrating racism as an unambiguous conquest—that white people need only to pity black people—elides the damage white people have done to their own humanity by their performance

¹³¹ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 5. Further references will appear parenthetically in the text.

¹³² "Such silence envelops us, making it impossible for the wound to be lanced or cauterized. As a result, we literally lack the language to recognize ourselves across the divisions our history names. We are left in silence, playing out endless games of guilt and recrimination benefiting no one. As a result, blacks and whites can find no common story that will enable them to heal the wound.... So we stare at one another and in the staring become less known to one another—and thus to ourselves. Allegedly having broken down the past walls of racism and slavery, we become even more divided from one another. That blacks and whites increasingly know one another only as abstractions, Berry observes, is not the intensification of the crisis, it *is* the crisis." Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 143.

and complicity in racism. Berry begins—his book, his life—with a damaged mind and a diminished humanity.¹³³

The desire for superiority is coextensive with narcissistic conceptions of freedom. Freedom from work—from sweat and bother—together with economic supremacy is the pattern of the desire to rise above the basic human condition that we must toil with the ground in order to eat. The freedom of others is not only excluded but also sacrificed; others are enslaved not merely because they are perceived to be inferior but because they can be forced to toil for the master's financial advantage. In short, the ultimate purpose for the lives of slaves is defined as the means for achieving the ultimate purpose for the lives of masters. Berry connects the two social issues of racism and ecological destruction by showing how white desires forced black agricultural labor, thereby dividing their experiences of working with the land from one another. Farming became “nigger work,” something whites presumed themselves to be superior to, which enabled machines to supplant black laborers after the slaves were freed. Freeing the slaves did not change the sense of “freedom” to include others' wellbeing as co-constitutive of a happy life. Rather, freedom, governed by the disordered desire for superiority, meant that slaves moved to the city to find different work. Far from addressing the wound of racism or its destructive consequences, this movement further alienated white people from both black people and the land, entrenching modes of white relations as economic and mechanistic. Inordinate desire, racism, and impoverished notions of freedom divided the experience of the land. Both suffered this division, but while the anguish of black people forced their development of cultural

¹³³ Charles Pinches has rightly pointed out that *The Hidden Wound* is a remarkable book “because it does not speak in abstractions about race but is rather Berry's quite personal attempt to understand his own and his family's complicity in the sin of racism, primarily through the quite real person of Bart Jenkins, a violent slave trader to whom Berry's great-grandfather once sold a slave and who later was eulogized by a white Southern writer named Mosgrove as a model of the best in Southern virtue.” Charles R. Pinches, “Stout, Hauerwas, and the Body of America,” *Political Theology* 8, no. 1 (2007): 23-24.

resources for the survival of a distinctive humanity, white people have ignored and denied their anguish and so remain less than human in their desires.

Without closeness to the land there is a lack of wisdom. Without wisdom there is an abstract relationship with the land, viz., a connection with the economic results of working the land separate from its health. Rather than building a culture that fosters the enjoyment of hard agricultural labor, white aspiration built a “pernicious value system, based on greed and egotism and the lust for status and comfort, without either an elemental knowledge on the one hand or a decent social vision on the other” (81). Land ownership was racially abstracted from labor such that the white mind became enslaved to the system of financial interests. Though black people were prevented from the possibility of land ownership, the labor they were forced to experience, ironically, freed their minds from a preoccupation with mistreating the land in order to maintain its possession. Opposed to the value system of the white mind estranged from the land, the free black mind in concrete relationship with the earth developed a more robust culture. Their “elemental experience” produced a culture through the work songs in the field and the jazz artists in the city that are “continuous, responsive to circumstance, and sustaining” that do not merely attest to a necessity for enduring bondage but triumphs over it (81). It is a genuine culture that makes possible the enjoyment of toil disconnected from exploitative aspirations. The inability of the white mind to live on the land in a way that resembles black attitudes and behaviour, the lack of a genuine culture and desire, is a “racial stupidity” that will “corrode the heart of our society” (107).

More than stupidity, the abstract economical mind denotes its pathology. The inherent violence of slavery threatens the comfort of those benefiting from its system. In order to neutralize white pathos, Christian institutions and chivalry offered an abstract language that

obfuscated the reality of the violence and malicious character of slave owners. Chivalry romanticized the violence, turning terrorists into heroes; Christianity suppressed the moral significance of violence, emphasizing the immortality of the soul at the expense of moral living. Both kept the felt need to change society at bay. “Christian democratic freedom-loving owners of slaves” were in a predicament when they attended church with their slaves, which could pose a social and moral question in the white mind: “how could he presume to own the body of a man whose soul he considered as worthy of salvation as his own?” (16). Such a question was obviated by maintaining a gap in his mind between heavenly and earthly responsibility, between bodily and spiritual matters. Rather than invoking a moral responsibility in its members, the church focused on beliefs “to secure the benefits of eternal bliss.” These beliefs could not address the realities of slavery—nor did the church intend it to do so, tied as it was “to the pocketbooks of racists”—and, as a consequence, instead of “curing the wound of racism, the white man’s Christianity has been its soothing bandage” (18-19). Thus, there is a silence in white theology and a hollow in white mentality, both of which form a single absence in the shape of black humanity. Put differently, the language and mind Berry was born into were already molded to exclude the black human—her experience, habits of thinking, culture, and spirituality. To fill out this hollow is not to speak for or on behalf of black people but rather to confront “the pain of the recognition of the humanity of an oppressed people and of one’s own guilt in their oppression” (19). Berry’s personal memories are offered as reflections on his pain and guilt in the hope that his wounds may receive healing.

Two people with whom Berry had especially formative relationships were slaves who had become servants: Nick Watkins and Aunt Georgie. Nick worked in the fields owned by Berry’s family and Aunt Georgie lived with him, gardening, raising chickens, gathering wild

food and the like. Though only a child, or perhaps because he was a child, Berry learned much from each—both about the world itself as well as its white-privileged social arrangement. Berry’s family history of its involvement in slavery—including a particularly gruesome event during the sale of a slave—contextualizes his experience. The experience itself, however, is not one of sympathy; he does not inject a condescending pity into his history. Compassion was an indispensable quality of the experience nevertheless, the benefit of his friendship with Nick and Aunt Georgie was “a prolonged intense contact with lives and minds radically unlike my own,” unlike any other among white people (63). From Aunt Georgie Berry learned that “life is perilous, surrounded by mystery, acted upon by powerful forces unknown to us... that men and events come to strange and painful ends, not foreseen” (73). She introduced him to the civil rights movement and the pursuit for social justice as well as the terrifying movements of the supernatural. From Nick Berry learned that “life is hard, full of work and pain and weariness” but that pleasure was still possible (74). Nick showed Berry how one could enjoy intimacy with the details of one’s surroundings—elemental pleasures that require attention and presence.¹³⁴ In short, Nick taught him the pleasure of using a mind freed from narcissistic ambition.

Berry admits, however, that some may find the premise of his reflections offensive—that his “black contemporaries may find some of [his] assumptions highly objectionable” (48). He is well aware that his account of Nick and Aunt Georgie, as well as his assessment of their impact on his thinking and language, bears potential violence against them. His only resources are the memories of a child from the distant past, which is why he never claims to have ultimately

¹³⁴ Nick’s intimacy with the land as Berry describes it is reflected in their relationship, which exceeds the hostility of social structures. “In his remembering of social interaction with Nick Watkins and Aunt Georgie, Berry endeavors to show that dominator culture and the racial apartheid it upheld could not prevent intimacy from emerging between black and white folk. And he emphasizes that such intimacy always humanizes, even though it forms itself within a dehumanizing social framework.” bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 176-177.

known either Nick or Aunt Georgie. Furthermore, it is an audacious claim to say that a black servant whose labor was exploited by an inherently violent economic system was more free than a white landowner who benefited from that system—especially when articulated by a white man writing in the library of a private university in California! It will seem highly offensive to depict “happy” or “good” black people living an agrarian life in the Old South over-against the “abstract” and “divided” language of black people fighting for a radical cultural nationalism in the Golden State. Berry acknowledges that he cannot defend himself against this charge; he can only “leave the question open” and say that he is neither trying to reify his memories of any black person nor trying to speak on behalf of any black person—hence his aversion to theorizing race. Rather, Berry gives his readers a description of his experiences and relationships that leads to a conception of the earth, its inhabitants, and a way of living that he could not have learned from another white person—a deficiency he continues to participate in and generate. He does not configure the need for receiving black humanity in the abstract—the necessity of his relationship with particular black people—as a means for self-fulfillment, actualizing a purpose defined separately from the meaning of black people’s lives. Berry is trying to delineate people—not who they are essentially, but how they appear and what they mean to Berry—that white people have excluded through racism to the detriment of their own humanity. The experience of one’s own incomplete humanity cannot be institutionally mediated back to white folk. Only undergoing face-to-face relationships can expose this loss, this hidden wound (104). The particularity of the relationship is difficult and dangerous—it will be offensive to those who want general and universal answers to the racial problem—but it is a risk Berry is willing to take.

Particularity allows difference, which is why relationships of the sort Berry is both reflecting on and advocating are difficult. And yet the difference between Berry and Nick and

Aunt Georgie constituted a relationship rather than a basic division. Though they were “people of another race and a radically different heritage” (48), Berry shared a friendship with them, the power of which remains in his mind as a resource for his life—its form and commitments. The nature of the friendship is such that difference is not elided into a false egalitarianism but rather disrupts the social roles meant to divide them. Berry recalls his fierce allegiance to Nick when family members would invoke racial difference derogatively. One exceptionally powerful act of allegiance, albeit out of ignorance, took place at one of Berry’s birthday parties. He had invited Nick unaware that Nick would not be allowed inside his grandmother’s house. Berry remembers leaving his own party to join Nick on the cellar wall outside the house, creating a social awkwardness for everyone involved. Though this act of Berry’s honesty and Nick’s generosity did not, could not, affect the system that assigns racial roles in society—“boss man,” “nigger”—it was nevertheless potent insofar as they “transcended [their] appointed roles” (53). The story is not meant to clarify or embody Nick—who, Berry confesses, may or may not have been able to recognize himself in it. Berry, helpfully imaged in this story, shows how his mind contains forces of both racism as well as memories of relationships that constructively disrupt the totality of its infection. Berry understands himself ineluctably caught in a history of racism that will always define him to a certain extent, but also as someone with the memory of a friendship that displaces him—from the party, from social roles.

The difficulty of this friendship is not only in the society that purposively estranges races from one another. The further difficulty is in the mind that remembers the lives of those who enabled the interruption of racist associations. The truth Berry is trying to tell about Nick and Aunt Georgie is incomplete and distorted by his own racist heritage, which is why he resists fictionalizing either to avoid giving them “an imaginative stability at the cost of oversimplifying

them” (50).¹³⁵ They remain a “live resource” in Berry’s mind, the force of which will change as he continues to struggle with the meaning of his friendships throughout his life—a struggle that is an “endless process.” The actual lives of Nick and Georgie, as well as Berry’s memories of them, cannot be defined or summarized, they can only be continuously negotiated within his self-consciousness. Because Berry has no pure access to the “otherness” of Nick and Aunt Georgie, their heritage of radical difference, Berry’s life will always be marked by a “continuing crisis—the sense of being doomed by my history to be... a man always limited by the inheritance of racism, condemned to be... always dealing deliberately with the reflexes of racism that are embedded in my mind as deeply at least as the language I speak” (48-49).

Berry’s friendship with Nick and Aunt Georgie is risky. He struggles with their memory despite his family, the objections of contemporaries, the fear of misrepresenting, and the conjectures about his actual knowledge of them. Not to do so would be to let the silence remain, the hollow that excludes a black experience of racism within a white configuration of humanity. For one to be whole, dignified, and free requires that the surrounding humans are “whole and dignified and free, and that the world itself is free of contempt and misuse” (105). Happiness, a good human life, depends on that of the other as well as the world in which both live. Put

¹³⁵ Though he does, to some extent, fictionalize Aunt Georgie in *A Place on Earth*—something he seems to regret. He also calls *The Hidden Wound* his “least satisfying essay” (111). The presence of what Toni Morrison calls “Africanist characters” diminishes in Berry’s novels. This insight into the ways in which characters can be given ‘stability’ and thereby ‘oversimplified’ through imagination seems to be a recognition of the possibility that these characters can act as “surrogate or enabler” for Berry’s own self-reflection and imaginative local adaptation. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 51. This insight distinguishes Berry from conceptions of freedom and self developed throughout American literature, which will be further analyzed in the following chapter. Berry, unlike other American novelists, does not use Africanist characters as the means by which to understand himself as an American; in American literature “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.” Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 52. It is perhaps telling that Berry’s engagement with his memories of Nick and Aunt-Georgie is in non-fiction, and is part of his penitential, self-reflection as a white agrarian who is enslaved to the economy, repulsive because of his complicity in slavery, helpless to the disintegrating forces that afflict communities, resists the ‘inevitability’ of progress, and guilty of the wounds inflicted on both the land and other humans.

differently, happiness is interdependent with and co-constitutive of different people and their environment without negating difference or redefining the interests of others within the terms and purview of one's own. Berry treats Nick and Georgie, as best he can and knowing the dangers of doing so, as moral agents with desires not reducible to his own. The possibility of such treatment and receptivity is based on the recognition that humans are dependent on their environment and others for survival. White Americans act as though they are free from such interdependency and continue to relate to the landscape independently of black experience, viz., in the mode of economic exploitation without hand labor and thus without the wisdom that arrives from it. Labor was consigned to black hands, which were considered subordinate to white desires; “in thus debasing labor, [the white man] destroyed the possibility of a meaningful contact with the earth” (105). Black people were forced to learn what white people continue to refuse, and this refusal has led to the continual division of races through a division of labor: “Today we send a bulldozer or a bomber to do our dirty work as casually, and by the same short-order morality, as once (in the South) we would ‘send a nigger,’ or (in the North) an Irishman, or (in the West now) a Mexican” (106). In other words, white desires—for superiority, financial control, short-term gain, and effective results—have not changed even if public institutions have shifted certain policies regarding civil rights. To transform desires one needs actual relationships with those who have both suffered as a result of those desires as well as maintained or developed different interests.

Neither pity nor public state apparatuses can produce such relationships. When white rhetoric is motivated by guilt it has a tendency to oversimplify the nature of oppressed/oppressor relationships in terms of benefit—“that by making black people miserable the white people have made themselves happy” (63). Berry is not trying to downplay the misery endured by black

bondage but rather questions white conceptions of happiness. The ability to survive and develop “the understanding and the means both of small private pleasures and of communal grief and celebration and joy” is something that cannot be acknowledged or learned if white people merely say that black people have only experienced misery all these years (63). Moreover, learning black experience, the transformation of lives, cannot happen through altering government. “No matter what laws or governments say, [humans] can only know and come to care for one another by meeting face to face, arduously, and by the willing loss of comfort” (104). Ultimately, this is the great lesson Berry learned from Nick, a man who was able to display a sense of pleasure despite being exploited and denied a permanent place on the land. Nick’s pleasures were dependent on the world itself; his desires emerged from his relation with his natural environment. It is this relation that enabled Nick’s mind to be free—a conception of freedom white people would do well to learn, that Berry is trying to learn. Nick enjoyed pleasures not “dependent on the government or on a power company or on the manufacturers of appliances” (75-76). His mind was free to enjoy aspects of his life that could be neither determined nor bound by the structure of desire that perpetuated a hegemonic system.

[Nick’s pleasures] were not large pleasures, they cost little or nothing, often they could not be anticipated, and yet they surrounded him; they were possible at almost any time, or at odd times, or at off times. They were pleasures to which a man had to be acutely and intricately attentive, or he could not have them at all. There were the elemental pleasures of eating and drinking and resting, of being dry while it is raining, of getting dry after getting wet, of getting warm again after getting cold, of cooling off after getting hot. There was pleasure to be taken in good work animals, as long as you remembered the bother and irritation of using the other kind. There was pleasure in the appetites and in the well-being of good animals. There was pleasure in quitting work. There were certain pleasures in the world itself. There was pleasure in hunting and in going to town, and in visiting and in having company. There was pleasure in observing and remembering the behavior of things, and in telling about it. There was pleasure in knowing where a fox lived, and in planning to run it, and in running it. And as I have already made clear, Nick knew how to use his mind for pleasure; he remembered and thought and pondered and imagined. (74)

Conceptions of happiness based on a freedom made possible by a “higher standard of life” that is manifestly “a carnival of waste and ostentation and greed” are impoverished, challenged by that

which Berry witnessed in the lives of Nick and Aunt Georgie. To desire a mode of life that includes the need to know how to care for the earth, and to know how to use the mind for pleasure: “Isn’t this the very antithesis of the thing that is breaking us in pieces?” (75).

Remembering his relationships with minds different from his own has been and continues to be a developmental force in Berry’s mind. The kind of relationship he had with Nick and Aunt Georgie is not meant to display his own exemplarity (“in order to give a case history or an example of race relations”) or confession (“of the extent of my involvement in a destructive mental condition”). Rather, he remembers them to be a “moral resource” of his mind, “ancestors” of consciousness, that remain dynamic within him and continue to affect his life. Berry indicates that his decision to give up strictly academic pursuits in favor of moving back to his family farm in order to “live there mindful of its nature and its possibilities” is indebted to the memory of these relationships (61). Thus, the form of the relationship is not of a white man using the black man to establish and secure his own humanity. The horizon of meaning for black life is not found within the horizon of meaning for white life. The form of Berry’s relationship as “friends and teachers, ancestors you could say, the forebears of certain essential strains in my thinking” rather than as “objects of pity” is inextricably linked to his desire for a non-destructive agrarian life (64). When white people are racist, when they reduce black experience as unqualifiedly miserable and wretched, they block the possibility of learning something substantially different from what they know otherwise.

Remembering is not culling ideology from unearthly fantasies. The continual memory of these radically different minds within Berry’s own mind oblige him to act out what he learned. That is, because Berry’s memory is not one of pity he is able to get beyond wistfully imagining what lives Nick and Aunt Georgie could have led had history been different. He remembers them

as they were, which allows him to discover something materially strange. Berry's sense of responsibility is to enact that which he learned from them, to perform the tasks they enjoyed according to the measure of their culture and nature rather than the aspirations of "the ornamental Europeanism that still passes for culture with most Americans" (86). Berry's thinking and life are formed by the way Nick and Aunt Georgie were—not romanticized, demonized, undignified, or marginalized—which in turn forms his relation with the soil. The mode of his relation is laborious, relating to others and nature through work.¹³⁶

Enacting Unity

The tasks by which one relates to the soil take a religious form. It is not the "abstract ministrations of priests and teachers from outside the immediate life of a place" that enable "atonement with the creation," but rather "going out to plant and to cultivate and to harvest again and again, as one's father went out and his father before him [until] the sense of familiarity finally crests in ritual—exactly as work rhythms build into work songs" (88). The culture of black people Berry witnessed on the fields stands over-against the religion of white people that prevented social change. The mind that participates in a culture based on a familiarity with the land is distinct from the mind that is abstracted from its social context and cultural place. The nature of this difference is an emotional dynamic; it is the difference between a mind that is

¹³⁶ Lionel Basney argues that Berry's poetry captures this sense of the relationship between people and with the earth insofar as it is "poetry of work." This kind of poetry places "the body in a social context and in this way make[s] it an instrument for articulating relationships with the world and with other people... A poetry of work, consequently, must exist in dialogue—probably in conflict—with social definitions of work and the body." Lionel Basney, "Having Your Meaning at Hand: Work in Snyder and Berry," *World, Self, Poem: Essays on Contemporary Poetry from the 'Jubilation of Poets,'* ed. Leonard M. Trawick (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1990), 130-143. Alternatively, Richard White suggests that Berry's romanticized notions of local work are alienating insofar as they are forms of elevated knowledge. "Berry regards his own writing as depending on 'work of the body and of the ground.' ... Berry writes as if working in nature, of being of a place, brought a moral superiority of sorts [to those who destroyed the land through their work]." Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 181. White ignores Berry's penitential acknowledgement of his contribution and complicity in both racial wounds in humanity and the wounds of the land in *The Hidden Wound*.

indifferent to the slave in the next pew and one that feels one's "obligation to one another and to the earth... [which] can come only within the patterns of familiarity" (88). Guilt is an inadequate emotional force insofar as it is "inexact and self-indulgent" leading to no "useful act;" racial indifference is an inadequate emotional force insofar as it neither challenges the "ambitions of the corporations" nor enables integrated communities with decentralized power and economy (136). This religious form is exemplified in the American Indian—the Pueblos, specifically. These are people who did not need to be told that their lives depended on the earth but who were conscious of that dependency, seen in the untold menial tasks they conducted on it. The Pueblo was a person who "did not conceive of himself as a mechanically producing and consuming agent of a political compact, but as the spiritual heir of the life of the creation. He was the agent and legator of this life, but also a part of it, and his religion was the enactment of his unity with it" (89). Such an enactment is diametrically opposed to mechanical and economically abstract relations with the land.

To say that farming culminates in a religious form is to say that it is soul-craft. Berry's description of farming as ritual indicates that religious forms, as he understands them, should neither absorb structures of institutional authority nor delimit the sacred from the secular. The religious life is one that participates in the life of creation. There is a life that enables and sustains both the land as well as the universe; humans are both dependent on as well as the protectors of this life (89). There is a life beyond one's own to which one is obligated and from which one receives grace. Berry quotes John Collier's description of a Pueblo sacred dance as an image of the unification of human and non-human life:

The occasion as a whole was a summoning by the tribe of many spirits of the wild, elements or cosmic kin known from ages gone by; and a summoning from within the breast of capacities and loves which had formed the ancient life and must sustain its present and future. As the hours moved on, a displacement of human and mystical factors seemed to take place. The rejoicing was not only a human rejoicing; and that marvelous ever-renewed, ever-increasing, ever-changing

leap and rush of song was not only human song. A threshold had been shifted, forces of the wild and of the universe had heard the call and had taken the proffered dominion. That is what the tribe believed; that is how it seemed... (89-90)

The sacred dance depicts grace. Indeed, it reveals a human activity whose movement does not stop, nor is fulfilled, in the self or even in the community performing it. For Berry, farming is a sacred dance. Traditional acts of planting, cultivating, and harvesting constitute love of the world, its sustaining life force that exists outside humanity. The origin and end of farming as active affection is not the lonely individual—to get out of the land what you can and then hold on to what you got—but is rather unity with the mystical forces of dominion within nature that renews, increases, and changes. Farming brings together visible and invisible forces, joining the farmer in affection to the life of creation. It is a dance that orders the soul, its affections and relations.

To turn farming from mechanical to ritual acts requires culture. Specifically, the awareness that repetitive acts become ritualistic emerges from an authentic culture that can transform the motive forces of economic aspiration from acquisition to affection. Neither the culture he was born into nor the one he sought in universities and urban centers gave Berry a familiarity with the place in which he lived. He received from his grandfather's economic campaign to retain the possession of his property "a sense of the continuity of my own people there, their lives invested in the earth, and also the sense of the land as the preserver of such a continuity and of the hope of it"; from Nick he received "a sense of free intimacy with the place, the possibility of pleasure in *being* there" (83-84). Without the latter, Berry's grandfather was estranged from his own land—an estrangement Berry would feel years later. After he returned home from a life of traveling and academia—a return that he initially describes as being in "exile" from American culture—he felt alienated from his native land. He began to get a sense for the agricultural acts that preceded his family's brief "violent spasm" on that land (88). In

other words, the intimacy and pleasure of performing the activities that maintained the continuity of his heritage made him conscious of the original labor performed by people who became abused and hated. There were people who had a culturally formed consciousness that enabled an awareness of the ritualistic form of agricultural activity, and they were despised, enslaved, or worse. Racism cuts white culture off from these predecessors. The disdain for people who live off the land disorients proper love and thereby damages the soul. Berry learned that the sense of pleasure, the affection for the earth, he received from Nick is part of a culture that enables the religious form of farming. Berry is not just adding Nick's experience to his grandfather's in order to reinforce the continuity of his family's culture. Rather, Nick introduces a love that reveals the economic system and institution of slavery—Berry's heritage—as a violent disruption of an exemplary culture. Nick's ongoing gift to Berry is the need for a culture that facilitates and informs an awareness of the connection to other people through the ritualized acts of farming. As such, the love for his land and others keeps Berry in a kind of cultural exile to the extent that he remains unsatisfied with the dominant culture's social fashions and economic trends.

An adequate culture is rooted in the pleasure of work. To labor in love is an emotional orientation with the activity performed, one that directs the worker differently than one whose interest in the land is abstract (i.e. its worth represented in dollars and size). White owners, such as Berry's grandfather, were estranged from their land through an economics that produced anxiety rather than pleasure in farming. White laborers were equally estranged insofar as their desires were to toil only in order to become owners. They perceived themselves to be above the necessary work and maintained the aspiration that one day they would be beyond needing to care for the land directly. The combination of this economy and aspiration enslaved black people to toil on someone else's land with no hope of owning it. The abstract relationship with land of

white people forced black people to come to “emotional or philosophical terms” with the work (81). This emotional orientation towards forced labor is part of the elemental experience with the land that precipitated the development of a distinct black culture and enabled it to both survive and flourish. Berry understands Nick’s experience of satisfaction and pleasure to be the manifestation of an emotional orientation derived from his experience as a black laborer on a white-owned farm. This experience of pleasure in work that does not give an abstract benefit continues to be excluded in white culture. Malcolm X, Berry remembers, had a formidable mind and an early formative experience in his mother’s garden. The effect of Malcolm’s experience on his intelligence, Berry speculates, is an enlightening of the “possibilities of life in this world,” and the sense of a free mind lying low on the earth “served him as a measure of the destructiveness and sterility of racism” (85). There is a cultural experience that serves as a measure against racism and for justice, but it requires a mind whose motive force is affection.

Berry does not suggest that black people were better off as laborers. He is emphatic that it was to their detriment that white society prevented the opportunity to establish a permanent relationship with the land. Again, Berry is not outlining a social arrangement to ensure more just economic and political freedom. That will have to be continuously negotiated. Rather, he is describing that which is obstructing freedom, namely, the desires constitutive of white culture. Neither black laborers nor white owners—nor their descendents for that matter—can have a full experience of freedom without the other’s freedom. The possibility of this freedom does not rest in the hands of white people—that they have it and have the power to give it to black people. White people forced a competitive relationship upon black people, damaging both. Healing can take place, not through sociopolitical structures (though they could change as a result) or reverting the nation to some bygone racist pattern of rural life, but by receiving one another’s

experience. This receptivity invokes the collective recognition of the deficiencies of America as well as a clear sense of the way in which white people have also been damaged, which includes an acknowledgment of the pain incurred from inordinate desires. The form of acknowledgement must not be “giving accommodation to an alien people” but receiving the black humanity that it has been heretofore denied. (107) Far from removing difference, acknowledging the hollow in white culture and the need for face-to-face encounters is simply saying that we share the same world and that our differences are therefore not absolute.

The religious form of agricultural tasks-as-rituals puts into practice the consciousness of non-competitive relationships. That is, Berry’s religious life is not the manifestation of an ideology or sociopolitical regime but the embodiment of desires attuned to nature and the interests of others. Religious life of the kind Berry sees in the Pueblos flows from a consciousness of being in relation. The development of these religious forms of life through which one can enact a consciousness of relationships is “psychologically necessary” for reconnecting the estranged existence of white people to emotional bonds (89). In other words, Berry suggests that there needs to be a different psychological structure to deal with the crisis of divided peoples from the one that maintains the false dichotomies of body and soul, material and spiritual, black and white. Berry argues that society lacks the language or social forms necessary for people to recognize any commonality beyond these divisions. Describing a common interest or humanity requires an imagination, an intellectual capacity, that breaks out of the constraints of a cramped, divisive psychology. It marks a commonwealth substantially different from a nationalism that merely tolerates difference and holds people together as a loose aggregate of individuals.

Conclusion: Dancing Forms

The interlinking activity of creation breaks through our modern form of life that is narcissistically enclosed within itself. “Comparatively few white people” in America have been willing to give themselves over to its cycles and order, but we can learn from others who have:

[those] who have undertaken to cherish the world and do it no damage, not because they are duty-bound, but because they love the world and love their children; whose work serves the earth they live on and from and with, and is therefore pleasurable and meaningful and unending; whose rewards are not deferred until ‘retirement,’ but arrive daily and seasonally out of the details of the life of their place; whose goal is the continuance of the life of the world, which for a while animates and contains them, and which they know they can never encompass with their understanding or desire.¹³⁷

To inhabit such a form of life is to participate in the dance exemplified in the Pueblo. Berry often uses the metaphor of dance to describe farming and responsibly dependent relationships.¹³⁸ It is a helpful metaphor for describing activity and relationships as interdependent agencies without loss of personality or individual agency. It is a non-competitive interlocking movement.

This life, like dancing, abides differences. Though relationships and morals are emulative, the “likenesses” do not overcome differences. And yet Berry shows us that we do not just stare across our difference, we talk. And we do not just talk endlessly. We do something, we act and work. Work “links us to each other, and it links us to nature.... In taking responsibility for our own lives and work, in unmasking the connections of our labor and nature, in giving up our hopeless fixation on purity, we may ultimately find a way to break the borders that imprison nature as much as ourselves. Work, then, is where we should begin.”¹³⁹ The community is the “proper place and frame of reference for work,” because it is the common place in and to which people can be loyal and affectionate regardless of their difference.¹⁴⁰ Put differently, it is the

¹³⁷ Berry, *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 23.

¹³⁸ E.g. Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 53.

¹³⁹ Berry, *Way of Ignorance*, 77.

¹⁴⁰ Berry, *Another Turn*, 17.

fidelity to community, to one's place on earth and everything in it, that enables speech and action without negating difference. Work, for Berry, does not only signify tasks that join people physically but names the way people can participate in an appropriately interdependent life, which, as seen in his description, concerns the interior lives of people. Nick shows Berry how work delivers him from the blockages of happiness—pride and despair—which is more than maintaining external conditions. That is, commonality, like happiness, is not an institutional condition. Work is the act of joining in commonwealth, open to judgment of people and the earth, and therefore can change the goals and desires of people. It is the practice of learning to be oneself as a creature, as a human moving with and in creation. Work as worship¹⁴¹ and prayer¹⁴² is participation in creation as a reality that points to God. This participation is learning to be distinct yet in relation, “collaborating with God and nature in the making of ourselves and one another.”¹⁴³ Meaning and identity are gifts, they are found outside the individual, but do not obliterate the self. To a certain degree, self-interest remains; no human is meant to be a mere function to an external power—human or divine.

Thus we see a way forward within the “racial problem in America” and why community as Berry understands it is an answer. Before we can talk about sharing a common humanity we need to have a fidelity to place. Berry's community is difference in unity, a whole not reducible to its parts. Identity is found in one's place, one's relation with thrushes, streams, and branches. It does not refer solely to oneself, to arbitrary physical attributes or a quixotic interiority. Humans are both wild and domestic, connected to the visible patterns and mysteries of creation. Land that is not viewed as merchandise or potential wealth can be a place of stability for relationships between people who are radically different. Berry's community is not reducible to

¹⁴¹ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community*, 113.

¹⁴² Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, 72.

¹⁴³ Berry, *Home Economics*, 115.

sociopolitical structures or ideological conception, but names a series of relationships that we need to be transformed into by relinquishing control over our lives. Meaning does not rest in one's self, in one's flesh abstracted from soul, but in one's relationship with everything else; the meaning of my life does not belong to me but to creation, within its interlinking system.

Community does not eliminate opposition, but it keeps opposition from becoming basic. It is “the sense of a shared humanity that would permit us to say even to our worst enemies, ‘We are working, after all, in your interest and your children’s. Ours is a common effort for the common good.’”¹⁴⁴ We can only speak of a common humanity through intimate, face-to-face relationships. There is no institution or legislation that can force or produce these relationships, no theory of relating that can be established prior to engagement. To know one another and oneself as a gift, a miracle, can overcome our current condition in which we know one another and ourselves in abstraction. To see the self and the other as equally part of God’s ongoing creation is to learn how to be human, to be a unique part of nature yet dependent upon it. We are subordinate yet not inferior to one another. Membership and community are not understood in strictly behavioral terms, which would not be enough to address our estrangement from one another, our unhealthy inward lives. Membership implicates a psychology, an order of the soul, that specifically addresses issues of satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness.

I know who I am by my relation to my place, and my work enacts that relationship. I have denied myself this work and participated in a culture that has lost its material identity by forcing others to work, and have become blind to the patterns and movements in the world that show me how to be human. As a result, I need to be shown the way back, guided into the forest and shown the work that needs to be done. My guide must be my friend, someone I know intimately and to whom I am loyal. Though the system of control in which I participate has failed

¹⁴⁴ Berry, *Way of Ignorance*, 74.

both my guide and me, the seeds of restoration are in that failure. My failure has forced another to know what I should have learned, without which I am incomplete and suffering. But my guide, who is also my victim, can show me that the world is good, the beauty in the interdependent agencies of all creatures, and save me from my prideful desire and paralyzing despair.¹⁴⁵ I have the opportunity to repent, to end my old ways, and turn toward the wilderness to see the sets of dependences to which I need to submit in order to receive back my life and return home.

Seeing freely and understanding the self relationally depends on recognizing nature as the context for being human. Atonement as fidelity to place is not necessarily conducive to Christian institutions, especially if the latter conceives a soteriology that redirects attention away from earthly concerns, making salvation a way to escape the worst of our inhumanity. Community as the unification of relationships allows a person to be who s/he is, and yet there are restraints and judgments. Berry helps us see that addressing the core issue at the heart of racism is the same issue for ecological morality: living responsibly with responsible dependences. Berry's commitments to creation and community are theological and political to the extent that they are deeply connected to the issues of race: we learn how to be ourselves in our relationships through the position of the victim who is intimate with creation. "*Is man no more than this?*" Though our social order has reduced people to figures who are pitied or scorned, tortured or saved, it is from the place of the person so reduced that salvation comes to us. It is the place where we are changed and thus are able to return to the social order, to the city, to change it in turn. The community does not simply include the outsider but learns about its constitution and failures

¹⁴⁵ Rowan Williams reminds us that the resurrected community is a victimizing people; those who claim that salvation is only found in Jesus comprise the court that murdered him. Conversion is recognizing the victim and turning to her to be transformed. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, Rev. ed. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

from the outsider. Justice does not come by way of law; we learn proper order through the interlinking system in which love circulates. Wilderness is crucial to this system, which has political effects to the extent that it leads to work and connections that expose political evasions.

Lear dies at the end, yet he is able to finally see Cordelia clearly for the first time. Berry suggests that here, in this moment when Lear is “filled with love and wonder,” Shakespeare shows us a miracle: “that Lear, dying, is more alive than he has ever been until this moment.”¹⁴⁶ This is the image of what it looks like to find life by losing it. There may be restoration in the death of self, but it does not direct our attention away from suffering. Berry shows us the danger in refusing to look at our suffering directly; ignoring our wounds of racism perpetuates the destruction of nature and nation. To imagine is not to look for an afterlife that denies the reality and significance of pain and loneliness. Atonement is in the relationships made possible through fidelity to place. Life is not a miracle because God makes the impossible possible, but that life is holy and thus beyond reduction, control, and predictability. That is to say, it is not enslaved to the determinations of any power—malevolent or benevolent. The mystery of freedom is gaining life in losing it, restoring humanity through relationships that enable us to experience—to suffer and rejoice in—life as it is. Though fidelity cannot prevent the loss of life and community, the possibilities of faithfulness, compassion, and love remain.

¹⁴⁶ Berry, *Imagination*, 178. Berry’s non-nihilistic interpretation of King Lear depends on his account of Edgar as someone who has both an intimacy with the land and the virtues of fidelity and compassion. Edgar could be seen, however, as more self-involved than Berry allows; when he notifies Lear of his victory at the end of the play he is a distraction from Lear’s focus on the body of his dead daughter. In other words, he seems to draw attention to himself, drawing the gaze away from Cordelia, in a way that breaks the significance of Lear’s final recognition and true acknowledgement of Cordelia. See Zdravko Planinc, “‘...this scattered kingdom’: A Study of King Lear,” *Interpretation* 29, no. 2 (2001-2): 171-186.

Chapter Three

“To Catch What Cannot Be Seen.”

“Are you sure you have told me everything you know about his death?” ... I said, “Everything.” “It’s not much, is it?” “No,” I replied, “but you can love completely without complete understanding.” “That I have known and preached,” my father said....

“I’ve said I’ve told you all I know. If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman.”

“You know more than that,” my father said. “He was beautiful.”

—*A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean

Works of art participate in our lives; we are not just distant observers of their lives. They are in conversation among themselves and with us. This is a part of the description of human life; we do the way we do partly because of things that have been said to us by works of art, and because of things that we have said in reply.

—*What Are People For?*, Wendell Berry

Introduction

Despite the restorative possibilities of community and fidelity to place, “tragedy,” Berry says, “is at the heart of community life.”¹ The previous chapter discussed work as the communal restoration of self and relationships. That is, community is a force of renewal, located in a particular landscape, and working together in that landscape renews people out of their inhumanity. Fidelity to place conditions the possibility for restoration by enabling and supporting relationships across conventional divides. But what about the people who do not share this fidelity? What about the members of a community who are not only nonconformists, but are alienated by their participation in the practices and social structures that bind the community together? Berry is certain that communities will fail to unify; loss is at the centre of communal life. If the subject of concern in the previous chapter was the excluded outsider, then the subject

¹ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (Berkeley: Counterpoint 1990), 76. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

concerned here is the alienated insider. For this person, relationships do not depend upon fidelity to place; communal life has failed to be a meeting place. Nevertheless, for Berry, the beloved community does not give up on the lost, but must search for a mode of inclusion that goes beyond the usual means of membership to the point that the flourishing of the community itself is threatened.

Berry uses the parable of the lost sheep to shape his narrative in four stories. The parable forms both his content and his style. The content of these stories is about the lost sheep—the non-conformists and recalcitrants present in every community. While it is popular for authors to present communities as rigid and closed in order to illustrate the heroism of such rebels as they strive for liberation, few pay attention to the complexity of particular communities in which individuals strive to be fully themselves in different ways. Berry, of course, writes about a small community, but does so in a way to pay attention to those whom it alienates, those who cannot be made whole by community practices and common bonds, and who suffer as a result. The way he does this is by having a narrator pursue such individuals, striving to be both a companion to the lost sheep as well as a steward to the community's survival. That is, the parable of the lost sheep undoes the binary between staid group and recalcitrant hero, confinement and liberation. The parable is about the search and the love of the shepherd, and about the desperation and individuality of the sheep. It is opposed to a religion in which commonality and unity are based on agreement. Sheep wander and shepherds search: the movement is constant—thus not rigidly confined to a pen—but it is understood within a wider context of the beloved community that gives the movement an end, even if it is not, or never can be, reached.

Berry tells this archetypal story in different ways with varying success. The risk involved in the parable is its colonial use, claiming all outside the community as “lost” and therefore in

need of what the community already offers. Berry gets his narrative style from his teacher Wallace Stegner. The previous chapter argued that Berry's mind has been formed by marginalized outsiders—black farmhands—yet his narrators are almost all white males. Berry chooses the style that refuses to claim the outsider as the source of authenticity and authority in a neo-colonial mode of narration. Berry's narration remains “open” in its willingness let otherness remain, to pursue the particularity of an individual that cannot be subsumed by a healthy community, yet is nevertheless committed to the integrity of the group.

The crux of this chapter reveals *A World Lost* as a story about the fictional narrator, Andy Catlett, doing what Berry himself does—in a sense, it is Berry illustrating his “theory” of narration through narration. Berry's style is not a theory that can be applied, however, because his attempt to “subject himself to his subject” tells stories about “whole people and whole communities,” which is impossible because life cannot be captured entirely in words. *A World Lost* depicts the necessary ambiguity in telling a story, and emphasizes the need to connect memory, reality, and imagination even though this approach will still be incapable of allowing one to understand the whole of any person's life. Berry ends the story with a quote from Stegner, demonstrating the kenotic love of a narrator subjecting himself to a subject: Andy constructs a narrative that shows what Berry learned from Stegner. Berry's fiction is not self-referential but points to the experience of mystery and ineffable truth, which he does by using a style—Stegner's—that incarnates his fidelity to place.

Berry's interpretation of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* outlines his understanding of tragedy, style, and grace. Maclean's novel is tragic as “a story of calamity and loss, which arrive implacably, which one sees coming and cannot prevent.” (68) The possibility of harmony in tragedy resides in its style. “Sometimes it works, sometimes it fails; when it fails,

it fails into tragedy, but here it is a tragedy that confirms the completeness and indeed the immortality of love.” (66) The style and narrative mode enact the chance that horror and grief are not triumphant. *A River Runs Through it*, Berry says, is a tragedy whose style witnesses the vulnerability of humanity, the irrevocable condition of living with the possibility of catastrophe. “It is a style vulnerable to bewilderment, mystery, and tragedy—and a style, therefore, that is open to grace.” (66) It is open because it is dispossessive, referring not to the artist but to the grace that surpasses art. Maclean “accepts fully the storyteller’s need to speak wholeheartedly however partial his understanding, but it is not pure or self-protective.” Maclean’s art of narration imitates the subject of his story, the art of fishing. An art is “emblematic of all that makes us companions with one another, joins us to nature, and joins the generations together.” (66) Maclean’s narration, like fishing, “is not a rite of solitary purification, a leaving of everything behind, but a rite of companionship.” In other words, it is an image of harmony, a local culture. Harmony is not the absence of grief, suffering, loss, and conflict but “a kind of community dance,” in which the participants “would know that their bodies renewed, time and again, the movements of other bodies.”² The story itself is about failure and futility, but Maclean’s style of telling it “admits grace” because it attests to a love that is “artistically unaccountable.” Maclean’s storytelling is the irresistible performance of an “unutterable joy” that does not consist solely of things “understood or understandable” but is a “fragment of a larger pattern.” (69) It points beyond itself to that which cannot be depicted without remainder—living souls. There are moments of harmony and love—connection and grace—that offer a glimpse of an ineffable love that contains and redeems tragedy without denying or evading it.

The paradox of this kind of literary tragedy is that its triumph is its defeat. Literary tragedy is not actual tragedy, which permits an instructive emotional response that may or may

² Berry, *Standing By Words* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1983), 79.

not prepare or help the reader for actual tragedy. The glimpses in literature of earthly love that cannot stop tragedy indicate that this love is partial, a fragment of a larger pattern that cannot be represented. Literary tragedy such as Maclean's story is a confession of his failure to depict perfection, which indicates something beyond itself, something unaccountable of which it is only an image. Tragic art imaginatively participates in grace, but the failure it depicts imitates its own failure. The triumph of imagination is its defeat because what it depicts is not grace or harmony itself, but itself is only a construction, a narration. It is the attempt at delineating faith in the existence of the Good; such faith can only attest and not represent. Contrary to Milton's representation of God, this faith is like Dante's depictions of Heaven, which Berry says "are a poetry of triumphant *faith*, which always implies the necessary failure of visualization."³ The defeat is necessary for the corrective aspect of tragedy. Because its defeat is in its self-effacement, its imitation not a representation of immortal love; the reader's response is not meant to imitate the imitation. Part of the corrective aspect of tragedy is to gesture towards something outside of it, something that contains it, which is why the important quality of tragedy is not training the reader to find something instructive or meaningful in the worst. The context for art is not itself but the world of love, actual beloved communities: "common experience and common effort on a common ground to which one willingly belongs." (85) Art refers to the dance that includes all members even though it depicts the failure of dance partners to understand, help, or recognize each other. Indeed, "tragedy is experienceable only in the context of a beloved community." Art itself is inefficient for the community's survival, but creates an experience that brings to consciousness the ineffectiveness of earthly love. Survival remains only as a possibility, but there are glimpses in tragedy that affect how it is imagined. The community's

³ Berry, *Standing By Words*, 122.

survival includes the flourishing of all its members, even, or especially, those whose infidelity or waywardness cause the suffering and grief the community needs to survive.

At the centre of Berry's tragic imagination is the parable of the lost sheep. The King James Version of the story in Matthew reads: "How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?" (Matthew 18:12) The possibility of return emerges from the shepherd's imagination, which is the tragic imagination "that, through communal form or ceremony, permits great loss to be recognized, suffered, and borne, and that makes possible some sort of consolation and renewal." (78) The story is about the possibility of return to the beloved community, which returns us, the readers, "to a renewed and corrected awareness of our partiality and mortality, but also to healing and to joy in a renewed awareness of our love and hope for one another." (78) The parable of the lost sheep is the archetypal story of tragedy: it is the nature of sheep to wander, a characteristic that gives the story its direction and fate; it is the nature of the shepherd to search for sheep, even though success and effectiveness are absent from the story.

The shepherd's imagination is part of a "sympathetic mind," which, among other things, "accepts loss and suffering as the price, willingly paid, of its sympathy and affection—its wholeness."⁴ That is, the shepherd

goes without hesitating to hunt for the lost sheep because he has committed himself to the care of the whole hundred, because he understands his work as the fulfillment of his whole trust, because he loves the sheep, and because he knows or imagines what it is to be lost. He does what he does on behalf of the whole flock because he wants to preserve himself as a whole shepherd.⁵

⁴ Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 92.

⁵ Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, 93.

Berry leaves “aside the theological import of the parable,” which makes Jesus the shepherd, and puts himself in the position of the shepherd. Or, more accurately, he does so by putting his most frequent narrator in the position of the shepherd: Andy Catlett. Andy knows what it is to be lost. He has also committed himself to care for his entire community. Furthermore, he knows that “companionship,” or shepherding, is a “tragic rite because of our inevitable failure to understand each other; and it is a triumphant rite because we can love completely without understanding.” (66) He narrates stories through memories—his own and the community’s—to search for the lost. The search is not to assert the authority of the community over wayward nonconformists; it is not the enactment of a totalized vision of inclusion based on a plan or program from which the individual has intentionally fled. Instead, Andy searches for the lost in order to be companions with them, to join them. Indeed, his search, because he looks with a tragic imagination, makes them companions.

The parable of the lost sheep is a dangerous narrative to use as a metaphor for inclusion and unity. Its history in colonialism is violent, used to justify displacement and dispossession of those deemed “lost sheep.” In 1455, for instance, Pope Nicholas V used the parable to justify the claim of all lands for Portugal. He imagined the church as the location of salvation to which all peoples must be brought. His bull *Romanus Pontifex* conferred the authority of the shepherd on the pope, who therefore “may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls.”⁶ Willie Jennings observes that this configures the church’s relationship with the world such that “the whole world is viewed through boundary-less desire... presenting a totalizing vision” that

⁶ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and The Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 26.

renders all peoples as “simply sheep bound under paternal-ecclesial care.”⁷ Berry deliberately resists colonial inclusion of this sort. Rather, his mode of inclusion imagines the world and its inhabitants differently, consistent with the community’s relationship with its landscape outlined in the previous chapter. In other words, though the parable is enacted through imagination and memory, the latter are formed by their place and are not motivated by boundless desire. Whereas the colonial use of the parable of the lost sheep bolsters dominant society’s identity, Berry uses it to display communal fragility, partiality, and heartbreak.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that Berry’s community does not suffocate individuality, but that the return of the lost and the survival of tragedy change the shape of the community. Berry’s narration of the way in which alienated insiders—eccentrics, mavericks, and exiles—are befriended and imagined instructs the readers’ imagination through a religious experience such as the one Berry suggests Maclean produces. Central to creating this experience is Berry’s style—his narrative mode reflects the love and suffering present in the parable of lost sheep. Berry’s narrative voice is not consistent throughout his fictional corpus. Though his narrator is always an insider, the point of view changes from straightforward first-person narration to third-person omniscient to first-person retrospective reflection. Berry’s search for perspective informs our understanding of the stories insofar as it tells us about who is telling them and how the stories change the narrator. Berry follows his teacher Wallace Stegner here, for whom Henry James’ fundamental problem of point of view is central for writing. Berry differs from other American post-war authors, such as his colleague Ken Kesey, insofar as his style is deeply connected to his region, his place on earth, which is what enables it to admit grace. The similarities between Andy and Berry are helpful to the extent that they show Berry’s interest in writing what he knows rather than creating an authoritative voice detached from the

⁷ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 26-27.

world. Berry's style indicates the connection between individuals and that which has been historically prepared for them, that character doesn't start from scratch. But Berry's stories also show how narrative establishes character as something that is suffered and alienating rather than salvific and harmonizing. The ethical importance of Berry's narration and his search for perspective is that people are not understood or explained without remainder, but imagined in a way that honours the lives of its subjects. Put differently, he subjects himself to his subject with reverence rather than trying to represent them in cold verisimilitude. An imagination that honours and loves a person without complete understanding reorders one's soul; a communal memory that accepts its losses reorganizes its sense of belonging.

This chapter will be divided into three parts. The first explains Berry's search for perspective as the attempt to find the best way to honour the subjects of his writing. The second shows that his stories based on the parable of the lost sheep display companionship and love through suffering and alienation. The mode of narration is integral for honoring the lives of "lost sheep" without downplaying the significance of estrangement and loss for both the narrator and the community. Finally, the third part will reflect on the ethics of Berry's narration as an art that subjects itself to its subject. A compassion that reveals itself in failure is an image of the love and harmony of which it is a part.

I

Berry received a Stegner fellowship for Stanford University in 1958. He was part of a graduate creative writing seminar taught by Wallace Stegner. Several other talented students were enrolled in this class, including authors such as Ernest Gaines and Ken Kesey. Stegner founded the writing program in 1945, which, in addition to his own literary success, according to

Mark McGurl, “makes him a pivotal figure in postwar American literary history.”⁸ Beginning with war veterans, Stegner taught creative writing to students by enabling them to “write what you know.” These classes, McGurl argues, formed a “strange new medium of literary camaraderie” and made Stegner pivotal for setting the standard against which writers in the 1950s and 1960s would define themselves (184). “We can put it crudely by saying that whereas for Stegner... the first task of a formal social grouping was to find its principle of definition—which is to say, its principle of closure and thus of integrity—for writers who came of age in the late 1950s and 1960s the problem was rather one of liberation: how can people come together in an intimate grouping and still be free?” (186). The model of liberation for the latter group was the “open market,” which appears to base institutional relations on economist Kenneth Boulding’s theory that systems of closure—institutions such as universities, for instance—are guaranteed to “decline into chaotic conformism.” The only hope in an open system was to find a voice that is located outside the institution but would be brought within in order to vivify it and resist its entropy. McGurl suggests that this struggle between inside and outside in the university is indicative of American culture, what he calls “the vertiginously dialectical mobilization of the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” (196-197). McGurl claims that Stegner was wrong to reject this mode of institutional relation as a “cult of total individual freedom,” because it focuses on a way of belonging that centres on the outsider, constantly moving back and forth between the “multiversity” and the outside sources on which it draws and reaches out toward (196). McGurl focuses on Berry’s colleague and classmate Ken Kesey as the figure who illustrates this “liminality,” which is the state in which “one exists temporarily from the status hierarchies of everyday social structure into an ecstatic inversive experience of community.” Kesey’s fiction is

⁸ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 184. Further citations will appear parenthetically within the text.

“a trip,” and the author creates spaces that novels constantly move between by way of voice (198-199).

Kesey inherits his teacher’s interest in perspective but develops it in a different direction. Instead of coalescing the styles “write what you know” and “find your voice,” Kesey creates a mobile narrative approach in which voice jettisons the closures and limitations of personal location and experience.⁹ Stegner writes stories about “men working in small groups at a common task” through which these men mark “the boundaries of their community” over-against “the shoddy work done by a dude from the city” (187). Kesey, also from a small town in the West, experiments with points of view that reflect the movement of “open market” relations between insiders and outsiders. McGurl is perhaps right to suggest that the difference between Stegner and Kesey is not between the former’s commitment to small community against the perceived “individualism run amok” of the latter (188). The difference is in the latter’s interest in constant mobility, his search for perspective outside the group or small community. Kesey describes this search in a letter to Ken Babbs:

I’ll discuss point of view for a time now. I am beginning to agree with Stegner, that it truly is the most important problem in writing. The book I have been doing [*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*] ... is a third person work, but something was lacking; I was not free to impose my perception and bizarre eye on the god-author who is supposed to be viewing the scene, so I tried something that will be extremely difficult to pull off, and, to my knowledge, has never been tried before—the narrator is going to be a character. He will not take part in the action or ever speak as I, but he will be a character to be influenced by the events that take place, he will have a position and a personality ... think of this: I, me ken kesey, is stepped back another step and am writing about a third person author [sic] writing about something” (207).

Kesey follows Stegner’s advice that an author should “approach the material as if he were one of the characters,” but he does so through a liminal figure rather than a member of the community.

⁹ Kesey’s discovery of voice in this way and its potential for “perspectival limitation” reflects “literary modernism’s fascination with the artifice and mobility of personae.” Voice, in this ambiguous and unsettled mode, “conceives authorship as a kind of ventriloquism and raises the specter of offensive appropriation, which is an offense against the rule of writing what you know” (234).

The figure Kesey produces in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is Indian Chief Bromden. As an ethnic outsider trapped within a tyrannical institution, Bromden represents the liminal figure: the “lowly ‘outsider’” who “becomes the ultimate ‘insider,’” which amounts to being the “bearer of spiritual authenticity and authority” (198). McGurl contextualizes Kesey’s choice with a quote from another Stegner student who illustrates the authority of the ethnic outsider: “to be an Indian on the Berkeley campus now, is to be *somebody*.” Moreover, white people, even countercultural beatniks like Kesey, could not acquire such a status. Whereas “Native Americans and African Americans could be understood as ‘liminal’ figures in American culture,” white Americans could, at best, be “liminoid” (198). McGurl understands this to mean that the book is not straightforwardly anti-institutional or a proponent of radical individualism, but rather uses the spiritual authenticity and authority of the outsider to combat the staidness of any claustrophobic social structure. The “Indian consciousness” complicates the resistance of the novel’s protagonist, Randall McMurphy, against the rule of the mental hospital in which he is trapped. Instead of simply pitting the individual against the institution, the Indian consciousness enacts “an imaginary transcendence of the institutional scene” because, though equally confined, it is a consciousness “of an original freedom from institutionality” (205). Freedom and resistance are not located in the struggle of the individual qua individual, but in the voice of someone else with a culture and heritage originating outside the dominant structures against which the individual resists. Despite claiming that Kesey was not entirely successful in establishing this narrative mode formally, McGurl maintains that the difference it established between Stegner and Kesey is important for understanding space and time in postwar American literature. For Stegner, according to McGurl, once a “human grouping” has found an appropriate size—“neither too large (a bureaucracy, [a mental ward]) nor too small (a nuclear family, lonely

individuality)”—it is “more or less allowed to be staid” and can be “closed against further development.” Kesey, however, concentrated on the “*temporality*” of small human groups and “their need to keep moving so as to stay open to the unpredictable” (211).

McGurl uses the parameters of Kesey’s spatio-temporal organization of communal life to describe an ideal literary space for the world. He responds to Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, in which a model is constructed for a literary space free from state politics. Here, a writer is recognized for aesthetic achievements representative of humanity as a whole, separated from the writer’s familial or national identity. McGurl takes Casanova’s interest in a space with “autonomous aesthetic value” further, replacing “unified world literary space” with a “global literary pluralism, a world Pluribus of Letters” (329). Cultural particularity is not left behind, but rather appreciated as a “compelling aesthetic vehicle” by those looking in the developed world who “look to various regions and localities as reassuring repositories of cultural diversity and authenticity” (330). The citizen of the World Pluribus of Letters

disaffiliates from the empirical nation, the super-nation, in order to re-affiliate with a utopian sub-nation, whether that be African- or Asian- or Mexican- or (a particularly complex case) Native-American.... Whether they have been the expression of formerly enslaved, immigrant, or indigenous populations, these subnational cultural interventions in the politics of American national culture have, through the years, sought to forge symbolic links to an international literary space which is not, however, the space of universal literary values but a pluralized space, a space of decolonized global cultural difference (330).

McGurl’s World Pluribus citizen is politically liberal: tolerant and even interested in difference just as long as cultural self-articulations are “utterly undisruptive of the mechanisms of global capital” (330). The potential for progress and opening up social institutions depends on appropriating outside voices of persecuted or marginalized cultures through which American authors can ventriloquate their notions of liberation and unfettered—if programmatic—creativity. Though located within a specific American context, as Kesey was in the university,

this citizen resists becoming conventional by finding new registers to articulate and analyze the organization of that context. Thus, the writer and the responsible citizen should always be “on the move,” looking for the authentic and authoritative voice of the enslaved, immigrant or indigenous sub-nation—some “bizarre eye”—to best give a story political significance. Originality, rather than integrity, is the paramount virtue of this citizenship.

In a critical review of McGurl’s book, Elif Batuman suggests that this racial ventriloquism is not liberating but problematic. McGurl wrongly highlights Kesey as the purveyor of “finding your voice” as really pushing the need for “finding *someone else’s* voice,” since Cervantes, Jane Austen, and Dostoevsky all struggled for narrative perspective.¹⁰ Kesey commences the sense of urgency for social justice by finding a persecuted culture for a unique perspective.¹¹ White Americans of privilege are taught that the importance of imagination is to deepen and enrich their stories through another culture’s social injustice. Writers use the hidden wound in America as material for literature. The implication is that “the children of privilege don’t have stories to tell;” or, their stories must rival other narratives of “sociopolitical grievances” in an “unhappiness contest, or an unhappiness-entitlement contest” (6).

Perhaps the motivation for McGurl’s *World Pluribus of Letters* is the guilt that writing isn’t work, much less work for social justice.¹² McGurl, who imagines a political space for Kesey’s literary attempt at social advocacy, shares this embarrassment with Kesey. The guilt over the social inefficiency of writing motivates the preference for originality over integrity. For

¹⁰ Elif Batuman, “Get a Real Degree,” *The New York Review of Books* 32, no.18 (2010): 3-8. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically within the text.

¹¹ For an example of this “narrative mobility,” Batuman cites Robert Olen Butler, a college-educated Vietnam veteran, who tells his story “ostensibly in Vietnamese thought-language, by a pregnant woman to her unborn child” (5). By virtue of the voice of the persecuted woman, Butler inhabits McGurl’s space of decolonized global culture difference. Batuman glosses it this way: “Non-white, non-college-educated or non-middle or upper-class people may write what they know, but White People have to find the voice of a Vietnamese woman impregnated by a member of the American army that killed her only true love” (5).

¹² Batuman posits, “Literary writing is inherently elitist and impractical. It doesn’t directly cure disease, combat injustice, or make enough money, usually, to support philanthropic aims” (7).

Batuman this penchant means, “raw material hardly seems to matter anymore.” Writers rely on style, understood as rigorous and refined technique, to compensate for their liberal anxiety, giving the appearance of writing as “real work.” The reduction of literature to style, however, is to the detriment of fiction. Contemporary readers are under the mistaken assumption that only non-fiction is about “some real thing in the world, some story that someone had to go out and pursue” (8). An author’s sources and historical consciousness are veiled or outright denied in order to claim originality. The embarrassing concealment of one’s time and place is indicative of American culture and politics, but not in the progressive sense that McGurl gives it. The postwar American creative writing program that follows from Kesey “stands for everything that’s wonderful about America: the belief that every individual life can be independent from historical givens, that all the forms and conditions can be reinvented from scratch” (8). The attempt to base social advocacy on a citizenship of a space with no landscape—however “decolonized” or “global” it may be—ends up being a cult of total individual freedom. Worse, it is a form of neo-colonialism: it uses an underprivileged “other” to secure and benefit financially, culturally, and nationally from that freedom.

Kesey wrote his book as a Stegner fellow, reading chapters in a seminar that included Berry. Though it might appear as though Berry’s style parallels Kesey’s, and therefore would be susceptible to Batuman’s critique, it more closely reflects Stegner’s own style. That is, the voice of Berry’s narrator is placed rather than mobile, connected to a particular landscape rather than always “on the move.” Moreover, Berry—despite his avowed dependence on black minds—never uses a racialized outsider to authorize and authenticate his stories. Instead, he prefers to use a narrative voice quite like his own, a point to which I shall return.¹³

¹³ Berry often talks about his time in Stegner’s class, and has written essays not only on his teacher but also on the friends he found in the program. However, he rarely mentions Kesey, a point not significant in and of itself, but it

Berry's relationship with Stegner is intimately familiar. Under his tutelage, Berry became a "regional" writer, which is a pejorative term: an ignorant and sectarian author. He distinguishes it from "regionalism," which is "work that is ostentatiously provincial, condescending and exploitive."¹⁴ The temptation for regional writers of this sort to become an "industrialist of letters, mining one's province for whatever can be got out of it in the way of 'raw material' for stories and novels."¹⁵ Once culturally exploited, regions are primed for their material exploitation. Berry learned from Stegner that to live and write in one's home region is to accept a certain responsibility for it—it was Stegner's influence that prepared Berry for the decision to move back to Henry County. Berry writes about the fictional Port William with the same respect with which he talks about his region near Port Royal. His description of Stegner could be used of Berry himself: he is "one who not only writes about his region but also does his best to protect it, by writing and in other ways, from its would-be exploiters and destroyers."¹⁶ Stegner wrote that his region, the West, "needs a civilization to match the scenery" which influences Berry's need for a community to match its landscape.¹⁷ On Stegner's influence, Berry honours his subjects, expecting others to be equally respectful and kind. Thus, Berry understands Stegner's instruction not simply in terms of academic and personal success, but in terms of responsible authorship.

highlights, I think, the difference between the two. In a letter addressed to Ed McClanahan, also a Stegner fellow and friend of Berry, Berry admits that the class "failed to be any kind of meeting ground" for him and Kesey. Wendell Berry, "Kentucky River Junction: A Letter and A Poem," *Spit in the Ocean #7: All About Ken Kesey*, ed. Ed McClanahan (New York: Penguin, 2003), 70. Though he accepts responsibility for that failure, due to the overly critical approach he used to mask his insecurity, he implies that they didn't agree on much. Berry discusses his change of demeanor over the years, from how he saw himself then in that class to how he sees himself at the time of the letter in 1970. He no longer worries that he is an "evolutionary accident" but recognizes that he is a "natural possibility" of his region. This transformation enabled him to see Kesey as equally possible, which withered away the anxieties of getting "stomped out" and the need for "people to confirm my existence by agreeing with my opinions." Berry implies that he had such anxieties in Kesey's presence. "A Letter and A Poem," 71.

¹⁴ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 74.

¹⁵ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 54.

¹⁶ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 55.

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 45.

That is, Stegner led his students “to a community of recorded human experience.”¹⁸ Contributors to and members of that community of writers participate by virtue of, rather than in abstraction from, located human experience.

It is the varied inheritance of the sense of community that manifests the difference between Berry and Kesey. The image of Kesey’s community is a technicolor school bus; his community is the “vehicular literalization of the idea of *social movement*” free from institutionalization and committed to the creativity of the members.¹⁹ Instead of having an appointed teacher, the group spun a wheel to decide who would lead the group for thirty minutes at a time. McGurl rightly understands this dynamic not as elevating individuality but as making “dictatorship interchangeable with *attention-getting*.”²⁰ Authority in Kesey’s community is willy-nilly, obscurely—if at all—directed to the purposes and history of the community. Stegner’s authority is that “of authentic membership in the great community, of one who had thought and worked in solitude, in quiet, in the company of the past.”²¹ This kind of undeclared authority is different from institutional authority in that it “would be destroyed in being asserted”; Stegner “did not display himself” or “try to get attention.”²² The world is not just immediate experience but also memory, which is not authored by the writer but something to which the author is faithful and committed to protect. The movement of the community that Berry inherited from Stegner is not across but downward: toward the ground. The disposition of

¹⁸ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 50.

¹⁹ McGurl, *Program Era*, 200.

²⁰ Though these exercises were meant to perform social cohesion, it “produces the hyper-reality of the drug high, in which the act of perception is enriched to the point of seeming to author the world I perceive.” McGurl, *Program Era*, 209.

²¹ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 51. Kesey’s own description of his departure from his teacher is perhaps instructive here: “I took LSD, and [Stegner] stayed with Jack Daniels; the line between us was drawn.” McGurl, *Program Era*, 211. Perhaps, then, Berry’s connection with Stegner is rooted in their mutual preference for bourbon. Location and tradition are important for producing whiskey in a way that is irrelevant for psychotropic drugs. Where bourbon is distilled—Kentucky or Tennessee—would be important to Berry.

²² Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 46.

the movement is not self-expressive but self-effacing, serving and caring for the place on which it stands. This self-effacement is not annihilating, but dispossessive; its movement is related to the land without the self as its horizon of meaning or its primary context.

Stegner and Berry's structure of the community distinguishes the contours of its space from that of McGurl's pluralized world of letters. McGurl's literary community is abstracted from any particular location in order for writers of the developed world to become affiliated with a "utopian sub-nation." The standards for literature are not based on value or practical use but on "persecutedness, euphemised as 'difference.'"²³ The anxiety to contribute to a "*social movement*" blinds writers to their own regions and how they contribute to the exploitation and destruction of their world; according to Berry, it leaves their regions susceptible to homogenization and destruction. He responds to an article whose author wants the same abstract identifications and relations as McGurl, namely to redefine identity—in this case "Southernness"—"without resort to geography."²⁴ Berry condemns this kind of territory, without referent or landscape, as one "impossible to correct." Without standards of correction and practical references the politics of a pluralized space is reduced to a contest of wills, each new writer trying to prove to be more authentic through conceptual innovation than the previous writer. Stegner withdraws from the "false camaraderie" of comparing suffering and indignity. The measure of difference isn't persecution; people are just different. There is no need to politicize the expression of difference as "subnational cultural interventions." When Stegner attempts to cross over his difference from other people, he does "not imply that this crossing was simple or easy, or that it ought to be." Instead, he respects the integrity of the difference between people by seeking and rediscovering his subjects and the community of "recorded human

²³ Batumen, "Get A Real Degree," 5.

²⁴ Regions, such as the South or any other utopian sub-nation, are "metaregions," i.e., "a map without a territory." Berry, *What Are People For?*, 82.

experience.” The space of that community is imagined according to his “competent knowledge of history and geography, and his close attention to his own experience.”²⁵

Stegner’s Great Community is not McGurl’s international literary space because of the attention given to the content, the subjects of novels and stories.²⁶ Berry follows Stegner’s search for the worth inherent in the subject; the work of the writer is to pay attention to that intrinsic or natural significance. The movement is erotic, reaching out toward the subject in love and without full understanding. Attention of this kind is “to come into the presence of a subject.” It is a desire, a hope, that reaches out; to pay attention is to “‘stretch toward’ a subject.”²⁷ Stegner’s work of protecting his region, his communal space that matches the scenery, is fulfilling the duty to erotically move beyond the confines of narcissistic ambition and toward the subject as it is, as it presents itself prior to transformation. The work of imagination is not to transform raw material into something interesting, but to give justice to subjects, to give the attention that is owed. The health of the community—its harmony and wholeness—obliges this attention, without which “our subjects, including ourselves, are endangered” (83).

Erotic attention is rooted in its region. Heritage is not only located in the mind, but exists in the world. Again, memory does not consist in abstract objects subject to detached examination, it is “not a cluster of relics in a museum or written history” but “a pattern upon the actual country” (84). Imagined space is connected to actual space. Put more strongly, the two spaces depend on one another. The work of authorship articulates their relationship. Bringing the

²⁵ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 46.

²⁶ Batuman is right to criticize McGurl’s disinterest in content insofar as it reduces the criteria for subject matter to grievances and persecution, which trivializes and exploits the actual plights of those in less developed countries. Still, she says, “there is nothing objectionable in a young writer plumbing her childhood and family for literary material.” Batuman sounds similar to William Mathews, for whom “subject matter is not in itself important.” For the writer, what is important is the ability to transform raw material into something interesting. Though it is Batuman who criticizes McGurl’s program writers for preferring style to content, the sense that memory is something to be “plumbed” for raw material perpetuates the presumption that subjects need to be transformed to have value.

²⁷ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 83. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.

memory of the place into the imagination and then expressing it publicly in stories preserves the integrity of the visible landscape. The expression—literature—affects the place, which in turn makes it truthful and constructive. Put negatively, without a visible landscape to correct an invisible literary space, the latter becomes “false, sentimental, and useless” while the former becomes “strange, threatening to humans and vulnerable to human abuse.” Berry’s retort to McGurl could be: “To assume that the context of literature is ‘the literary world’ is, I believe, simply wrong. Its real habitat is the household and the community” (84). Economy and the commonwealth is the true home of literature. Moreover, Berry doesn’t impugn Kesey’s commitment to social justice but makes it more concrete. Social action requires “local and communal reference.” This community is not the strained and artificial “groupiness” of Kesey’s psychedelic bus—not a “planned community”—but an actual neighborhood in which members are necessarily interdependent (85). Literature’s authority and authenticity does not depend on forging symbolic links and appropriating utopian histories of persecution. Instead, the “common work, common suffering, and a common willingness to join and belong” are the “conditions that make speech possible” in a world of persecution and injustice (85). Writing, for Berry, is the communication of his devotion to a place. To give the place justice is to carefully attend to its local life.

First-person retrospective reflection is the narrative perspective Berry uses to give the life of his place its due attention. Like Kesey, Berry’s perspective is tied to his community and struggles within its parameters and structure to become more capacious in order to resist inhospitable closures. Also like Kesey, Berry looks for an adequate narrative voice to express the alienating characteristics of communal life in order to generate imaginative openings for receiving and loving the estranged as they present themselves to the community. Unlike Kesey,

Berry's narrative voice remains within the memory and heritage of the community in question. His resource for stretching out and transformative magnanimity is the history of the shared place. Community, for Berry, is not just a remedy for lonely individuals but the context within which individuals are allowed and enabled to be most fully themselves. However, the given differences between individuals are not easily understood or explained, which means that people cannot be smoothly comprehended. Memory is an attempt to imagine difference, not in order to understand or explain, but to pay attention to the irreducible distinction of a life. Memory is not pure imagination out of nothing, an act of the solitary mind attempting to establish symbolic affiliations. Memory can be shared and, in that sense, exists outside the individual; it constitutes the erotic movement out towards the unknown, which affects the rememberer and community. Yet because there is no history as such, no account of people or events that are not selective and interpreted, there can be no appeal to a god or omniscient perspective.

Community cannot prevent persecution and suffering, but it can enable fidelity to the lost and grieving. The inevitable failures of community to understand and sustain its members are met with companionship in Berry's fiction. He shows a resolute commitment to pay attention not only to the most virtuous and exemplary, but also to the estranged and those who prove to be disappointments. His commitment to region, however, keeps his voice placed within the community. Help for the alienated insider does not come from a perceived outside; Berry dismisses a narrative mobility that presumes authority is elsewhere in a more authentic culture. Though Berry indicates that cultures other than his own—African- and Native-American—have been indeed more authentic than his own wounded and broken heritage, he does not grant himself the permission to appropriate their voices through narrative. African-American characters are occasional in Berry's fiction, often appearing as virtuous and exemplary of the

community. That is, they are not alienated by the practices that sustain communal life but usually embody excellences of character. There are no black narrators in Berry's short stories or novels. This silence is not cultural insensitivity; it is honesty: Berry is admitting both the limitations of imagination as well as the persistence of difference within imagination. Berry's fiction shows that though we cannot completely know people, our love can participate in a grace, a divine love, without understanding. His search for perspective is the search for a way to attest a complete love with incomplete knowledge. The earthly love that stretches out toward another does not absorb difference and nonconformity but attempts to reshape and reconstitute the community to embrace its alienated insiders without losing its integrity. In other words, the community's integrity does not limit its adaptability to the vicissitudes of social forms but rather names its commitment to its life together. The community might not last, but Berry shows its wholeness through its losses and failures that last in memory incarnated in speech.

The next section will analyze stories in which community deals with loss: *Nathan Coulter*, *A Place On Earth*, *Watch With Me*, and *A World Lost*. Each deals with the theme of lost sheep—some explicitly—within a different mode of narration. Berry changes his point of view in each story, I argue, in order to find the best way to see the community from the perspective of the lost without colonizing that position. Berry himself is a privileged member of his community, one who records experiences that educate fidelity to place. It is tempting, I think, for readers to focus on the practices that bolster community, highlighting the ways in which the community preserves itself despite failures and infidelities by remaining steadfast to existing social structure and institutional authority. No doubt there is a commitment to preservation and protection in Berry's work. And yet the failure of the community to recognize and embrace all its members for who they are demonstrates the need to reconfigure the community rather than enforce the

transformation of recalcitrant individuals to safeguard stability and constancy for the virtuous. In other words, Berry looks at the community and its need for correction from the standpoint of the disgraced. He does so through an exemplary narrator—a shepherd figure—struggling to imagine via memory what it is like to be a lonely soul, a lost sheep.

II

Nathan Coulter

Wendell Berry's first novel, *Nathan Coulter*, is a first person recollection of the eponymous character, to the approximate age of thirteen or fourteen years. Already the reader finds themes that reemerge frequently in Berry's work. It begins in darkness, allowing Nathan's close presence to his surroundings: "Because in the dark I could remember and not see." The darkness enables an intimacy with his place—the sun, the hills, the barn, the river, the house, neighboring buildings—for the reason that "memory was closer than the sight of them."²⁸ Despite his age, the perception Nathan goes by is memory rather than sight. Blindness is a dominant theme throughout the novel; sight is not as reliable as memory for navigating the community and its landscape. Around him is a disintegrating community, fragmented by death and alienation. Nathan's observation and reflection is voiced through sparse narrative, mediated mostly by his relationship with his wayward uncle Burley. The reader meets him at a point in his life when he is beginning to develop his self-awareness: "I said, 'I'm Nathan Coulter.' It seemed strange" (13). Through loss and division, Nathan matures in the novel and learns about the certainty of sorrow. He learns to see himself and the country according to the memory of those who have worked in the fields, through their suffering and grief.

²⁸ Wendell Berry, *Nathan Coulter* Rev. ed. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 3. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

Nathan and his older brother Tom live with their parents beside their grandparents, with whom, reluctantly, lives Burley. Nathan's and Tom's mother is afflicted with an undisclosed illness and dies. Their father, Jarrat, lacks the coping mechanisms necessary to both come to grips with the loss and raise his two sons. As a result, they move in with their grandparents and Burley agrees to stay to help look after them. Nathan's grandfather, David, is an exacting presence in the lives of all who live with—or “around,” as his wife emends—him (35). The story consists of episodes in which Nathan learns about the tenuous bonds that hold the community together and the fragility of understanding himself as a member of that community. Despite brief moments of reconciliation and pleasure, there is no permanent image of fulfillment or redemption. Each such instance is spoiled by disappointment, disaster, or separation: Burley can't meet the expectations of his mother, Jarrat's barn burns down, Nathan splits with Tom, and Tom fiercely separates from his father, which results in his departure from the community. The novel ends with the death of David, and Nathan, alone, carrying his grandfather's corpse home. There is no restoration, no moment of reconciliation that lasts after death. There is only loss and the return home.

Nathan Coulter is about death and grief and their effect on relationships. Nathan is forced to learn good and bad ways of negotiating loss. Nathan's family, like any other, has had to handle the death of family members; however, he remembers two unseemly ways his family has dealt with loss. The first is a striking communal memory about the burial of Aunt Mary, the youngest daughter of Nathan's great-great-grandfather, Jonas Thomasson Coulter. Jonas had fought over the property line between his farm and that of his neighbour, Jeff Ellis, who lived on the farm that Nathan eventually grows up on. It was a particularly heated and violent argument, settled only by Mary's corpse and Ellis' fear of the dead. Knowing Jeff Ellis would avoid the

burial site, Jonas “dug a grave where he thought the fence ought to run, and he made the rest of the family bury her in it.” It was not without consequence, for his wife “would never speak to him or even look at him after that.” Jonas uses the dead to claim land, exploiting its significance to expand his property. His desire to possess land—even, as in this case, a useless hollow—was at variance with his familial love.

The second story is a similar display of the self-serving use of death, differing only in the function of visibility. Whereas the effect of the former story depends on hiding the grave’s location from Ellis—to the extent that family members could not even place flowers on it—the second describes an ostentatious display of the Coulter family monument in the cemetery. Its scale so grand that the angel atop the granite memorial can be seen “jutting up even taller than most of the cedars.” Nathan’s great-grandmother, perhaps afraid of being lost in the earth like Aunt Mary, purchased it from a traveling salesman. Again, it has consequences for the family, this time physical and material rather than emotional. “It had taken twenty mules to pull the base of it seven miles from the railroad station. And the old woman had been dead about five years before Grandpa was able to pay for it” (17). Nathan’s grandfather appears to have a fear of death all his own. He hates the monument so much he purchases a separate lot for his own burial, refusing to let the dead have any influence over him. Both graves stake claims on the living that damage familial and inter-generational relationships. The Coulter’s history of using the dead has affected how they understand the self, community, and landscape. Death is something that can be exploited; Nathan has grown up in a family that does not handle loss well.

One of the ramifications is a lack of adequate coping mechanisms. The resources available to the family—religion, community, work—fail to help them stay together. After Nathan’s mother dies, his grandmother tells him and Tom “not to grieve” because their “mother

was in Heaven with all the angels, and she was happy there and never would have to suffer any more” (31). Like the angel on the monument, religious language and imagery deny humble reflections on mortality. And again, the consequences are divisive. Invoking Heaven diverts attention from that which has passed away, isolating individual family members in their grief. Instead of encouraging an acknowledgement of human mortality, Nathan’s grandmother instills an image of Heaven “so beautiful and far away that you couldn’t think about it.” Death itself remains incomprehensible and Nathan is left wondering alone in his sadness why something so pretty would result in “people always ending up so far from each other” (34). Nathan and Tom are taken from their home to live with their grandparents and Jarrat is left alone. The community is also unable to help Jarrat, who refuses to be emotionally available to the visitors paying respect. Jarrat engrosses himself in his work, here chopping wood. As he returns to the house the community “turned away from him, embarrassed because they’d come to say they were sorry and the look of him didn’t allow it” (27). Though Jarrat’s disposition arrests the community’s good intentions, their social awkwardness, their self-consciousness of being denied the position of comforters, puts distance between them. It is the community that turns away and is embarrassed to meet and address Jarrat as he is, according to his form of sorrow.

The work Jarrat absorbs himself in does not offer comfort or renewal, but instead tears apart his relationship with Tom. The pain of work overrides emotional strain: “when the sweat runs it quits hurting” (91). Jarrat’s ability surpasses his sons’, which he never lets them forget. He heckles and provokes them, refusing to admit any dependence or mortal limit. Jarrat’s skill and strength, his keen ability to harvest tobacco, not only prevents intimacy with his sons but also causes a vicious disruption with Tom. Competition and resistance comprise the Coulter world, and eventually Tom engages his father on these terms. The world is not a capacious place

in which all work together and share in its life. Jarrat asserts his authority in rivalry with his son “as if he’d just made the world over to suit himself.” Tom cannot beat Jarrat at his own game, in a race that he has set. “[Jarrat] had to work hard for so long, pushed by creditors and seasons and weather, until now it was a habit. That had made him what he was” (94). Jarrat’s work has determined his character, which damages and thrusts Tom out. Tom cannot overcome Jarrat’s pace during tobacco cutting, and in frustration attacks his father. By the time the rest of the group intervenes, “they’d already half killed each other” (95). Their division is irrevocable. Even when Tom eventually ceases to be angry with Jarrat, who mourns the loss of his son, their relationship is never fully reconciled. They become “friendly” together but “never had much to say to each other” and when they did they were “always a little uncomfortable” (111). The work that should unite them is the cause of their separation.

Nathan learns that suffering and alienation derive from character, which cannot be altered significantly. There are instances that anticipate Nathan’s interpretation of his father’s and brother’s estrangement. Early on, Nathan and Tom steal a dynamite cap, which they use to blow up a little boy’s pet crow. Despite Nathan’s regret and sympathy he flees the scene with his brother because “there was nothing to do but run” (19). At a carnival, Nathan wants to ride the Ferris wheel but Tom wants to see a peep show. The man who sells them tickets to the show cracks a crowd-pleasing joke, which makes Nathan self-conscious about attending, but “there was nothing to do but keep going” (47). These events, along with several others, lead up to Nathan’s revelation into the binding mortal nature of humanity: watching his father cry over the loss of Tom he says,

I could have cried myself. Brother was gone, and he wouldn’t be back. And things that had been so before never would be so again. We were the way we were; nothing could make us any different, and we suffered because of it. Things happened to us the way they did because we were ourselves, and if we’d been other people it wouldn’t have

mattered... we'd have had to suffer what ever it was that they suffered because they were themselves. And there was nothing anybody could do but let it happen" (103-104).

The final image of his arms carrying his grandfather's corpse depicts the maturation of Nathan's psychological and moral formation. He has learned how to think about himself, which is as a Coulter. That is, he has become familiar—no longer “strange”—in one of its root senses: as a servant to his household. His understanding of himself is in service to—after the fashion of—his family's unhappiness and pain.

Nathan, however, is able to overcome his familial fear of death. His father's character has been historically prepared by his grandfather, and appears to be inherited by his brother. The chief attribute of the Coulter patrimony is a resolute individualism that denies bequeathing gracefully property and authority to the next generation. Dave Coulter is isolated and, at times, despondent because his son Jarrat had the ability to takeover his father's legacy as a masterful farmer. Tom similarly attempts to overtake Jarrat, who refuses to let go of his entitlement. Jarrat rebuffs his mortal condition, desiring to set the terms of succession according to his will. Tom's defeat, in fact, contributes to his inheritance of the Coulter self-determination; he comes to understand himself in terms of his independence. Nathan says, “Brother had been beaten and insulted until it would be a long time before he'd know what to think of himself” (96). The indication of Tom's change in consciousness and that he “had got to be his own man” is his self-reliance: “He wasn't asking any of us for anything” (111). Though he no longer knows himself as subject to his father's authority, that authority nevertheless conditions his self-understanding: “to farm without having to say please or thank you to a living soul” (6).

Nathan's development is different than Tom's. Berry pronounces their difference in the revised ending. In the Original ending, Jarrat's anger expels Nathan in parallel fashion to Tom's estrangement. Dave does not die alone with Nathan but suffers a stroke and dies later. Nathan

had not been able to overcome his fear of death, which leads to a tryst with a married woman. The disgrace enrages Jarrat, forcing Nathan's departure. Berry's revised ending returns to the motifs at the beginning of the novel. In the opening dream sequence, a wind carries Nathan's bed and sets it down at the edge of a wood. A roaring lion is positioned at the woods' entrance, which reminds Nathan of his grandfather. The wind is actually the lion's "lonely" voice, and cannot carry him over the woods—if he wants to get to the other side, to the river, Nathan must go through it on the ground. The next day, Nathan and Tom go through the woods hoping to "kill a lion." They travel on an old blind horse, Oscar, whom they find next to "Grandpa's spring." Oscar navigates the land via memory rather than sight. Burley claims that "Oscar knew his way around the farm as well as he knew the inside of his skin.... He didn't need to see it." The place is in his mind. Neither Dave nor Jarrat trust Oscar even though he is surefooted—they cannot put faith in the memory of others to give protection and direction in the wildness of the world.

The final moment of the revised story begins with Nathan and Dave coming "up out of the woods." They stop at the spring to drink and Nathan recognizes his grandfather's mortality in terms of nature rather than competition and independence—that is, he sees it as inescapable rather than a vexing predicament. Nathan sees that his grandfather, and therefore also himself, is "waiting his turn." Just like the spring that is known according its history—its provision and form—in the place, so too Dave is known according to his land. "His life couldn't be divided from the days he'd spent at work in the fields" (117). The country itself is known through his presence, and will be recognized differently by other workers after people like Dave and Jarrat die. The elder Coulters know this and flaunt it as a testament to their abilities. Channeling Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," Dave says, "An old man's not worth a damn, he might as well be

knocked in the head”²⁹ (116). Working hard country is for the young and able; Death is a kind of justice, nature settling the account with the loss of facility. Nathan, however, comes to see his family’s life as part of the history of the place—that the Coulter heritage and land cannot be understood separate from one another. Dave dies in the place on which the lion stood in the dream, striking the same pose, facing the same direction. Nathan realizes that death is not something to be feared but is simply the condition of humanity’s relation with the land; loss is the condition of possession. His grandfather, and eventually he himself, will die, be buried, and become, like Aunt Mary, “a part of Grandpa’s farm, or maybe a hickory tree” (9). Nathan’s perception has changed, and now he must see the country for what it is in the lion’s absence.

The novel is about Nathan’s purgatorial experience going through the woods, purging his fear of death and its concomitant loneliness. The challenge Nathan faces on the other side of the woods is: how will he relate to his brother and his country? He knows he must move through the land by memory as Oscar does, relinquishing the self-determination that guides his family’s movements. Yet he is still a Coulter and cannot forget that part of his character is his work ethic, for which he will suffer. The shift in perception from relying purely on sight to memory cannot forestall pain and loss, but it might prevent the work from being an alienating practice. In *A Place On Earth*, readers are informed that Nathan goes off to war along with Tom (who dies digging mass graves), but returns to the community. We also know, in *Remembering*, that he is an important person for helping Andy remain part of the community after the latter’s self-imposed exile. We learn later, in *Hannah Coulter*, that Nathan becomes a farmer who works with the history of the place in his mind. He does not work independently but mindful of his relationships with others, both living and dead. Nathan becomes a shepherd for the lost, allowing

²⁹ “An aged man is but a paltry thing.”

the past and present form his imagination so that, even though *Nathan Coulter* ends in death and loss, restoration and love are still possible in the presence of the worst.

Nathan's character as a shepherd or leader in the community only develops in later novels. Berry cannot develop it here because his mode of narration prevents it. It is difficult for first person narration to convey the importance of memory—to feel its weight on characters and narratives—for negotiating loss. Jack Hicks assesses it this way: "Filtered as it is, back through a youthful first-person consciousness, the novel shows little of the rich verdure of history that characterizes Wendell Berry's best work, few of the intertwinings of character—their lives and pasts that suggest the ripe weight of past on present."³⁰ The moments when Berry attempts to impose a historical consciousness onto Nathan, it feels forced and contrived. Would a fourteen year-old really be able to say something like, "And things that had been so before never would be so again"? Fritz Oehlschlaeger suggest that this line is Nathan's reflection on his grandmother's lament after the death of his mother that the brothers "never will see her any more."³¹ Yet Oehlschlaeger admits that its meaning is "in a way impossible" to understand at such a young age. Perhaps it is the beginning of understanding, but it feels more like something Berry would say than young Nathan. It takes years of reflection and experience to be able to articulate an understanding of mortality and history in this way. First person narration is a perspective discontinuous with the kind of memoried imagination that is so important to Berry, especially in one of such a young age. It is a point of view that depends on solitary sight, not communal memory, and is thus a kind of blindness. Berry senses the discontinuity, for he shifts away completely from this point of view in his next novel, *A Place on Earth*.

³⁰ Hicks, "Husband to the World," 122.

³¹ Fritz Oehlschlaeger, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 165-166.

A Place On Earth

In many ways, *A Place On Earth* begins where *Nathan Coulter* ends. Mat Feltner, a literal shepherd, replaces Nathan as the main figure who learns to see himself and the world in terms of loss. The transition is explicit early in the novel, depicted in Nathan's departure for America's second war in Europe. Nathan waits in the rain for a bus to take him to the same war that killed his brother Tom. Mat sees him waiting with Burley after having learned that his (Mat's) own son, Virgil, is missing in action. He notices that they do not seek shelter, refusing to "interrupt or disguise" the mortal implications of the departure. It seems to Mat that Tom's death is "somehow implicit in the stance and attitude of their waiting."³² Nathan is waiting his turn. Mat is left to learn how to wait, how to live in a community broken by forces beyond anyone's control. He must cope with the same problem posed at the end of *Nathan Coulter*: How will Mat relate to his family and his country in the midst of suffering and loss?

"Not well," is the immediate short-answer. Mat is consumed and isolated by his grief. He detaches himself from his wife, Margaret, and daughter-in-law, Hannah, and finds bitter satisfaction in the loneliness of his waiting. Whereas Nathan's story is a coming of age from strangeness into familiarity, Mat's is a loss of familiarity into strangeness. Because of his grief, he "loses track of time," both in the sense that he is unaware of the current time and also that he fails to be conscious of the course that has been historically prepared for him. He moves and works without consciousness, "held to the place and his work only by the old habits of his life" (243). As with Jarrat, the habit of work is psychologically and relationally insufficient. His farm also suffers from this self-absorbed neglect. A lamb has died because of his "failure of

³² Wendell Berry, *A Place On Earth* Rev. ed. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1983), 16. Further references will appear parenthetically within the text.

attention,” because his “mind has fallen short of its subject” (89). It is the failure of a shepherd committed to his entire flock, not just the ninety-nine.

Mat’s loss of time reflects Port William’s historical condition. The first-comers came to the new place and established its existence without regard to “explanations and motives and reasons and memories” (26). All they brought were themselves and their ambitions. The abundance of the place was exploited, and their relation to the place engendered competitive relations with each other and their descendants. Their consumption unhinged it from history, and it “became like an island. . . . Past and future bore against it under cover of darkness.” Though Port William has been determined by this past, it has done collectively all it could to forget it. It is a town that is “detached from its sources,” its only permanence that of “restlessness and disturbance.”

Mat’s anger has blinded him. He becomes disconnected from his memories of Virgil, too painful to face his son’s hopes and intentions inextricably entwined with them. He violates the silence binding him to Margaret and Hannah by insisting that they admit that Virgil is dead. The unspoken avoidance of using “is” and “was” is confronted publicly, but not out of love or surrender. Mat thinks he is addressing the reality of the situation; however, it blinds him to the reality of Hannah and Margaret. He sees Hannah as surrounded by only “the loss of everything.” He tells Margaret that the loss of everything “singles us out.” Margaret helps him to see that this isolation has given him only a false comfort. He realizes that they are both broken, that claims regarding the “loss of everything” are attempts at disguising and interrupting brokenness. Self-imposed loneliness is trying to “prescribe terms to the world,” limiting humanity according to personal preferences. Margaret teaches him that his anger at losing Virgil, his rebellion against the knowledge that “losing is the condition of having,” is alienating. She reminds Mat of the loss

they had prepared for, the familiarity of the pain of disappearance. What cannot be lost is the presence that remains after death, the denial that when Virgil's "death is subtracted from his life it leaves nothing" (262). The "not-nothing" is their memory and their belonging to each other that has been and continues to be conditioned by that memory. Mat has forgotten this, but, in remembering, becomes reconnected with his family and learns to see the world differently—no longer on his own terms or according to his stipulations.

The story ends with Mat's renewed sense of time, his memoried connection to his place. Mat's perception of his place changes from reflecting Port William's detached approach to Hannah's harmonic mode of being.³³ He sees that the work done on his land before him was damaging to both people and place. His own heritage is tied to Port William's violence, including the exploitative ambition to turn the sweat of black men into money. But he also sees that the place antedates this heritage, that there is present a "silence" of the "big trees standing without age or history." Though the lives of those who worked the land so long ago are "unimaginable," Mat imagines the ageless trees "shivering as he does." He is no longer consumed by loss, but enters the woods with a full sense of its time. A joyful peace replaces the bitterness and anger that hollowed him and reduced his work to mere habit. "He feels the great restfulness of that place, its casual perfect order" (321). He realizes that he has given order to his farm and his life by setting the terms of transition from wilderness to farm and from generation to generation. Virgil's absence destroyed his prearranged order, his advanced arrangement of how things will be passed from father to son. Margaret shows him how to survive the destruction

³³ This mode of being is more fully developed in her character in *The Memory of Old Jack* and *Hannah Coulter. A Place on Earth* nevertheless adumbrates her exemplary relationship with the place and community. She moves through the landscape not just by sight but also by "her memory of [Virgil]" thereby receiving back into herself his presence. Hannah breast-feeds her daughter, both imitating and participating in the natural flow of hospitality and love that moves the world and connects its inhabitants. It is a comforting moment though it doesn't last; she feels the "melancholy" of darkness as night falls, the place withdrawing from her "to leave her alone" (243). Nevertheless, her memories of Virgil in the place give her a sense of his presence that is "not to be lost again" (241).

of his failed expectations and live in the presence of an absence, to see the country for what it is without the assurance of a successful future.

One of the lessons Mat tries to teach Virgil is the responsibility of permanence. After one of Virgil's first tobacco patches was destroyed, Mat reprimands him saying, "This is your fault. This is one of your contributions to the world" (180). The moral Mat wants his son to know is that "the worst, most dangerous kind of irresponsibility is to think of your actions and dealings as temporary." Mat learns that the provisional nature of actions is not irresponsible but simply the condition of being a part of nature. No action can be made permanent. Mat is wrong when he tells Virgil, "what you do on the earth, the earth makes permanent" (180).³⁴ Such thinking presumes that the earth will perpetuate the order humans impose on it, giving him a kind of immortality by handing over to his son what he has established and the earth has made permanent. His vision of the earth changes, seeing it not in terms of what he can pass on, the easy transition of love, knowledge, and work, but the overturning of human projects by nature. The failure of expectations and ambitions is not a loss of devotion or meaning, but rather the loss of order. Only now, with a renewed memoried perspective, can Mat see that loss without sorrow. All his work to "maintain and regulate" his place will one day be swallowed up by the surrounding wilderness and will be returned to its restful order. Mat is no longer preoccupied with permanence—the transition from life to life—but with the natural "design where death can only give into life." His sense of loss and death no longer alienates him but now brings him into a more familiar presence of the place.

³⁴ I therefore disagree with Oehlschlaeger's interpretation of this passage as instructive for human action. "Knowing this, one's first care must always be to do nothing that cannot be undone unless one is certain that it is good." *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 204. From reading Berry, I doubt such certainty is possible in our limited knowledge and understanding of the world, which means that Mat's lesson is paralyzing.

Unfortunately, Mat's change comes too late. His failure to be present to his family and farm costs more than the life of one lamb; it also claims the life of his brother-in-law Ernest. Mat's isolating bitterness blinds him to Ernest's anguish; his own alienation prevents his attention to Ernest's. Ernest is wounded in the First World War and returns to Port William. The permanence of this loss, the undisclosed wound, leaves him in—as the community calls him—shambles. He returns as a “stranger” with his “mouth shut, permanently,” recognizing that “nothing could ever be as it was” (34). He sees himself as no longer fully human, but “half contraption” (35). And so Ernest isolates himself in his work. He is a skilled carpenter who is loved and welcomed by the community. Juxtaposed against the incomprehensible chaos of war that crippled his life, Ernest's shop is a carefully constructed world of order, with established certainties and limits.

Ernest is caught between two catastrophes. On the one hand, his life at home has been disordered by the loss of his nephew at war. On the other hand, he has been sent to repair the barn and outbuildings of a farm nearly flattened by a flash flood. The farm is Ida and Gideon Crop's, and the flood drowned their daughter Annie. Gideon's tragedy parallels Mat's own: both Mat and Gideon have a child completely absorbed by bewildering forces outside of their control; both lack confirmation of their child's death beyond sheer absence; both are without a grave, a place at which to mourn; both become detached from their place by their loss. Whereas Mat withdraws his mind, Gideon withdraws his body; both are preserved by the fidelity of their wives; both return to their place. The community rallies around Ida, helping her to cope with the loss of her daughter, the destruction of her farm, and the absence of her husband. The form their help takes is physical work, binding them together in a common project. It is Ernest, however, that spends the most time helping her.

As any small community will do, the town gossips about the suggestive relationship between Ernest and the lonely “widow.” Ernest denies it, and Burley, in a letter to Nathan, indicates that such an idea is preposterous. “You don’t have to be around Ida long to know that she’s as mindful of Gideon now that he’s gone as she ever was when he was there. If I ever seen a woman whose ways gave the signs of belonging to one man, it’s her” (238). But Burley is worried, for “Ernest has Ida on his mind in a way he thinks he ought to keep quiet about.” Burley’s perceptive insight is well beyond Mat’s awareness, who thinks that Ernest goes about his business as usual. Despite recognizing “the possibility of pain” here, Burley does nothing to intervene or address Ernest. Burley’s letter suggests the possibility that, despite Ernest’s silence, Mat could have recognized the potential of calamity before it came to fruition. But Mat failed to know Ernest, which is a failure to recognize him.

Ernest is, in fact, caught in a fantasy. His work on the place stirs in him a sense of belonging. His vision of repair, and the idea of restoring and maintaining order, takes hold of him in a way that draws his life toward the life of the place. He becomes intimate with the place, forming the possibilities of the landscape in his mind and becomes attracted to his design for it. In the midst of this erotic exchange between Ernest and the farm is Ida. Gideon always mediates her presence; she is almost always wearing an article of clothing that belongs to him. This is not lost on Ernest; nevertheless, Ida, in Burley’s words, “is a woman who can take up a lot of space in a man’s mind.” Ernest feels himself made more human, “made as if whole,” by her. The feeling is an irresistible indulgence. Though nothing happens between them except communal hospitality, he is caught by his obsessive love for a woman with whom he rarely speaks. He constructs daydreams that offer a false happiness, a life that reflects the one he arranges in his shop: perfectly crafted to offer order and fulfillment in a world of chaos and destruction. Ernest

“realizes vaguely that he’s trapped, endangered, like an animal that has crept through a narrow opening and fed until it has grown too large to escape” (199). He is trapped by an imagined existence outside his life, which excludes him from himself, as it were. The happiness of his daydreams is so disconnected from the world that it destroys the possibility of being actually happy. He forms an ideal in his mind that he desires but that excludes him, and he implodes.

Ernest’s anguish differs from Mat’s and Gideon’s in that he suffers alienation from the very thing that brings him closer to the community and its place. The work that brings people together tears Ernest apart. Mat and Gideon are driven from their place and exile themselves from their loved ones, only to return and be made whole again. Ernest is brought into the presence of place and enters into a relationship, only to be thrust out and shattered. Eventually, the sense of futility is too much for Ernest’s mind to bear. While preparing the house to be painted, he peers into Annie’s room and feels a “sexual intimacy” that becomes an “invasion” (266). His fantasy falters at the sight of the space made by Ida and Gideon’s love. His own intimacy “was purely professional, purely temporary” (269). He feels betrayed by his work, the condition that demands the carpenter leave the place after it has been repaired, to be forever excluded from enjoying the use and pleasure of the thing restored. The lack of permanence is too much for Ernest to live with now. “Here the use of his skill, which always before has transcended and carried him past his jobs, has failed him” (269). He cannot be present there as Gideon has been and will continue to be. But now that he’s felt that presence and its loss, his work has lost all meaning. The ability to continue, to go on to do another job, is impossible. Ernest leaves Ida and Gideon’s farm, returns to his shop, sits on the floor, slices open his left wrist, and dies.

The narrative perspective in *A Place On Earth* fails Berry in the same way Ernest's work fails him. Throughout the novel, the perspective constantly shifts from one community member to the next. The reader becomes intimate with the inner thoughts and motives of several characters: in addition to those named above, it includes Uncle Jack, Stanley Gibbs, Roger Merchant, Milton Burgess, Jayber Crow, Andy Coulter, and Wheeler Coulter. Berry uses third-person narration to find a communal point of view, to give depth and life to a vibrant community. The problem, however, is that there is no such thing as a communal point of view; such a perspective hovers above the community, detached from real possibilities. In other words, it is a perspective outside the community, giving a point of view that no one actually has. It is a fantasy, able to fill in gaps imperceptible to a limited perspective. The work depends on a transcendence to provide continuity, and therefore disables Berry's struggle to "live within his subject."³⁵ Writing this way is tantamount to maintaining space for order within a world of chaos. The finality given to the community and its members offers a tidiness that betrays the actual character of temporality. It also betrays the character of memory, which is reconstructive and personal. Thus when the memory is retrieved, when Mat and Gideon return to their respective places, the recovery comes too neatly and completely.

Berry admits that he wanted to write a book less "limited" than *Nathan Coulter*, but, not knowing how, found there to be "a lot of awkwardness in the writing of *A Place on Earth*."³⁶ Berry seems to have approached his problem as merely a mechanical one, using narrative crutches to piece together what is lost.³⁷ While writing *A Place on Earth*, Berry realizes he does not have to be a forceful writer; he shifts from "writing by will power" to becoming an

³⁵ Morris Allen Grubbs, ed., *Conversations with Wendell Berry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 132

³⁶ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 69.

³⁷ Berry perhaps sees the issue as he describes Ernest's approach to his wound: "learning, as though it was some ultimately unsolvable problem of mechanics, to piece out his loss with the crutches." *A Place On Earth*, 34.

“amateur” working for love.³⁸ Berry learns, as Ernest did, that work alone does not make one happy. Work—maintaining order—is not itself enough to make a life, and can be alienating. Though it takes a while for the difference to become manifest in his narrative perspective, one of the results of this shift is the move away from writing novels from the third-person omniscient point of view. The latter perspective contradicts the content of a story that warns against maintaining an order discontinuous with history and place. If there is no protection from chaos in the world, then to control a narrative so tightly simply won’t do. To be a shepherd, to imagine the lives of one’s subjects, requires one to live with a sense of partiality and vulnerability. Not all sheep can be saved; shepherds fail. Moreover, the clearings the shepherd provides for the sheep will eventually return to their original chaotic state. Or, put better, there is an original design that will one day overturn any temporary order. Narrative should reflect the provisional nature of historical life in the world. Futility always haunts human attempts to create and maintain order. Ernest found that he could not live in a world in which his work lacks the meaning he desires for it. Berry features the possibility of meaninglessness in human ambitions and arrangements.³⁹ Belonging to one another and the earth as Mat does is to be ignorant of the meaning or efficacy of modes of attachment but nevertheless mindful of their worth (262). Berry himself becomes a shepherd, finding a voice appropriately partial and vulnerable for doing so—one close to his own.

Watch With Me

³⁸ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 130.

³⁹ Mat’s hope constitutes the manner in which Berry approaches the world: “His hope of Heaven must be the hope of a man bound to the world that his life is not ultimately futile or ultimately meaningless, a hope more burdening than despair.” *A Place on Earth*, 99. This is a religious hope, though not confined to any institution. The local preacher fails this hope: “It is from this possibility of meaninglessness that the preacher has retreated.” Because of his fear of meaninglessness and his commitment to the structural and institutional permanence of the church, he ignores the possible futility of his vocation and thus ignores the depth and significance of human suffering and grief.

Perhaps the story most explicitly drawing on the parable of the lost sheep, *Watch With Me*, “shows the way a functioning neighborhood acts even when the act of neighborliness seems as ineffectual as the lost sheep’s cry of desperation.”⁴⁰ It is about Ptolemy Proudfoot’s watch over his unstable neighbour, Nightlife. Nightlife comes from a family with poor vision; his nickname comes from his tendency to act out his nightlife during the light of day, given his inability to distinguish night and day. He is “incomplete”⁴¹ and a “stranger to everybody” when he comes under a spell of confused and dangerous emotions, which sometimes requires him to be committed (147). Before the story begins, preachers leading a revival at the local church have spurned Nightlife’s attempt to lead a service. They are not willing to let him preach the sermon—complete with accompanying prayers and hymns—he had prepared for the third night. Nightlife “threwed a reg’lar fit” and Tol tried to comfort him with his surpassing kindness (142). The story begins the following morning, after Nightlife picks up Tol’s loaded shotgun, Old Fetcher, and threatens to shoot himself. Throughout the entire day, into the night and the following morning, Tol simply follows Nightlife, joined by other members of the community—Sam Hanks, Braymer and Tom Hardy, Walter Cotman, Put Woolfork, and Burley Coulter—who become bound to one another in their pursuit and care of their wayward neighbour.

Nightlife’s real name is Thacker Hample. The Hamples, though all visually impaired, have a “second sight” in their hands; they all have an uncanny knack for fixing machinery (150). Nightlife and his mother, a widow, live on the family farm alone. The farm is “marginal” and no one in the community remembers anyone else living there. It is a “remnant of land” overlooked, or forgotten, and neglected by the hysteria of the first white settlers in the region (149). The land

⁴⁰ Grubbs, *Conversations*, 128.

⁴¹ Wendell Berry, *Watch with Me: And Six Other Stories of the Yet-Remembered Ptolemy Proudfoot and His Wife, Miss Minnie, Née Quinch* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 141. Further references will appear parenthetically within the text.

was more or less destroyed by these settlers, and the Hamples have been barely able to eke out a living there. They are not good farmers; in likeness with the ruin the first settlers brought to that place, they have “destroyed maybe forever the possibility of farming” on their land (156). But they “persevered” and even have a “hearty and bitter amusement” all their own (150). They have been able to benefit from the introduction of complex farm machinery into the community. In fact, it seems as though this mechanical skill ties them to the community, to the extent that the “neighborhood liked to boast of them that they could ‘make anything or fix anything’” (150). Nightlife has inherited the technical aptitude of Hample hands but not their sense of humour; he is skillful but not emotionally adjusted. Though it wasn’t his material proficiency that estranged him, neither did it integrate him into the life of the community.

Nightlife’s sermon, it turns out at the end, is about himself as a lost sheep. He writes on the Matthean parable as a way to talk about himself, communicating to others what it is like to be Nightlife. “Though Christ, in speaking this parable, asked his hearers to think of the shepherd, Nightlife understood it entirely from the viewpoint of the lost sheep, who could imagine fully the condition of being lost and even the hope of rescue, but could not imagine rescue itself.” Nightlife preaches that the lost sheep is trapped in darkness, blind and snared, trying to find his way over difficult terrain. Though the shepherd calls the sheep, who recognizes the voice and “wants to go to it,” he “can’t find the path, and he can’t make it” (207). He delivers his sermon, finally, to Tol and the rest of his followers in Tol’s shop, the place where he picked up Old Fetcher and the journey began. Though they end up in their starting place, they have not traveled in a perfect circle. Nightlife leads them all over the region, “governed too much both by the lay of the land and by his craziness for his course to have assumed any sort of regular shape (202). Like Dante, the straight way was lost to Nightlife; however, the latter travels through woods

without a guide but instead with a motley train. Though the neighborhood watches over Nightlife in compassion, they are literally his followers. In other words, their effort to help Nightlife culminates in having his perspective instruct them.

Berry uses further biblical imagery to complicate the roles and figures in the story. The morning that Nightlife takes Old Fetcher is in August 1916, when “a new kind of world was in the making on the battlefields of France.” However, from Tol’s farm, that new world “could not be told” because the perspective from the ridge over the valley viewed a “dazzling cloud” covering the valley below with “the woods and the ridgetops looking as clear and clean as Resurrection Morning” (134). The bright cloud recalls Christ’s transfiguration in Matthew 17:5, which is coupled with his resurrection. *Watch With Me* reiterates the coupling of these biblical themes, and should be read in Christ-like terms. Nightlife’s story really begins at night when the religious leaders, who could not include him in the terms set by their institutional arrangement, reject him. He is abandoned by everyone at the church except Tol, comes to see himself as a “damned fellow,” and threatens suicide (145). At about midmorning on the third day, after an intervention by Tol’s hen at the conclusion of his sermon, Nightlife becomes “like a man just awakened” (209). The title of the story comes from Matthew 26:38 in Gethsemane, where Jesus says to his disciples, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.” Jesus’ words could be said by Nightlife; indeed, when the group following him falls asleep he asks them repeatedly “Couldn’t you stay awake?”, reminiscent of Jesus’ question, “could ye not watch with me one hour?” (Matt. 26:40).

Tol is also a godly figure. He is “slow to anger,” which describes God in a number of Old Testament passages (Neh 9:17; Psalm 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; and Nahum 1:3) that usually co-occurs with a report of God’s mercy. Tol’s mercy and kindness are crucial for the

survival of both Nightlife and the neighbourhood; however, it seems more appropriate to read him as Proverbs 15:18 describes: “A wrathful man stirreth up strife; but he that is slow to anger appeases strife.” Tol does not over-react to Nightlife’s threats, but is able to calm contention within the community. Tol is demonstrably not a wrathful man. Prior to Nightlife’s arrival to his shop, Tol’s cow plants her manure-covered hind foot in a bucket of milk. Though his “sense of justice was outraged,” Tol is not hot-tempered enough to actually “knock her in the head.” He “sympathized with the cow,” enabling him to “rid himself of the thought of joyful revenge” (135). It is Tol’s sympathy and compassion that gives the community’s perspective of Nightlife its character.

Biblical themes also figure non-human roles. After his incident with the cow, Tol checks on a setting hen in his shop and finds her distressed over the presence of a snake. Jesus calls the Pharisees “snakes,” a “brood of vipers,” when they claim that they would not have murdered the prophets as did their ancestors (Matt 23:33). They are as guilty as their ancestors for they crucify the prophet sent to them, and so they will be judged by the same measure against which they judge their forefathers. The preachers of the revival are like the Pharisees, the snakes: they claim to be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man but aren’t prepared even for the coming of Nightlife. Jesus follows his judgment on the snakes with a lament over Jerusalem: “the city that kills the prophets... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” (Matt. 23:37). The hen is still in the shop when Nightlife *et al* return to Tol’s shop. Echoing Jesus’ words, the hen is dismayed at Nightlife’s proximity to her nest and paces back and forth in front of him “crying out with rapidly increasing hysteria, ‘My children! My children! What will become of my children?’” (208). Nightlife takes the place of the snake, the killer, and the hen reacts in defense of her children by launching herself into his face.

Nightlife slaps her away in self-defense, and “a change” comes over him. He rises up out of his unconsciousness able to recognize and know his neighbours, his sight now “clarified by intelligence” (209). Nightlife is resurrected by the “biblical hen” after spending the last two days confined by a sense of mortality.⁴² Tol and the others, having accompanied him during his wandering become equally aware of the fact of their own mortality, learning “by what precarious interplay of effort and grace the neighborhood had lived” (210).

The biblical imagery sets the terms of the meaning and perspective of the story in opposition to the war that contextualizes it in time. Though war produces heroic tales of brave soldiers risking their lives to save one fallen comrade, the logic of war is the willingness to sacrifice the lives of some for the sake of the rest. That is, it is the opposite of the sympathetic mind, the shepherd and the lost sheep. Old Fetcher is the violence present in any community, almost an independent agency threatening to tear the community apart. It is “an influential weapon,” one that a person couldn’t simply put down without consciously deciding not to shoot a person (159). Tol equally has to consciously decide to enter into Nightlife’s world without letting his presence be dictated by the terms of that world, even as he is vulnerable to them. In crossing “the boundary between two worlds,” Tol leaves behind a world of his own design and forethought for a world “in which he intended nothing and foresaw nothing” (146). The presence of the gun brings the danger of this world into relief. It puts all involved on “the margin between life and death” (162). It transforms Tol and his company from “men merely walking on the world” into “men walking between this present world and the larger one that lies beyond it and contains it” (166-167). A world that was once familiar has become strange, as if now coloured and configured by Nightlife’s own strangeness. This is not Tol’s world, but he is committed to Nightlife and so is willing to risk following along with others into the unknown.

⁴² The term “biblical hen” is from Oehlschlaeger, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 132.

The commitment to stay together with Nightlife is the only thing left that can be intended. The group members organize themselves according to their sight on Nightlife, refusing to let him be “further divided from them” (158). They follow a man wanting rescue or escape from his world. This man is now “central to their lives,” even though he is a man “whom it had never occurred to them to follow before” (159). They tarry with “their strange neighbor—who had become at once their fear, their quarry, and their leader” to the extent that they no longer “wonder what end they were moving toward.” In other words, their tarrying is their work. They linger with Nightlife to the point that the orientation of their purpose has changed. After darkness falls, they can no longer travel by sight, and yet they remain. Their movement once ordered by their sight of Nightlife is now reordered by a “fearfully simple, almost a brutal, act of faith” (192). They trust Nightlife to find, rather than shoot, them in the dark. And he does. Nightlife finds them, which allows them to continue to follow him. The order of the community is reversed: the lost sheep finds the shepherd, though he remains in the condition of being lost. The final gathering in Tol’s shop is the fulfillment of the group’s commitment to each other and to Nightlife. The adventure, however, is not perfectly successful. One of their members leaves offended midway and another refuses to either join in a group-sing or accept Nightlife as a leader. Nevertheless, bonds contrary to those offered by war hold the neighbourhood together. As the majority of the group sing the hymn led by Nightlife in Tol’s shop, “in them the neighborhood sang, even under threat, its love for itself and its grief for itself, greater than the terms of this world allow” (206). The vulnerable and partial love of the community is a greater bond than the sacrificial violence of the world.

Tol is the godly man who gathers together the community to follow Nightlife in Christ-like terms. Perhaps some might be offended at the idea that a figure as strange and mentally

unsound as Nightlife reflects Jesus. Be that as it may, Nightlife is a Christ figure in the sense that the community is reorganized around a vulnerable person who leads them into the unknown. To follow him, the community must not go by sight alone, viz., by what can be expected, prepared for, and controlled. The terms of the journey and its pilgrims are not prescribed by the world. The community on this journey is therefore ordered differently than nations at war, who bring peace and unification to their people by focusing their hatred on a person or group that appears to threaten the existence and order of the community. Nightlife is in the place of the hated, the threat, and the lost sheep. From here, he reorders the community to include himself in terms beyond those previously set by the community.

About a quarter of the way into the story, it is revealed to the reader that a narrator who is part of the community is actually telling the tale. Up until this point, the narrative appears to be simply about a character, Tol, and his encounter with Nightlife spanning a couple of days in 1916. Though the narrative style is third person, the perspective is indirectly Tol's point of view. In an interlude an "I" tells the reader that this story took place fifty years ago, giving it a new historical context. Someone remembering it in 1966 is telling the reader a tale that happened in 1916. The narrator, who never names himself (presumably male for ease of pronoun), emerges at the point when the narrative divulges Tol's belief that when Nightlife dies "the name and the prospects of the Hamples would depart forever" from that place. (153) The narrator confirms that, indeed, the "history and the future" of the Hamples end with Nightlife. Part of the memory, therefore, includes Tol's motivation for abiding with Nightlife as a remnant of the community during his potentially fateful wandering. The narrator recounts how he came to know the story of Tol and Nightlife during his own ramble with four companions—Elton Penn, Mart and Art Rowanberry, and Burley Coulter. They walk through the woods that now engulf the Hample,

Proudfoot, and Cotman place. The obliteration of the original divisions between these places is first the result of an absentee owner who bought it “for a weekend retreat” and ended up neglecting it save a few poorly kept rental units. The ruin brought by the first settlers continues through the Hample family and concludes with a Louisville doctor. Now, the narrator tells the reader, trees shadow the ruins of the old buildings and animals claim the debris for shelter. As the narrator puts it, “the trees had returned as a kind of justice. They had only drawn back and paused a moment while a futile human experiment had been tried and suffered in that place, and had failed at last as it was bound to do” (156). The narrator witnesses the impermanence of human designs, the failure to preserve order against the forces of nature. This futility and impotence is the environment in which the story is told. That is, it is a story of neighborliness within the vision of nature Mat Feltner learns to see at the end of *A Place on Earth*.

The narrator pieces together the story in a way that reflects the “precarious interplay of effort and grace” of community life. He originally heard it from his friends, none of whom accompanied Tol. Later, he heard it from Tol’s wife, Miss Minnie, and Sam Hanks, and then “would pick up bits of it from Braymer Hardy, from Walter Cotman by way of Elton Penn, and from others” (210). The story is kept alive in the community through memories and memories of memories. The story, however, is mostly about Tol and Nightlife—about Tol imagining what it might be like to be Nightlife—even though neither is a direct source for the narrator. The reader is told about Tol’s inner life—his thoughts, intentions, motivations, and feelings—which were probably conveyed through Miss Minnie. But the reader is also told about Nightlife’s intentions, which are all described in ambivalent terms. The description of his approach to Tol’s farm is illustrative: “But then when he crossed the road and entered Tol’s driveway, Nightlife *appeared* to lose his intention; *perhaps* he had wanted to talk with Tol alone, and Sam’s presence put him

off. He wandered past the house in to the barn lot. Now he was pretending, *perhaps*, that he did not know they were there and that he was just looking around to see if Tol was at home” (144—emphasis added). Nightlife remains an enigmatic figure, never entirely known or understood, but nevertheless a person of dignity, of worth. Thus, it remains a story about Tol’s compassion, which is done without overcoming Nightlife’s mystery and distinction, and without any over-determined meaning or effect the encounter has on his relationship with Nightlife. The manner of Tol’s actions are incarnated in the style of the narration: it is a communal memory of a man’s charity, remembered from his perspective but told by a person with a future frame of reference.

The reason for leaving the narrator unnamed is unclear. One could assume that it is Andy Catlett, because there is precedent for that.⁴³ Perhaps Berry could not find a way of identifying the narrator that wouldn’t be awkward or ham-fisted, although he has done so with Andy elsewhere. The problem of an unidentified narrator, however, is that, though the story is adequately placed within a community and given a historical and geographical context, the effect of the story on the teller is absent. *Watch With Me* gives a sufficient account of the complexity of the moral landscape in the parable of the lost sheep. It attempts to imagine the life of the lost sheep without domesticating it—that is, without prescribing the terms of belonging to the community from the standpoint of the shepherd and acknowledging the presence and influence of the natural region in which their relationship is rooted. It conveys the possibility of meaninglessness and ineffectuality of what Berry calls neighborliness—Tol never really *does* anything—and yet also portrays kindness as more than sentiment and detached acceptance.⁴⁴

⁴³ Oehlschlaeger presumes that the narrator is Andy. *Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 127.

⁴⁴ Miss Minnie confers effectivity on the story, though I don’t think the reader is bound to her interpretation. She says that Tol and the other followers “kept [Nightlife] alive that time, anyhow. They and the Good Lord.” To which Sam Hanks adds, “And that old hen” (210). There is nothing in the story as it is presented that indicates as much, no moment in which they act in a conclusive way to save Nightlife’s life. They simply hear his desperate cry and follow, willing to let come what may.

Central to the story is Tol's compassion, his imaginative ability to suffer with Nightlife along his rambling while conscious of the futility and impermanence of human plans. It is unclear how Tol's consciousness affects the narrator without giving him an equally concrete character. Berry makes the narrator explicitly Andy in *A World Lost* to show how he struggles to shape his imagination through memories accumulated piecemeal into one that resembles Tol's sympathetic mind.

A World Lost

A World Lost begins similarly to *Nathan Coulter*. Andy Catlett is not yet ten years old in the summer of 1944 and he is at a transitional point in his self-understanding. Excluded from a salvaging venture at an old lead mine, Andy disobeys his parents' proscription against swimming alone in the local pond and enjoys his solitude. As he hastens to the pond he narrates his experience, "telling myself the story of myself" (5). Floating in the pond he enjoys his freedom as complete unrestraint; his happiness is in his unmediated presence, singularly attentive to his place. He imagines himself as "ancestorless as the first creature," gazing up at the sky as though "the world [was] almost nothing at all, and I apparently absent altogether."⁴⁵ He sees himself in the world free from all historical condition, merely part of the landscape. This illusory self-consciousness and the world it views collapse when he returns to his grandparents' house to learn that his paternal Uncle Andrew was shot and killed while salvaging at the mine. Though he already "unwillingly knew" that he was a part of his father's world of "expectation and obligation, difficulty and sorrow," the perfect world Andy escaped to has been irrevocably lost

⁴⁵ Wendell Berry, *A World Lost* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1996), 8. Further citations will appear parenthetically within the text.

(12). Moreover, his sense of self and his relationships change; his world becomes unfamiliar yet joined in grief.

Andy is Andrew Catlett's namesake. They have a fond relationship, though Andrew was unlike anyone else in the community and thus seemed to be "a species of one" (22). He and his wife Judith have traveled, lived in cities, and are not interested in the life required of them by his family or the economy of Port William. Andrew prefers to socialize rather than to work and so he farms for the companionship not for its pleasure or beauty. He is known as a great dancer and a lover of women, and so he suffers his marriage though remains in it. Andy admires Andrew to the extent that "Sometimes it seemed unfair to me that I was not his son" (26). His death has a profound effect on Andy's self-consciousness, losing the uncle that "was right at the center of the idea I had formed of myself" (43). Andy is more confused than grieved by his loss, unable to articulate his experience and feeling (44). The presence of Andrew's absence in Andy's life makes him uneasy and unstable, as though trying simultaneously to cope with the shock and to resolve a problem. And yet Andrew remains unknowable to Andy. *A World Lost* is Andy remembering that summer fifty years later, trying to piece together memories of Andrew and the events surrounding his death in order to come to terms finally with the person whose character so influenced him. Andy has been wondering all these fifty years "What was he? What manner of a man?" (28). *A World Lost* is Andy telling the story of Andrew's life and death, keeping alive his presence in Andy's mind.

Andrew's death marks, for Andy, the end of a world even though the former was not a part of it. Andrew's desires and aspirations are different from those of Andy's father and grandfather. Yet his death signifies a "time of ending" that characterizes the period of a little over a year and half between Andrew's and Andy's father's funeral. It is not just the end of their

lives but of “a kind of life and a kind of world” (55-56). Andy is only able to recognize this momentous change at a posterior date, though claims that he felt the ending’s “shadow” that summer. The world of “bodily strength and skill of people and horses and mules” with its attendant “fundamental realities and interests and pleasures” were being violently overthrown by the war of “industrial machinery, and electric wires” (56). Andrew belongs to this “self-consciously larger life” of industrialized economy; he could not be confined by the smaller farming life—“he simply overflowed it.... Making nothing of the boundaries and barriers that stand in [his] way” (35). He inhabits the community the way he does his marriage. Andy is enthralled by his uncle’s characteristics that reflect this larger life. Andy says that his uncle “was a child who wanted only to be free, as I myself had been free back at the pond that afternoon of his death... [He] could be balked by no requirement or demand” (67-68). Andrew is carefree and a daydreamer, which describes Andy perfectly. Andrew participates in but is not characterized or satisfied by the old world, which makes him different from Andy. And yet losing his uncle indicates losing that world. Andy reckons with the cost of losing an alienated insider, namely, losing a sense of self and its way of life. To lose a world not only changes external conditions and practices but also inward orientations and affections.

If *Watch with Me* outlines the physical movement of the shepherd’s search for the lost sheep, then *A Lost World* outlines the inward movement. Berry describes Andrew in terms similar to *Nightlife* in his isolation, the difference being that Andrew’s is self-imposed though no less imprisoning—“he was the way he was and would not change, or could not” (68). This confinement—the loneliness of his condition—makes the grief of his survivors harder to bear. Andrew’s mother, Andy notes, displays the condition of the shepherd in his lifetime. Andrew had two uncles who were also wayward, and so with these three “she enacted ... the parable of

the lost sheep, who is to be sought and brought back without end, brought back into mind and into love without end, death no deterrent, futility no bar” (65). Andy learns the determining force of character in relationship that the parable describes. “[The lost sheep] were not correctable because of the way they were; they were not dismissable because of the way she was” (65). Like Mat she has trouble with the fact that loss is the condition of having, that we have relationships with people who cannot or will not change or be put right. “Her loss would be unrelieved to the end of her life... she had come to loss beyond life, unfathomable and inconsolable, as dimensionless as the dark” (67). Andy’s loss was that of a child’s perception of an adult that enthralled him. In other words, he came to realize that he lost his uncle as he knew him, in their relationship between young nephew and carefree uncle. “I had lost what I remembered” (20). The inward change Andy undergoes is the loss of a known world, one as uncomplicated as the illusory autonomous one he perceived in the pond. Now he must come to terms with his uncle as he did not know him, as he remembered him only in part. Andy comes to realize that he must contend with the partiality of the world as his grandmother had to, and so must learn to know his uncle as she did. Andy, unlike his grandmother, “lived beyond my loss even as I suffered it,” but grew into a sympathy for his grandmother as a shepherd (67). Andy loses a sense of self that knows the world independently from others’ concerns and suffering; he gains a new sense of self back by seeking out companions, despite death and futility, who illuminate his knowledge of the world.

The partiality of the world is incarnated in the cobbled telling of Andy’s story: My memories of Uncle Andrew are thus an accumulation of little pictures and episodes, isolated from one another, unbegun and unended. They are vividly colored, clear in outline, and spare, as if they belong to an early age of the world when there were not too many details.... Perhaps it was from thinking about him after his death, discovering how much I remembered and how little I knew, that I learned that all human stories in this world contain many lost or unwritten or unreadable or unwritable pages and that the truth

about us, though it must exist, though it must lie all around us every day, is mostly hidden from us, like birds' nests in the woods (43).

In the fifty years that pass between Andrew's death and Andy's reflections, he has collected stories from various members of the community as well as newspaper articles and court documents involving his uncle's case. He receives bits of information that do not fill out a whole picture and are not all congruous with one another. Everyone has said that Andrew was an excellent dancer, and that he was an impulsive philanderer. The latter characteristic was probably related to his demise, but to what extent is never sorted out. Carp Harmon, Andrew's killer, only receives two years in jail. There is a story, entirely believable but no way confirmable, that Andrew propositioned Harmon's daughter without knowing her father's identity. Harmon's homicidal act was avenging his pride. But if this story is true, Andy recognizes that his uncle summoned his fate, at least partially; his destruction would then be commensurate with his character. Harmon further claimed that Andrew picked up a 2 x 4 and that he only shot him in self-defense. A friend of Andy's who was present, R. T., refutes both stories. But Andy is familiar with R. T.'s memory, which "was not safe from his imagination" (84). His story is somewhat inconsistent with itself. Andy does not think R. T. prevaricates intentionally but that he "in brooding over the story for so many years, had imagined it from shifting points of view, had imagined what he had not seen, had seen what he had not remembered" (84). Andy must choose what to believe and what is suspect because the actual events are unknowable.

Andy's final account of Andrew's murder is one of his own imagination. It is based in reality, on memories both confirmed and unproven, but is not a narrative of "realism." It is an imagination that reflects his grandmother's mind, one that configures the world according to his loyalty and love. He does not simply accept "the worst" version, but chooses to believe "the best" imaginable in the face of the evidence, "accepting the bonds of faith and affection" (87).

He imagines as best he can what it is like to be his uncle in those particular circumstances according to the best in Andrew's character. He does not claim to know his uncle in summary and without remainder, but tries to honour Andrew's life in the same terms in which his grandmother loved her son. His belief and imagination are moved by his heart. Andy is unable to answer the question, "what manner of man" was Andrew, but is able to tell a story that draws him closer to his uncle in love. "A story," to be sure, "is not a life," which is "impossible to fix in time, for it does not begin within itself, and it does not end." The point of the story, it seems, is rather to enable Andy to "extend compassion to the limit of imagination." It makes Andrew "in the plenitude of his being" present in Andy's mind as "a living soul" (103). Andy's "true home" is not the immediate world, himself alone and sufficient in his place, but in the "company of immortals," the dead that remain alive in thought. He understands himself as partial, living in a world in which very little can be understood but yet contains much to love. His is not a solitary mind, but one formed by memories of others whom he loves despite their flaws and failures.

Andy's memories of his uncle, and how he came to piece together the fragments imaginatively, inform the reader of Andy. Telling his Uncle Andrew's story is also Andy telling the reader his own. It is also Andy telling Andrew how much is owed him; it is the settling of an account with Andrew. Andy, like young Nathan, must grapple with the relationship between character and fate. Is the manner of the man historically determined such that his life is simply the unfolding of events? Perhaps we suffer who we are and just need to become psychologically adjusted to that fact. Andy suggests that, despite being gregarious and attractive, his uncle was also "dark and troubled... as though he foresaw his fate" and was "resigned to being himself" (29). It seems to Andy as though Andrew saw his actions as somehow beyond his control, his agency as the enactment of fate. Consequences, for Andrew, are not expected but "discovered"

(41). If this is truly the case, however, and Andrew is killed because he acted out one of his impulses to hit on a young girl, then there was a “kind of justice” in Carp Harmon’s murderous actions. Summarily stated, if “character is fate,” then “Carp Harmon was no more than the virtually innocent agent of the appointed fate” (85). But Andy refuses to reduce Andrew to the outline of a merely impulsive man, knowing him enough—better than Harmon—to see that he “bore his life and fate as suffering” and that he “wanted to be a better man” than he was (86). Andy’s imaginative reconstruction is a vision of Andrew that sees himself in a “direct confrontation with his fate” in which he understands himself as “what he was: a man dearly beloved, in spite of his faults.” He begs for his life to continue living in this beloved community, but instead is put to death. Andy understands himself and his world according to the light of this vision, which is “this old injury of love and grief, this flickering lamp that I have watched beside for all these years” (104). After fifty years, Andy realizes that he owes Andrew the condition of his soul; he loves and desires in a similar fashion to his uncle. Justice is not Harmon giving Andrew his due as a cosmic balancing out of debts or doling out just deserts. Neither would it serve justice were Andy’s father to kill Harmon “according to his own will” (94). To do justice to Andrew, Andy realizes, is to imagine him as best he can, honour him and keep him as a living source of thought in memory. Andy’s grandmother could not change Andrew, but her love shows Andy how to accept him and live according to that acceptance.

Andy’s story is a kind of reversal of Matthew 16:26: “For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” *A World Lost* is a soul gained; Andy finds himself by finding Andrew. On the one hand, the regained soul is Andrew’s, who lost the world of the community but is sought and brought back through Andy’s reconstructive memory. That is, Andy remembers him in both senses of recalling and restoring him as a member in the

community. On the other hand, Andy gains his soul when he accepts the impermanence of the world, its partial and temporary condition. Andrew is part of the new world of mechanization that destroyed the old world Andy preferred. Andrew is a man of his world, “a man of his own time and place” (35). Andy learns the different desires between these two worlds when his uncle laughs at his dream to buy a mule and become economically self-sufficient. Even fifty years later when Andy’s love for his uncle has expanded significantly, he is still troubled by that memory. Andy’s father affirmed his son’s passion to farm, recognizing it as his own, but Andy is able to see their shared desires in the context of Andrew’s story. Andy sees himself as his father’s son divided from his wish to be like his uncle only after he has imagined Andrew’s life and death. Andy becomes a member of his community through his passion for farming, which he inherits from his father. But Andy eventually learns to see that Andrew’s alienation from the community was based in the lack of similar desire for farming, and though Andrew seems to be resigned to his estrangement as a consequence of his character, he wished he could have been more fully part of the community. Andrew is lost in an industrialized world incommensurate with his native land, wishing but unable to be found and brought back to wholeness. His death both marks the brokenness of the community as well as evinces the community’s continual destruction by the same forces that alienate him, namely the social fashions of life outside the community. Andy cannot save either his uncle or his community, but, though imagining Andrew as he was and keeping him present in mind, Andy can be more fully himself. Andrew’s death signals a world lost, a way of life and a community, but also heralds an awareness of partiality and mortality in Andy’s soul.

Respecting the life of another is an act of imagination. Berry elsewhere describes imagination as “the ability to see one another, across our inevitable differences, as living

souls.”⁴⁶ Imagining Andrew as a living soul brings his presence “not into view or thought, but just within the outmost reach of love” (103). It is a mortal love, one of the earth that seeks the fullness of being and yet cannot but fail. Andy’s love reaches out to Andrew as he (Andrew) might have imagined himself to be when he was most fully himself, but knows that Andrew exceeds Andy’s knowledge and reconstruction. There is a failure that haunts Andy’s imagination and love, an irreducible partiality and limitation. It is an example of “earthly love” that desires “the full membership to be present and to be joined” but it “does not have the power, the knowledge, or the will” to satisfy its wishes. Telling Andrew’s story is part of the “story of human love on this earth” which is “a story by which this love reveals and even validates itself by its failures to be complete and comprehensive and effective enough.”⁴⁷ Andrew’s wish to be restored to the community is defeated by his death, yet that desire outlives his life. The desperate cry of the lost sheep echoes in the wilderness after its death, the shepherd still follows the sound of its voice. The shepherd goes after the cry without considering the inefficiency of his movement, simply out of compassion and love. Andy’s community is like an ecosystem Berry describes, which, when it loses one species, is not the same “ecosystem minus one species [but] is a different ecosystem.”⁴⁸ The community without Andrew, alienated as he was by them, ceases to be a full membership and is now a world lost. And yet the earthly love of the community “in confronting death” learns its “immortality.”⁴⁹ The form of that immortality is the grief of the survivors. Grief “has no case to make,” (86) it is not an argument, but the manner in which love enters the world. Grief is unique to each sufferer; Andy’s grief is different and divided from that of his grandmother. But through her suffering Andy witnesses the love she has for her son and

⁴⁶ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 173. Berry retains the difficulty of this noted by Stegner.

⁴⁷ Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1995), 102.

⁴⁸ Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank*, 105.

⁴⁹ Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank*, 105.

learns that he is involved in the “immortal love” she embodies because that love involves everyone “so inescapably in the limits, sufferings, and sorrows of mortality.”⁵⁰ The divine, immortal love that creates, sustains, and redeems the world flickers in earthly love from time to time through suffering. Andy’s grief is the ‘flickering lamp’ that lights his imagination, revealing and validating his love for Andrew in his attempt to honor and respect the man as he was, even in his failure to understand and complete him.

The point of view Berry uses in *A World Lost* is a first person retrospective reflection, which he adapts from Wallace Stegner. The model for Berry is Stegner’s “Letter, Much Too Late,” which is a letter he writes to his mother dead over fifty years.⁵¹ Stegner himself is close to death when he writes it, reflecting on his life through his mother’s life and character even though he was only a “schoolboy” when she died.⁵² Stegner tells his dead mother “how much he owes her and how much he loves her,” which Berry describes as a “settling of an account, an act of justice.”⁵³ Her final words to Stegner were to tell him he was a good boy. Stegner attributes this expression not to her will or conscious intention but to her love, which outlasts her mortal life. But he also tells her that her continual presence with him indicates that she did not die, for “death is a convention.” Stegner maintains a “clear mental image” of her earthly particularity. He says, “Your kind of love, once given, is never lost. You are alive and luminous in my head.”⁵⁴ Her presence inspired Stegner to try to “do her justice” in his fiction, trying to represent her as she was, but he failed to do so adequately.⁵⁵ He tells his mother that her love laid upon him an obligation to be what she thought he was, though he tells her he was never able to do so. He

⁵⁰ Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank*, 102.

⁵¹ Wallace Stegner, “Letter, Much Too Late,” *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York: Random House, 1992), 22-33.

⁵² Stegner, “Letter, Much Too Late,” 25.

⁵³ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 47.

⁵⁴ Stegner, “Letter, Much Too Late,” 23.

⁵⁵ Stegner, “Letter, Much too Late,” 24.

wished he could have been a better man for his mother. Berry's account of Stegner's letter is of "a conversation between two souls... Death is brushed aside like a hanging cobweb, and the voice of the essay continues out of time, speaking of memories and regrets, calling up visions, telling his mother, with the utmost candor of gratitude and affection, all that he has come to understand, until finally he can say to her as she was, and is, 'Any minute now I will hear you singing.'"⁵⁶ Andy writes to Andrew in the same way Berry sees Stegner writing to his mother.

Andy's voice echoes Stegner's voice in the letter. In the final chapter of *A World Lost*, Andy tells the reader that he had "a friend" who "said as he approached [death] himself" that "death is a convention ... not binding upon anyone but the keepers of graveyard records" (103). Here Andy's and Berry's voice harmonize, Berry speaking not through but with Andy. It is not Andy but Berry who was friends with Wallace Stegner, yet in the story the statement regards Andy's uncle Andrew. Stegner's voice gives Andy's a reality that conveys the presence of Andrew in his imagination, the convergence and recognition of Andrew in his timeless fullness, as he was, and is, and wished to be. The difference is in the kinds of people Andrew's and Stegner's mother's were. Part of Stegner's reckoning with his memories of his mother includes accounting for her relationship with her husband, Stegner's father. Unlike his mother who was patient, kind and loving, his father was, among other things, "a husky, laughing, reckless, irreverent, storytelling charmer" and a "true believer in the American dream." Their marriage, Stegner thinks, was a "mistake."⁵⁷ Berry describes Andrew in likeness to Stegner's father; it is Andy's grandmother who sounds like Stegner's mother. Whereas Stegner felt his obligation to be the person his mother thought he was, Andy's obligation seems to be to remember his uncle as he wished he could have been. Andy's grandmother gives him the desire to seek out his lost

⁵⁶ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 47.

⁵⁷ Stegner, "Letter, Much Too Late," 29.

uncle, the love required for remembering and respecting a person as he was and is rather than as he could have been. Andy imagines that Andrew, among his dead family, can see himself in the complete light of love revealed in part by his mother. Now, in this light, Andrew can see how far he “failed the only justice of loving one another,” but also feel the forgiveness, beauty, and comfort of that light, feeling the completeness and redemption of its love (104). Andy seeks to do justice to Andrew according to the standards of his grandmother’s love, imagining him as the better man he wished to be and telling him how much of Andy’s own life is owed to him.

III

Berry’s community in his novels is not a world intact but a world lost. It is not lost to history, as though there once existed a perfect community, but lost to harmony. Put differently, Port William is a broken community, conditioned by and seen through its losses. And yet it is whole insofar as Berry presents it in its particularity and its relation to eternity—its brokenness attests to a wholeness Berry did not create nor can he represent. His clearest articulation of the relation between wholeness and the world is in his understanding of the Gospel of John:

I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.⁵⁸

Atonement is not an ontological condition, doctrinal belief, or otherworldly event but is “an extension of consciousness so that we may *feel* God, or, if you will, an experience of harmony, an intimation of the Divine, which will link us again with *animism*, the experience of unity lost at the in-break of self-consciousness.”⁵⁹ Berry’s narrative construction of the parable of the lost

⁵⁸ Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank*, 89.

⁵⁹ Berry, *Continuous Harmony*, 11.

sheep elicits an experience of the possibility of harmony. His art participates in divine love by depicting the failure of earthly love and incarnating the possibility of harmony and wholeness.

Art is a form of service. It serves a common subject shared between artist and viewer, and is therefore a means to an end. Its mode of expression is not monological but dialogical; it is in conversation with the viewer over the subject they have in common. The art in this case is narrative—the art of storytelling. First-person retrospective reflection is an appropriate style for expressing Berry's understanding of the parable of the lost sheep because narration of this kind allows for grace. Redemption is missing in *Nathan Coulter* because it requires a long reflective silence before it can be recognized and uttered without being forced, and is therefore false. It is missing in *A Place on Earth* because it arrives as a mystery, amidst the partiality of understanding that omniscience eliminates by definition. It is hinted at in *Watch with Me*, but the difficulty in portraying the precarious nature of grace in a community is concealed in the narrator's hidden identity. It is hard to capture the difficult presence of grace in the shepherd. Berry attempts it in *A World Lost* as the story of the irremediable end of the world. Andy's imaginative glimpse into Andrew is the presence of grace in the tragedy, making the redemptive ending possible. Andy does not simply tell a story; Berry does not tell Andy's story out of literary ambition. Andy uses the story as a way to struggle with his own identity, coming to terms with the invisible sources of his life. Put differently, Andy uses his narration to "subject himself to his subject." It is not "public, all to be observed, but instead is modest, solitary, somewhat secretive—used, like fishing, to catch what cannot be seen."⁶⁰ Stegner says the same about Berry: "Everything you write subjects itself to its subject, grapples with the difficult and perhaps inexpressible, confronts mystery, conveys real and observed and felt life, and does so

⁶⁰ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 70.

modestly and with grace.”⁶¹ First-person retrospective reflection conveys the presence of hidden truth without making it observable, something to be seen by sight alone. “To see is to remember.” The search for the lost is done imaginatively, through narration and negotiation through memory tied to landscape. Berry uses narration to include alienated community members, to love people as they are and give their lives justice, which he learned from Stegner.

“What has been done needs undoing, and cannot be undone.”⁶² This is Andrew’s problem, but it involves Andy along with the rest of the community. How is justice done in these circumstances? How can we get to the truth and settle the account? These questions live past the book, posing themselves to the reader. Andy figures that if “you are a gossip, or a cynic or an apostle of realism, you believe the worst you can imagine.”⁶³ Berry also eschews the “devastating assumption” of this reductionistic realism “that people are no better than their faults.”⁶⁴ The inevitability of suffering from our faults seems like a closure without further possibility. Restoration and justice, then, cannot exceed or fall short of our expectations of how reality should be—punishment should fit the crime, what goes around comes around, and so on. Berry’s ambivalent restoration through imagination unsettles modern conceptions of justice.⁶⁵

Berry rejects the determinism of inevitability, and so the reader is engaged according to her willingness to suspend her belief or, in this case, disbelief. Andy is not attempting realism; he

⁶¹ Wallace Stegner, “A Letter to Wendell Berry,” *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York: Random House, 1992), 213.

⁶² Berry, *A World Lost*, 88.

⁶³ Berry, *A World Lost*, 87.

⁶⁴ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 79.

⁶⁵ One reviewer, for example, suggests that Andy is blind to the justice in Andrew’s murder. Andy’s failure to know his uncle, the inability to say what manner of man Andrew was, makes the final restoration mere fantasy. “Evoking Andrew as ‘a big, supremely willful child . . . who could be balked by no requirement or demand,’ he fails to see his uncle as a faithless husband and careless farmer who may have got not only what was coming to him but perhaps what he asked for.” Berry’s “technique robs his scenes of emotional power and his characters of flesh -- so the story’s potentially powerful moments lack spark.” Tobin Harshaw, “Books in Brief, Fiction: A World Lost,” *New York Times*, 3 November 1996. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/03/books/books-in-brief-fiction-072109.html>. Ultimately, accuses this reviewer, Berry fails to engage the reader, who cannot but see Andy’s toil as a failure of imagination.

is not trying to be disinterestedly representative but truthful. The author who uses realism as “‘pure’ representation” is only an “imitator of surfaces.”⁶⁶ But *A World Lost* is an example of an author who wants to write “a whole story about whole people—living souls” which requires him to “reach for a reality which is inaccessible merely to observation or perception but which in addition requires imagination, for imagination knows more than the eye sees, and also inspiration, which you can only hope and pray for.”⁶⁷ Berry presents a story of a man imagining the life of someone he has no access to except through memories, fragments, and hearsay. Andy’s story has its own kind of truth, one dependent on the imagination of a mind moved by love. Imagination is set against a life without any false assurance of a narrative gloss to subsume grief and tragedy. Andy refuses to believe that his uncle was no more than his worst faults and therefore imagines Andrew’s death in a way that is both possible and yet not simply the outworking of fate. Berry writes Andy’s narration in such a way that the reader must decide whether Andy is delusional—do we live in a world in which we get what is coming to us? Are we only judged according to our worst faults? Most of us do not want to think this way about ourselves, but we think that way of others—our judiciary justice system depends on it. Andy decides to disbelieve the dominant narration of the world that people get what’s coming to them. Despite the fact that Andrew is flawed, that he commits acts that need undoing but cannot be undone, his fate was not inevitable. It is Harmon, not the narrator, who sees Andrew as “asking for it” and getting what he deserves. The reader must decide to see Andrew as Andy does—through imagination and love—or as Carp Harmon does—through an oversimplified narrative of the world. It remains an open question because both are fictions. Neither view is a perfect representation or explanation of the events, characters, or plot. The reader never fully knows

⁶⁶ Wendell Berry, *Harlan Hubbard: Life and Work* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 67. Berry describes Hubbard’s work as opposed to this way, which I think can also be said of Berry’s.

⁶⁷ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 15.

what manner of man Andrew was or what happened to him. Truth is present but it is hidden. Berry's narration reminds the reader that perceptions of the world and others are partial and incomplete. How the reader judges Andrew reveals more about her than Andy's uncle.

Restoration is possible after it is too late, after things that need undoing cannot be undone. Berry learns this much from Stegner; settling an account with someone long after her death is possible through imagination even though it may be futile. Everything in Stegner's letter and Berry's novel is based in reality but takes place in the imagination. Andy's vision of the company of immortals and the light of love is imagined but not impossible. Of course, the imagination is no place to live—Andy learns that it is not his home—and it might not make any noticeable difference in the world. It is an attempt at atonement, imagining a relationship of love with someone dead. Andy does not try to escape his suffering but addresses its source directly, seeing the nature of loss in the community as honestly and respectfully as possible. That is, his fidelity to his place makes possible the presence of Andrew in his mind through local stories, memories, and histories. This kind of atonement happens outside any Christian institution and inside the fragmented narration of his community and family's history of suffering. And yet restoration is temporary; it can occur beyond a life but, given its place in imagination, cannot be permanent. It does not undo character flaws or social injustices, but names a way of living with them without seeing them as inevitable. Neither community nor the earth can make human attempts at restoration permanent; all our communal practices of reconciliation and unity are threatened by the possibility of meaninglessness and ineffectuality. Imagining the possibility of restoration after it's too late is part of the erotic moving out toward a subject, ordering one's love according to the best possible account of a life. Though the story is imagined, it can be truthful.

The truth is, simply put, that Berry wants his readers to be equally respectful and compassionate as Stegner. Andy is the image of Berry imitating Stegner's "Letter, Much Too Late." Berry's style does not point to himself but to Stegner's actual experience.⁶⁸ Stegner's conversation is one that leads to wholeness, and thus Berry's style admits grace without depicting it. Berry puts Andy in a similar position to Stegner, though reckoning with the stock of a person seemingly less admirable than Stegner's mother. Nevertheless, the primary aim is the integrity of the community in question rather than the freedom of the narrating individual. Berry does not hide the fact that ultimately, no matter which aim an author decides, the narrator determines the terms and capacity of restoration. In other words, Berry does not disguise his voice in the register of a victim of social injustice to elevate the authority of his work to provide justice. Berry is able to make the discussion of social justice concrete by giving it a place and a community in which it is discussed, but it is no more or less imagined than any other fictive narration. A shifting point of view is too much like unbridled imagination, which is parasitic on real places. Berry's self-conscious presentation of a partial narration of unknowable subjects is part of his refusal to exploit death for false restorations and reconciliations—as some Christians in his stories do with their images of Heaven, as some political liberals do with their accounts of retributive worldly justice. Andy does not hide his love and suffering over his lost uncle, but neither does he use his imagination to deny the reality of grief and mortality. Compassion and respect depend on imagination, but not one that undermines reality or is independent of memory.

⁶⁸ I disagree with Daniel Cornell's claim that "Berry is not merely writing to expound a way of life and thought but to urge the culture to see itself reflected in him. He is arguing that his life represents, both literally and metaphorically, the values from which the culture has strayed." "'The Country of Marriage': Wendell Berry's Personal Political Vision," *The Southern Literary Journal* 16 (fall 1983): 63. James K. Robinson argues that "'The Country of Marriage' is about as close as Berry comes to a confessional poem." James K. Robinson, "Sailing Close-Hauled and Diving into the Wreck: From Nemerov to Rich," *Southern Review* 11 (July 1975), 671.

Again, Andy's imagination is the internal movement of the shepherd's search for the lost sheep. This movement shapes his soul and community without the institutional church, which is conspicuously absent. Andy imagines Andrew discovering himself loved in the face of death and understands himself differently through the telling of that story. That is, his sense of happiness and love—hence, his soul—is reoriented. Happiness is not freedom from others and distraction, love is not conditioned by expectations and behavior. Loving a person as he is, as best as one can imagine him, is ineffectual and incomplete. Be that as it may, it is not a social structure but this love that is the bond of community. Therefore, the community cannot be made permanent, cannot be given a narration or meaning that protects it from the same forces of nature that will destroy all our clearings and farms. The ways in which individuals belong to their communities should not deny the possibility of meaninglessness, that all constructive and effective efforts of inclusion, virtue, and unity may be futile. A community aware of its own impermanence has no one way to belong. In Berry's imagined community, members are included in a farming community not only by way of farming but by love. He describes its emotional fabric that connects various members, which is more than just practices, habits, and work. Berry shows us the complexity of this fabric, that we exist through relationships mediated by memory and imagination, without giving easy answers to its problems or delineations of life without remainders. The rescue of those lost within this environment is not conducted on the premise that a person once found will not be lost again. Sheep are animals prone to wandering and getting lost; the shepherd's search never eliminates this essential fact. This self-knowledge of the sheep cannot be known by the shepherd, but can be imagined.

A World Lost tells the reader something about the condition of Andy's mind, and so perhaps also of Berry's. Andy waits fifty years before he records his narration of Andrew's

murder and its affect on his family. The silence is partly due to the importance of placing the event in its historical context; to write of it too soon would perhaps succumb to the temptation to exploit Andrew's death. The first time Andy tries to articulate his grief publically is to a girl in an attempt to "enlarge" himself, "squandering" his family's tragedy to get a girl's attention.⁶⁹ It is deployed in a misguided erotics. He does not speak again of his loss until after a long silence. Speaking too soon, impatiently, is the temptation of a narrator eager to take charge of the experience, to decide on all outcomes and claim meaning for the death. Once certain aspects of the story have closed around him, he can narrate it in a style that doesn't reduce Andrew or his family and leave it open to bewilderment, mystery, and tragedy. The same could be said of Berry, who gives Andy's narration a style that reflects his own. It is a sparse and economical prose; it does not seek a purified or self-protected style that hides the mystery of experience. All we have are our fictions that offer a kind of coherence rather than explanations of what "really" happened. Berry's sincerity and commitment to his subject is part of a narrative style that does not point to itself. In other words, Berry purposely writes in a way that does not engage the reader solely through its style, it does not ask the reader to be conscious of it as merely a work of art. He delivers no cheap "spark" to give tragedy an easy legitimacy, he does not rely on style to overcome the ineffability of his subject.⁷⁰ He tells stories that he enjoys telling. He conveys something of the ordinariness of life without reducing it, articulating the wholeness of life without perfection.

Art is used to pay attention, to subject oneself to one's subject, to honor and respect life in the world. In short, art is used to do justice. Berry never gives a definition of justice in and of itself because it does not exist as an abstract concept that needs to be applied. It is the beloved

⁶⁹ Berry, *A World Lost*, 20.

⁷⁰ See fn. 60 above.

community, the incarnation of the mystical experience of wholeness. Art is a conversation leading to community but is confined to conventions that make it partial. It is used to pay attention to what is owed, its influences and interlocutors. Art and life become indistinguishable; art brings the peculiarity of another into the presence of one's mind. This presencing is done through conversation, which is possible in literature only through a style that does not point to itself but to another that it imitates but does not represent. The art of writing reflects the shepherd's search in its inefficiency—it is an act of neighborliness that reflects the sheep's cry of desperation. It is a story of earthly love, but it is just a story. Berry's art is radically democratic—it does not delegate it is against representation but simply participates in Stegner's conversation. The justice of Berry's community in narration is not in its political structures and laws but in its being present to another; it is subjecting oneself to a subject held in common. The happy community is the end to which this conversation tends, its wholeness. "The community is happy in that it has survived its remembered tragedies, has re-shaped itself coherently around its known losses, has included kindly its eccentrics, invalids, oddities and even its one would-be exile."⁷¹ The conversation is the community, Stegner's Great Community of human experience.

⁷¹ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 87. Berry's quote is a description of the community found in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. It is an apt description of both *Watch with Me* and *A World Lost*, which tell the same story, the former as a comedy and the latter as a tragedy.

Chapter Four

Suffering Love and Living Souls: Memory, Poetry, and Pain of Communal Life

Our politics and science have never mastered the fact that people need more than to understand their obligation to one another and of the earth; they need also the *feeling* of such obligation, and the feeling can come only within the patterns of familiarity.

—*The Hidden Wound*

To imagine is to see most clearly, familiarly, and understandingly with the eyes, but also to see inwardly, with “the mind’s eye.”

—*The Jefferson Lectures*

The relevance of such imagining is urgently practical; it is the propriety or justness that holds art and the world together.

—*Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*

To represent the intimacy of desire or of grief without the art that compels one to imagine these things as the events of lives and of shared lives is actually to misrepresent them. This is the “objectivity”... [that] functions in art much the same as in science; it obstructs compassion; it obscures the particularity of creatures and places.

—*Life is a Miracle*

Introduction

Each of Berry’s novels named for one person—*The Memory of Old Jack*, *Hannah Coulter*, and *Jayber Crow*—insist “that one man or woman’s life, lived in rhythms of its own, can make more sense out of the American past, and connect us to it more surely, than a chronicle of great events or biographies of the Men Who Made History.”¹ Though none of these books is “about the past, or the way in which the past is a prelude to the present,” neither are they “about the way in which the past can be made congruent with

¹ Griel Marcus, review of *The Memory of Old Jack*, by Wendell Berry, in *Rolling Stone* 4 December 1975, 89

the present, made part of it.”² The historical awareness that ties these stories together—the “sense” it makes of America’s past—is that history is not inevitable; they connect us to the contingency of history through the vicissitudes of life that disrupt narratives of cultural progression and technological evolution. Berry’s narrative voice as a counter movement in American literature outlined in the previous chapter is embodied in the rhythms of Jack, Hannah, and Jayber. Berry delineates three lives that are incongruent with the present; their histories form their ethics—that is, their virtues and their orientation toward the good—exposing the dominant tendency to understand the moral life as separate from contingency. These characters do not coalesce with cultural and economic trends.

Though they oppose the social forces that threaten the welfare of their community, the posture of each character is prone to failure. Indeed, they fail in their relationships and are reduced in their humanity; Jack, Hannah, and Jayber are almost completely overwhelmed by regret, grief, and despair respectively. Jack’s regret is repentance for failing to be a good husband to both his farm and his wife; Hannah’s grief is the sorrow over the loss of loved ones; Jayber’s despair is the failure of his love for his beloved to find fulfillment on earth. These poignant experiences refer to each character’s particular descent: Jack journeys through the “valley of the shadow of death”; Hannah reckons with “the hell that humans have learned to make”; Jayber says his book was almost one about “Hell.” But these low-points give them each a vision of love that they experience as a

² Ibid.

redemption of their suffering. The novels in question, therefore, reflect what Berry says of

William Carlos Williams' imagination indicated in the first chapter:

And so even the 'descent' of age, even defeat and despair, may bring us to 'new places' where love may be perceived as shadowless, as light:

Love without shadows stirs now
 beginning to waken
 as night
 advances.

The imagination may show us Hell, but not Hell alone. It shows us, beyond Hell, the beckoning light, to be reached even by descent.³

That these are stories of failure yet not of "unrelieved pain and horror"⁴ means they escape "the conventional trap of 'realism' that recognizes reality only by the violence, selfishness, and despair of the individualistic modern individual."⁵ Berry imagines their lives through the reality of suffering and the love that exceeds the devastation of failure and pain. They are like the servants in *King Lear*: "They can give no victory and achieve no restoration, as the world understands such things. Their virtues do not lead certainly or even probably to worldly success... They stand by, suffering what they cannot help... This assures only the survival in this world of faithfulness, compassion, and love—which is no small thing."⁶ Redemption comes not from an "intercession from Heaven" but is "earned, or lived out, or suffered out."⁷ Berry shows these characters in their "eternal moment," reckoning the coming changes to the community, both for good and bad, in

³ Wendell Berry, *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011), 120.

⁴ Berry, *William Carlos Williams*, 120.

⁵ Berry, *William Carlos Williams*, 163.

⁶ Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 167-168.

⁷ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 177.

terms of a keen awareness of the present. These descents—despair, regret, and grief—do not close possibilities for happiness, redemption, and reconciliation with the community. Rather, they open into an imaginative world, one that perceives “the immanence of the spirit and breath of God in the creation” that exceeds and redeems perdition.⁸ Jack, Hannah, and Jayber are opposed to any idea that regret, grief, and despair indicate the meaninglessness of life, that make defeat final. They are ambassadors of the imaginative world, come to show the reader the reality of this presence of divine love in ordinary life; that is, their eternal moments can clarify the reader’s own eternal moments.

That their stories are indeed ordinary shows the subversive nature of acknowledging the mystery and holiness of daily life. Very little “happens” in the lives of three ordinary, rural humans, and yet they are each attuned to divine presence; they are attentive to the highest qualities of humanity and nature. As such, they cultivate a perception of quotidian habits and relationships that sees the world differently from a perspective overly determined by unseemly aspirations for success or dominated by self-interest. It is the sheer ordinariness of such lives—the refusal to live as if human actions give meaning to and preserve creation—that threatens power structures because it denies the anxiety and fear that motivates and justifies the violent defense of worldly powers and authority. Jack, Hannah, and Jayber face the cultural devastation of their withering communities with resources that have accompanied their personal losses. That is, their characters are more formed by their pain than their successes, but they develop virtues that help them live well with others amidst the community’s deterioration. They each

⁸ Harold K. Bush, Jr., “Hunting for Reasons to Hope: A Conversation with Wendell Berry,” *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 229.

show in their own way that the emotional tie of their social contract is not fear but sorrow. None of them fear death or the powers of cultural and personal destruction, which means that they understand the material and emotional conditions of freedom differently from much of modern political society. The drama consists in the tension between what they perceive to be the central aspects of their individual and collective life and conventional assumptions of progress or liberty. Their suffering itself becomes civil disobedience; they are not formed by the social and political powers that create the modern political subject but rather by the wounds these forces inflict. The community is formed in sharing these wounds; they suffer together in their work, losses, and failures. The highest moments they experience—their visions of love that elevate them out of their descent—are possible because belonging is important for personal identity and happiness, and suffering is their mode of belonging. Each protagonist learns how to belong to a dying community that neither collaborates with the agents of destruction nor repairs the damages.

I shall argue that Jack, Hannah, and Jayber express a full, embodied poetic display of how people belong to one another in a particular place—and that the effect is to clarify the reader's experience of love. Berry uses each life to “make real to us the ordinary drama of our daily lives,” as he says of Williams' poems.⁹ Berry's characters present a communal life in which belonging through fidelity to place is the moral life. Each is oriented toward the good through interdependence in a place according to a vision of divine presence. The membership of the community is bound by a suffering love. Put

⁹ Berry, *William Carlos Williams*, 142. Though each story draws on the “Judeo-Christian tradition” they are different from this tradition insofar as the latter is “so strongly heroic... Ordinary behavior belongs to a different dramatic mode, a different understanding of action, even a different understanding of virtue... the drama of ordinary or daily behavior also raises the issue of courage, but it raises in a more complex and difficult way the issue of perseverance.” Berry, *The Gift of Good Land*, 276-277.

somewhat differently, Berry gives an account of the reality of love in its embodied, psychological, and spiritual contours. Berry's critique of modernity—the industrialization of agriculture and economy, the degeneration of language, the cultural decline of the arts—is that it corrupts the way people relate, the way they love.

This chapter tracks the movements of descent and ascent to show what each character learns and experiences. Berry gives each story a poetic reference to help interpret the movements within the meaning and framework of the poem. Connecting Berry's novels to their poetic antecedents clarifies each character's experience of love—its nature, qualities, and the ends to which it draws the characters. Though they all undergo deeply distressing and disturbing experiences because of their love, they are all permeated—perhaps one could say impregnated—with virtues as a result. These virtues constitute their development of becoming good, which is what Berry means by belonging. Each is an experience of love through descent by which they come to sense the fullness of their belonging to their community. As readers follow the fictional movements, they are given a sense, an experience, of what it is like to be at home in the world. Through the love and suffering of the characters, readers have the opportunity to change their own motives to be more affectionate.

To belong is to be at home in the world; to be at home is the good life. For Berry, being at home is a labor to “live on and use and preserve and learn from and enrich and enjoy the land.”¹⁰ Though Jack, Hannah, and Jayber all make their homes in the world in a way that reflects Berry's understanding of his own life, he does not offer this life as the

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969; repr., Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), 88.

form to imitate. Berry's books do not offer a "model home," as it were. Instead, the home is "a center of interest."¹¹ His personal response to this interest has been to live on and from the land, but acknowledges it "is only one of several possibilities."¹² To change the location of interest from a bank account to one's home is a change in life, a conversion. It is a revolution, "not the revolution by which men change governments, but that by which they change themselves."¹³ The problem of 'purely political' revolutions is that they often give up the rhythms of a difficult and complicated past, as well as the spiritual labor of renewing principles in light of new circumstances. "The political activist *sacrifices* himself to politics; though he has a cause, he has no life... he narrows and desiccates his life for the sake of the future of his ideals."¹⁴ Changing interest, unlike regime reconfiguration, contemplates a "revision of our assumptions [and] our aims" as it involves a "change of heart [and] mind."¹⁵ Reading the stories of Jack, Hannah, and Jayber gives one a sense of being at home that is both a cultivation of the inner self, one's spiritual life, as well as a life of protest without presuming a basic distinction between public and private morality—that there are different standards for running a government and managing a household.

As in many of Berry's stories, war is the background for each novel; it is what each protagonist protests. War disregards the particularity of people and places, destroying communities for abstract ideals of justice and peace. Suffering love stands against war but does not form a community free of violence; instead, it is the commitment

¹¹ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 88.

¹² Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 89.

¹³ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 74.

¹⁴ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 83.

¹⁵ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 54.

to love people and places as they are, despite the disappointments and inadequacies that arise. Peace is not a state of affairs or a pure absence of violence; it is a way of life that is not passive but attuned to the presence of the divine in nature, its mortal condition, and acts accordingly. It is a constant vigilance to investigate the ways in which one is unknowingly complicit with violence. Berry's moral imperative is that "we must patiently and humbly seek out the causes of war that lie in our own thoughts and our own behavior, never forgetting that we are human beings, members of a war-making species."¹⁶ Jack, Hannah, and Jayber share this self-scrutiny, bearing thoughts and behavior that cause violence as much as anybody. Though such criticism inevitably entails a recognition of defeat—it is largely a movement of descent to discover one's vices—it leads to an eternal moment: divine presence that comes in the form of failure. Thus, each story is Christologically informed—*Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* explicitly, *Old Jack* implicitly—insofar as despair, regret, and grief do not determine life. Though none of these novels is a nihilistic story of heroic characters with "the 'courage' to face the immitigable pointlessness of human experience," neither do they deny the significance of suffering or accept divinity as a solution to the problem of pain—all escape sentimentality and superstition.¹⁷ Rather, they deny that the meaning of suffering is found in a political or religious scheme to unite people by abstracting them from their place on earth in ways that only assist the logic of war. Essentially, their protest is that "The earth, which we all have in common, is our deepest bond."¹⁸ They each have a love for a particular place in

¹⁶ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 74.

¹⁷ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 168.

¹⁸ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 85.

the world that is trivialized by the logic of war and disenfranchised by the abstract political and religious programs based on an ideal vision of the world of the distant planners.

Marriage is the central motif Berry uses to represent love. It is the form that gives love a particular familiarity, and therefore stands in contrast to the abstractions and generalizations used to justify violence; however, he does not use it conventionally. Jack is more a husband of his land than of either his wife or mistress; Hannah marries World War II—twice; Jayber imagines himself married to a married woman through a vow he alone is aware. Neither are they conventionally generative; the few children that are born not only abandon the community but also become agents of its disintegration. That they are all orphans highlights further their complicated and wayward kinship. It also shows that Berry's sense of corrupted love is not merely evinced in broken ties and estranged families, which are commonplace. Rather, the perversion is in the denial that there is a range of love that can be experienced. It is not simply a matter of ensuring one is in a relationship with the right object or person, but that the nature of the love is properly ordered. The outward appearance of relationships does not necessarily indicate its orientation; Berry is presenting the spiritual substance of attraction and belonging. The community orients the person as the context in which they learn about the best and worst of reality; the moral life does not overcome dangers and harms but enables familiarity, i.e., intimate relationships within a community in its fullest sense. It is their familiarity with their place and their beloveds that distinguishes their life's patterns. The intimate relationships of these ambassadors incarnate the divine love that has awakened and

attracted Berry. As Berry has been drawn toward the love he perceives in creation that illuminates his imagined world, so too is the reader drawn through the invitation to join the descents and ascents of Jack, Hannah, and Jayber.

The Memory of Old Jack

Berry is often compared favorably to Thoreau; however, they belong to nature differently, and represent different spiritualities. According to Thoreau, the kind of commitment agricultural work requires chokes the spirit; one needs to remain a bachelor of nature to continue to be open to new experiences of wonder that lead to insight and fulfillment. That Berry is a farmer is a significant divergence from Thoreau; the difference is not just in Berry's practical abilities but also in his mind. Their difference is spiritual; they belong differently.¹⁹ The knowledge and virtue their respective loves for nature produce are ordered in different ways. They both agree that one gains knowledge of the utmost through nature, but Berry argues that the love of nature that mediates this kind of knowledge requires responsibility and fidelity. Movement of ascent towards transcendence needs guidance—instructions from those who have experienced it and whose knowledge has been formed by it—in the form of an education in devotion and fertility. In other words, it is not the bachelor but the husband of nature who is more in tune with the divine in nature.²⁰ The husband's spirituality leads to work; it is generative.

¹⁹ It is not as though Berry is only advocating the agrarian life; he is too indebted and appreciative of Thoreau to be dismissive of his kind of presence in and attitude about nature. I am here only emphasizing their difference to show what Berry contributes to an understanding of human relations with nature that is distinct from Thoreau.

²⁰ This seems to be a claim in tension with *Jayber Crow*, who is also a kind of "bachelor of nature." However, Jayber is an exception that proves the rule because, though he remains a bachelor, he understands

Berry uses the structure and literary tropes of Odysseus in *The Odyssey*—rather than Thoreau in *Walden*—to illustrate a mind that is spiritually ordered to nature in knowledge and virtue; he shows an intelligence that opposes the mind of the specialist, what Jack calls the modern ignorance.

Berry presents Jack as a new Odysseus.²¹ *The Memory of Old Jack* is both a “criticism and celebration of my grandfather Berry’s generation, born about the time of the Civil War.”²² The Civil War, for Berry is the world of the *Iliad*: the world that is “war-obsessed, preoccupied with ‘manly’ deeds of exploitation, anger, aggression, pillage, and the disorder, uprootedness, and vagabondage that are their result”²³ Berry sees in his grandfather’s generation the last opportunity to “become a truly indigenous agricultural community” but failed to do so because of “adverse markets and social fashions.”²⁴ Their response to economic difficulty was to seize the opportunities of the cities, telling their children and grandchildren to give up farming and take what could be had in the world beyond—even though they knew this meant the end of a way of life. Instead of identifying with the land and taking care of it—instead of staying home—many

himself as married. That is, he only appears as a bachelor, which is a different understanding of bachelorhood than both Twain and Thoreau.

²¹ The description of Odysseus at the outset of the epic could be used to portray Jack: Jack learns the minds of many men, but he does so by staying in his hometown. He is a man “skilled in contending, the wanderer, harried for years on end,” (I.2-3) but his skill is in contending with his land, he wanders within his community, and is harried for years by his family. Berry tells the story of Old Jack who has “weathered many nights and days deep in his heart” (I.7-9) and saved his life, but could not save his community with either “will nor valor” (I.10). I will quote from the Fitzgerald translation of *The Odyssey* because it is the version to which Berry refers. Further citations will appear in the text.

²² Morris Allen Grubbs, ed. *Conversations with Wendell Berry* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 17

²³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 128.

²⁴ Grubbs, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 17

left without ever returning. Old Jack's odyssey is a homecoming, an education in how good agriculture rather than war serves social peace and order.²⁵

Using marriage and returning home as the structure and standard to portray the intelligence of a farmer is Berry's shot across Thoreau's bow. Jack's husbandry is the antithesis of Thoreau's bachelorhood. Berry not only wants to show that Jack is better attuned to nature, but also that he has a "formidable intelligence" that is a more constructive inheritance for resisting modernity's trappings than Thoreau's genius.²⁶ To be sure, there is much Berry appreciates about and has learned from Thoreau; however, their differences are instructive for understanding Berry's contributions to agrarianism.²⁷

Perception and its source of light are central to cultivating the soul and farming; however, there is a hierarchy of illumination. Thoreau tells his reader to "Direct your eye right inward" to explore your imagination and then "live the life which [you have]

²⁵ Mark Shadle explores the "curiously-disturbing" use of *The Odyssey* by Berry. Mark Shadle, "Traveling at Home: Wandering and Return in Wendell Berry," *Wendell Berry* (Lewiston: Confluence Press, 1991), 104. Shadle, however, does not mention the presence of tropes found in *The Odyssey* within Berry's fiction. He also construes Odysseus as "symbolic of violence and disunity in our industrial world," which does not accord with Berry's depiction of him. Shadle, "Traveling at Home," 107. Nevertheless, Shadle is right to recognize the importance of Berry's reading of *The Odyssey* for understanding what Berry means by "traveling at home" and "homecoming."

²⁶ "...in [*The Memory of Old Jack*] I've tried to keep the modern world in mind, and tried to gauge what we've inherited that can stand against it. I finally realized that in Old Jack a rather formidable intelligence comes through, and a kind of tragic experience. He understands that there is such a thing as a modern ignorance that consists of arrogance and the assumption that we can outsmart our nature. His conclusion is that man can't help being ignorant, but he can help being a fool." *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 17.

²⁷ Speer Morgan contrasts Thoreau and Berry's poetry, calling the former a "Romantic monk" for whom nature is a sacred symbol. Speer Morgan, "Wendell Berry: A Fatal Singing," *Southern Review* 10, no. 4 (1974): 865-877. The monk's pilgrimage to nature is primarily an internal motion; the physical wandering occasions epiphanies that inform alternatives to the vapidness of modern culture. To work in, to cultivate, and therefore change the order of wilderness would be to restrain or regulate its possibilities. Thoreau, as with the other Transcendentalists, drew from nature a mystical experience that taught him something about himself rather than the life of the material world. As Morgan puts it, "He chose to tend his soul directly through an elevated relationship with an ideal nature, a scheme which scarcely left time for the rootedness and 'drudgery' of an occupation like farming." "A Fatal Singing," 868.

imagined.”²⁸ Imagination is distinct from nature, resourcing a life based on an ideal form that is then given an earthly foundation. Thoreau distinguishes natural light from imaginative vision: “The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.”²⁹ The life of the farmer is too determined by the earthly light that orders the cycles, growth, and shape of nature, and thus cannot see how the wilderness is only meant to be a mediation of a higher order. The sun’s darkness, its distraction from internal insight, must be denied. Resistance to modernity and the potential for alternative forms of life require “enlightened eyes” that alone offer “transforming clarity.”³⁰ It has become commonplace that the internal life of the farmer, the soul of the person who seeks to understand nature and cultivate it, is insipid and obtuse.

Berry is at odds with Thoreau’s claim that only wilderness, and not agriculture, connects humans to nature. The difference has psychic consequences.³¹ Insofar as Thoreau is the “Protestant Bachelor” that Emerson calls him, his pattern of thought is closed to the intimate knowledge of fertility cycles and fecundity in nature.³² Thoreau’s

²⁸ Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, ed. William Rossi, 2nd Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 217.

²⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 223.

³⁰ Morgan, “A Fatal Singing,” 868.

³¹ Here I disagree with Jack Hicks, who suggests that the affinities between Berry and Thoreau make them “psychic kinsmen.” Jack Hicks, “Wendell Berry’s Husband to the World: *A Place on Earth*,” *Wendell Berry*, ed. Paul Merchant (Lewiston: Confluence Press, Inc., 1991), 119. There are indeed affinities, but they exhibit different kinds of intellectual life because of their different spiritual orientations with nature.

³² Herman Nibbelink highlights the important difference between husband and bachelor in these two writers, focusing on Thoreau’s irony—“the interplay between attraction (or involvement) and detachment”—as the habit of mind that distinguishes him from Berry. Herman Nibbelink, “Thoreau and Wendell Berry: Bachelor and Husband of Nature,” *Wendell Berry*, ed. Paul Merchant (Lewiston: Confluence Press, Inc., 1991), 139. Nibbelink analyzes Thoreau’s chapter on his bean field, in which he explicitly rejects farming as degrading, imprisoning, and stultifying. The mystical force of nature must be approached with “a bachelor’s dalliance.” “Thoreau and Wendell Berry,” 139.

observation, understanding, and advocacy of nature are tempered with disengagement and a fear of commitment. Independence and freedom from labor achieve clarity and enlightenment; bodily responsibilities and fidelity obstruct the soul's transcendence and dissipates the spirit. For Berry, marriage is a relationship that changes the vision of culture and nature. It is not just a metaphor for articulating how agriculture brokers the relationship between culture and nature as Thoreau saw it.³³ At issue are the experiences of oppositions and contraries in marriage, which is, for Berry, more than an institutional arrangement to hold these tensions together.³⁴ With respect to *The Memory of Old Jack*, if Jack is a husband in both senses, his husbandry with his wife and with his farm evoke similar kinds of inner experiences—attraction, fascination, temptation, dependence, and disappointment. Berry's novels, especially *The Memory of Old Jack*, describe the dramatic experience of marriage,

³³ Both Morgan and Nibblink see the missing trope of marriage in Thoreau as his primary difference from Berry; however, they both maintain that the congruence between Berry and Thoreau is in their internal life; what Berry inherits from Thoreau is his intelligence. Morgan says that while Thoreau uses his mind to create an ideal nature that confirms “a heavenly order” for a flourishing life, Berry “constructs an ideal [agricultural life] according to the life he is trying to live.” Morgan, “A Fatal Singing,” 869. The difference, for Morgan, is in the material one uses to construct the ideal; both epiphany and agriculture are ways of putting foundations under “castles in the air.” See Thoreau, *Walden*, 216. Nibbelink agrees that Thoreau and Berry are “psychic kinsmen.” “Thoreau and Wendell Berry,” 135. Berry, according to Nibbelink, accepts Thoreau's vision of nature but includes his wife. Or, as Morgan puts it, “the love affair of the Romantic agrarian becomes a permanent marriage.” Morgan, “A Fatal Singing,” 871. Both Morgan and Nibbelink interpret Berry's use of marriage as analogous to the farmer's relationship with nature, a pattern for resolving the tensions and problems of culture's relationship with nature. The genius of Berry, according to them, is his use of marriage to harmonize life and work, mind and nature.

³⁴ Daniel Cornell suggests that the role of marriage in Berry's vision of nature is best articulated in his poems “where the metaphoric play of language can be given its fullest expression.” Daniel Cornell, “‘The Country of Marriage’: Wendell Berry's Personal Political Vision,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 16 (fall 1983), 63-64. Perhaps Morgan and Nibbelink agree; they, too, solely analyze Berry's poems in their essays. All three authors call attention to the oppositions and contraries present in Berry's poems, but they see in marriage an institutional arrangement that holds them together. Mostly, the metaphor is applied to culture and nature; because Berry writes about his own marriage in his poems rather than marriage as a cultural abstraction, commentators hold his example of fidelity as a standard against which industrialized uses of nature are judged. It would be unseemly to offer suggestions to improve Wendell and Tanya's marriage outside of their friendship.

That Jack's intelligence is formed by both technical knowledge of farming and a fascination with the world indicates a deviation from Thoreau. Berry has his Romantic sources, and Jack's experiences form a marriage of heaven and hell in his mind. Berry patterns his novel on *The Odyssey*, but Blake's poem helps inform Jack's internal tensions and stimulations as felt contraries that are not categorically distinct. In an essay written concurrently with the publication of *Old Jack*, Berry argues against the possibility of choosing between Yeat's "Perfection of the life, or of the work."³⁵ The oppositions and contrarities within marriage, and between the marriages of husband and wife and farm, are not resolved but suffered. The value of marriage is its conflicts and felt tensions. "One longs to be a perfect family man *and* a perfect workman... and it is better to suffer the imperfection of both than to gamble the total failure of one against an illusory hope of perfection in the other."³⁶ It is the specialized intellect who uses "life to perfect work," turning "the most humane of disciplines [into] an exploitive industry."³⁷ *Old Jack* performs this longing and suffering; he struggles with the specialized intellect but also gains a responsible mind. Jack's "drudgery," marriage, and affair all manifest his suffering and failure—his regret—but also constitute his formidable intelligence. It is one's openness to the unknown aspects of the world and time that makes life both difficult and enjoyable; this knowledge is not the perception of an individual, enlightened eye but the enactment of farming practices rooted in tradition, conversation, and

³⁵ Wendell Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," *Poetry in Place* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1983), 21.

³⁶ Berry, *Poetry in Place*, 22.

³⁷ Berry, *Poetry in Place*, 22.

community.³⁸ It is also a generative intelligence, reproducing patterns of thought and speech in people. In short, Jack’s memory, his experience of insight and recall, is equivalent to his husbandry.

On his last day on earth, Jack awakes before sunrise and stands on his porch until the sun rises and covers him “from head to foot with light.”³⁹ Jack begins in darkness, and receives a light that does not provide warmth. Somehow, the sun is inadequate. At the end of the day, he finds himself again alone in darkness. Though there is neither the sun nor artificial lights illuminating his room, the moon shines through the window, “and that makes light enough—more than he needs” (144). The sun’s insufficiency is not compared with an internal light— from the first, Jack’s “consciousness” is somnolent rather than crisp and clear, as though he is still “asleep and dreaming” (3). The difference is in the kind of light the moon emits. In “An Anniversary,” Berry writes

Lovers live by the moon
Whose dark and light are one,
Changing without rest.

The light that includes darkness exceeds the dawn. Though the moon is often considered a symbol of chastity, here it is a source of fertility. The literary function of contraries and reversals, and Berry’s phraseology itself, recalls Blake: “You never know what is enough

³⁸ This is what makes Berry’s intelligence of a different kind from Thoreau’s genius. Again, Berry has important and acknowledged similarities with and inheritances of Thoreau, but, as Jason Peters says, “Berry’s voice... also resounds within a richly varied tradition, and his critique reaches further and sustains an urgency greater than anything Thoreau ever attempted: for above all this, Berry, more than any living writer, certainly more than any commander in chief, has defended—without a standing army—actual American soil.” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 4.

³⁹ Wendell Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1999), 3. Further citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

unless you know what is more than enough.”⁴⁰ Berry’s paraphrases this aphorism as a condemnation of excess: “When the road of excess has reached the palace of wisdom it is a healed wound, a long scar.”⁴¹ Jack’s final day of life charts his road to wisdom, the experiences that have formed his intelligence. His burdens and adversities, his pride and excesses, have wounded him but led him to wisdom; he has learned how to be faithful from his failures and defeats. In short, his wisdom is a “scar of knowledge.”⁴²

The title of the book assumes both definitions of memory: his memory is both internal and external; he remembers and is remembered. What and how he remembers will be his legacy for the community, but how it will be inherited remains an open question. Mat Feltner sees him standing on the porch “like the monument of some historical personage,” (8) and Burley says that Jack won’t so much die as metamorphose into a “statue” (9). Jack is affronted, however, by those who treat him as an object of reminiscence, “a relic of somebody else’s past”⁴³ (140). Jack’s internal struggles to make sense of his life and generate virtues form a mind different from that characterized by modern ignorance: “people’s assumption that they can outsmart their own nature” (141).

⁴⁰ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 9.

⁴¹ Wendell Berry, “Damage,” *The American Poetry Review* 4, no. 3 (1975), 29.

⁴² It could have been otherwise. Jack’s commitments and fidelity do not safeguard his journey, nor is he consistent. That he was settled in a local culture and tradition that prepared a path helped him but also hindered him. Had he gone his own way to be a wanderer—which he does as will be discussed below—he could have remained a foreigner, for whom “the road of excess leads to a desert.” Berry, “Damage,” 29.

⁴³ Commentators are in disagreement over the literary function of Jack for Berry. For one, the memory of Jack is a “pastoral ideal” that Berry “celebrates” but “which our nation in this century has abandoned.” Joan Joff Hall, review of *The Memory of Old Jack*, by Wendell Berry, in *The New Republic* 170 (6 April 1974), 26. For another, the memory of Jack does not “trade in nostalgia” or “any facile celebration of pastoralism or ‘lost values,’” but celebrates Jack’s character insofar as it can make “sense out of the American past, and connect us to it.” Griel Marcus, review of *The Memory of Old Jack*, by Wendell Berry, in *Rolling Stone* 4 December 1975, 89.

To read *Old Jack* as the memory of America's past is to abort its wisdom, to miscarry its attempt to bring its virtue of knowing to birth in the reader.

Jack is not a frontiersman; his journey to wisdom does not forge a permanent path. His desires and habits precede him, and his way of life will not last as the world around him changes. What he learns from his mentors and passes on is not a set of techniques or principles that can be maintained and protected. He was born into and sustained within the "yeoman's tradition of sufficiency to himself, of faithfulness to his place" (44). His perception includes the reality of the unknown, "what he is not looking at and he does not see" (142). He was lucky enough to have good teachers, and yet he does not maintain this independence, commitment, and sense of mystery consistently. For instance, though he is aware of the existence of things unseen he is not always properly related to it. He sees in Ruth "possibilities that did not exist" because his desire to possess her beauty for his own enlargement misleads him (41). There are some things that can only be learned by going through adversity, by experience. His conflicts with those around him reflect his temptations and vices; they show the experience of education. In other words, Jack's relationships display his scar of knowledge—their role is, in part, to test Jack—rather than develop his character as an ideal.

Berry uses Odysseus' wanderings to characterize Jack's scar of knowledge. The route Jack takes to wisdom is patterned after Odysseus' homecoming. Just as Odysseus' travels at sea are also inward—they describe his education in becoming a different kind of hero from the warrior Achilles—Jack travels at home, learning how to become the kind of farmer who identifies with his land and is satisfied in taking care of it.

Jack's life begins during the Civil War. His brothers fought and died for the union. His family's farm had slaves, though its economy was not dependent on the institution of slavery. Nevertheless, he and his brothers are the kind of men who fight; it would not occur to them to do otherwise. Jack's mother dies the next year in 1865 when Jack is at the age of five. The household is diminished in its losses and melancholy. From that point until Jack's father dies in 1879, the "farm deteriorated"; Jack never learned to farm from his father; they would form nothing more than a "strange companionship" (21). Jack turns his back on his house and goes to the fields; he balks at his father's restraints, wanting to do more.

The beginning of Jack's story, however, is his marriage to Ruth. Ruth is no Penelope. Jack first notices her eyes "gray, grave, and clear" (35). It is her eyes that he fixes upon, wanting to see them acknowledge his desire for her. Throughout the story, Berry uses the epithet "gray eyes" to refer to Ruth. It suggests a connection to Athena in Homer; however, their literary roles are quite different. Ruth is no aid for Jack, but a constant source of sorrow. It appears that Berry has Athena's genealogy in mind; according to Homer, Athena emerged from Zeus' head without a mother. The primary source of Ruth's expectations of Jack is her father's ambitions to abandon farming for the economic fashions in the town. Her mother is never mentioned; Ruth is a product of her father's mind, which is of the kind that prefers exploitation and pillaging to agricultural domesticity. Though Jack is different from her, he is also a product of the world of the Civil War; he is aggressive and angry, and, as Odysseus is called a "raider of cities," Jack's physical relations with Ruth make him "like the taker of a city" (45). The result is

a stillborn son. Jack's story begins in a brutal condition that reflects war; he begins with a barbarous character—he is both violent and not properly at home.

Jack's journey home takes fifteen years. From his stillborn son to the time he gets out of debt the second time, from February of 1893 to February of 1908, he is on a "long voyage;" he returns as though from "a war" (121-122). The events the story conveys, however, are between February 1893 and February 1903; the ten years between the deaths of his son and of his mistress Rose McInnis, "and the shadow of death was heavy on him all that time" (121).⁴⁴ During these ten years he learns the moral and economic complexity of husbandry—of combining his commitments to both his farm and his wife.

Jack's failure is the breakage and division between "farm and household and marriage bed" (126). The marriage bed is at the center of household and farm; these three form the structure of order as concentric circles around sexuality. That Jack and Ruth do not have a vibrant sex life is not a matter of "poor technique," as our sexologists would call it, but of spiritual disorder; they both have corrupted patterns of love into which each tries to force the other. Material order is not maintained with this kind of perverted fascination. Berry reads *The Odyssey* as a careful understanding of "the connections between marriage and household and the earth."⁴⁵ Odysseus' journey home, his longing to renew his marriage to Penelope, is the "geographical and moral" movement toward "restoration and order."⁴⁶ Berry sees in their marriage "a complex practical circumstance

⁴⁴ This is for the entire fifteen years, although he divides the period in two by noting that the last five were "the darkest and worst."

⁴⁵ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Books Club, 1977), 124.

⁴⁶ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 125-126. "Viewed from the perspective of a good deal of contemporary theory, such an assertion may seem hazy, even reactionary, but if we look at it in a different light, the celebration of the 'geographical and moral' structure of a poem—which is part of what I would call Berry's

involving, in addition to husband and wife, their family of both descendants and forebears, their household, their community, and the sources of all these lives in memory and tradition, in the countryside, and in the earth.”⁴⁷ Jack learns of this kind of marriage by failing to make his one like it. By the time he gains a vision of its absence, it is too late, “though a vision of what he had lost survived in his knowledge of his failure, and taught him the magnitude of his tragedy” (126). This vision, though too late, makes him “whole,” but to understand how he is able to see it at all one must track his failure to move outward from his bed to his house to his farm.

Jack and Ruth’s world *East of Eden* never ends; their lights never unify. Ruth can never see Jack beyond his unwillingness and inability to fulfill her imagined image of him; Jack can never make her become a person who accepts him for who he is. Just as Jack’s perception was prepared for him, so too is Ruth’s blindness: “Nothing in her experience had prepared her to recognize—much less to value—such a man as Jack Beechum was” (41). Her father was a merchant and a landlord. Both his business and farm failed, but the ambition for affluence was bred into Ruth. Jack has inherited his father’s and grandfather’s desires that found satisfaction in the fields rather than the city. His farming is his vocation. Jack’s and Ruth’s desires travel in opposing directions; one toward the city and opulence, the other toward the field and sufficiency. Each sees the other according to his or her own desires; neither sees the actual person present.

poetics of embodiment—appears positively luminous.” Roger Lundin, “Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Marriage and Embodiment,” *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 334.

⁴⁷ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 127.

Prior to his odyssey, Jack's attachment to women is deficient.⁴⁸ Jack's desire for women is in tension with the passage of his vocation. As a young farmer, his work gave his days an "order" and "comeliness" because his labor was a unification of "skill and passion" (30). That is, he was united in body and spirit. His mind was "free in the fields," not separate from his labor such that his work freed his mind from bodily constraints. Rather, it was open to "the eye of heaven" and "the gods of the fields," namely "Old Marster" and the sun (30). Put differently, his mind was properly related to its natural and transcendent ground. Jack inclines towards women, by whom he is "moved" and "carried away." The ascent of this desire does not share the form of his coherent character in the field, however, as his mind is separated from his bodily pleasures. He let himself go "thoughtless" into "casual" relationships, "forget[ting] where he [was]" (31). His vision of women and his field are not unified; his erotic ascent is discordant with his experience of descent into the furrow. Bodily pleasure is not bad in itself, but it is corrupting without proper orientation to the ground.

Jack's first vision of Ruth is without this proper orientation. It happens in church, which shapes its disorder. He only goes to church on Sunday morning "in uneasy compensation for the extravagances" of his time with women on Saturday night. The church is the place that should be most open to God, freeing minds to ascend to the highest goods and impregnate souls with virtues and insights. Jack's church, however, is sterile and stuffy. In church his body is present but his mind drifts elsewhere, searching

⁴⁸ The failure of Jack's marriage to Ruth is captured in Yeats' poem, *Solomon and the Witch*: "Maybe the bride-bed brings despair, /For each an imagined image brings /And finds a real image there; /Yet the world ends when these two things, /Though several, are a single light..."

out women with his imagination. At the dance his body moves without his mind; at church his mind moves without his body. The sight of Ruth moves him “strangely;” his mind is stirred and searches her “like a water witch” (35). His divination reflects the church’s relation to God, preoccupied with satisfying desires by focusing on the invisible at the exclusion of the visible.⁴⁹ That is, its orientation to reality is superstitious. Ruth is beautiful, but so are the women at the dance. Ruth stands out to Jack in this context because he perceives her to be unaware of her beauty; he is not after an innocent body but an innocent mind. That she does not acknowledge her bodily allure reflects Jack’s division of mind and body. Their visions of each other are perfectly mirrored opposites that reflect the same basic division between mind and body and its concomitant perverted love. Jack’s vision of Ruth’s innocent mind “shone before him” with the “wonder” it would be if she admitted his desire; Ruth’s vision of Jack’s guilty body had a “dark energy” that “fascinated” her impulse to control (39). Jack’s vision of Ruth is “beneath her;” Ruth’s vision of Jack is “above him” (40). Neither accepts the other for who he or she is; they have no common ground.

Jack’s vision clouds his judgment; Ruth’s ambitions become his mind’s desires. Taking care of his own land, maintaining what is enough for his family, becomes dissatisfying. He wants more than enough. His movements are not aligned with his tradition but in accordance with an “unconscious obedience” to the myth of Ruth’s

⁴⁹ This is different than Thomas Merton’s imagery through Edwin Muir of the poet as water-diviner. “As a poet, Muir felt himself compelled to ‘divine and persuade’—to divine in the sense of a water-diviner finding hidden springs; to persuade, not by demonstration but by sharing the water with others.” Thomas Merton, “The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir,” *The Sewanee Review* 75, no. 2 (1967), 318. For Merton, Muir, unlike the church or even Jack in this instance, “was the enemy of all abstractions.” *Ibid.*, 320.

heritage: “that no place may be sufficient to itself, but must lead to another place, and that all places must finally lead to money; that a man’s work must lead not to the health of his family and the respect of his neighbors but to the market place, to that deference that strangers yield to sufficient cash” (50). Jack’s skill and practical knowledge do not stop him from internalizing Ruth’s desires. He shapes them in a way he finds acceptable.

Jack’s odyssey begins after his son’s death. Jack turns to his fields with the same movement he turned to his father’s fields after his mother’s death. He lacks “grace” and “forbearance” to give Ruth the attention and care she needs after delivering their child’s corpse; he does not have it in his character to have “gentled and humbled himself” to offer anything (48). He is too hubristic, and too pained, to provide calmness and order to the house; it is the same house as his childhood home, and is in the same spiritual condition of “sorrow and failure” that recalls the presence of “loss and defeat” it contained after the Civil War. The fields are his comfort, but his mind is closed and darkened to the divine. He is confused and disordered; his disorientation is like an “opaque membrane between him and the sky” (48). Ruth and Jack are estranged, though their life together appears good. Jack is divided between his body and his spirit and lacks the ability to negotiate his pride and despair. His unfulfilled desires have made his “feet and hands as restless as his mind”⁵⁰ (49). Both his body and mind find rest in the fields of an adjacent farm. He desires the farm with the same desires he has for Ruth as a taker of cities.

⁵⁰ This restlessness reflects the kind Berry sees in vacationers who seek rest in a lake by bringing a speedboat. “Which is a little like going in search of a forest with a logging crew... They seek relief from restlessness and anxiety in these expensive, fast, superhorsepowered boats, which are embodiments of restlessness and anxiety. They go toward their desire with such violence of haste that they can never arrive.” *Long-Legged House*, 38.

The farm's condition is largely uncultured. The owners reflect the fragmented, disordered society of Cyclops; the family and heirs have scattered and cannot assemble together due to lack of agreement and so have left the estate unsettled. The farmhouse burned down, leaving two chimneys and fireplaces freestanding like isolated caves. The farm is marginal compared to Jack's farm, but half of it is "ridge land" that could be "made good." This is the isle that is not far from the Cyclops' island, which is "good land" but in a state of wilderness that could be cultivated for economic purposes. Both are well-watered and well-soiled lands that have been under-utilized by their respective tenants. The farm's current inhabitant is Sims McGrother. Sims is not a Cyclops but he is monstrous: "Three fingers of his left hand had been cut off above the third joint, leaving the thumb and forefinger a kind of double claw" (53). The Cyclops Polyphêmos looks like a "shaggy mountain reared in solitude," (IX.200) part of a species who deals out "rough justice to wife and child" (IX.120). McGrother is "in appearance a characteristic product of his own making; worn lean and ragged, his face, within its nap of gray beard, burnt and wrinkled and dry." His "women" stay just out of reach and "watchful of his wrath" (53).

McGrother also echoes the cannibalism of the Laistrygonians. He and his family do not eat human flesh, but they consume the lives of his hired hands. Unlike the Cyclops who leave the land untended as herders, McGrother's economics is like the Laistrygonians who make their laborers work from dawn until dusk for wages. They both have a sharp division of labor and a productive economy that exploits and ruins both people and the land. McGrother "drove himself and all that belonged to him in the

direction of money as if it were as far off as heaven and as if he were running out of time.” As for his treatment of hired laborers, he says, “Kill a mule, buy another’n, kill a nigger, hire another’n.” The McGrother household feeds on the work of this labor to expand itself by gaining capital.

Though the villainy of McGrother makes it seem just that Jack should take this land for himself, Jack’s desire for it betrays his likeness to him. Jack discovers a passion for cunning, and outwits McGrother. Jack spies out the land, approaching it from the back, and bids on the farm in secret. He allows his desire for the fertility and produce of his own land to “reach out beyond his own boundaries” (55); he wants to see both Ruth and the land “respond to him” (51). But the place is like Solomon’s “strange woman” in Proverbs, who coaxes and persuades with flattery but is ultimately a narrow pit.⁵¹ The farm is foreign, not his home; Jack marries a stranger out of a desire to enlarge himself. He feels this desire for the land could carry him “through the Cumberland Gap on foot,” which is the route that once was traveled by Native Americans but was appropriated by Daniel Boone for loggers and pioneers and also was the location of Civil War engagements. In other words, his desire follows the path of exploiters and soldiers. The resulting order he brings to the farm is the same as the Laistrygonians: highly productive at the expense of another’s life.

The name of the farm Jack purchases is the Farrier place. A farrier is a craftsman who trims and shoes horse hooves. That is, it is the farrier’s art to maintain a horse’s proper orientation to the ground. To know how much to trim and how to shoe requires

⁵¹ See Proverbs 2:16; 5:3; 6:24; 7:5; 23:27.

both the craft of blacksmith and the knowledge of a veterinarian; caring for horse feet includes both technical and medical wisdom about efficiency and health. Put simply, a farrier cares for both the body and the spirit. Jack's desire to make the Farrier place productive again, to heal it from the abuses McGrother wrought in it, appear not only reasonable but also good. But it lacks a proper orientation to the ground; Jack is no farrier of his woman, household, or his farm. He relates to the place economically, exploiting it not only for its natural resources but also to continue to lead Ruth to think that he can and will become the man of her dreams. The victim that exposes his inordinate aspirations is Will Wells.

Will Wells is Jack's hired hand, his servant. That they first experience harmony in their work does not parallel any of Odysseus' encounters during his wandering, but instead resembles his first meeting with Eumaios the swineherd. Eumaios's importance for understanding Odysseus is transparent in Berry's characterization of Will Wells—that Berry gives him a name that resembles an epithet is already a strong indication of his literary role.⁵² The significance for both is the implication of equality; Jack and Will share a "brotherhood" like "twins" that Jack "would only know that once." Divided by their

⁵² It should be noted that Will Wells' fundamental literary role is developing Jack's character, which makes Berry susceptible to Toni Morrison's argument that African characters in American literature mark a presence that is "serviceable" for establishing white authority and identity. See *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Wells hardly speaks, is crucial for determining the essential quality of Jack's marriage, and is described only in terms of his relationship with Jack and Jack's property. Any difference between Jack and Will, any of Will's particularity, is in service to the dramatic tension that displays and constitutes Jack's integrity. Oehlschlaeger notes that Jack and Will's "relationship follows the pattern outlined by Rene Girard in his analysis of imitative desire. As the difference between the two men diminishes, they need to reassert it more emphatically." *Achievement of Berry*, 190. Even though Will does not exemplify the kinds of Africanist characters Morrison analyzes, there is a sense in which Will Wells is sacrificed by Berry to substantiate Jack's virtues. It also should be noted, however, that Berry never uses African characters in this way after *The Hidden Wound*.

“inevitable economic roles of master and servant,” they were nevertheless “equals before the work” in a shared knowledge of “the hardships of labor and weather” (59). Berry understands the function of Eumaios to say, “the health of the kingdom depends fully as much on the faithfulness of its servants as it does on the faithfulness of its king.” Odysseus and Eumaios, like Jack and Will, occupy “opposite ends of the social scale” but represent two halves of a whole. Thus, Odysseus and Jack are each “incomplete in himself.”⁵³ The difference the placement of the encounter makes in Old Jack is that in the Odyssey, by the time Odysseus meets Eumaios he has lost everything. He is “a man reduced to the narrowest definition of manhood” and is in that state materially equal to Eumaios.⁵⁴ Jack, however, is in the midst of his “expansionist efforts.” (60) They are indeed two halves of a whole—one is bound to the land by economics, the other by caretaking—but are divided by Jack’s “money hunger” that consumes Will’s life. Jack learns from what he does to Will—which will be important when he finally attains his homecoming—but in this sequence, it is not a moment of recognition and reconciliation but of alienation and violence.

The cost of Jack’s mistake combines the destruction that both Polyphêmos and the Laistrygonians deliver. After he sells the farm to McGrother, they have a final showdown. Their previous encounter was after Jack’s cunning “blinded” McGrother to the new owner of the land, when Jack reveals himself to McGrother. Presently, McGrother publically mocks Jack, who then attacks him and his three sons. Jack’s cunning, his skill at out-thinking his enemy, has left him. The calamity that follows is never definitively

⁵³ Berry, *The Hidden Wound*, 93

⁵⁴ Berry, *The Hidden Wound*, 94

described as retribution, but the flow of the story connects the two events: Jack's skirmish with McGrother and the loss of his barn, three brood mares, a team of mules, and two milk cows in a fire. Jack is all but ruined; as Odysseus escapes the Laistrygonians with only his own ship, Jack escapes the catastrophe with only the barest of his possessions remaining. He will be in significant debt for ten more years. In a phrase that echoes the end of book X of the *Odyssey*, Berry ends his chapter with an image of the morning after the catastrophe: "the sun rises and stains the white frost with its rosy light." A woodpecker alights on a smoldering post for an instant before flying away; Jack still has his life, but almost nothing else.

The following encounter happens in the present time, out of synchronicity with the timeline of Jack's fifteen-year journey. The composition of Berry's narrative blends Jack's present and a memory of his past; his homecoming has not been articulated yet but the experience of his Circe and her household happens chronologically long after he emerges from his debt. Circe is a lesser divinity who acts as Odysseus' spiritual guide, informing him of things both mortal and heavenly. Hannah is both at the center of Jack's story and his life; Berry places her in the middle of the book before Jack dies and describes her as embodying a harmony of bed, household, and farm. She both represents to Jack what he never had in a woman, and also stands outside him as a teacher from whom he and the community learn.

Hannah is familiar with both death and the fullness of life. She is pregnant with her third child; she is "swollen with life" that is "greater than hers" in both the sense that a life gestates within her as well as that its movement is spiritual, coming to her as a

sacred place “like a pilgrim” (71). Her first husband, Virgil, was killed in World War II. She has learned about mortality and has accepted it for her children. Hannah’s uniqueness is presented through a biblical and gender reversal, which indicates her orientation toward both heaven and earth. The meek life in her womb is one “the earth will inherit;” (72) but she is also attentive to it “as a dancer who lifts his partner” (71). She has knowledge of both descent and ascent. This “extraordinary” knowledge is reflected in her beauty, which is not only physical but “lighted as if from beneath the skin by a serenity that lives upon her.” The light of her knowledge is a “deep equanimity” (72) that is “her own, though she is only its bearer” (76). The image of the most profound knowledge and virtuous mind is a pregnant woman, who is both satisfied to give birth and accepts the mortality of the world into which her child will be born.

The important similarity between Hannah and Circe is that Hannah’s relationship with Jack, like Circe’s with Odysseus, offers a high point and erotic lesson.⁵⁵ Of all the townspeople, Jack is the only one who “most carefully understands” Hannah and “most exactly values” her (79). His journey has prepared him to recognize her, and she acknowledges his knowledge of her as distinct in the community. Hannah’s guidance to the prepared feast quickens him, elevating his disposition; her guidance “changes his mind,” transporting him from his “world of old age” to “the very heart of that world” of work and hunger (81). Like Circe she feeds Jack’s companions; her hospitality is what attracts and conditions the reunion of Jack with his kin and friends. She feels “in her

⁵⁵ Describing Circe as Jack’s central “erotic guide” comes from Zdravko Planinc, “Ascending with Socrates: Plato’s Use of Homeric Imagery in the Symposium,” *Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (2004): 325-350. My descriptions and considerations of *The Odyssey* is indebted to Planinc’s thought here.

flesh” the “welcoming hunger of the men” and satisfies their needs with food. With Jack, Hannah feels his need for a woman whose body is “one with the world” (76) and satisfies his needs with her life. “She is his Promised Land, that he may see but never hope to enter” (79). Jack’s relationship with Hannah is the reason his mind is worth revering; Hannah’s love is the standard for his character. She reveals that Jack’s “knowledge is womanly,” that “all human labor passes into mystery” (81). Her life is the embodiment of Jack’s intelligence; his regret at failing to be a better husband and father to his family enables him to recognize her. In her he sees what he was unsuccessful at becoming, but is still able to acknowledge it because of his betrayals and abandonments. He sees that “she is what he has failed” (79). Hannah is the figure who makes possible Jack’s “vision of the world,” his imagination; she is “a woman fulfilled and satisfied, her man’s welcome, at home in the world!” (79). Hannah’s attractions and satisfactions are the vision of ordinary living as being at home in the world. She has a patience with creation that opposes the indifference and hostility that Jack regrets have conditioned his life. She shows that it is possible to see the world as God’s creation, as one who is at home in the world yet free from the powers of mastery

There is feast and celebration, joking and lively conversation. Afterward, however, they must go back to work. The moment after dinner is rest and pleasure, but it is troubled by an “ancient anguish”; “they are again at the gate of Eden, looking out. Again they must resume their journey, the long return of dust to dust” (87). The wording recalls Genesis and the curse of Adam’s mortality, the sweat of labor and return to the earth. The work is unavoidable and necessary, but far from romantic; it is “breaking sweat

under the sun's blaze" working in the "dread of the heat and heaviness" that the most skilled and virtuous among them will suffer (85). It is the descent to Hades—going beneath the earth—to gain knowledge that cannot be acquired except by experiencing it, by going through it. Hannah, again because of her place in the story, does not offer instruction for the particular passage as Circe does, nor does Jack return to her after the journey, but she is his "vision of the world" (79). Jack sees her desires and their fulfillment in the order of her household and in the character of her husband. To be a good farmer requires more than skillful, technical knowledge. Hannah's presence is characterized by the quality of her love that is risky and costly in a world of war; her love "has stood up in the world—as one who has been sick nearly to death and grown well again rises, wondering, in the mortal light, and stands and moves" (76). Her affection has been a movement of descent with her first husband down to his death in the war and a movement of ascent with her second husband's return home from war. Jack sees in her this descent and ascent; he knows the risk and the cost of this love, but that it survives all disappointments and failures. Jack has learned the need for this love from his foundering and defeat at husbandry. Thus Hannah's presence at this point in his story and life instructs the reader's connection between erotics and agriculture, the need for a body to be not just skilled but properly oriented in love to get through the hellish experiences in ordinary life.

Before dinner ends, Jack remembers the time after the fire when he broke horses for extra income. It was a dangerous trade, which he practiced between the two sources of agony in his life: Ruth and work—the latter having been "blighted by debt" (86). He had

to be “on the lookout against tooth and hoof” or a “flying bird” that would spook the horse. He was breaking horses also to avoid drowning in debt. This was his “narrow line” between life and death. In *The Odyssey*, following Circe’s instructions, Odysseus travels to Hades to seek further guidance for his journey home from Tiresias. Tiresias tells Odysseus of the “narrow strait” (XI.110) he must negotiate between the Skylla—who attacks with teeth and claws from above—and drowning in Kharybdis. Like the Kharybdis, his work to get out of debt is where his voyage takes place. It is the place between the earth and “the eye of heaven” (30); it is “the heart of the world” but could destroy him. Jack gets “back the feel of his life” during this time of danger (86). Dinner ends and the men going back to the fields to work; Jack remains at the dinner table with the women. The memories of horse-breaking and the following conversation concerning his nephew, Andy, are described through the tropes of difficulty and danger in *The Odyssey*, namely, Skylla and Kharybdis (mentioned above) and Thrinakia and the Sirens (mentioned below). Jack’s moments following dinner reflect the equivalent difficulties and dangers he experiences in his fifteen-year journey out of debt.

The next stop in Odysseus’ trip after Circe’s island is Thrinakia, the island of Helios’ cattle. Odysseus wants to avoid the island altogether, but is compelled to land there. Odysseus tells his men that they have been instructed not to kill the sheep on the island, but they run out of food and kill and eat the sheep anyway. Odysseus alone does not consume the meat, and Odysseus alone survives Zeus’ retributive attack on the ship.

For Jack, Thrinakia is the prosperity of the city—i.e., the opulence to which Ruth is attracted and the place to which other people of Jack’s generation fled to find

opportunities and escape the difficulties of remaining in farming communities. When Jack returns to the present moment after his memory of horse breaking, he is in the company of women who are worried about Andy, Jack's great-great nephew, who is leaving the town to attend university. The women in Jack's company do not want Andy to go, and if he must go they certainly do not want him to stay. Their fear is articulated during dinner: that if he will "mind [his] books, and amount to something," and become "full of book learning" then he "won't have any more time for us here at all" (85). Jack, like Odysseus, avoids the temptation but is implicated in its consequences. Berry uses the trope of the sun more generally than the way Helios functions in *The Odyssey* and blends it with the sirens. Like the warning to pass by the sun god's island, or at least avoid consuming its stock, there is a profound danger in Andy's potential "city life" (88). It threatens the existence of community and the continuation of its identity and knowledge. Andy's decisions and consequences are not covered in this narrative, but the threat hangs over the novel.

Andy's girlfriend, Kirby, will be attending a "fashionable Eastern school in keeping with her social aspirations." She is a "lure and trial" of Andy's mind; she offers knowledge that appears like wisdom, "as if she managed... to be as doubtful and prudent as the old" (117). Kirby is "lithe and smooth and lovely," and distracts Andy from acknowledging that they come from different worlds (118). All she gives him is confusion—her knowledge sounds good but does not fit with his life in the community and would alter his course. The challenge the sirens pose to Odysseus is not in the content of their song per se; their knowledge is not fundamentally different from Circe's. The

problem is that they want Odysseus to stay with them, to learn without travelling and gain knowledge without experience. Both Hannah and Kirby encourage Andy to go to school; the knowledge he can gain there is not corrupting in and of itself. The danger is to stay there, to not continue moving back to the community. In short, Kirby's siren song is for Andy to become an intellectual, to gain knowledge that is isolated from his life in Port William.⁵⁶ Though this temptation is Andy's, Jack has learned the dangers of becoming an intellectual—a specialist—through different episodes. He indicates the insufficiency of "pure knowledge" in his phrase, "if you're going to talk to me, you'll have to walk" (157). There are some things that cannot just be told in order to learn; to know some things you must suffer and experience them. That this challenge is posed to Andy is important, and will be taken up again when the relationship between Jack and Andy is discussed.

Berry blends the potential disaster in the siren song and the island of the sun god, which is reflected in Jack's subsequent events. He leaves the women at the dinner table by himself and enters the town, which is "filled with light" and almost without shadow. This light, it seems, is not neutral but antagonistic: "Every surface glints with a hard, piercing brightness... [the sky] swells and aches with light" (88). Jack is completely alone in the town and cannot find refuge. He is in an island of sunlight that endangers him. He remembers a particularly painful argument he had with Ruth: they have run out of food and he leaves to get more from town without eating. Jack's trip to town turns out to be futile, and he gets caught in a storm. The storm that Odysseus and his men encounter after

⁵⁶ Note that "Kirby" is very close to "Kirke" – what they offer (how they arrange erotics and knowledge) appear very similar but are quite different.

the island is natural, but a thunderbolt sent by Zeus destroys their ship. For Jack, it is not just the storm but the “aimless demon of his fury” that causes the destruction of his wagon. Odysseus describes his men in the water “like seabirds on the waves” (XII.492); Jack describes the waves on the ford “like a flock of brown hens feeding” (90). His team of sorrels and carriage “plunges” into the swollen creek, which is described as “the no man’s land of his despair” (91). The wagon and horses are torn from the ground in the turbulent water; as Odysseus and his men are “flung into the sea,” (XII.490) Jack’s horses lose “their purchase on the ground,” which is “like falling” (91). Odysseus survives by hanging onto pieces of his ship—the keel and mast. Jack grabs on to the horses—that which provides movement, as does the mast for a ship—and cuts their harness to the wagon. Odysseus is carried back to Kharybdis and Skylla, surviving both in part by luck and in part by the mast and keel, and eventually lands on a new shore. Jack is carried down the stream grasping the collars of the horses, again caught between the dangers of drowning and the potential violent desperation of the horses, and finally reaches a bank.

Odysseus lands on the island of Kalypso. It is an idyllic home, surrounded by wood and teeming with life and fecundity. Even Hermes is in awe of Kalypso’s paradisaical place, upon which he “would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight” (V.80). Jack’s mistress, Rose McInnis, lives in a cottage that is equally bucolic. Not only does it abound in flora and fauna but it recalls “ancient happy memories or dreams;” its external life seems to issue from a “deeply indwelling artistry” and “knowledge of some mystery.” Many who visit think, “Once, long ago, I must have lived in such a place” (95). It is a mixture of the natural and divine. When Hermes visits Kalypso, she is sewing next to her

blazing hearth; when Jack first visits Rose he is seated next to the hearth in order to get his wound sewed. Just as Kalypso takes care of Odysseus after his wreck, Rose cares for Jack's body by cleaning and dressing his wound.

Rose is presented in the way Berry understands Kalypso, offering Jack the same conundrum Odysseus experiences on the island of Ogygia: though Odysseus enjoys “the delights of Kalypso's cave” he suffers the “grief and longing of exile.”⁵⁷ Kalypso finally agrees to release Odysseus, but warns him of his adversity both at sea and at home. She also asks Odysseus to compare Penelope to herself: who is more desirable, interesting, beautiful?—surely Penelope cannot compete with her “grace and form” (V.220-222). Odysseus concedes Kalypso this victory over Penelope, but says, “Yet, it is true, each day I long for home, long for the sight of home” (V.228-229). Berry sees in Odysseus' response, his choice of Penelope over a goddess and immortality, a kind of wedding ritual. “Odysseus forsakes all others... and renews his pledge to the mortal terms of his marriage.” This wedding, to Berry's mind, is different from a modern marriage because it “involves an explicit loyalty to a home.”⁵⁸ Central to both *The Odyssey* and *Old Jack* is the sense of home for which both long as well as the kind of education they undergo during the journey and how they enact those lessons once they reach home.

Just prior to meeting Rose, Jack has learned the lessons of his divisions. The despair that results from bringing predetermined desires and expectations to a relationship in order to be fulfilled without receiving the character and qualities of the other is felt when that relationship is with either a spouse or a farm. Jack has learned the importance

⁵⁷ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 124.

⁵⁸ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 125

of working with integrity, which entails both farming practices and relationships with laborers that have a proper orientation and end. He also knows his own need to reconnect body and spirit in order to relate well with others, which, in turn allows him to relate well to the land. The problem is that he goes to someone else's bed—Rose's—to fulfill his needs, rather than attending to the relations in his own bed to reorder his life and household management.

Rose is like Hannah but insufficient for Jack's life. Rose's cottage exhibits the fecundity of nature, reflecting Hannah's pregnancy and motherhood that exhibit her bodily fertility. Both are comfortably at home in the world through their love of creation. Both provide erotic lessons for how to understand Jack's mind, what attracts it and how it moves out to the world. Both are located in a paradisaal place, at "the gates of Eden." Both show the need for generation, although it is telling that Rose does not produce offspring or a need to farm.

Rose is also the inversion of Ruth. She is the one who "loved him as he was" (93). Rose married the old doctor of the town just after turning twenty-years-old. Though the town figured Rose only married the doctor for his money, she remains married to him for thirteen years, and after he dies she neither remarries nor leaves Port William. Jack meets her when he visits the doctor's house after a farming accident. Rose, to Jack's surprise, inspects his wound "knowingly" and her hands touch his body "unhesitatingly" (96). Unlike Ruth, Rose knows and unflinchingly handles Jack's body. Her husband's name is "Clay," which is the substance of the human body. Though Rose's intentions are never revealed, her love for the old doctor is not for material gain or purely for the pleasures of

the body. Their marriage, unlike Jack and Ruth's relationship, shows the attraction of two souls; their inner connection is embodied. They remain oblivious to the town's judgments, and unconcerned about outward appearance, which is not a rejection or denial of the body. She knows bodies but is oriented to them properly. The fecundity of their married life is not in their offspring; the old doctor is presumably too old to procreate. Instead, the life not of their loins but of their cabin overflows. "The order and abundance of the place seemed the emanation of a deeply indwelling artistry" (95). Even after Clay dies, the place remains an island of fertility amidst the desert of the town's judgment.

The image of Rose is divine; her cottage is paradise. The town sees her as "odd" and feels her flourishing presence as a "mystery" (95). Jack's affair with Rose recreates him. In Rose's bed, in the order and lushness of her house, he is "within the gates of Eden," (103) and he stands "naked before her and [is] not ashamed" (100). She offers him delights and yet he is isolated from his life outside her. Rose has "imparadised his mind," such that he ceases to care for anything outside "her reach and touch" (101). Though Rose has revitalized him in all the ways Ruth deadened him, he goes to Rose in exile. He is always a guest in her house; it can never be his home because their love cannot lead to anything beyond itself. After Ruth discovers the affair, Jack is torn—his love is divided between two women: "With Ruth, his work had led to no good love. With Rose, his love led to no work" (103). Work needs the fall; Jack cannot stay in the garden of Eden if he wants to be husband to the earth. He needs a "worldly faith" and "labor," neither of which will come with the uncommitted freedom of Rose's paradise and delights (103). Rose's knowing and passionate touch restores Jack's bodily needs; her perfection in herself

shows him what completeness looks like and that he is incomplete. That he feels “out of place” in her garden and bed teaches him the need for a home that is more than just a man and wife. Rose helps Jack recover his spirit, reconnecting it to his body. Jack learns the futility of this wholeness when isolated from the earth. He learns the need for both paradise and “earthly troth and travail.”

Kalypso is forced by the gods to free Odysseus; Hermes is the messenger that informs her of this decree. Jack, after years of his affair with Rose, goes to Louisville to sell his tobacco crop in February 1903. While on the steamboat, Jack is approached by “a dignified little man with a gray mustache, a man of jokes and riddles and precisions of speech.” Out of a group of people, he alone delivers to Jack the message that Rose is dead. She has burned to death after her skirt caught fire from the hearth. The gods, it seems, force Jack and Rose’s separation; her fate reflects that of Jack’s barn. Joan Joff Hall argues that Rose’s death is a deficiency in Berry’s novel. “Berry does not permit Jack to work out the consequences of his painful dilemma. Rose is killed off and Jack remains: pained, bereft, yet essentially unchanged, in many ways a moral innocent. He and Berry both get off easily.”⁵⁹ Hall’s criticism should be taken seriously, for Rose’s death allows Jack to mourn without need of much self-reflection. The drama is patterned after *The Odyssey*, which means that Berry perhaps only meant for it to display the drama on Kalypso’s island. That Jack is “essentially unchanged,” however, is not the case; his arguments with Rose reflect the kind of marriage ritual Berry sees occurring in *The Odyssey*. That Jack learns of the inevitable barrenness of a relationship cordoned off from

⁵⁹ Joan Joff Hall, Review of *The Memory of Old Jack*, by Wendell Berry, in *The New Republic* 170 (6 April 1974), 27.

the earth and of the need for both Eden and work evinces his change. He becomes more faithful to his wife than ever before, even though it is too late for that fidelity to reorder his household.

Odysseus travels home after leaving Kalypso's island but crashes on the island of the Phaiakians in a windstorm and tells them his story. After Jack visits Rose's grave, he finds himself alone in the town as "steady and strong" winds form. As night falls the darkness rises "like rising water." He returns to his present moment, but is disoriented by his grief. He is sitting on a bench in the town, which is "flooded and foundering in the brilliant sky." He stands, but "the street sways under him. The town tilts like a sinking ship, poised upon darkness" (105). Jack falls, crashing on the ground. An unknown person finds him, addressing him only as "Uncle."

The story shifts back to Andy, about to embark on his own journey to university. The next time Jack is mentioned in the narrative is when Andy meets him one last time before he leaves. Jack mistakes Andy for the person who found him after he fell. Andy is the person to whom Jack tells his stories. Andy is Jack's great-great-nephew who has had his mind formed by his community, and so he knows "the truths older than the town's truths; he knows a faith and a hardship and a delight older than the town's ambition to be a bigger town." In him his community sees "traits and features of dead men and women they loved" (107). Andy mirrors Jack; it is also his last day in Port William, but as Jack is at the end of his journey Andy is at the beginning of his. Andy has learned from Jack and so shares his mind. Both Andy and his brother are "initiates of a way of life that was threatened and nearly done with" and are "among the last survivors" (108). Though he

has yet to have a formal education, Andy's mind is already a "luminous landscape"; the stories he has heard and relationships he has had shape his orientation to the world. His departure is "complex" because he sees the place he is leaving as his home. He walks in his world "surrounded by the ghosts and presence of the ones who have cared for him and watched over him there all his life, and he is accompanied by earlier versions of himself that he has lived beyond" (113). Andy's journey begins where Jack's ends. The questions this poses is whether Andy will return home and, if he does, what kind of ordering vision will he bring to Port William? In other words, Berry asks whether there is an Odysseus for his generation.

After Andy leaves, Jack remembers his homecoming. His time laboring was "longer than Jacob labored for the daughters of Laban" though he never "dreamed of an easier way" (119). His time working to get out of debt after Rose's death was his marriage ritual to his land. He learns to "forsake all others"—both foreign land and women. At this, "his soul breaks open" (121). Once again he is open to the transcendent with "the eye of heaven clear upon him," allowing him to see his land differently from how he had before (122). During the five years of darkness Jack learned what it means to be faithful; "he lost his life" to that work in debt but returns to the same place, the same fields, different than he was before. He is "where he was when he began. But that is enough, and more. He is returning home." He, like Odysseus, will die twice. They both return home not outwardly changed but renewed internally. For neither of them are the lessons simply practical skills or techniques, but a way of understanding the world

according to knowledge of death and goodness. Jack, like Odysseus, returns home alive and with a heightened sense for the importance of things divine—of peace and faith.

The difference between Odysseus and Jack is that Jack's sense of the divine is Christian; however, it is not institutional. Odysseus' journey through death is through Hades; Jack's journey is through Psalm 23, the valley of the shadow of death. He had not understood it before but does now:

The man who first spoke the psalm had been driven to the limit, he had seen his ruin, he had felt in the weight of his own flesh the substantiality of his death and the measure of his despair. He knew that his origin was in nothing that he or any man had done, and that he could do nothing sufficient to his needs. And he looked finally beyond those limits and saw the world still there, potent and abounding, as it would be whether he lived or died, worthy of his life and work and faith... And when he knows that he lives by a bounty not his own, though his ruin lies behind him and again ahead of him, he will be at peace, for he has seen what is worthy (122-123).

His is a "different faith" from Ruth's, which was bound to the church rather than her home. His faith is a return to his origins, with a new recognition of how he should relate to it. He had to go through his hardships and joys, through failures and death itself to learn how to work in his land and see the world's abundance—that it is more than enough. This excess and the natural rhythms and life of the world that produce it is not to be manipulated and controlled for selfish desires. Rather, it provides a perspective of the world as that which people have in common rather than as material for self-fulfillment.

Jack returns to his homeland to restore order, as does Odysseus. Jack's inward change affects the order of his place. He no longer focuses on his own economic affairs but does "unflinchingly whatever he thought necessary, whatever affection or loyalty or obligation demanded" (124). He thus comes to influence others. His household also

improves as he fixes and replaces what is needed as a result of his absence. He remembers Will Wells and enacts what he learned from his treatment of Will: he would not acquire more land but attend his own with “redoubled care... not because it belonged to him so much as because, by the expenditure of history and work, he belonged to it.” The results of this lesson “became visible around him and under his feet” (125). In short, as Odysseus returns to Ithaka as “the great husband” (XXI.337) Jack “became again the true husband of his land” (125). Though Jack’s return does not offer a reconciliation with Ruth, he manages to make her life a little easier and enjoyable. Jack’s return offers order in the same concentric focus as Odysseus: land, household, marriage. Unlike Odysseus’ marriage, Jack’s cannot be reconciled; it is too late.

Because it is too late for their marriage to be fully reconciled, the order of Jack and Ruth’s household cannot last. Presently, Jack lives in Mrs. Hendrick’s hotel with a few other “guests”—geriatrics with nowhere else to live. They have outlived their respective spouses and are incapable of unassisted life. Their children live in the city, and in each case neither one of the relatives—parent or child—wants to or can live with the other. Ultimately, Jack will die, once again, in exile. The problem with his daughter, Clara, is rooted in her upbringing; she did not follow Jack into his fields to learn of his character but instead stayed in the house “under the persistent tutelage of her mother’s thwarted ambition” (131). Such was Clara’s moral formation, which consisted in Ruth imputing the desires and aspirations that she (Ruth) received from her father. The result is a house that reflects Odysseus’ own home upon his return. Suitors of Penelope inhabit Odysseus’ house; they eat his food, consume his resources, and mock him as a vagabond

instead of recognizing him as Penelope's true husband. While Clara is away at school, Jack, though out of debt, is "again forced to skimp and deny himself in order to pay her expenses" (131). Ruth contributes to the household economy, hiding the division between herself and Jack, so that Clara could be notably eligible for marriage. Showy and boisterous parties result, which puts the actual work of the farm in the background. Clara, in the presence of friends, condescends to Jack as "the urban stereotype of the farmer: the man of the soil, the hardy plowman, rugged and proud, but somewhat comical in his speech and old clothes, with his quaint preoccupations and his stay-at-home ways" (132). Jack belongs more to his fields than to his own daughter.

This estrangement is manifested in Clara's suitor, Glad Pettit, a banker. Previously, the narrator has referred to the town's bank as the church's "crony" (88). Though this association is a cliché, it helps to understand Glad; his profession is not just superficially material but associated with spiritual disorder. Unlike Odysseus, Jack does not kill the suitor; he is a farmer not a warrior. Nevertheless, there is a divine judgment of Glad's disrespect for Jack's domestic order. The form of Glad's contempt is his friendly tolerance of his father-in-law: Jack is a "Man of the Soil" who has nothing to teach but is a "type"—the "salt of the earth"—of hard-working people.⁶⁰ Glad and Clara's visits to the farm reflect the ostentation of their wedding, accepting Jack's produce not as something needed but as decoration for their lives. Their meals together are not celebrations or even acknowledgements of their relationship as a family but enact their estrangement. Thus,

⁶⁰ Glad's speech appears good but lacks substance. Jack does not mistake the appearance of the words for reality – compared to Lightning—one of the Feltner's hired hands—who cannot see the mockery of Burley's praise; he mistakes the appearance of quality for substance of character and ability.

the lonely meal with strangers in a hotel is the continuation of the farm's bounty carried off in the banker's car "to the satisfaction of such hunger as might be roused by the balancing of figures in a book" (134). It is the result of his marriage's division, the failure to unite farm, household, and bed. Clara's marriage to Glad is the desecration of the kind of household Hannah runs; not only does it not generate anything that is not useless—Glad and Clara have no children—it degrades the things that good work generates.

Though Jack's sense of the divine is Christian and his vision of the world is biblical, Berry draws on *The Odyssey* for an image of the unification of fidelity to place and to spouse. Ruth has a heart attack and Clara takes her from the farm to her palatial house in Louisville where she can be "comfortable"—a term that Clara uses to finalize the division between life on the farm and the urban environment (135). As Ruth is taken by paramedics into the ambulance, she holds Jack's hand and looks at him straight: he feels her hand "that perhaps had never touched him so" and in her eyes sees "their tiredness, their unaccustomed gentleness upon him, as though wearied at last into some final and frail, hopeless and helpless love" (135). Penelope's recognition of Odysseus is a triumph; Ruth's acknowledgement of Jack is broken, though not quite a defeat. Jack is moved by Ruth's look and he cries while plowing, "his tears fall into the furrow as it opens" (136). The scene, however opposed in emotional circumstance, parallels what Berry finds instructive about Odysseus' reunion with Penelope. When they finally embrace "from his heart into his eyes the ache of longing mounted, and he wept at last, his dear wife, clear and faithful in his arms, longed for as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer spent in rough water where his ship went down..." (XXIII.235-238).

Berry sees in this articulation of the embrace “the long-hinted analogy between Odysseus’ fidelity to his wife and his fidelity to his homeland;” in their embrace “his two fidelities become one.”⁶¹ Though Jack and Ruth’s isolation from each other and its damages are complete, there is a glimpse at reconciliation. It is not enough for hope, but it is enough to make her death disheartening; one feels Jack’s inability to unite these two fidelities.

Glad is Jack’s occasion for civil war. Odysseus slays the suitors, and their kin want revenge. The only way to avert civil war is through Athena’s intervention; though Odysseus learned much in his wandering, it seems as though he is unwilling or unable to bring all his lessons to bear at home. In Hades, Tiresias tells Odysseus to take an oar, an instrument of invasion and conquest, to a place where “men have... never known the sea” and mistake it for a “winnowing fan.” Only then will Odysseus be able to die in “blessed peace” (XI.130-146). As Berry describes the prophecy, “Odysseus will not know rest... until he has seen the symbol of his warrior life as a farming tool.” It will give Odysseus “atonement” and a “gentle death will come to him when he is weary with age.”⁶² Jack attempts atonement with Glad, offering him the purchase of a neighboring farm. The thing he used for expansion and mastery at the expense of Will he offers up to Glad. Jack envisions “the kindness and mutual pleasure” in Glad’s acquisition and the life they might share together as a family united in life and work in a way it never was between Jack and Ruth. It is the return of the generosity Jack had for Ruth in their engagement. It is Jack’s “desperate attempt to make between them a common ground and a bond” (137). Though

⁶¹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 127.

⁶² Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 129. Jack is denied this kind of death, which is “the one Homer seems to recommend.” *Life is a Miracle*, 146. Jason Peters suggests that “this underwrites the death of Nathan Coulter” in *Hannah Coulter*. Peters, “Education, Heresy,” 277n. 24.

Odysseus never plants his oar, Jack tries and fails. Glad is not a person who can recognize any kind of agricultural tool that he would actually use. Glad turns down the offer because, despite the possible economic gains from the purchase, if he lived next to Jack “he’d have to look [him] in the face” (139). It is the attempt at atonement that Glad rejects, the prospect of being one with anything other than “figures in a book.” After the offer, Glad ceases even to visit the farm; Jack ceases even to call him by his name, instead calling him “Irvin... to signify that he was *done* with him.” And so, both Odysseus and Jack’s final movements in their homelands lack atonement and peace due to their respective failures.

Glad’s inability to recognize Jack contrasts Mat’s recognition of Jack and their relationship. Odysseus goes to the fields after he kills the suitors and reunites with Penelope. He meets his father Laertes who is planting a fruit tree dressed as a farmer. Berry finds the encounter moving; Laertes is a king but has “survived his son’s absence and the consequent grief and disorder *as a peasant*.”⁶³ Odysseus does not run to embrace his father, revealing everything he has learned; Odysseus tests him. Jack’s father is long dead, but he has learned more from his sister’s husband, Ben Feltner, who raised him. When Jack returns home from clearing his debt with the bank, the person he meets in the fields is Ben’s son, Mat. Jack figures Ben is too old to bear his lessons, which include “too strict a qualification of pain,” (123) so he tests Mat. Gesturing toward Mat’s fields, which reflect Ben’s careful work, he says, “That’s all you’ve got, Mat. It’s your only choice. It’s all you can have; whatever you try to gain somewhere else, you’ll lose here....

⁶³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 128.

And it's enough. It's more than enough." Jack quotes psalm twenty-three, testing Mat's understanding; Mat understands without "saying glibly or too soon that he understood" (124). Mat understands what Glad will never know, namely, what is enough, what is more than enough. Jack's test shows him that Mat is not Glad; Jack tells Mat of Glad's disrespect and greed in order to acknowledge and "clarify their [Jack and Mat's] kinship in its final terms" (139). Mat embodies the lesson in Laertes' test and recognition: "in a time of disorder he has returned to the care of the earth, the foundation of life and hope."⁶⁴ The tension at the heart of Jack and Glad's civil war will live past Jack, and Mat will have to face the coming disorder.

Jack's death is his mind finally "coming to rest" (146). He experiences Odysseus' death as foretold by Teiresias. And yet the story continues for thirty pages—spanning three chapters and an epilogue—detailing Jack's funeral and the various responses to Jack's death by the community. Griel Marcus takes exception to Berry's artistic decision, suggesting the final pages ring a "false note" of "facile celebration of pastoralism or 'lost values.'"⁶⁵ The question is whether Berry intends his novel to be "a verbal monument which preserves [Jack's] wisdom but not his biases."⁶⁶ Does Jack, for Berry, stand as "an ideal" that "confirms the order in his own history and bolsters his present position[?]"⁶⁷ The failures and shortcomings of Jack should be obvious enough to counter the proposition that he is an ideal. The final pages reflect the difficulty in inheriting Jack's wisdom.

⁶⁴ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 129.

⁶⁵ Marcus, *Rolling Stone*, 89.

⁶⁶ Alan Cheuse, "A Squarebuilt Cairn of Stones," *Nation* 219 (28 September 1974): 280.

⁶⁷ Janet Goodrich, *The Unforeseen Self in the Works of Wendell Berry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 65-68.

Part of the wisdom of *The Odyssey*, according to Berry, is that, although it is a kind of “anti-*Iliad*, posing against the warrior values... an affirmation of the values of domesticity and farming,” it does not set these two kinds of moral characters “in any purity or exclusiveness of opposition.” The poems do not name two kinds of opposing experiences but “are linked together.”⁶⁸ It is important that Odysseus learn from his experiences in order to make appropriate judgments, and so the moments of peaceful domesticity and marital faithfulness have emotional impact on the reader because they are in tension with the “dark wilderness of natural force and mystery.”⁶⁹ Nor is Jack an experience, a moral character, or standard that is placed in pure opposition with modernity—what Jack calls “this modern ignorance.” Both Berry and Homer are trying to create an experience of tension in the reader—between art and life—to figure out what the hero ought to have learned in his experiences by becoming more attuned with the erotic nature of the world. The temptation for the reader is to see Jack in the way he did not want to be seen: as a relic, a monument of the past. In the last part of the book, Berry dramatizes the inclination of his kin and community to remember him in this way. They struggle to continue on in light of Jack’s wisdom, knowing they cannot simply imitate his ways or wait for another of his kind to come along.

There are two occasions that will test the community’s memory of Old Jack. The first is Jack’s funeral, which Mat must negotiate with both the town’s pastor and Clara. Mat has recognized Jack and learned from him and is concerned that the memory of Jack bear witness to his mind as Mat understood it. Glad and Clara’s ostentation threaten

⁶⁸ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 129.

⁶⁹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 130.

Jack's wisdom regarding what is enough; Brother Wingfare's display of spirituality threatens Jack's wisdom regarding the reality of what is hidden in nature. Both are ways to forget Jack as he was, to avoid learning what he learned through his suffering and hardships. Mat knows there are people who will "exact their tribute now upon the passive remnant of Jack Beechum" in order to overcome the way in which he made himself different from them (148). Mat also knows that this is the nature of the precarious place in which the community is perched; "A landmark that they all had depended on had fallen... and things would no longer be as they had been" (149). Their minds and their relationship with the land have changed. Mat has taken Jack's place in the community by virtue of his age and memory and thus feels he must "find the way" and stand "guard over Old Jack and over his death" (149). Mat's first impulse is to protect Jack in a feat of exclusive opposition, to keep his memory safe from those who hold contempt for what Jack valued most.

Mat tries and fails to be Jack's custodian: despite Mat's efforts, there is a pretentious coffin instead of a wooden box, and elevated theology instead of a simple graveside service. Mat "erected... a proprietary claim" of self-appointed authority over Clara and Brother Wingfare that "would have embarrassed him greatly in different circumstances" (153). His behavior is in tension with his character. Mat should be embarrassed by his attempt to wield his authority as though it were institutional; he asserts in his pose and tactics to control the conditions of Jack's memory. Mat is not perfect—nor is he quite like his father Ben—as Jack already had seen: Mat has Ben's "kindness" and "sweetness of spirit" but Mat also has "a restless intelligence, an

eagerness for things as they ought to be, an anger and grief against things as they are... Mat has never had Ben's patience" (15). Nevertheless, Mat is "a good man" (127). What is instructive about the failure of Jack's funeral is not that it signifies the impossibility for men of virtue, such as Jack and his heir in authority Mat, to withstand the coming fashions and trends of the likes of Glad and Clara Pettit. Rather, Mat learns from his mistake. Mat's felt inadequacy to be the "defender of the dead" puts him "near to the most wholehearted curse of his life upon the Pettits and the likes of them." But because Mat holds Jack "only in his mind" rather than preserves his place in the world, he will not "even form the words [of the curse] in his mind." Mat contemplates in the silence Jack left him, and comes to an insight about his tenants, Lightning and Sylvania Berlew. Previously, the Berlews' condescension, ignorance, and laziness provoked Mat's sense of self-righteousness. At the beginning of the book, Mat offers Lightning a hog knowing he would refuse it, but volunteers the meat anyway "for some perverse fascination in seeing the man so steadfastly prove himself a fool" (13). Mat's interest and attraction are wrongly oriented; they are turned around. Mat experiences a deep intuitive understanding of the Berlews and Pettits as "two halves of the same distraction," unable to imagine anything "higher than they are" (156-157). Both couples are unlikable and vicious in their ways, but Mat learns through his contemplation in silence rather than in obstinate confrontation the need for the mind to ascend. Mat has learned from Jack that the mind's ascent is not one of theoretical knowledge or insight of the self separate from the world, but one that includes a practical kindly intelligence.

In the face of fear Jack learned to stay in place. He learned only by going through the valley of the shadow of death what it takes to be “faithful to his land, through all its yearly changes from maiden to mother, the bride and wife and widow of men like himself since the world began” (122). When Odysseus is in Hades, he awaits Theseus and Peirithoos claiming to have “stood fast, awaiting other great souls who perished in times past” (XI.706-709). So too Jack “stood unconditionally where he stood.” (157) Jack did not flee to the city; he was not scared by either his mortality or his failures to give into the fashions and economics that oppose the values of his yeoman tradition. Mat too stands fast after the funeral, standing “like another of the inscribed stones, bearing the graved name of what is gone” (161). Mat will not flee to the city, but neither will he be satisfied with Jack as an ideal. To do so would be a continuation of his perverse fascination to converse with those deemed morally inferior only to prove them fools. Mat does not move, but his mind ascends, moving into the fields open to the eye of heaven as Jack did. This movement is thus spiritual, though one different from Brother Wingfare’s who makes a final proclamation that the afterlife provides comforts “to erase forever from our hearts the memory of our sufferings” on earth (159). Such is the spirituality of the modern ignorance, unable to gain the wisdom found only by going through Hades.

The second test of the community is Jack’s land. Wheeler, Andy’s father and Jack’s lawyer, must execute Jack’s will. Wheeler, like Mat, has “recognized Old Jack’s death as one of the crucial divisions in his own life” (162). Wheeler maintains a “filial devotion” to Jack as the last of the generation of “the old way;” the few in whom Jack’s way of farming survives compose “a race doomed to extinction” (163). Wheeler has

become a lawyer to serve these farmers, to protect them as best he can against the legal and economic changes that will be their undoing. Jack leaves to Elton—not to Clara—his farm, but arranges his will so that Elton must purchase half of it on his own. Jack did not want to leave the farm to Elton “outright. He thought you ought to work for it the way he did... there were some essential things he never learned until he got in debt” (165).

Wheeler knows as Jack knew that Elton is a good farmer; he has good practical knowledge of caring for the land. There is more to farming, however, than technique; Wheeler struggles with understanding this “key” to Jack’s life beyond having a sense for it as “some vital power” (166). By the impulse of his “objectless grief” Wheeler enters Jack’s old harness room and sees a 1936 campaign poster for Franklin Roosevelt. Jack “admired Roosevelt mainly... for his willingness to place himself in difficulty” (167). On the poster are figures and dates that record the accounting of Jack’s farming. They are “the visible tracks of Jack Beechum’s mind.” Wheeler is about to take the poster as a keepsake and then decides against it, saying, “we’ll take no trophies, no souvenirs. Let it fall like a leaf” (167).

In “Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer,” Berry writes

When I fall
let me fall without regret
like a leaf.⁷⁰

Regret is “one of the powerful themes” of Jack’s life (31). Sorrow and disappointment characterize much of Jack’s wanderings, but his final descent into death resembles the fall of a leaf: pleasant and restful. Wheeler’s instinct is to regret and defy the extinction of the

⁷⁰ Wendell Berry, *The Collected Poems of Wendell Berry* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 130.

old way; he wants to keep Jack's figures as a set of instructions that can be passed on or as a useless memorial of the way things used to be. Abstracting Jack's knowledge of farming will not preserve the past, or the presence of the past in living farmers. It is a difficult thing for a man like Wheeler to accept the fact that there are no fundamental principles of farming that can be taught and applied such that the kind of character Jack was will stay in the world. There are some "essential" things that must be undergone if one is to learn what it means to farm. The wisdom of Jack is not in his incoherent scriblings on the poster but rather in what he admired in the man on it; central to Jack's wisdom is his willingness to be present in difficult circumstances.

Both Wheeler and Mat must learn that Jack's memory cannot be protected, defended, and secured but remembered in the lives of those who knew him. One must imagine things higher than oneself; one must accept the loss of all things dearly held without regret. These lessons for Jack's kin and fellowship amount to the same thing: be careful not to avoid walking through the valley of the shadow of death. The movement of the modern ignorance, the "pilgrimage in search of Easy Street," (156) circumvents Hades; it is what makes a person a fool rather than wise. The Berlews and Pettits dramatize the foolishness of a life lived avoiding death, but also Mat and Wheeler learn that there are ways of treating the dead with respect that nevertheless reinscribe the perverse fascination—the corrupt erotics—of trying to institutionalize Jack's wisdom. In other words, readers of *The Memory of Old Jack* must learn through Jack's stories and

those of his successors, how to remember Jack.⁷¹ The book's pedagogy is not in its instructions or reminder of America's past. Rather, Berry displays a man's intelligence through his homecoming and the continued life of the community in which his household is situated. That is, the complexity of Berry's novel is in Jack's education in the interconnection between marriage and the earth; the commitment to forsake all others and bind sexuality to the fecundity of nature—in short, erotics—forms a mind different from one that thinks itself the source of knowledge.

Wisdom is more than either inward knowledge of the self or practical knowledge of crafts—or even the two together. Wisdom is erotic; making a virtue of knowing something involves educating the mind's movements, the things to which it is attracted. Berry uses the trope of marriage and fidelity in *The Odyssey* to give an interpretive structure for Jack's education. Marriage, of a certain kind, forms multiple internal and external connections and helps to negotiate the moral complexity of cultural and relational disintegrations. Put differently, modern marriage, as Berry sees it, largely consists in “duty”—fidelity driven less by joy than by will-power—that divides people into individuals who must conjure up the brute strength to remain faithful, which thereby disables its potential for generosity and dignity. Odysseus' love for and faithfulness to Penelope is the basic energy that drives him home; the guidance he receives from women is essentially helping him learn how to love and be faithful in better ways. The tests

⁷¹ I disagree with seeing Jack as “the avatar of what we in the northern cities lack... having decided to ignore him, we institutionalize him, in literature or nursing homes.” John Ditsky, review of *The Memory of Old Jack* by Wendell Berry, *University of Windsor Review* (Fall/Winter 1974): 113. Rather, the novel “seems remarkably *unprogrammatic*, its values emerging from the lives of its characters rather than the pronouncements of its author.” Patricia Meyer Spacks, review of *The Memory of Old Jack* by Wendell Berry, *The Hudson Review* 27, no. 2 (1974): 292.

Odysseus faces are moments that communicate his ability to learn the lessons he receives from these erotic guides. In other words, his mind and his political judgments are the result of his ability—or not—to learn how to love properly and remain faithful to that love. Odysseus needs to learn how to be consistent in his love by learning about both the higher and lower things in life, both the mysterious and practical understanding of nature and human experience. It is this love—its basis in the household rooted to the earth—that survives political turmoil in cultivation and herding that makes *The Odyssey* an anti-*Iliad*; Odysseus' domestic peace characterizes him as a different hero from Achilles the warrior.

Odysseus is known for his cunning and skillful leadership, but he is not perfect. Berry argues that Odysseus' success and failures are judged according to the “understanding that agricultural value [is] the foundation of domestic order and peace.”⁷² Berry uses Odysseus' homecoming to show Jack's wisdom, but he makes Jack's primary marriage to his fields. Jack returns home as the true husband of the land in the same way Odysseus returns home as the true husband of Penelope. Odysseus reunites with Penelope, but his story does not end there; that he needs the intervention of Athena to stop a civil war reveals his inadequacy, which Homer presents as the opportunity for the reader to test her judgments. That Jack fails as a husband to Ruth reveals his inadequacy, which Berry leaves unresolved for the judgment of the reader; the last thirty pages of the novel give readers the opportunity to test their judgments.

The epilogue gives a small sense of how the community properly holds the memory of old Jack. In the winter of his death, his closest friends are together stripping

⁷² Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 128.

tobacco. Uncalled, one of them remembers Jack and repeats one of Jack's well-known expressions. Each one follows up with another of Jack's maxims or epigrams. "His words pass among them, possessing their tongues" (169). The memory of Jack is in their speech: the way they talk to one another, the stories they tell—in short, the conversational life of the community. It is his fidelity and gentleness that remain with them and is exchanged in dialogue. The wisdom of Jack lingers in the form of this fidelity and gentleness, which cannot be preserved outside of the community's conversation about itself. The conversation is not aimless; its purpose is the same as the purpose of fidelity as a virtue, which "must lead to harmony between one creature and another."⁷³ That is, it has practical—political—consequences for the order of the community.

Hannah Coulter

In *Hannah Coulter*, Berry returns to his Circe—the erotic guide of the Port William community. Berry describes the novel as "strongly sexual" and yet there are no 'sex scenes.'⁷⁴ Hannah is the embodiment of the sexual energy at the heart of the community. In other words, Berry explores sexuality without abstracting it from the public life of its participants and their various relationships. Sex is part of the pattern outlined in *The Memory of Old Jack*, and it is given specific attention in *Hannah Coulter* without making a "specialty" or an "irrelevancy" of it.⁷⁵ The background for the novel is

⁷³ Not that this excludes arguments and refutation. Jack often got into arguments with Wheeler about figures and plans for the farm. Jack spoke with his friends in such a way that, although confident, allowed them to challenge him, to speak back.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Gene Lodgson, "Wendell Berry: Agrarian Artist," *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 252.

⁷⁵ Lodgson, "Wendell Berry," 252.

World War II; Hannah, who “married the war twice,” responds to her grief with her love and care for her husbands, families, and community. *Hannah Coulter* is Berry’s literary response to the presumed inevitability and necessity of world warfare. It is a direct criticism of the “hopeless paradox of making peace by making war”⁷⁶ and describes a hopeful paradox of making peace by making love. Hannah’s sexuality is exhibited in both her marriage to Nathan and Virgil as well as her hospitable connection to the community, as seen in the communal dinner scene in *Old Jack*. Berry shows that Hannah’s sexuality is deeply practical, rooted in an economy on which people—both family members and others—depend.

Hannah is Berry’s only non-white-male narrator. It may appear that this is an example contradicting the argument in chapter three of Berry using a marginalized voice to authenticate his own. Hannah’s voice, however, is hardly outside the community. Instead, Berry opposes the motive for using outsiders to resist institutional closures by placing a woman at the centre of the rural commonwealth. Berry runs counter to popular images of rural life for women, which is often depicted as oppressive, constrained, and burdensome. Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street*, which portrays the drudgery and exploitation of women in agrarian life, is one example of this image; it is a stereotype that Berry has resisted.⁷⁷ Berry assumes the same moral structure in *Hannah Coulter* as in *The Memory of Old Jack*: the domestic life is more virtuous than the “manly” art of war. Hannah’s voice is subversive for a male-oriented society that looks to politicians and generals for

⁷⁶ Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 24

⁷⁷ “During the first year I was back in Kentucky, though my work apparently gave no evidence of decline, I received letters warning me against the Village Virus and the attitudes of Main Street, counseling me to remain broad-minded and intellectually aware, admonishing that I should be on the lookout for signs of decay in my work and in my mind.” Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 176.

historical meaning; her portrayal as Circe in *Old Jack* positions her as a person of authority concerning membership in Port William. That is, at the heart of the community is a woman who is raised by her grandmother and estranged from her children. She has suffered, but Berry does not use this to manipulate the reader's moral judgment that she is not, for example, worth listening to because she has been a victim. Instead, I shall argue that Hannah's voice is the one through which Berry most explicitly articulates the best and worst of human experience; biblically stated, she is the one most attuned to death and resurrection. Rather than use an epic such as *The Odyssey* to structure her story, Berry uses biblical and poetic language to describe the range of the embodied nature of life.

My reading of *Hannah Coulter* will therefore argue against the charge that Berry is sexist. This indictment has troubled Berry for decades, and the way in which I have framed *Hannah Coulter* will not appease all who level the indictment against him. There is a way in which the book can be seen as just another example of Berry's tendency to "objectify women as objects of worship or beauty or corporate success."⁷⁸ Because he places the health of the place and the flourishing of the community ahead of individual autonomy, he is seen as a "sentimentalist" who is ignorant of the individual plights and social disorders that rural culture shares with wider society.⁷⁹ Moreover, his notions of sexuality and marriage as the connection between humans and agriculture support an "agrarian ideology" in which "the treatment of women" is "overlooked for the good of the farm." The "real issues" of maintaining peace, order, and the progression of the local

⁷⁸ Staff Writer, "Return to the land," review of *Remembering*, by Wendell Berry, in *Progressive* December, 1988, 47.

⁷⁹ Jack Temple Kirby, "Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley," *Agricultural History* 70, no. 4 (1996): 592

community relativize women's "complaints."⁸⁰ The question left open is: Does Berry construct Hannah in order to safeguard his agrarianism, or does he imaginatively shape the commonwealth according to her needs and concerns?

Kimberly Smith argues that Berry's agrarianism is feminist—ie., congenial to women's rightful grievances. "Specifically, Berry offers three arguments that build on feminist insights: a critique of the traditional construction of masculinity, an analysis of the conventional nature of marriage and family, and an attack on the 'patrimonial ideal'—the desire to establish intergenerational continuity by passing the farm down from father to son."⁸¹ Smith's essay outlines the feminist critique of Berry that has been reiterated in sundry sources. Berry incited a "small maelstrom" in an essay written in 1988 for Harper's magazine wherein he divulged his preference to have his wife type his manuscripts on a typewriter rather than to own a computer. Since then, he has often been accused either of objectifying or exploiting woman. Smith defends him, however, arguing that his agrarianism is neither ideologically or socially constrictive for women. She points out that the economy he advocates offers women "meaningful, productive labor" over-against urban alienating jobs that are assumed to be liberating (627); he criticizes agrarianism insofar as it promotes a masculine ideal of exploitation and domination (628); the best virtues of the community are those usually attributed to "female pioneers: resiliency, vulnerability, and dependence" (629); his understanding of marriage and family shares with feminists the premise that "marriage and family are not natural

⁸⁰ Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 193-94.

⁸¹ Kimberly K. Smith, "Wendell Berry's Feminist Agrarianism," *Women's Studies* 30, no. 5 (2001): 623. Further citations with appear parenthetically within the text.

artifacts but socially constructed forms” (636); and his concern for domesticity is not a place to hide women from properly public concerns for social justice; rather, the home is a “critical cite for responsible action aimed at realizing public values” (643).

Berry challenges the assumption that rural life is inherently abusive and that the city is the horizon of freedom and prosperity. The division of labor that orders many farming households largely reinforces traditional gender roles, but Smith suggests that Berry leaves much room for complexity and flexibility for women to negotiate their life and work within the power relations that structure these roles. Smith sees, through Berry, that “agrarian life” is an “egalitarian gender system” in which “equality would be realized in day-to-day practice, by virtue of strong interdependencies among men and women and the enhanced status of the domestic sphere as a center of production rather than simply consumption” (633). Berry resists the feminist critique not because he is sexist, but rather because he recognizes that the autonomy that is assumed preferable to agrarian domestic life is already gendered as masculine—defined by the ability to participate in socio-economic domination and exploitation.

While there is much to Smith’s argument that is helpful for responding to the feminist critique, the primary resource she finds for responding to feminist perspectives is Berry’s “utopian vision of an agrarian society” (628). She rightfully argues that Berry’s vision neither “romanticizes rural life” nor elides the oppression of “social forces beyond [one’s] control.” The defense of agrarianism is also a critique of the isolating effects of industrialized economies; Berry promotes the best aspects of rural culture not to hide its deficiencies but to bring critical relief to the unquestioned triumph of urban consumer

society. Berry depicts “the resources rural folk have to deal with hardship” in order to “stimulate our political imaginations by offering alternative visions of the good life.” Such “utopian visions are the only guide to the future.” His idealism, developed according to his experience of reality, is meant to prevent sentimentality and offer a way to evaluate and judge the inadequacies of modern society. It is this vision of agrarian society that best accords with feminist objectives: namely, that social life is the “reconstruction of the economy and the domestic sphere in a way that allows for proper valuation of ‘women’s work’ and eliminates tragic choices between work and family; the establishment of complex interdependence rather than simple autonomy as the norm in social relations; and a greater awareness of the connections between social structural forces and domestic arrangements currently masked by the public/private distinction” (643). Ideally, the community would be thus structured, which would offer the conditions in which women would not be rendered vulnerable to exploitation and yet would be ordered by a household economy.

Hannah Coulter, written after Smith’s article was published, is not idealistic. Were Hannah simply an ideal, she would be less than a fully realized character. None of Berry’s novels offer ideals to which political society should be conformed, and *Hannah Coulter* is no exception. Nevertheless, Smith’s argument that Berry is hospitable to feminist goals remains relevant. Hannah is not an abstract standard for women—or men; the book is not a cultural imposition of an agrarian ideology. Berry is trying to represent the sexuality at the heart of community life through affection, care, and loyalty—all of which have practical results—rather than the more ideological dynamic of victimization

and liberation. On the surface it may seem as if the male Berry is articulating a vision of the perfect woman to support his project. Beneath the surface, however, there is a vision of community whose bonds of membership depend upon the kinds of virtues Hannah embodies; her kindness and care. In that sense, she is in a ‘position of power’, but social relations look quite different from her perspective from from a position of male power. Put more accurately, her authoritative role does not simply invert but transfigures the standard configuration of political power structures and relations. Hannah’s character is rooted in an artistic configuration that is not a “utopian vision” but rather a “theological vision,” articulating a criticism and hope that are less a “guide to the future” than a “way of ignorance.”

Before getting to the theological vision underlying *Hannah Coulter*, a word on her sexuality. The public nature of sexuality —its role in sustaining community relations—is dependent upon forgiveness. Berry advocates marriage as the social form of sexuality—while, again, allowing for flexibility and complexity in notions and practices of marriage⁸²—because it is one that requires community. Sexuality binds not only the two who forsake all others but also the others who have been forsaken. In other words, the strength of the relationship is not in its legality but in the capacity of two lovers to give themselves until death, and the willingness of witnesses and neighbours to provide the emotional and material conditions that enable this commitment to last. Berry puts it in religious language, saying marriage “brings [two people] in the same breath into the

⁸² For example, he is in favor of gay marriage. See his interview with journalist John Miller, <http://www.heymler.com/2012/07/wendell-berry>

freedom of sexual consent and into the fullest earthly realization of the image of God.”⁸³

Berry is skeptical about “liberating” sex from this context for public reasons: without a community as the primary reference point for marriage, difficulties and dilemmas will tend to be solved through litigation. Berry again puts it in religious language; quoting Lao-tzu, “Losing kindness... they turn to justness.”⁸⁴ Personal relationships do not primarily depend on justice but on forgiveness. That is, the assumption that all grievances can be settled by establishing guilt and innocence is not only impossible but also makes the relationship endlessly competitive. Hannah Coulter displays a sexuality that does not primarily dramatize feeling, but one that dramatizes the practices of love—how a woman makes love that exceeds the public/private binary.

There is for Berry a “higher, juster love” than what is typically portrayed in sex. It is the mutual self-giving, the death of self, in the joining of two living souls. Its “sign” is “the meeting of the eyes.”⁸⁵ This is a physical encounter; it is sexual, but not of the commercialized variety. Commercial sexuality eliminates countenance. Berry describes an advertisement for skin lotion

that displayed a photograph of the naked torso of a woman. From a feminist point of view, this headless and footless body represents the male chauvinist’s sexual ideal: a woman who cannot think and cannot escape. From a point of view somewhat more comprehensive—the point of view of community—it represents also the commercial ideal of the industrial economy: the completely seducible consumer, unable either to judge or to resist.⁸⁶

The eyes are a central part of human sexual anatomy; two lovers looking into one another’s eyes constitutes a deep interpenetration. A testimony to this higher love,

⁸³ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 138

⁸⁴ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 139.

⁸⁵ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 136

⁸⁶ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 134.

according to Berry, is found in *The Merchant of Venice*. He argues that Portia and Bossanio “attest to the sexual and the spiritual power of a look, which has just begun an endless conversation between two living souls.”⁸⁷ Their look is without “sexism” or “double standard”; when Portia addresses Bossanio she is not “submitting to the power of a man” but is “one of a pair who are submitting to the redemptive power of love.”⁸⁸ Berry sees in it “the order of community” insofar as their union does not isolate them from others.

In Berry’s novel, of course, it is Hannah rather than Portia who embodies communal sexuality. The circumstance under which Portia and Bossanio meet characterizes their relationship: they each desire fortune. Portia is greedy; she agrees to the terms of her father’s will only to get his money. She judges her suitors on the basis of their appearance, making categorical assumptions—i.e., racist speculations—instead of judging each person according to his individual character. Yet she would marry any of them, despite her criticisms, to obtain her inheritance. Bossanio is even more self-centered: he has no household to which he is responsible; he is willing to let his friend die rather than lend the poor man money; he is anti-Semitic; and he uses virtues to appear good in order to augment his power. Neither person is willing to risk anything for love. Once Portia and Bossanio have their fortune, they use it to destroy another man’s life. Their household in Belmont—their order of community—is formed through theft, deception, and degradation. Their community is the inversion of “the precedence of

⁸⁷ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 136.

⁸⁸ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 137.

affection and fidelity over profit.”⁸⁹ They are more like Glad and Clara Petit: they live in a suburb—in a place they do not respect—and they “may do *anything* with money.”⁹⁰ Is Berry too caught up in his critique of usury to see how Portia and Bossanio live narcissistically for themselves?⁹¹

The most intense, sexual exchange in *Hannah Coulter* is in the meeting of Hannah’s and Nathan’s eyes. Hannah is first attracted to Nathan’s countenance; “his best beauty was in his face, mostly in his eyes.”⁹² Nathan shows no guile and has no coy; he has a look that is oblivious to those around him, unconcerned about how he might appear in the minds of others. Hannah remembers his look before their courtship while she was still mourning the loss of her first husband:

There was no apology in his look and no plea, but there was purpose. When he began to look at me with purpose, I felt myself beginning to change. It was not a look a woman would want to look back at unless she was ready to take off her clothes. I was aware of that look a long time before I was ready to look back. I knew that when I did I would be a goner. We both would be. We would be given over to a time that would be ours together, and we could not know what it would be. When I finally did look back at him, it was lovely beyond the telling of this world, and it was almost terrible. After that, we were going into the dark. We understood, and we were scared, and I wanted nothing more than to go into the dark with him.⁹³

The power of this meeting of the eyes is described with a passion that characterizes the love of the community. Berry illustrates the dynamics of the love between Hannah and Nathan that binds them together in a way that reveals the kind of love that binds together

⁸⁹ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 137

⁹⁰ Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack*, 138

⁹¹ See Zdravko Planinc, “Reading the Merchant of Venice Through Adorno,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 8, no. 3 (2007): 20-42.

⁹² Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2004), 65. Further citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁹³ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 65.

any relationship. This exchange is particular, and particularly ardent, but in it one recognizes the aspects of love Berry argues is relevant for communal life: the need for love to have a proper end, finding one's life in losing it, the unconditional surrender of self, and the suffering involved in giving up self-interest as guiding the course of life. The simultaneous sense of difficulty and pleasure of companionship is in all relationships; the virtues and disciplines will be the same for enabling any love to endure the vagaries of mortal life lived together. The exclusivity of their marriage does not isolate them from others. In short, the love that Hannah and Nathan share is also shared with their community; the loyalty and affection of the membership of Port William is understood in the same terms, in the same binding way, as Hannah and Nathan's marriage—the vigor of which is signified in the meeting of eyes.

Hannah begins her story precisely where *Nathan Coulter* ends. Berry's choice to make Hannah the narrator instead of Nathan is part of his dramatization of the movement of the loving imagination; an important part of Hannah's story is discovering Nathan's story after his death. Hannah says "I know, beyond what I have learned to imagine, almost nothing" of Nathan between the end of his story recounted in *Nathan Coulter* and his marriage to Hannah after his return from the war (4). Hannah writes her memoir after she imagines Nathan's experience in Okinawa; it is the story of their place together. In other words, she is able to talk about her shared life in her shared place after she can imagine how Nathan saw her and their place, and what it meant, as "always within a circle of fire that might have closed upon it" (173). Hannah's story is a "giving of thanks"

for the “benediction” their life together was for Nathan after experiencing hell’s firestorms.

The epigraph for *Hannah Coulter* is taken from one of Edwin Muir’s last poems, “I have been taught”:

Have drawn at last from time which takes away
And taking leaves all things in their right place
An image of forever
One and whole.⁹⁴

Part of Hannah’s story is an attempt to articulate “an image of forever” that emerges at the end of a life distinguished by its losses and grief. Her lesson is not a facile version of “you don’t know what you have until it’s been taken away.” Therefore, her description of Port William and its membership should not be read as a relic or lamented as a romanticized community that no longer underwrites life due to modern fashions and economic forces. Rather, it represents a paradox: only something taken away, the “altogether given,” as Hannah puts it, can remain without loss. The condition of forever is all things passing away. Hannah’s language of Heaven and eternity comprises this image of forever. She looks back on her life as though she is “looking down from Heaven” (31); she describes Port William as “eternal” (43). Both Hannah and Port William wait for the return of the lost while time marches on, taking more and more from each. And yet what is left, the remnant of the membership, keeps the memory and hope of those gone in the same place; it is memory and love rather than grief and death, that characterize both Hannah and Port William, which makes them each one and whole.

⁹⁴ For the full poem see Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 302.

The physicality of Hannah's love, its practices of household management, are present from the outset: after her mother dies Hannah is raised more by her "Grandmam" than her father. Her father is a good man but remarries a woman, Ivy, who sees Hannah as the rival of her two sons. Grandmam lives with them, "making her last stand in the kitchen" (9). Grandmam is the head of the household, both its economics and its care, from the place assumed to be the center of oppression rather than of authority. From the kitchen she not only performs "women's work" but could do "man's work" when necessary. She "oversaw the garden, the cellar, the smokehouse, the henhouse, the barn lots and the barns, and all the comings and goings between barns and fields" (9). Hannah lists all her contributions and influences over the management of the house, which are too many to name here. Grandmam's role as "landlady" is unambiguous: "her word on everything having to do with the farm was final" (10). And yet Hannah is equally clear that she "was an old-fashioned housewife: determined and skillful and saving and sparing" (11). It is her economy, not that of Hannah's father, that brings the family through the Depression. Grandmam's life forms Hannah—its shape is an audacious devotion with practical outcomes (12).

After high school when Hannah moves to work in Hargrave, Grandmam orchestrates her transition, introducing her to Ora Finley. Hannah describes herself at this stage as "malleable"; she has difficulty speaking for herself, taking her "form" through Grandmam's words, who is determined to "mold [Hannah] into something that could stay alive" (19). Ora stabilizes the shape of Hannah's life. She is a recent widow of a doctor, who provided a "good life in their good house, but nothing extra" (20). Ora has had to

maintain the house alone, which she does by renting rooms to travelling tobacco buyers. Her backyard has no fences; she shares a garden with two neighbours. Hannah rents a room in Ora's home and works hard while in Hargrave, and yet finds the house to be a place of rest. Ora keeps Hannah from isolating herself, giving her books to read and discussing things of which she disapproved in "these modern writers" as a way to help Hannah negotiate "this modern world" (22). The work she does for Ora around the house is a "comfort" and a pleasure, for Hannah not only likes Ora but remembers that "I needed her to like me." Though Ora will become Hannah's aunt by marriage, it is this time spent with Ora that informs Hannah's sense of community. Ora's household management reflects Grandmam's—centered on a capable, dignified widow—but includes Hannah for reasons unrelated to direct kinship. Burley says, "All women is brothers," which is not meant as a joke but an aphorism; Hannah, Grandmam, and Ora form a relationship deeply connected by trust and dependence.⁹⁵ Hannah learns the emotional connection between work and rest, care and dependency—and its practical consequences—through her initiation into the female bond.

⁹⁵ It is therefore not the case that independence (autonomy) is central for flourishing and a desirable life. Care and dependency, rather, is central for communal life, which means that individuals and community relate in complex ways. In this way, Berry follows closely with feminist thinkers, such as Eva Feder Kittay, who argue that the caregiver is central to the public life of community, serving and participating in the community by virtue of remaining in the domain of the home. If one begins with liberal assumptions regarding equality and independence, then one will conceive of a freedom that looks like the lives of men; if one begins with care and dependency, then one gets a different freedom—something that resembles the life Hannah Coulter. The demands of dependency are shared rather than unloaded on a select few so that others can be free and independent. Even the male farmers in *Hannah Coulter*, and elsewhere in Berry's novels when seen in light of his delineation of Hannah, are examples of dependency workers. See Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (London: Routledge, 1999). In *Hannah Coulter*, sexual energy—rather than institutional forms and litigation—enable and sustain dependency and care. Berry does not appropriate creative capacities from women and apply it to exclusively male domains; hence the virtue of keeping Hannah at the center of the community rather than placing her as a guide for her husband at his side. See Eva Feder Kittay, "Womb Envy: An Explanatory Concept," *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 94-128.

Hannah's courtship with and marriage to Virgil is not the completion of her life but its continuation. Put differently, Grandmam and Ora have already informed the meaning and shape of her life, which is what attracts Virgil; her fulfillment is not determined solely by Virgil's needs and aspirations. Hannah is perhaps "too pretty for [her] own good," as Grandmam says, raising her suspicions about beauty and its implications (15). She has dated some men, but finds that with each one she "didn't agree with his opinion that he was the best thing that had ever happened to [her]" (25). Hannah is also skeptical about the assumption that bringing men satisfaction should sufficiently satisfy women. Virgil is unlike these men, yet treats Hannah like a "China doll." Hannah recognizes this as a sign of consideration, but begins to "sort of wish he would try something" (27). He is not perfect, but Hannah, through her own desires, resists his inclination to 'objectify' her. Hannah is not "swept away by some irresistible emotion" but rather sees in Virgil "an ancient happiness" in his own life and what he sees as possible in it (28). The shape of their union resembles Ora's garden: desirable, connected to others, practical, and part of a place that preceded their arrival.

Hannah begins to know the story of her life when Virgil goes missing. Because of her alienating relationship with Ivy, Hannah is grafted to Virgil's family; they live with his parents, Mat and Margaret Feltner, knowing that war is coming. Rumors of war make it difficult to plan for their future (36). It is Christmas 1941; Hannah contemplates the birth of Christ as the incarnation of peace. Nevertheless, war becomes incarnate in all of them, a "bodily presence" that makes their "voices sound different." The rumors of war are a parody of the angels announcing peace. In this conflicted space the extended

household has a feast—sixteen in all—around a table. For Hannah, however, “maybe the best part of all” was cleaning up afterward in “the quiet of women working together, making order again after the commotion and hurry of the meal” (39). Her domestic work is neither oppressive nor oversweet; the “easy conversation” within setting things “back to rights” is poised against the background of the palpable fear and anxiety of the war. It develops her character, preparing her for both shared sorrow and living on with others in ordinary things.

Between Virgil’s parents and Hannah grows a “heartbreaking kindness” (50). To be in love with Virgil is to be in the house with Mat and Margaret, bound by a burdensome commitment to help and comfort even though there is no relief for their grief. Hannah sees this time as the beginning of her story; it is the time when she begins to understand that love shares the same space as pain. For Hannah, both peace and war are felt but cannot be touched, incarnate and real yet invisible. To survive in this space is to continue to be the person Grandmam formed, to live the same life, to go on as though nothing happened. Hannah learns that the world may be trusted, not to give her what she wants, “but to give unforeseen goods and pleasures” she had not thought to want (57-58). These emerge out of the ongoing life of the community, while “farming went on, housekeeping went on, cooking went on, eating and sleeping went on, Port Williams’ endless conversation about itself went on” (44). Hannah remembers the joy of washing dishes not because it preserved the family farm but precisely the opposite, because “what we were that day was lovely and could not last” (40). Hannah’s memoir is the story of her

attempt to work out how and why her life with the Feltners could not last while giving this life presence through her memory.

Hannah learns most in experience through being a mother. A parallel image to the “room” of love is a piece of embroidery; Hannah asks, “What is the thread that holds it all together?” (51). Not grief, but love and gratitude. With her first born, Margaret, she describes a moment of hospitality as self-emptying love. She nurses her baby feeling “milk and love flowing from me to her as once it had flowed to me” (55). Grief has no power against this flow; the baby is made in Hannah’s “body by [her] desire and brought forth into the world by [her] pain and strength” (54). In this sense she feels “sort of motherly” toward Nathan when he returns (64). This feeling remains with her, as Hannah recounts two other times she feels the desire to “hold and protect and save him forever” (72) and “an absurd yearning to shelter” him (130). The desire for a life in Port William is mutual, as it was with Virgil; Nathan, unlike Virgil, did not receive this desire from his father as did Virgil. Instead, Nathan got his desire by “going through everything that was opposed to it” (67). In other words, Nathan’s desire is not inherited or prepared for him with a purpose by someone else; his vision does not come to him externally. Instead, his vision of their life together and the product of it—the actual farm he and Hannah create—is instead brought forth in a pain and strength. Put simply, it is birthed. That they share this vision and produce a life together out of it shows that their pain and strength are more powerful than grief, which degenerates a life into paralysis. Their redemption of the run-down farm is thus their stand against the war that has damaged them both; it is “the possibility that among the world’s wars and sufferings two people could love each other

for a long time, until death and beyond and could make a place for each other that would be a part of their love, as their love for each other would be a way of loving their place” (67-68). It is enacting the “greater” and “juster” love beyond two lovers.

The hard labor to restore the place and live there is not the only difficulty; so too is communicating its meaning. Of the embroidery, what is “the loose thread that unravels the whole garment?” Answer: failed conversation. The particularity of two married people’s experience of one another means that no one outside of the marriage can see how one person is psychologically injured or how the other responds to it in hospitality by fixing a disregarded farm. Hannah, hunting for words, simply describes it as a “light” between them that only they can see, one that “doesn’t shine outward into time” (71). She recalls “the feeling it gave me just to make this house clean,” but instead of articulating that feeling she lists the chores and says they “seemed to start something that was going to go on and on” (77). The work is physical and practical, with economic results, but one with internal effects. Hannah uses the memory of her body’s labor to describe their palliating love. But how is she to communicate this to her children? She fails, or at least suspects that she does, because its repercussions are plain. Her children have left the membership, as did the African-American servants of the Feltner household; the latter are gone because, despite the common history and shared affection and loyalty, there were no economic ties to the place; the former feel no desire to stay because all they have are economic bonds to the farm without affection and loyalty.

Grandmam is not perfect. After graduation, she tells Hannah, “You’re smart, and you can do things. This is not the right place for you. You need to go” (16). She was

“desperate” for Hannah to go to high school; Hannah inherits her preoccupation, becoming equally “desperate” for her children to go to college (112). Both women want their heirs to have what they did not; they feel they “owed” it to their kin to have “a better chance.” And so each of Hannah’s children leave for college and do not return. On the one hand, this may appear to be a simple didactic lesson Berry inserts: “the way of education leads away from home”—even when they have conflicting desires, as does Hannah’s youngest son Caleb. For Hannah, however, the more important question is, “did we tell the stories right?”⁹⁶ Did she and Nathan describe the labor, hardships, and suffering of that time restoring the Cuthbert place as a way of “mourning and rejoicing over the past” or as a way to say that “everything should have been different” (113). She regrets that she did not make the “choice of coming home... clearer” (151). There are various emotional forces that pull Margaret and Caleb back to the farm, but not to stay.

Hannah worries that she has failed their imagination. The children are “fascinated” by the stories but in a way that lead them away from home; education itself may or may not produce the same effect, but it is Hannah’s and Grandmam’s prior failure that prepared the way. Both are tempted by the extraordinary, the elusive better chance to have a life without the afflictions the parent has undergone. Hannah realizes, too late, that “the chance you had is the life you’ve got” (113). In times of crisis and toil it is best not

⁹⁶ Here I disagree somewhat with Stanley Hauerwas’ claim that the “novel *Hannah Coulter* expresses Berry’s deepest worry about the contemporary university. Berry’s deepest worry about the university is what an ‘education’ does to people.” Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 101. Berry is forthcoming about the damages he thinks specialized education brings about to small communities; here, I think he is trying to articulate the ways in which those small communities unwittingly collude with those forces of destruction. In other words, there is a sense in which he is implicating himself in Hannah’s concern about telling stories well, rather than differentiating himself and communities from universities per se.

to wish for another life or that things were different. Hannah becomes aware that the need to keep living right on is not only a mode of survival but also a way to flourish, not only away “deal with” but enjoy and be satisfied with what is at hand. Her tasks and chores, her physical movements, are therefore meant to offer a different structure to her family’s psychology. After the war, her domesticity brings satisfaction within the remaining brokenness of her family.

Through this miserable fracturing, not despite it, Hannah learns to care. One of the last times her family eats together is a parody of the Christmas feast in 1941; Hannah’s middle child Matthew is absent, and those gathered together were “like stray pieces of several puzzles” (157). Margaret’s husband abandons her for another woman; her son, Virgie, rebels against his father’s infidelity and also deserts her in the process. Previously, Virgie enjoyed farming with Nathan. Having learned from their children’s departures, Hannah and Nathan do not expect him to stay on the farm. They learn to lead a “sort of futureless life,” one that takes “little thought for the morrow” (152 – from Mat 6:34). Indeed, the future looks bleak: Nathan dies with no one to inherit his farm, which is lusted after by a developer and invaded by poachers. And yet Virgie returns. His homecoming is not a sign of hope that things will turn out all right after all. Hannah’s story ends with a question, “can he stand what has got to be stood?” (184). It signifies not his ability to save the family, to continue the old way of life; it is his only chance to heal himself and his relationships after his self-destructive life of drugs and prodigality. Virgie does not represent the possibility that others will return and the community will survive its losses. He is simply “the last care” of Hannah’s life. Her life up to that day in late winter of 2001

has only led to this, that “I must care for him as I care for a wildflower or a singing bird, no terms, no expectations, as finally I care for Port William and the ones who have been with me” (185). It will be difficult to care for Virgie, but she receives him with the same love and virtues that have been prepared in difficulty. It is part of her continual waiting, her patience, and her living in the absence of the dead.

Muir wrote his poem “I have been taught” at the same time he wrote “The Day Before the Last Day,” which precedes it in his collected poetry.⁹⁷ “The Day Before the Last Day” describes war as a “Mechanical parody of the Judgment Day /That does not judge but only deals damnation.”⁹⁸ Muir imagines that if war reached its utmost conclusion and “all kill all,” then it would include not only “all /That has ever been” but also “that by which they were known.” The remaining silence would be the place “Where all was now as if it had never been.”⁹⁹ Muir contrasts this violent silence of all things left without a trace, and the abundant silence of time taking all things so as to leave them in their right place. The last day in the gospel of John is the day when Christ is resurrected.¹⁰⁰ “Death’s last day” is the day before the resurrection, the day before the last

⁹⁷ “It is appropriate that the last two poems Edwin Muir wrote—‘The Day Before the Last Day’ and ‘I Have Been Taught’—should appear together at the end of the Collected Poems. These poems represent the two extremes of experience and vision and serve as a supremely fitting summary of his view of human life.” Christopher Wiseman, *Beyond the Labyrinth: A Study of Edwin Muir’s Poetry* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1978), 230.

⁹⁸ For full poem see Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems*, 300-301.

⁹⁹ “All life on the planet would be extinguished so that no thing and no one would be left even to witness the fact of the extinction; death would continue to generate its own negative force, spreading from the present to cancel the future and even the past. Man’s destructive ingenuity would not only eliminate all ‘memory of our friends among the dead’ but would reach back through the millennia to undo time and the Creation.” James Aitchison, *The Golden Harvester: The Vision of Edwin Muir* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 57.

¹⁰⁰ P. H. Butter observes that the imagery in Muir’s poem resembles that of Muir’s earlier novel, *The Three Brothers*, especially on “one of David Blackadder’s waking visions—that of the Last Judgment near the end.” P. H. Butter, *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), 291. From these dreams

day; it is Holy Saturday, the day Christ descended into Hell.¹⁰¹ Muir uses the imagery of war to describe this descent; the dead wonder who will remember them if everyone is already dead and the means of memory have been equally destroyed. All it takes, the poet suggests, is one sound, “a single ear that listening heard /A footstep coming nearer it would bring /Annunciation of the world’s resurrection.” But we cannot even recognize the absence of this sound. The poet in “I have been taught,” however, has gained knowledge from the dead. This knowledge gained through “dreams and fantasies” are ways of knowing that have not been destroyed by the other ways the dead are remembered in the previous poem through “Sight and hearing and touch, feeling and thought, /And memory.” Dreams and fantasies teach the poet that the absences and silences are indeed forever; these “shadows /Are cast by the true.”¹⁰² Here, the poet recounts the lessons that led him up to truth; it marks his ascent to resurrection.

Though previously in *Old Jack* Berry used *The Odyssey*, for Hannah’s understanding of death and divinity he uses Muir’s perception of descent and ascent in

and images Muir has learned, but also from “ancestors and friends, from the founts, but most from time itself, which he now sees as an image of eternity.” Butter, *Edwin Muir*, 295.

¹⁰¹ Holy Saturday is not an image of triumph over death, or of a victorious sacrifice, but of “divine love at its least discernible point.” Shelley Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 55. Rambo analyzes Hans Urs von Balthasar’s witness of Adrienne von Speyr’s supernatural suffering during the passion week for twenty-five years beginning in 1941.

¹⁰² The stanza reads: “And now that time grows shorter, I perceive /That Plato’s is the truest poetry, ‘And that these shadows /Are cast by the true.’” Muir, according to Wiseman, affirms “that the Platonic belief in perfect forms and order, of which our world is an imperfect reflection, does in fact sustain life. There is, he is saying, a true order, unaffected by time and change, which ultimately defeats doubt and negates the Fall. This distinction between an ideal world and our world of time and experience lies at the heart of Muir’s thought.” Wiseman, *Beyond the Labyrinth*, 235. Berry would brook no such distinction. The tensions between Muir’s poems reverberate within Berry’s novel; however, Berry’s imagery is of a historical and transitory world that nevertheless is a true order. For Berry, the relationship is closer to Yeats’ formulation, “There is another world but it is in this one.” In this sense, Berry is closer to Merton’s assertion that Muir’s imagination “was never Platonic.” Merton, “True Legendary Sound,” 320. As Kathleen Raine says of Muir, so too could be said of Berry: “The world of ideas for him was not a doctrine but an experience.” Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.

Hannah Coulter. It marks a theological shift, using the narrative of Christ's pattern of movement. The intended effect is to call into question the use of religious language in American rhetoric of war. The last day of Hannah's story is in early 2001, prior to the attacks of 9/11 that send America into war yet again. She is waiting "For what?... For the catastrophe that will end everything? For the Second Coming?" (181). The answer is unclear to her, to the reader. Instead of giving an answer to what can be legitimately hoped for, however, the story offers a series of images that show her descent and ascent; her coming to know of Hell and Heaven, death and love.¹⁰³ This movement happens while waiting; if "The Day Before the Last Day" is an "Imaginary picture of a stationary fear" then *Hannah Coulter* is an imaginary picture of an operating love. Berry vents his frustration at the rhetoric of war that explains itself in allegedly Christian language; it is claimed that violence is the process by which the world is rid of evil. Nowhere, Berry often says, is either this language or its violent aftereffects found in the gospels. What he finds there is love, death, and resurrection; descent and ascent.¹⁰⁴ *Hannah Coulter* is the

¹⁰³ "The descent into hell is a necessary prerequisite for the ascent to heaven. Neither means anything without the other." Wiseman, *Beyond the Labyrinth*, 231. Though Muir, according to Wiseman, separates "The Day Before the Last Day" and "I Have Been Taught" they should be read together; "These two last poems, one a terrifying prophecy of utter annihilation and the other a quiet assertion of wholeness, form a completed pattern, drawing together, from the furthest rim of human experience, one man's intuitions about chaos and order." Ibid. The stark juxtaposition between Hannah's life and her imaginative experience of Nathan's involvement in war equally merge the imagery evoked by Muir's two poems. Hannah's community and 'quiet assertion of wholeness' against the thrusts of violence is therefore not a refuge or avoidance of experiencing 'utter annihilation,' for it is in Port William where she is able to imagine and feel violence and love most acutely. Rather it is Andy's fantasy of having an apartment in San Francisco adorned with ornamental culture that is a refuge from community life, which is the social structure that enables and contains Hannah's insights and grief. See Berry, *Remembering*, 37.

¹⁰⁴ Allie Corbin Hixson describes Edwin Muir's vision of the Christ in ways that might be applicable to Berry: "[Muir] stood then at the foot of the Cross and there found love and forgiveness in the image of the god 'incarnate'—but through it all he maintained his unique place: one foot in Eden and the other with 'man, beast, and tree in fire, the bright cloud showering peace.'" Allie Corbin Hixson, *Edwin Muir: A Critical Study* (New York: Vantage Press, 1977), 230. This is not to make Muir a "Christian" poet; Hixson suggests that Muir undergoes a change that "begins and ends in 'poetic imagination,' which has more to do with

earthly dramatization of his reading of the gospels. It cannot be institutionalized, nor will it save or make any difference to the world. It does have a practical, bodily life; one that does not have to be lived in a small farming community, but one that finds a way, wherever it is, to learn to wait and receive what comes.

Hannah learns second-hand what Nathan experienced during “the day before the last day.” She imagines the worst as “a man-made natural disaster” that “can happen anywhere” (172). Berry’s description of the battle of Okinawa is contrasted with Hannah’s final dream. Seeing Nathan—his approach, his touch—Hannah feels that “The shiver of the altogether given passes over me from head to foot” (186). Nathan’s “taciturn kindness” describes the room of love, the space it occupies in the world, and the love by which this final dream is reached.¹⁰⁵ In other words, loving-kindness is the movement of ascent toward “the altogether given.” The shiver is her body’s erotic response to the touch of “forever /One and whole.” The image of forever is remembering his look, the meeting of their eyes. Such a meeting can only be hoped for insofar as it can be remembered. And yet the storm of war can reach Port William too; Hannah can still wake from her dream “to the thought of the hurt and the helpless, the scorned and the cheated, the burnt, the bombed, the shot, the imprisoned, the beaten, the tortured, the maimed, the spit upon, the shit upon” (171).

universal human needs than with the adoption of any particular religious creed.” Ibid., 196. Following Hixon, neither am I saying that Berry is “Christian” in a way that “explains” Berry. As Merton says of Muir, so too could be said of Berry: “Muir is concerned with imagination not only in order that there may be good poetry, but in order that man himself may survive.” Merton, “The True Legendary Sound,” 323.
¹⁰⁵ The term “taciturn kindness” is from Jason Peters, “The Tenderness of Remembering,” *Sewanee Review* 113, no. 2 (2005): lx.

Occasionally she imagines she is telling her story to Andy; she sometimes speaks to him directly. She tells it “with patience, going over it again and again in order to get it right” (158). Hannah tells her story as part of Port William’s ongoing conversation about itself, trying to tell it properly to avoid the mistakes she made telling it to her children. It is her attempt to teach Andy, the reader, about the worst and best things in life. Its education is not in “what happens” but how it is described. War is not inevitable; it does not rid the world of evil; it is hell; love is not a feeling to be taken lightly in a world prone to war but an experience and commitment that involves the whole community, and, in so doing, is heaven. Hannah is an ordinary woman with an ordinary life. She uses poetic and biblical language to try to give it depth, not to make it special or instructively unique but rather to describe its reality in a way that includes the presence of things invisible—memories, ghosts, silences, absences—as profoundly set against the extraordinariness of war. Its reticence and mundaneness will frustrate those looking for biomedical or technological ways to end suffering once and for all, or those who think that a life not committed to such advancements are provincial at best or oppressive at worst. Hannah makes Christ’s teachings of peace look normal, thinking of its physical life as part of everyday existence rather than an extraordinary alternative to war, which is just a failure to think of peace apart from war.¹⁰⁶ Hannah’s character is not “passive” but peaceful, as it

¹⁰⁶ “And yet we have not learned to think of peace apart from war. We have received many teachings about peace and peaceability in biblical and other religious traditions, but we have marginalized those teachings, have made them abnormal, in deference to the great norm of violence and conflict. We wait, still, until we face terrifying dangers and the necessity to choose among bad alternatives, and then we think again of peace, and again we fight a war to secure it.” *Citizenship Papers*, 15. Hannah’s peaceful life is thus also against the “normal” violence of “our economic life,” namely “toxic pollution, land destruction, soil erosion, and the destruction of biological diversity, and of the degradation of ecological supports of agriculture.” *Citizenship Papers*, 5-6.

is “an alert, informed, practiced, and active state of being.”¹⁰⁷ Her memory breaks open the present; it is a resource for relationships in a post 9/11 world that transcends the dual options of power and powerlessness, terrorism and war.

Hannah’s memory is hopeful without bearing expectations. Remembering the past is not sentimental or a wistful affection for a place but the presence of the past. Both the past and hope are like dreams; their existence is “alive with you in the only time you are alive” (148). Hannah experiences her life physically; “it weighted upon me and pressed against me and filled all my senses to overflowing” but at its end “is like a dream dreamed” (5). Muir’s poem begins, “I have been taught by dreams and fantasies.” Muir’s sense of dream may be used to articulate Hannah’s sense of the paradox of eternity in revealing itself through passing away.¹⁰⁸ She calls the shape of life still living that “includes the past” but has its “expectations subtracted” (148) from the “dream of time” that comes “to rest in eternity” (158). She is trying to describe the love that binds her relationships, not just in feeling but practically; how it exists in the world spatially and temporally. Hannah reiterates St. Paul’s view that love “hopeth all things,” but without putting that hope into words, without turning it into expectation. Hope is like memory because it is receptive; like the past “it can return only by surprise” (148). Thus the return of Virgie is a particular instance of her care for the community: it is a surprise, one that requires patience and remaining in place to receive—it could not have happened if she sold her place to Kelly Crowley—without terms or expectations. She loves Virgie because

¹⁰⁷ Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, 20

¹⁰⁸ This is to put in Yeats’ terms, that in nature “things reveal themselves passing away.” Quoted in *Standing by Words*, 163.

he is at hand, and this love is hopeful because it bears generative possibilities; Virgie might prove himself worthy of the place. Idealistic or superstitious hope—that a solution will come down from on high, out of nothing but the minds of politicians or the clouds in heaven—is a “love of ghosts,” which “is not expectant” (185). That is, this love is not pregnant with possibilities, it will not generate any virtues such as hope.

Hope is ignorant. This is what Berry understands T.S. Eliot to mean by “the way of ignorance,” which is “the way of neighborly love, kindness, caution, care, appropriate scale, thrift, good work, right livelihood” accepting that we are irremediably prone to “mortality, partiality, fallibility, and error.”¹⁰⁹ It is the opposite of the way of power, which Richard Dawkins sums up in his assertion that “our brains... are big enough to see into the future and plot long-term consequences.”¹¹⁰ There are two kinds of “hopeless hope” that are different from Hannah’s receptivity. On the one hand, when her first husband Virgil is declared M.I.A. she grieves for the life they “might have lived.” Imagining their life together is desirable but a dream detached from time, “a hopeless hope” (56). On the other hand, when Nathan is diagnosed with cancer he turns down the radiation therapy that might prolong his life. He simply wants to “die as himself out of his own life” rather than “at the end of a technological process” for the sake of a “hopeless hope” (161). The latter describes Dawkins’ perception, the idea that science can outwit the limits of human ignorance. The former describes Berry’s perception according to interpreters who think he is an idealist: someone who praises ignorance as the solution to technological hubris and revels in the simple life that might have been. Both of these

¹⁰⁹ Berry, *The Way of Ignorance*, ix

¹¹⁰ Berry, *The Way of Ignorance*, 53

visions of life, however, are rooted in the attempt to master death, to deny the limits of what is possible. The image of Hannah's life as "brief and timeless" is cast by death, the lens that "changes things and makes them clear" (157). Death is not the end of life but the way to understand human constraints and possibilities. Hannah sets no terms for her acceptance of the world as it is, but acknowledges it in her mortal love. Her "hopeless hope" is better put as the hope of the hopeless: it is not an idealistic dream nor does it ignore the frailties and limits of earthly life; it is the virtue of being receptive in ignorance, willing to receive whatever happiness and pleasure can be found in fallibility and weakness.

Death is the condition of love also for those Hannah dislikes. Death is not only a way to acknowledge limitations but an excuse to sever relations with enemies. Hannah recalls a tender moment after Mat Feltner dies; several close friends and family sing the hymn, "Abide with Me." Burley leads the song as a "mourning and benediction" for the "membership" and "its long suffering," singing "*Help of the helpless, O abide with me*" (100). It is profound for each participant, reminding each not only of their fragility but that divine help arrives in the form of helplessness. Hope comes from futile and weak things. The occasion of the song calls her step-mother, Ivy, to Hannah's mind. Hannah harbors a just grudge against the injustices Ivy inflicted on her as a child. Though she claims that she did not dwell on it she uses her father's death as a way to sever her relationship with Ivy, to be done with her. Hannah uses death to solve her problems. Hannah accidentally later sees Ivy who has become "shrunk and twisted by arthritis" (103). Hannah does not recognize her at first, but comes to know her through this

encounter. Ivy either forgot or never knew Hannah's resentment. Hannah forgives Ivy and is finally "free" of the "contempt and fear that I had kept so carefully so long" (104). The encounter is an act of forgiveness, a display of marital love. It is so not because Hannah is willing to forget or let go of the injustices, but because she sees Ivy in her mortal condition, i.e., she sees her as human previously unrecognized. Before, Hannah only sees Ivy egotistically through her sense of justice. The primary effect of Hannah's forgiveness is that she no longer sees her stepmother as inhuman; she includes Ivy in the tender love of the membership. Not the injustices but the estrangement is gone. Ivy is reintroduced into Hannah's life; though we do not see Ivy again, we see how Hannah learns to see the humanity of her enemy. By doing so she can receive that which was threatening and disheartening in her past as part of her love.

Hannah describes love as a room. The spatial metaphor is helpful for understanding how her waiting "makes her body one with the world, time passing, her time coming."¹¹¹ It is what she means when she says that the story of her marriage is the story of their place together; their love has room to be productive. "We got married and went to work" (105). This is no romance; "our work brought us together and drew us apart" both emotionally and physically (107). She remembers their arguments and differences, their failures and loneliness. But she also remembers Nathan's "gentleness that had been made in him by loss and grief and suffering, a gentleness opposite to the war" (109). It is this gentleness that brings them together and shapes their life on the farm. The room of love is "another world" to war; "war is Hell. It is the outer darkness

¹¹¹ Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack*, 76

beyond the reach of love”¹¹² (168). The room of love is Heaven—where desire and satisfaction are in the same place, and the love that holds people together are not their own. It is the sexual energy that allows bodily transcendence within mortal flesh, the possibility of giving everything away and yet be spared destruction.

Through her research into the battle of Okinawa that Nathan survived, Hannah discovers the need for imagination. “Want of imagination makes things unreal enough to be destroyed.” Imagination is “knowledge and love;” that is, “compassion” (168). Sexual habits can compromise one’s ability to be compassionate in this way. “In sex,” according to Berry’s assessment on commercialized sexuality, “we have liberated fantasy but killed imagination, and so have sealed ourselves in selfishness and loneliness.” Sexual liberation and war-protests seem to go hand-in-hand as they did in the slogans of the Sixties, but Berry reverses their relationship. To “free” sex from mortality—from the way of ignorance—diminishes the kind of responsible, practical life that comes from the knowledge and love that Hannah and Nathan share. Imagination is sexual but not gendered; it interpenetrates, impregnates, receives, and gives birth. “It is by imagination that we cross over the differences between ourselves and other beings and thus learn compassion, forbearance, mercy, forgiveness, sympathy, and love—the virtues without which neither we nor the world can live.”¹¹³

Hannah engenders these virtues in the community, without which the world turns to war. Those who cannot imagine the lives of others will command them to kill and be killed. Hannah reflects on the difficulty of living in a place like Port William while

¹¹² Hannah’s language comes from Matt 8:12.

¹¹³ Berry, *Sex, Economy Freedom Community*, 143

imagining the devastation of Okinawa. In frustration she speaks of the imperative to nevertheless imagine such places because it is those who “have power” to destroy who have “no imagination” for love. Then she wonders, “Can you have power and imagination at the same time? Can you kill people you don’t know and have compassion for them at the same time?” (168). Again, the question is not rhetorical but a paradox. The world is not divided into good and evil, those who have power and those who suffer what they must, those who have compassion and those who have no imagination. Berry’s language of having “killed” the imagination is misleading; Hannah would not ask these questions if she were convinced that one could not have both power to kill and imagination. Recall that, according to Berry, imagination is the force that gives sympathy and leads to affection. His point is not that killing the imagination and the power to kill are the same but rather that once one has lost the ability, or simply refuses, to imagine the lives of enemies, one is unlikely to sympathize and then have affection for that life.

Hannah’s imagination resembles more closely one of Berry’s Sabbath poems:

But do the Lords of War in fact
hate the world? That would be easy
to bear, if so. If they hated
their children and their flowers
that grow in the warming light,
that would be easy to bear. For then
we could hate the haters
and be right. What is hard
is to imagine the Lords of War
may love the things they destroy.¹¹⁴

Hannah does not get angry at the “Lords of War” responsible for the death of her first husband and the psychological damage of her second—though she does “dislike” Virgil’s

¹¹⁴ Berry, *Given* (San Francisco: Counterpoint, 2005), 132.

death being given an “official” meaning distinct from his life (56-57). That her grief does not demonize her enemies makes it more difficult to bear. Compassion makes suffering worse, suffering both one’s own miseries as well as taking on those of others.

The difference is in Hannah’s willingness, unlike the Lords of War, to give herself over to suffering as part of her giving herself over to love. Hannah’s understanding of love is theological; the love that people share in the room of love is Christ’s. “It is this body of our suffering that Christ was born into, to suffer it Himself and to fill it with light, so that beyond the suffering we can imagine Easter morning and the peace of God on little earthly homelands such as Port William and the farming villages of Okinawa” (171). The divine is expressed in its earthly terms; the Creator is present in creation. As in Berry’s poetry on Jacob’s dream, “The light and dark are bound, /Heaven to all below,” and one must figure out how to live “Heaven’s earthly life.”¹¹⁵ Hannah’s “art /by which this sight can live” is her ordinary life; she makes her life an ordinary expression of Christ’s love. She does not make her loss and grief extraordinary; she bears witness to the helpless and brief form of the world. Relief from her sorrow over Virgil’s absence “came from ordinary pleasures in ordinary things,” such as her child and flowers (57). The “great crisis” of Nathan’s diagnosis is “dealt with as an ordinary thing” (161). To live on despite war and cancer, as Nathan and Hannah would have it, “called for nothing out of the ordinary” (162). It is the life of war that is extraordinary, refusing to be at home in the world.

¹¹⁵ Berry, *Given*, 138

Hannah's ordinary life, the reason reviewers point out that "nothing happens" in the book, is the daily economic practice of an abundant life. The light Christ come to give through suffering that enables compassionate imagination is expressed in John 10:10: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Abundant life is "a life not reducible by division, category, or degree, but is one thing, heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material, divided only insofar as it is embodied in distinct creatures."¹¹⁶ The abundant life is "the way of love" Hannah embodies; it is in her way of life as a simple rural housewife. Berry depicts Hannah as a person attuned to God's presence in the world through her personal understanding of mortality; it is a challenge to those who think one must be a "certified 'Christian'" to follow Christ's teachings, for her life is "a fulfillment hardly institutional at all."¹¹⁷ It is also offensive to those who think an abundant life is marked by material possessions and a greater life expectancy, which only technological advancement will provide. These are the ones who think that Berry "comes off as chillingly inhuman" for being skeptical at the superstition that technology will save us.¹¹⁸ People looking for heroism and "the future shining before us" but find only Hannah and an old abandoned farmhouse will think Berry is sexist and/or sentimental. However, Hannah's life is a way to challenge the Christian imagination about Christ's love and the modern imagination about a fulfilled life.

Jayber Crow

¹¹⁶ Berry, *The Way of Ignorance*, 136

¹¹⁷ Berry, *The Way of Ignorance*, 136

¹¹⁸ Bruce Bawer, review of *Given*, by Wendell Berry, in *The Hudson Review* 59, no. 1 (2006), 145.

Berry cites Mark Twain's "Notice" at the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn* as the "plainest and most emphatic denunciation of critical reductionism," which reads: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot."¹¹⁹ Art, like life, cannot be reduced.¹²⁰ Lifting narrative components such as motive and plot out of a story will not help a reader understand the meaning or know the characters better. Lives within stories are not ciphers hiding a ready-made truth to be extracted and applied to everyday life. Berry does not deny that there is motive, moral, and plot in *Huckleberry Finn*, but Twain's warning indicates the value of a story is in its language—that "it is a story *told*, not a story explained."¹²¹ The reader's primary response to a story—as with parables, memoirs, and jokes—is not to explain it, which often destroys its aesthetic structure and dynamic force. The language and approach of scientific classification, analysis, and interpretation cannot be used to describe literature. Put simply, to explain literature is to explain it away.

Jayber Crow's warning to the reader at the beginning of his story echoes Twain's.¹²² His "Notice" reads: "Persons attempting to find a 'text' in this book will be

¹¹⁹ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 116.

¹²⁰ In the essay *Life is a Miracle*, published the same year as *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry argues that the irreducibility of subjects obviates any conciliation of the humanities and science by which the latter subjugates the former. Individual lives—human and non-human alike—cannot be explained by listing what is known of them. Nor can they be understood by reference to a type; a particular life exceeds categorical definitions—a person's region, a cattle's breed, a tree's species.

¹²¹ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 116.

¹²² Eric Freyfogle puts the relationship between *Jayber Crow* and *Huckleberry Finn* more closely: "In a sense, Berry has written a sequel to *Huckleberry Finn*, proposing a morally superior conclusion. Twain's book stumbles toward the end (as commentators have long noted) because of uncertainties about what Huck should do next. Having learned what he set out to learn, the wandering Huck might have returned home to join and help improve his riverside hometown. But Twain had difficulty imagining a settled, small community that was not confining and corroding, and so Huck is dispatched to the territories. What if,

prosecuted; persons attempting to find a ‘subtext’ in it will be banished; persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise ‘understand’ it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers.” Perhaps the only reason they will not be “shot” is that Jayber is a pacifist. The book is his “life story;” any explanation of it would be reductive. His life is involved—a word Jayber eventually uses to describe himself—both in the sense of being connected and complicated. He is entangled in his community and in his inward life. Berry has offered his own “Notice” to any explainer tempted to reduce the entanglements of his writing: “to hell with any value anybody may find in it ‘as literature.’”¹²³ The value of literature, in this pejorative sense, is what can be learned about it rather than from it; in the better sense, Berry wants the reader involved. Berry’s work seeks to say something true about the world and the human condition; however, he does so through depicting lives that the reader experiences. That is, the truths of “literature and other ‘humanities’” are not “provable as are the truths of science.”¹²⁴ Life “can be known only by being experienced,” which is “not to ‘figure it

instead, Huck had chosen to return home? And what if, upon returning home, he had taken seriously the Christian gospels and tried to love his fellow town members, all of them?” Eric T. Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 129. Though Freyfogle is right to notice the important difference in attitude toward community between Berry and Twain, he fails to notice that this difference is manifested in Berry in the absence of a ‘Jim.’ Twain’s dramatization of freedom from community is constructed over-against the blackness of Jim; the reason why the ‘book stumbles toward the end’ is because “there is no way, given the confines of the novel, for Huck to mature into a moral human being in America without Jim... Neither Huck nor Mark Twain can tolerate, in imaginative terms, Jim freed.” Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 56. Berry’s essay on Twain focuses on the role of community for understanding freedom and responsibility, but his novel does not use any Africanist character to measure their (freedom and responsibility) extent and significance. Morrison’s account of the ending of Huckleberry Finn can be contrasted with the ending of Jayber Crow; while the former puts its readers through “hell” and “simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom,” the latter, though melancholic, is finally a book about “heaven” and dramatizes a dependent, marginal, self-forgetting freedom. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 57.

¹²³ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 16.

¹²⁴ Berry, *Home Economics*, 92.

out’ or even to understand it, but to suffer it and rejoice in it as it is.”¹²⁵ Like *Huckleberry Finn*, *Jayber Crow* is valuable because of its language; the truth of it that can be learned must be shown.

Jayber, the fictional autobiographer, alerts the reader to the nature of the life shown, but also to its experiences. His epigraph is from Andrew Marvell’s poem “The Definition of Love,” which reads: “Magnanimous Despair alone/ Could show me so divine a thing...”¹²⁶ The reader is asked to approach the novel poetically rather than scientifically or mechanically. Indeed, the language of interpretation and explanation will be inadequate for describing Jayber’s life story, not only because it is an irreducible life, but also because it may be the only time Berry employs an unreliable narrator. Late in his memoir, Jayber admits to the reader that he knows himself “to be a man skilled in self-deception” (247); he confesses that the account of his life given to the reader is not “exactly true” (354). His voice is not a mechanical apparatus that can be taken apart and explained. Jayber’s magnanimous despair is a revelation of the “thingness” of the divine—Jayber’s experience of the divine in earthly life—which cannot be revealed or summarized in a different language from Jayber’s own. His words incarnate the truth to which his life bears witness. What follows is an attempt to lay out the imaginative experience of reading *Jayber Crow*, to say what is shown.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 8-9.

¹²⁶ For the full poem see Andrew Marvell, *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, Vol. I. ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 39-40.

¹²⁷ Perhaps, then, this work is doomed to be an explanation of sorts, but, unlike E.O. Wilson, I do not suggest that interpretation and literary criticism are equally as valuable as the art about which they reflect. “Mr. Wilson’s project of consilience depends upon his assumption that works of art can be rendered into ‘interpretations’ that can then be aligned with the laws of biology and ultimately with the laws of physics.

Jayber's echo of *Huckleberry Finn* reveals his sympathies with a childlike desire for escape. Jayber, like Berry, imagines his boyhood through Huck. Jayber's "Notice" suggests that he thinks there is something equally instructive about his elusion of institutions as there is about Huck's escape from piety and civilization. Huck turns to face "the world itself: the night, the woods, and eventually the river and all it would lead to" in his escape from "the strictures of the evangelical Miss Watson."¹²⁸ Huck's melancholy marks his estrangement from his restricted enclosure, a condition that allows his imagination to escape Miss Watson's dominion even prior to his actual liberation: "I went up to my room... and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead." As a child, Jayber is forced into an orphanage, placed under the authority of a man behind a desk named Brother Whitespade, "one of the crossest of Christians" (30). The first nights in his room are "filled with a strange objectless fear" during which he could only go to sleep "in despair of anything else to do" (31). Jayber enters the country to escape the man across the desk, but is unable to leave his lonely fear behind. After going to seminary and then to university, two more institutions following the orphanage, Jayber "hit the bottom." He feels "just awfully lonesome... sad beyond the thought or memory of happiness." Like Huck, Jayber "couldn't stop" his melancholy. He can only recall an early traumatic memory, thinking "again and again of myself running barefoot over the frozen grass the morning Aunt

He assumes, in other words, that a sufficient response to a work of art is to 'interpret' it, and moreover that the resulting interpretation is as good as or is equal to the work of art." *Life is a Miracle*, 112.

¹²⁸ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 72-73.

Cordie died” (71). The lonesomeness of institutional and religious convention turns Jayber to a world haunted and threatened: the night, the woods, and the river.

Unlike Huck, Jayber’s ultimate liberation from convention and expectation is an escape to, not from, membership in a community. It is institutional life rather than community life that diminishes Jayber’s individuality. Jayber feels he has “got to get to [his] people” (78). In both Huck’s and Jayber’s youth there “is an extremity, an enclosure, of conventional piety and propriety that needs to be escaped.”¹²⁹ However, whereas Huck mistakes all relationships for Miss Watson’s oppressive religiosity, Jayber distinguishes his Aunt Cordie’s love from Brother Whitespade’s institutional charity. Berry suggests that Huck’s mistake is Twain’s appropriation of the narrator’s voice; Twain’s authorship muzzles Huck’s voice. Jayber’s voice remains his own; Berry’s authorship does not coalesce with Jayber’s voice as it does with Andy Catlett’s. Twain’s obsession with “the damned human race’ and the malevolence of God” freezes his conception of freedom in terms of boyhood and bachelorhood.¹³⁰ Jayber, unlike Huck, grows up. Nevertheless, boyhood and bachelorhood remain dominant conditions for Jayber’s self-consciousness, although he understands them within the context of becoming a responsible member in an adult community. *Jayber Crow* tells the story of the Port William membership through his life, how he has watched the community and remained faithful to it. Though he stays a bachelor and therefore has always been on the margin of the community, he is a man

¹²⁹ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 75.

¹³⁰ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 79. Twain’s failure is an inability to imagine community life in non-infantile ways. As Richard Poirier points out, Twain’s failings in *Huckleberry Finn* are symptomatic “of some larger distrust of social structures themselves.” Richard Poirier, “Mark Twain, Jane Austen, and the Imagination of Society,” *In Defense of Reading*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), 284.

finally capable of “that magnanimity that is the most difficult and the most necessary: forgiveness of human nature and human circumstance.”¹³¹

Whereas Twain’s despair was “inconsolable,” Jayber’s despair is magnanimous—his is a “great-souled” despair.¹³² The two lines from Marvell’s “Definition of love”—“*Magnanimous Despair alone / Could show me so divine a thing...*”—temper his Twain-like “Notice”; his story should be free from any agent of reduction but should be understood within love’s definition—i.e., within its limits.¹³³ Magnanimous despair is opposed to faint-hearted or small-souled despair, which forsakes difficulty and resigns itself to fate.¹³⁴ Small-souled despair, to which Huck escapes, is “where it is assumed that what is objectionable is ‘inevitable,’ and so again the essential work is neglected.”¹³⁵ Jayber’s story of escape is one in which he is called into a lonely love for Mattie, a woman married to an unfaithful man, Troy, as a witness to the possibility of faithful love. In other words, his despair is in the difficult work of proving to himself that Mattie’s mistaken (at least to his mind) marriage with Troy was not inevitable—a truth that cannot be proved but only experienced. Jayber becomes Mattie’s hidden, silently faithful

¹³¹ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 79.

¹³² Harold Toliver describes this despair as “a productive, even ‘magnanimous,’ creature (including the Latin sense of *magnus animus* or ‘great-souled’).” Harold E. Toliver, *Marvell’s Ironic Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 45.

¹³³ Not that Marvell’s poem should necessarily be read in the tradition of the *Definition* genre of Renaissance poets, which is distinguished from Description insofar as the former is a “somber and hostile analysis of sexual love.” Frank Kermode, “Definitions of Love,” *Review of English Studies* 7, no. 26 (1956): 183. It is not love “considered in the abstract; it is the rarity, the unusual qualities, of his particular love, that the poem deals with.” Kermode, “Definitions of Love,” 184. Kermode’s point is that the poem is not about the “alteration of Hope and Despair.”

¹³⁴ “The notion of sublimating infinitely frustrated desire into Aristotelian ‘great-souledness’ may be a beautiful thought, but even more beautiful is love mutually acknowledge and capable of healing our small-souledness.” Oehlschlaeger, *Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 235. Though my reading of *Jayber Crow* differs from Oehlschlaeger’s, I agree with the importance of Marvell for understanding the novel as well as with his interpretation of the poem; however, I connect the soul more to Plato than Aristotle in my analysis of *Jayber Crow* through Marvell. See footnote 133 below.

¹³⁵ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 81.

husband, to show both that Mattie could have had a faithful husband as well as that she does in fact have a faithful husband. Jayber's life is the embodiment of a possibility. Though Troy and Mattie's marriage is objectionable it is not inevitable, and so Jayber concentrates on the work of love.

Marvell's poem indicates the form of love in Jayber's life. Marvell's articulation of the love between lover and beloved is geometrically precise: truly parallel lines that are infinite yet can never meet.¹³⁶ Jayber's love is unfulfilled in the ordinary experience of requited love on earth; his love and Mattie's love are never met. *Jayber Crow* could be read, then, as an experience of frustrated desire as the ideal form of love in the same way the standard account of Platonic love is understood as an enlightened bond whose connection surpasses the need for bodily union.¹³⁷ The "divine love" that one attains is then categorically distinct from the earthly love experienced in oblique lines that intersect and penetrate. There would be evidence for such a reading: Jayber sometimes thinks of himself as being "the most married" of all men in Port William insofar as he is faithful to his "ideal of marriage" as a "kind of last-ditch holy of holies"¹³⁸; Jayber distinguishes his love for Mattie from his sexually-driven relationship with Clydie, whom he "liked," (174) which he admits is a kind of love albeit further down the "scale" (239). Jayber's love may

¹³⁶ As lines, so love's oblique, may well
 Themselves in every angle greet:
 But ours, so truly parallel,
 Though infinite, can never meet.

¹³⁷ Marvell's poem "is commonly read either as an ingeniously abstract declaration of love or as a description of Platonic love." Ann E. Berthoff, *The Resolved Soul: A Study of Marvell's Major Poems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 88.

¹³⁸ Berry, *A Place On Earth*, 72.

be Platonic but not in this conventional sense.¹³⁹ Not only does this misreading presume a body/soul distinction Berry abhors consistently throughout his corpus, but it also ignores the mimetic relationship between Jayber and Troy. Jayber makes his vow only after he is faced with his outward similarity to Troy; his “marriage” is his commitment to prove to himself that “We’re *not* alike!” (238). Troy’s love for his wife is not deficient insofar as it is physical; Jayber’s love is not genuine insofar as it is virginal. Both have frustrated desires. Jayber’s love for Mattie is thus not the “divine thing” but his “magnanimous despair,” the failure of love fulfilled on earth.

In addition to describing the form of love as failure, Marvell’s poem also articulates the kind of difference love makes in the world. Jayber’s vow, his way of love in the world, cannot provide answers or give explanations. He asks, “What did love have to say to its own repeated failure to transform the world that it might yet redeem?” (249) In Marvell’s poem, fate is set against the fulfillment of love in time, driving an iron

¹³⁹ Toliver connects this poem to Plato’s *Symposium* in which Socrates’ “attempt to define love... is concerned with the essential nature of love as well as the personal experience of the speaker.” By suggesting that Marvell’s poem is both reliant upon as well as a “free manipulation of” *Symposium*, Toliver focuses on the intermediary aspect of love—between the definition and experience of love. *Marvell’s Ironic Vision*, 48-49. Toliver’s comparison is fruitful, but ultimately over-determined by reading Marvell’s love through Dante: “there is a more than casual penetration into the common human dilemma in which a brief glimpse of Beatrice is nourished into divine aspiration, while love runs out of affairs that, not being star-crossed, are ‘fixed’ by permanent union.” *Marvell’s Ironic Vision*, 46-47. *Jayber Crow* also draws on Dante, specifically *La Vita Nuova*. See Anthony Esolen, “If Dante Were a Kentucky Barber” *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 255-274. My emphasis on Marvell is not meant to be an argument against the presence of Dantean themes but rather to suggest that they are complementary. For the connection between Berry and a Platonic account of the soul and sexuality in *Remembering*, which has influenced my reading of Berry, see P. Travis Kroeker, “Sexuality and the Sacramental Imagination: It All Turns on Affection,” *Wendell Berry: Life and Work* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 119-136. Fritz Oehlschlaeger suggests that *A World Lost* also “invokes St. Paul and Plato.” *Achievement of Berry*, 173-174. Kroeker turns to the *Phaedrus* and Oehlschlaeger uses *The Republic*; my understanding of Platonic love draws mainly from the *Symposium*, a reading which has been largely influenced by Zdravko Planinc, “Ascending with Socrates: Plato’s Use of Homeric Imagery in the Symposium,” *Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (2004): 325-350.

wedge between the author and his “extended soul.”¹⁴⁰ Love will continue to fail here unless the “earth some new convulsion tear./ And, us to join, the world should all/ Be cramp’d into a planisphere.” It will take a sudden, violent, and radical upheaval to restructure the world—a change like turning a globe into a map—in order for this love to finally succeed.¹⁴¹ And yet this impossible love does exist in the world.¹⁴² Jayber experiences it, is changed by it, without it making any noticeable difference in the world. “I had changed, and the sign of it was only that my own death now seemed to me by far the least important thing in my life” (252). What Jayber is shown by his experience is an absence, a silence, in the irreducibility of love. “I saw something that a normal life with a normal marriage might never have allowed me to see. I saw that Mattie was not merely desirable, but desirable beyond the power of time to show” (249). His is a “faith without hope”; the only good he gets from it is having “love in [his] heart” (247).

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Hill reads this poem within its politically charged polemical context. These lines—“But Fate does iron wedges drive, / And always crowds itself betwixt...” —is an image “perfect for the age of Civil War. Fate is symbolized by the products of one of the industries which were transforming rural Britain, by the conventional symbol for warlike arms; and it ‘crowds itself betwixt’ with irresistible force: here Fate is thought of as a tumultuous multitude of human individuals, as well as abstract military and industrial process. Nor is Fate merely an external force” but rather “Fate ‘defines’ Love in both senses of the word – it both limits it and expresses its full significance.” Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), 344. Hill emphasizes the function of Fate to express the conflicting experience of love in a world torn by civil war. Berthoff’s understanding of Fate not as “the way things go but the way things are” and “not a mode of happening but the fact of being” resonates with Hill’s depiction. Berthoff, *Resolved Soul*, 95.

¹⁴¹ Berthoff reads this upheaval in celestial terms, but Frank Kermode and Keith Walker—following D.M Schmitter, “The Cartography of ‘The Definition of Love’” *Review of English Studies*, 12 (1961): 49-51—suggest that there “is a possibility... that the figure is terrestrial rather than celestial. Thus the poles would be terrestrial, the planisphere a crushed globe, with the lines of latitude parallel, and those of longitude meeting the poles.” Frank Kermode and Keith Walker, ed. *Andrew Marvell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 293. Margarita Stocker calls this transformation an “apocalyptic solution” in which union is achieved when “the world itself must be crushed from globe into wheel—in geometric terms a ‘Planisphere.’” Stocker identifies this apocalyptic movement with Christ, but does not reflect on the constructive capacity of despair. Margarita Stocker, *Apocalyptic Marvell: The Second Coming in Seventeenth Century Poetry* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1986), 231-233.

¹⁴² Jayber Crow conveys the paradoxical imagery of Marvell’s poem, which defines “the paradox of a love created by despair and impossibility.” Berthoff, *Resolved Soul*, 90.

Thus, love's work, for Jayber is psychological—it changes his soul. His transformation is not from despair to hope, but from despairing at the world as it is as all there is, to imagining the world as it is as more than what can be seen or shown in time. Jayber's despair is magnanimous—great souled—to the extent that it is a condition of having love in his heart, i.e., having a soul's love oriented properly. The “divine thing” is having a soul open to God's love for the world present in the world as it is, a love containing suffering and partiality in the form of crucifixion.¹⁴³ That is, God descends down to the world out of love only to again descend into suffering and death in order for “the possibility that we might be bound to Him and He to us and us to one another by love” (295). Jayber learns that God's love for the world—in its visible shape of brokenness—might be shown in Jayber's own love for Port William, and so he prays “to know in my heart His love for the world” (253). This prayer is Jayber's “step into the abyss,” his acknowledgment that the form of God's love is simultaneously free and costly. “To love the world as much even as I could love it would be suffering also, for I would fail. And yet all the good I know is in this, that a man might so love this world that it would break his heart” (254). The change Jayber's soul undergoes is orienting itself to this good, this divine thing. Jayber's life story as an infinitely parallel line opposing the tyranny of fate is not about unrequited or idealized love but about a broken heart that allows Jayber to see the love of Christ “in the ordinary miracle of the existence of His creatures... in the poor, the hungry, the hurt, the wordless creatures, the groaning and travailing beautiful world” (295). Heartbreak—the movement beyond the self toward the

¹⁴³ “This *divine thing*—‘that thing Divine’ is Marvell's name for the soul in ‘A Dialogue Between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure.’ Berthoff, *Resolved Soul*, 97.

good that cannot be possessed—expands the soul’s capacity to love.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, it is the work of love to become like Christ in love.

Jayber’s ineligibility for Mattie’s love allows him to see her as an ordinary creature of God, a living soul, irreducible to his or Troy’s desires, which helps him to see the presence of God’s love in the fallen world. Jayber narrates the story of his life, which is the story of his relation to Port William, in theological language (12). From his time in seminary, he continues to ask questions about prayer, the incarnation, the will of God, and Christian living. These questions cannot be answered, but rather Jayber must “live them out” (54). Jayber never lets go of these questions, interpreting the events of his life according to their terms. Jayber’s mind habitually returns to “final questions... with fascination and with strange delight.” And so the reader must make a judgment on Jayber: “Is it noble faith or cowardice that, though he cannot see that all loves do not end in the dark, he cannot believe they do?”¹⁴⁵ There is no proof that Jayber’s love is not delusional, that the divine good he sees in the love of a broken heart is not a projection of a grand narrative to justify the pathetic illusions of a self-enclosed voyeur. Jayber admits that there is no way to prove that all good in the world is not such a projection, a human invention to give heightened meaning or gain heroic acknowledgement. “How could

¹⁴⁴ James Alison informs my thinking on heartbreak and the bonds of human relationships. For example, “If any of us, Christians, Muslims, or Jews, are able to make a pilgrimage together in which gay and lesbian people are to take part, fully ourselves, and fully in need of all the same graces as everybody else, it will only be because we will have undergone an arduous process of learning in which we will all have been stripped of different sorts of idolatry. A painful and disorienting process, for it is our hearts that will have become detached from forms of belonging to which they ought not to have been attached, so as to become aligned with something imperishable. On the way, we will have learned things about being human that none of us knew before, and what we know will be real. Our unity will no longer be that inspired by the fierce guardians of idolatrous righteousness. Our bonds will have become those of the broken-hearted.” James Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Continuum, 2010), 279.

¹⁴⁵ Berry, *A Place On Earth*, 297.

divine intervention happen, if it happens, without looking like a coincidence or luck?” (253). The argument between chance and divine intervention cannot be settled; but “love does not answer any argument. It answers all arguments, merely by turning away, leaving them to find what rest they can” (248). The difference prayer has made for Jayber, his “proof” that his lifelong love has been noble faith, is in his sense of belonging to his place (253).

How did Jayber belong to the world before he had his heart broken and learned to pray? How did his despair become magnanimous? Jayber’s original name is Jonah Crow and he is twice orphaned. His maternal grandmother died young, prompting his mother, Iona Quail, to marry young after she was pregnant with Jayber, who “was not thought of until too late” (12). Jayber’s parents are both dead before he is four years old. One of his few memories of his mother is “sitting in [her] lap in the rocking chair beside the kitchen stove” while she sang to him. Details about the song and kitchen, as well as the features of his parents’ faces, remain unknown. His aunt Cordelia Quail—Aunt Cordie—finds Jayber “crouching beside the woodbox behind the kitchen stove” refusing to be comforted. Aunt Cordie simply “gathered [him] up without asking and sat down in the rocking chair... trying to enclose [him] entirely in her arms.” She proclaims, “God love his heart!” and tells her husband, Othy, that they are going to raise him (14). As a three-year-old, Jayber looks for his missing mother in the place most closely associated with her affection and receives it as any child receives a mother’s love—unrequested and absolutely. In addition, Cordelia—the root of which is the Latin word for “heart”—provides the association of perfect earthly and divine love. Aunt Cordie’s prayer for

Jayber becomes his calling—his understanding of the good life lived in faith without hope, the language that enables him to recognize the divine thing. Cordie is his heart at its most comforted and secure; she is the standard for the soul's properly oriented love.

Cordie and Othy are both dead by the time Jayber is ten years old. The years under their care, however, are formative. They live on the river; the banks have been devastated by the winter, reflecting Jayber's world after the death of his parents and the loss of his "old life." For comfort, Jayber shadows Cordie. His life on the river gives him the language to describe the love Aunt Cordie has given him; the physical attributes of the river characterizes the form of unearned, complete love. It is mystifying and enchanting to contemplate its nature, difficult to locate in its ever-present yet ever-flowing condition. Jayber describes the relation of the shore to the river in language that recalls Marvell's poem and reflects his relationship with Mattie: its banks are "parallel, never-meeting... which yet never part" (310). Jayber will continue to use the same language to describe the river, Mattie, and love itself.

Jayber associates Aunt Cordie with his childhood life on the river. Jayber says, "From start to finish, I was pretty much Aunt Cordie's boy." Jayber spends time with Othy as well, but Othy is "persnickety in his ways and hard to please" (23). Cordie dies about a year after Othy's death; Jayber loses the orientation for his life and is sent flying—"Though there was frost on the ground, I didn't even wait to put on my shoes" (28)—in need of order and love. Jayber describes the next twelve years as "the course that carried me away from the Port William neighborhood and then... back again to the proper end of my life, to the love of my life, Mattie Chatham" (29). Aunt Cordie provides

comfort and care after the first disruption in Jayber's life, but her death also marks the second disruption for which there is no second Aunt Cordie, no new mother-figure. There is only Brother Whitespade at the church orphanage called The Good Shepherd.

Whitespade is Jayber's earliest childhood memory of institutional authority. Whitespade "embodied most formidably" the institution (32). He is the figure of power that haunts Jayber for the rest of his life—he is "the man across the desk" that Jayber tries to elude. Jayber feels Whitespade's power palpably, though he cannot articulate its effect or describe its force. Jayber says Whitespade's influence "came into me as a hollow place that opened slowly and ached under my breastbone" (30). Whitespade's penetrating gaze of order and discipline enters Jayber's heart—his soul—and rearranges his sense of self. While under Cordie's care, Jayber thought of himself as Jonah Crow—"a pretty name"—which he associated with his mother's love. Now, he asks himself, "I was who? A little somebody who could have been anybody, looking across that wide desk at Brother Whitespade." Whitespade renames him J. Crow—"not quite nameless, but also not quite named" (31). All the children in the orphanage are re-identified in kind, becoming different people than they were before they arrived.

In this organized context, this new Jayber develops the desire to escape. Division characterizes institutional life, which Jayber handles by evading it as best he can. The world of the orphanage is divided into the ideal world of order, which was "of the soul, whose claims the institution represented" while the real world of disorder was of nature, the body, represented by the orphans. The orphans are "a sort of infection" (32). The orphanage determines the social structure against which Jayber desires freedom. In

response to the prevalent supervision—the “ever-watching eyes” that “lusted to know all that we least wanted to tell”—Jayber develops an inward life “of the intensest privacy” (32). Jayber’s escape from institutional life turns him away from its gaze, first inward and then out toward nature. In other words, *The Good Shepherd* unsettles Jayber’s self-understanding and institutionally defines the conditions of social integration and freedom. His objection to “the life of institutions and organizations” as well as his distrust of those “who willingly live such a life” is “a considered judgment... that *The Good Shepherd* taught [him] to make” (33). Although he is willing to learn in school and enjoys reading, his mind gains the habit to wander without the force of his will. His daydreams become a place of escape; he imagines the outdoors of his former life and secures a stronger affiliation to these thoughts than to his social environment.

Jayber admits that he was already willfully deluding himself, presuming that his memories of his childhood place reflected the existing condition of his former home. But things had changed as they are wont to do; the development of a road required the destruction of his father’s blacksmith shop; his house was burned to the ground, leaving only weeds and tree sprouts among a protruding chimney. Among these recollections of the lost are uncalled memories of being loved: “one of the old times would come over me entirely, and I could remember sitting in Aunt Cordie’s lap while she rocked me and sang” (37). His memory of his mother and Aunt Cordie coalesce into one formative image of motherly love, which functions to estrange him from the institutional charity of the orphanage. Nevertheless, despite belonging defiantly to these memories rather than

The Good Shepherd, it is the latter that teaches him the knowledge and understanding of belonging itself, the mode of relating to others.

If Whitespade embodies the institution, then Jayber becomes the embodiment of its disorder, its infection. Not that Jayber's life is diametrically opposed to the life of the institution, Jayber defines himself against Whitespade in a way that depends upon and reflects the essential features of life in the orphanage. Jayber describes himself as not "just lonely, but solitary, living as much as I could in secret, looking about, seeing much, revealing little" (38). Jayber describes Whitespade as "a little lonely," part of the institution that was "turned inward," constantly watching others while maintaining a protective distance and reluctant to show himself (44). Jayber's private inward life is the internalization of Whitespade's authoritative presence. Despite preferring the outdoors to the classroom and the pleasures of the body to preserving an austere soul, Jayber becomes attached to his community in a similar manner as Whitespade. The likeness is confirmed after Jayber receives "the call" to become a preacher like Whitespade. Jayber quells his existential anxiety and disarray in relation to the figure of Whitespade by turning him into a friend, but with the effect of creating a critical internal voice with the same religious and moral mandate. Jayber infects the orphanage not because he is so different from it but because he introduces ambivalence within its world; he is a parody, a perversion of both authority and subjugation. While the other children exhibit their defiance by simply breaking the rules the orphanage imposes upon them, Jayber sublimates institutional ideals in order to neutralize their threat to his bodily pleasures only to have them create in him a conscience that estranges him from others. Jayber is the embodiment of disorder to

the extent that he does not fit neatly into either category of orphan or staff within the social structure, and therefore has confused and contradictory feelings about those to whom he primarily belongs. It is both strategic and disruptive; he has “set the stage for well-paying hypocrisy and self-deception” (44). He gains both privileges and the compunction to abandon them.

Though the process of internalization begins with Whitespade’s gaze, Jayber’s ambivalence is intensified in his alleged “call.” At the outset of adolescence, Jayber begins stealing down to the countryside. He escapes to the outdoors mostly and preferably alone, though sometimes joining a group of boys.¹⁴⁶ These “excursions were worth whatever punishment” meted out if caught (42). However, Jayber is already unsure of his allegiance. As a teenager, Jayber joins the other older boys who escape into town to buy cigarettes and meet girls—“maybe just to declare to myself whose side I was on.” The moment he tries to distance himself from Whitespade Jayber begins to wonder if he might be called to preach, a suspicion for which he can give no account or cause. It seems as though Jayber is being pulled, at this juncture, by his fear of becoming a preacher and the recurring theme of “the call” in Whitespade’s sermons. It would be the highest occasion were Jayber to become a preacher and thereby “repay his debt” for “having been rescued by the charity of the church.” Jayber feels guilty for what he has received from the orphanage, but also for hearing the call of other, forbidden desires. Though he never feels

¹⁴⁶ There was a large stream in which the boys would swim and engage in “outlawry: swimming, diving out of the overhanging trees, and then sitting around in our birthday suits, smoking cigars that we bought at a little general store by the railroad bridge” (42). This experience describes one that Berry himself had as an adolescent with his friend: “We were against civilization. . . . On the river we came aware of a most inviting silence: the absence of somebody telling us what to do and what not to do. We swam and fished and ate and slept. We could leave our clothes in the cabin and run naked down the bank and into the water. We could buy cigars and lie around and smoke.” Berry, *The Long-Legged House*, 121.

the call or hears a voice from God, Jayber is “starting to respond at about that time to the distant calling of girls” (43). Guilt, fear, the feeling of failure and deficiency all intensify at the continuing uncertainty of his life in ministry and the increasing strength of the “siren song of girls” in his mind. Jayber tells Whitespade he received the call, which settles his sense of debt, uncertainty, and sexuality. His internal disorder is complete: the problematic moral structure of the institution that he has inwardly incorporated sets in opposition his desire for girls and the vocation of ministry. The decision releases his emotional tension, but disrupts his ability to form bonds of friendship with the other orphan boys or develop a mature sexuality with girls.

Just before “the call,” Jayber meets Nan. Thinking, “if I became a preacher I was going to need a wife”—which was “the thought that I liked most”—Jayber and Nan share a springtime kiss. Jayber says the kiss “was the strongest thing that had happened to me since Aunt Cordie died.” Nan has copper coloured hair, and so Jayber “imagined a wife with red hair.” Nan leaves the orphanage immediately afterward, but remains imprinted on Jayber’s imagination. Jayber says, “I imagined us sitting at our kitchen table, eating a big supper that always ended with a cherry pie like Aunt Cordie used to make” (45). Jayber’s sexual appetite is not only at odds with his conceptual capacity to receive the divine “call”; it is also associated with his need for maternal love. Jayber links Nan to Cordie in a kind of regression; his first episode of sexual love is so powerful he reverts to an infantile vulnerability that undoes his sense of self and requires the need for a moral structure to provide mental stability. But because he correctly distinguishes Cordie’s motherly love and Whitespade’s institutional charity, Jayber is never able to fully

stabilize his ambivalence. His calling provides him with a “perfect camouflage” that affords him an appearance of reputation without needing to actually change into the person Whitespade wants him to become (44). Unfortunately, Jayber never explores his need for a camouflage—as the only orphan to even claim to receive “the call” under Whitespade, Jayber is also the only orphan to need such a façade in order to continue to rebel. The camouflage hides Jayber’s inward life from Whitespade and others, but also hides his aggression toward Whitespade, which makes him feel guilty and inhibited about his sexual feelings. In order to alleviate this pressure of guilt, Jayber associates his bodily desires with the maternal love that is acceptable within the religious moral system and also discharges his sense of helplessness and despair. Jayber leaves The Good Shepherd neither as a non-conformist orphan nor a genuine preacher, neither with traditional Christian ethics nor with unselfconscious sexual habits. Instead, he leaves with a fractured self—“confused and hopeful and self-deluded” (45).

To summarize: Jayber was orphaned during infancy, which understandably augmented early feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. Aunt Cordie’s love overcame these feelings, reestablishing his earliest connection of safety and love with his mother. Jayber developed his personality particularly in connection to Cordie rather than Othy, who was difficult to please. Cordie’s death understandably devastates Jayber, whose sense of self is further disoriented by the hostile charity of Brother Whitespade. Jayber is changed into “another world” and “another body” at the orphanage but maintains vestiges of his old life. He enjoys nature, which is deemed suspicious by institutional life, but he also wants to please Whitespade. With memories of his birth as unintended by his father

and his uncle's hard disposition, and with the absence of a mother's love, Jayber attempts to overcome his antagonism toward the institution Whitespade embodies by becoming the person Whitespade wishes him to be. Jayber develops a new personality, one that preserves the desires of his old life by disguising it with the new outward religious life that Whitespade provides. However, Jayber's private life is unconsciously affected by his pretense; he develops an internal voice of authority, a voice of criticism and judgment, which produces guilt and repression—particularly in relation to romantic feelings. Jayber's inner life reflects Whitespade; by depending on Whitespade as the model against which he defines himself, Jayber becomes a form of him. When sexual feelings emerge, they are experienced as a conflict with his inner voice of authority. Despite defying the institution's division of body and soul, Jayber feels that his sexual desires and his religious commitments are at odds with each other. Jayber's religious pretense to overcome this conflicting dualism discharges mounting internal tensions, but does so by changing the nature of his desire for female companionship. Just as he turns inward to escape from the institution, so too his sexual life is turned inward to the imagination. Instead of to the church, he belongs to his mind where the memory of his mother and Cordie have made female love both a formative force for his mode of relating to others as well as an acceptable form for his new religious life. Jayber leaves the orphanage with confused and contrasting views about pleasure and pleasing God, about imagined and physical love, and about belonging to the mind and to the community.

Jayber attends seminary at Pigeonville College, from which he leaves more confused than he was when he left The Good Shepherd. Though he has a small

scholarship, Jayber also works as a server in a girls dormitory, which sets him at “cross purposes” (46). Thinking sexual love and love of God are categorically distinct, that they have different ends or purposes, prepares Jayber for theological bewilderment. He is unable to develop a healthy sexual identity, which forestalls the capacity to reckon with God’s love for the world. Put differently, his disoriented sense of “lower things” interferes with his understanding of “divine things.” This does not mean, however, that Jayber does not love earthly things; just the opposite is the case. Jayber, however, believes his love for nature is antithetical to his theological training.

Whitespade still haunts him, only in a mirror-opposite form. Jayber’s relationship with authority has changed: whereas at the orphanage he was willing to be punished for enacting his freedom, “at this school I not only learned what the rules were but even willing kept them... I didn’t want to be punished” (46-47). Jayber maintains his habit of distancing himself from his father figures; however, now this figure is ossified in “the man behind the desk.” Jayber associates institutions with Whitespade, exchanging or perhaps amalgamating love from a father and systemic power. “I didn’t want ever again to stand in front of the desk of somebody who had more power than I had” (47). And still Jayber has “no social life to speak of” (48). Jayber organizes his life around avoidance and isolation. He is “ashamed” of his uncertainty concerning the common theology of the seminary and so he withdraws (54). Leaving religious institutional life once again, “feeling free” and without “fear of failure,” he has an uncalled memory of Nan. It is again

spring, and as he leaves another “man behind a desk”¹⁴⁷ he thinks of—his mind motions towards—the woman who has replaced Cordie who replaced his mother.

Jayber’s thoughts of Nan at the beginning of the next phase of his life both inaugurate and shape his movement back to order and harmony. This movement is not linear, however, and begins with Jayber’s desire to “make something out of myself” (56). He goes to the city and barbers to pay his way through university with the ostensible purpose of becoming a teacher. On his way to the city he gets a ride from Sam Hanks, a member of Port William, who gives him a five-dollar bill. Believing this to be something that needs to be repaid, and also that it was given to him on the basis of a lie he told Sam, Jayber embarks his new life where he left off—dominated by feelings of guilt, shame and obligation. He is utterly free, but is still held by his old habits of mind. Just as his declaration of becoming a preacher was a “camouflage,” so too his claim to become a schoolteacher is his “pretense” for going to university (69). Thus, his failure to become a teacher is a repetition of his previous failure to become a preacher.¹⁴⁸ He uses it as a way to solidify his personality, his sense of self, but is left confused and in despair. Again he is encouraged to make a new self and leave the old life behind, to “rise above [his] humble origins” (71). At this point, his lonesomeness and discomfort for institutional life again turns him out, and he begins his journey back to his origins, to the original order and harmony experienced in Aunt Cordie’s love.

¹⁴⁷ At the seminary, the particular man behind the desk is Dr. Ardmire.

¹⁴⁸ “Sometimes he half believed that, having been born by nobody’s intention, and brought up as a mistake by public duty, he had come finally into his fated inheritance, the failure of all purpose. He had made no friends. He owed nothing to anybody, he became more and more depressed under the burden of his freedom.” Berry, *A Place on Earth*, 65.

After his final experience of disaffection for institutional life—now both secular academy and religious church—Jayber enters a lonely fear and thinks of Aunt Cordie. He cries, Cordie’s last words echoing in his mind: “I don’t know. Honey, I just don’t know” (72). Just as Cordie did not know what would become of Jayber after her death, Jayber does not know what will become of him after he ends his institutional life once and for all. Uncalled memories of Cordie continue to emerge in Jayber’s mind, her voice endlessly sounding and reducing him to tears, bringing tension to his life of pretense. Jayber still belongs more to his mind than to his social milieu—“I hadn’t formed any ties at all” (72)—and the internal pressure pushes him to return to the source of his life. He realizes, despite his teachers’ geographical conceits, that he needs a “loved life to live” (73). Cordie’s voice draws him back to his original sense of love, back to his origins. Jayber remembers, “in my hopelessness and sorrow, I began a motion of the heart toward my origins. Far from rising above them, I was longing to sink into them until I would know the fundamental things. I needed to know the original first chapter of the world” (73). The movement that began with memories of Nan culminates in memories of Cordie. He remains somewhat of a mystery to himself and his reasons for his life’s movements are not transparent to him.¹⁴⁹

Jayber’s pilgrimage home is a mystical experience. He uses religious language to describe his travel home during an epic flood of the Ohio river. Jayber is drawn to the rising waters as he is drawn to return to his old life; his early sense of the river as his

¹⁴⁹ “He left, less because he wanted to leave than because he no longer wanted to stay.” Berry, *A Place on Earth*, 65.

origin plays a significant emotional and theological role in his wandering. Seeing the engorged river and its path of destruction, Jayber says,

And this is what it was like—the words were just right there in my mind, and I knew they were true: “the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” I’m not sure that I can tell you what was happening to me then, or that I know even now.... But... I seemed to have wandered my way back to the beginning—not just of the book, but of the world—and all the rest was yet to come (79).

Jayber, feeling like the earth has reverted to its primordial condition, is being remade—he is beginning again. His beginning is the beginning of the world; the substance of his life is the same as that of all creation. He understands the “original first chapter of the world” as his own origins, both already formed and yet continuously remade by the Spirit. “I could see that I lived in the created world, and it was still being created” (83). Jayber experiences his return home as a calling, something that has been with him despite feeling uncertain and lost—like following a path “without an arrow” (86). Jayber now sees the arrow as pointing toward Port William, as Sam Hanks’ five-dollar bill, and the sustaining life of all creation. In other words, he gathers up all the conflicting internal drives—his earliest experience of love, his guilt, his religious conscience, his flight from institutions—into one purpose. He feels his calling in the motions of his heart toward his origins, which is captured in the river.

Jayber has no problem being received into male companionship. Along his path back to Port Williams he meets Burley Coulter, who is nineteen years older than Jayber and happens to be the same age Jayber’s “father would have been if he had lived” (124). Burley gives Jayber a life in Port William, helping him acquire his barbershop and

apartment in town as well as the cabin he retires to on the river. Burley is a friend but also a new father figure for Jayber; after Burley dies Jayber says, “I had been living out a vision that he had seen” (318). Put differently, Burley gives him the calling, the vocation, that eluded him in institutions—namely to live and work in the same place at the same time. Like any son could say of his father, “You will know how much, practically and otherwise my life... had been his gift” (318). Burley’s gift is to give back Jayber’s past, which was revoked from him by Brother Whitespade. At *The Good Shepherd* Jayber “learned to think of myself as myself. The past was gone. I was unattached” (130). Now, Burley introduces Jayber into a new life by allowing him to feel what he lost, by enabling him to remember his past. Burley did so by simply introducing Jayber to people as “the boy Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy took to raise;” Jayber is “changed” by Burley’s inauguration into the community (130). No longer isolated and empty, Jayber becomes attached to and integrated with his place.

Jayber, however, is never fully accepted into the female company of Port William. He attributes the cause of his “social ineligibility” to Cecelia Overhold. Shortly after his arrival and during Jayber’s first spring in Port William, Burley invites Jayber to a night of drinking with several other men in the woods. The following morning Jayber awakes to Cecelia’s approach and reproach. Jayber describes her as “walking like the Divine Wrath itself. She was a beautiful woman still... really something to look at.” Though he does not run, neither does he climb a nearby tree, as do the other men, including Cecelia’s husband, Roy. She accosts Jayber; she asks him, “What are you looking at, you bald-headed thing?” and subsequently hurls a rock at his mouth chipping off a piece of his

tooth (118). The verbal abuse “hurt [his] feelings probably worse than anything else she could have done” (118). Cecelia—a person with a low opinion of Port William and even lower opinion of those who willingly live there—never lets go of her judgement of Jayber. She is the kind of person who keeps “you reminded of how you fit in.” Jayber remains a “bystander” for a long while before he becomes “involved” (123). Cecelia is Jayber’s enemy only because that is how she sees him. To Cecelia, Jayber is a man who cannot be made better—“a piece of raw material permanently raw, forever to be unimproved”—and thus represents all that she resents about her husband and the town in which they live. Jayber is the force that prevents Roy and Port William from becoming better than they are, preventing her from accepting them as they are. Jayber is the “gatekeeper” of the “unregulated other world” that threatens the proper order and potential embodied in Cecelia’s self- righteous and self-proclaimed social superiority (155).

Jayber’s chipped tooth betrays the scar Cecelia leaves on his heart. Though he claims to have had no romantic desire for Cecelia, she troubles him throughout his life. Jayber admits his predicament does not make sense, but his trouble is “being actively and somewhat joyously disliked by a woman you may not much desire... but all the same would rather not be disliked by” (207). He does not say why he would prefer for Cecelia to not dislike him; she simply never forgives him for that morning in the woods. She becomes the new figure for his internal critical voice; the encounter with Cecelia marks the recurrence of an authority-figure’s moral structure that brings internal conflict and guilt. The incident is not only a “failure of common sense” as Jayber concedes, but it is

also transfers his experience with Brother Whitespade onto Cecelia. That is, it not only confuses his mind but also his heart, his way of being attached to his new community. Jayber does not have romantic feelings for her, but he wants Cecelia to approve of him. The effect is not only a morally motivated self-criticism—“If I had climbed that tree like the others, would she have liked me better? Was it my passivity...? Did she [Cecelia] see it as indifference to her, or disrespect? ... Did she think I was lying there in case of an opportunity to look up her skirt?”—but also diminishes his sense as a social being—“Often her dislike of me... has made me feel unlikeable” (208). Despite his motion toward his origins, his being recreated, Jayber’s old self lingers and is also socially defined. Like Whitespade, Cecelia affects Jayber’s soul, causing it to “fester with self-doubt and self-justification and anger” (209). Jayber thus remains ambiguously connected to the private and public life of Port William. Such is his condition when he first meets Mattie.

Jayber’s next memorable event is watching Mattie walk home from school. He has “no extraordinary affection” for her at that time, yet his pattern remains mostly the same: upon entering a new social environment he undergoes intense self-questioning, which complicates his social life and stimulates his romantic imagination. Cecelia refuses to look at Jayber in her confrontation, as though she has seen enough and that there was no more to him that one could see. When he sees Mattie for the first time, she gives him a look that makes him feel “extraordinarily seen” (10). It is spring again and Mattie is the same age and fits the same description as Nan, namely, they both have copper hair. Mattie’s parents are Athey (compare with Othy) and Della (a short version of Cordelia).

Both Mattie and Cecelia signal Jayber's repression of wishes for approval and protection. His descriptions reveal more about his own inward life than they do about the women themselves. Both women set the terms by which Jayber understands himself in the community, though Mattie is the opposite of Cecelia—"a neat, bright, pretty, clear-spirited girl with all her feeling right there in her eyes... with a good openhearted smile" (134). These women will determine the conflicts, the questions and self-criticism, which he must live out.

Because he binds himself to the two women from whom he can never be given satisfaction or peace of mind, he is bound to Port William. He is able to become involved in the happenings of the town only when he decides to share its fate. It is a course of life over which Jayber bears little control; external forces determine its direction and end. Being the town barber, and then also the church janitor and gravedigger, thrusts Jayber into its social life. However, his involvement consists in listening to others and observing the life of the town rather than speaking into the lives of others. In other words, Jayber remains somewhat eccentric. The internal conflict over his sense of self and the habit of pretense make Jayber unable to speak for himself. Though this is a problem that he addresses later, it inhibits his capacity to reckon with Port William as a town within a nation at war. That is, his inability to settle questions about himself prevents him from knowing how to respond to a social problem. He was taught to love his enemies but he lives in a community that sends its young men off to be killed. He did not want to make himself a special case in the community by opting out of the war, but knew that no good would come to Port William from fighting in the war. Jayber cannot think his way out of

this crisis; he cannot figure out his path through the crossroads. He simply says, “my mind was failing me.” Either he kills people he “wasn’t even mad at and who were no more to blame” or “take[s] an exemption” he “didn’t believe was right” or feel “worthy of” (143). His decision to let the town’s decision be his own includes suffering and sorrow, but it changes him and engenders his involvement. Once again, his internal problems prevent him from fulfilling his social bonds. He is classified 4-F because of a “little heart problem” (145). Once again, he is deemed ineligible by an authority. To share Port William’s fate means that the form Jayber’s involvement takes is in sharing its hidden wounds, enduring its grief.

Troy disturbs Jayber’s social and emotional attachments. Port William and Mattie provide the “fate” and “true end” of Jayber’s life respectively, despite his “wandering and unmarked” pilgrimage by means of “mistakes and surprises” (133). His movement has not been straight and his agony has not been external because of his relationship with Troy. Perhaps put better, Troy gives Jayber reason to hate and despair, the repercussions of which Jayber alone suffers. Jayber says that he disliked Troy “in his own right” before he (Troy) dated Mattie—which he confesses is a “serious fault” (134)—but Jayber does not mention their similarities. The difficulty with Jayber’s love for Mattie is his apparent jealousy and bitterness toward Troy for having that which Jayber can never possess. His first memories of Troy are shaped by his insistence that they are not alike; however, his own presentation of Troy and self-description indicate otherwise.¹⁵⁰ Both appreciate the

¹⁵⁰ Oehlschlaeger describes “Jayber’s status as a rival double of Troy.” That is, there is a sense in which “one might say [Troy] is everything Jayber is not yet would like to be.” When Jayber thinks to himself of Troy, “Why, you impudent son of a bitch!” Oehlschlaeger points out that Jayber is “not yet sufficiently aware of how well that describes himself as well as Troy.” *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 230.

efficiency and speed of machines and share the concomitant impatience with slower forms of transportation (187). Both seek freedom in loneliness (233). Jayber says, “I knew also that Troy was incoherent and obscure within himself. He was a wishful thinker. A dreamer... He was an escapee” (241). Jayber could not know this about Troy’s inward life; he is describing himself. Troy acknowledges Jayber at a dance in a way that forces him to reckon with Troy as a person like himself; he must become someone else entirely. Such a transformation is “no sure thing” and a “fearful thing,” because Jayber “would have to become a man yet unimaginable to [himself]” (241). Upon reflection at the end of his life, Jayber’s story “seems not surprising at all but only a little strange, as if it all has happened to somebody I don’t yet quite know” (12). Jayber’s love for Mattie is transformative, and the clearest picture of what Jayber changes from—his desires and habits—is his portrayal of Troy as irreverent and unfaithful.

It is hard to understand how Jayber could be so upset by Troy’s impudence and infidelity without seeing Jayber as jealous and bitter. After all, Troy has everything Jayber wants, more or less takes it all for granted, and ends up losing it all. Jayber’s motives could be reduced to “imitative desire and resentment” if he is only compared to Troy.¹⁵¹ However, the conflict between his physical relationship with Clydie and his imaginary relationship with Mattie suggests a more complicated reading of Jayber’s motives—one that includes both his understanding of love and his hatred for Troy.

¹⁵¹ Oehlschlaeger, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 229. Oehlschlaeger suggests that the crux to reading Jayber Crow is deciding whether it is “a love story or one of self-deception.” He reads it as a love story, taking Jayber’s words at face value despite the acknowledged counter-evidence. I don’t think the reader must choose because we are not trying to put together a history of Jayber’s life or a chronology of events in Port William (not that Oehlschlaeger does either). Taken together, Jayber’s motivation of love and self-deception creates an ambiguous story that reflects life as it is experienced—namely, the experience of negotiating our relationships and identities.

Like all of Jayber's beloveds, Clydie too is a redhead and has a parental figure who resembles a representative of authority in his life; such is Jayber's "type." Clydie lives with her mother and aunt, who is "a sort of old-age version of Cecelia Overhold" (173). Clydie is also in a serious relationship with another man; however, it does not interfere with her affair with Jayber. The point at which Jayber introduces the reader to Clydie he says he did not love her but only "liked" her as a companion.¹⁵² He meets Clydie in 1948. Troy and Mattie marry in 1945, working and living on Athey and Della's farm. Troy is successful early on, despite possessing all the desires and habits of mind antithetical to Athey's. Mattie gives birth to Liddie in 1946; the same year Troy buys a tractor and manifests his divergence with his father-in-law's way of life. The timeline is important; seeing Mattie's generative love flourish, despite normal family disagreements, Jayber buys a car to drive to the nearby town of Hargrave to seek out the female companionship he has been denied in Port William. Jayber is simultaneously distancing himself from Mattie and Port William, while he begins to notice his similarities with Troy despite his growing hatred.

During this withdrawal, Jayber falls in love with Mattie. Jayber perceives the tension between Troy and Athey taking its toll on Mattie, who "was put upon and divided in her loyalties" (189). Jayber claims to know that "in her heart, she was not pitying herself or complaining," and "that she would finally have to love [Troy] without approving of him" (188). Of course, Jayber could never know any of this; all he knows is that she never looked like she was divided or in need of sympathy. Nevertheless, he sees

¹⁵² "I liked her hugely and thoroughly and admired her and was in a way crazy about her, but I did not love her in the way that, later, I would come to love Mattie Chatham" (174).

Troy as undeserving and Mattie suffering yet loving him. Also at this time, Jayber watches Mattie become responsible for the community by joining the women who watch over its life and constancy. In 1950, Jayber sees her enacting this charity, a vision that was “the most deciding event of [his] life” (191). The scene itself is normal enough: Jayber, the church’s janitor, is cleaning up garbage and sees Mattie watching over the children at Vacation Bible School. With his knowledge and assumptions about her home life—mostly consisting of his dislike of Troy and admiration of Athey—he sees her “as free as a child but with a generosity and watchfulness that were anything but childish” (191). It is the vision of freedom in her love for the children and for Troy that causes Jayber to fall in love with her. It is a transformative moment, one that changes his mind—“she had assumed in my mind a new dimension”—and soul—“my heart hollowed out with longing” (192). Jayber’s dreams change from images of “nymphs or goddesses” to Mattie herself (192). More importantly, it returns Jayber’s need for a “secret life.” Jayber’s vision is what he needs most in his life under a repressive authority.

Jayber’s change is the return of the repressed need for a mother figure in a new permutation. Whereas Cecelia makes him feel unlikable, Mattie helps Jayber “think [himself] desirable” (194). Clydie is unable to offer a presence of love, though this revelation of what Jayber calls “love itself” is what he is unconsciously looking for in his relationship with her. Contrasted with Mattie’s complete presence, Clydie “always consciously reserved something of herself” (193). The absolute love of Cordie’s care is reflected in Mattie’s love for the church’s children. The spectacle ignites Jayber’s imagination, seeing the intimacy within a marriage that includes two people present to

one another in spite of faults and failures. Such a mutually constituted presence is lacking in Jayber's affair with Clydie. He maintains his façade—the camouflage of barber, janitor, gravedigger—that hides his desire. Clydie sees through his pretense, but no further intimacy ensues. Instead, Jayber uses his imagination to escape his constrained life, just as he did when he imagined married life “with a redhead” while at The Good Shepherd. Presently, Jayber is unable to forgive or disregard either Cecelia or Troy; his vision exacerbates his ill will. Jayber's rivalry is put in a nutshell: “The lower Troy Chatham fell in my estimation, the better I thought of myself” (195). This competitive consciousness further deludes Jayber's desire: “I reasoned that if Troy was hateful to me, then he must be at least objectionable to Mattie... [and] then she might be attracted to me as one who truly loved and appreciated her” (196). Once again he turns inward to address his loneliness only to find his isolation intensified. Once again Jayber's sense of self is conflicted—“I had not been at myself”—and obscures his sense of romantic love.

Jayber's immediate sense of his love for Mattie is not romantic. Or as he puts it, “This love did not come to me like an arrow piercing my heart” (192). After his vision fails, viz. after he realizes that he imagines Mattie as the subject of his desires, “the arrow stuck.” That is, his desire changes, taking further possession of him. The possibility of her love is impossible, but nevertheless remains with him. Put differently, “The hopelessness of my love became the sign of its permanence” (198). Four years after his initial vision, Jayber encounters Troy at a dance, which made him “unfit for Clydie” (238). He does not explain why he deems himself no longer suitable. Perhaps it is the result of seeing Troy's unseemly character reflected back onto him. Or, perhaps he realizes his love is like that of

a child for his mother, which is unseemly in the context of his affair with Clydie. The first thought Jayber has is his memory of Mattie on that day when he fell in love with her. “I had thought many times of her as I had seen her then, with the children so completely admitted into her affection and her presence—as, I thought, a man might be if he wholly loved her... as a little child” (238). Only now he realizes he has loved Clydie—not just “liked—but not in this child-like way that he understands as “love itself.” Only now he realizes he has to change his way of life and not just keep up appearances in order to escape inward. “I have got to give up my life or die” (239). Jayber changes again, questioning and undoing himself in the process, into the child he was under Aunt Cordie’s care.

Jayber vows to be married to Mattie in secret. The subsequent changes are associated with childhood: “as she grew older, I saw in her always the child she had been” (249); after he sells his car, “The world all at once became bigger, as big almost as I remembered it from my childhood” (254). His love is no longer estranging, but binding to the community. He is now “involved, a participant” in the same community for which Mattie is responsible and thereby becomes connected to her. Jayber has “become eligible” (259). Despite claims to having relinquished it in the past, “Now, finally, I really had lost all desire for change, every last twinge of the notion that I ought to get somewhere or make something of myself” (254). Put positively, Jayber says, “I was making nothing of myself. I was not going anywhere.” Instead of trying to become distinguished by elevating himself above and beyond his community and its way of life, he settles into it and becomes unified with it. The “nothing” he becomes is not nihilistic, a pure loss of self

in an undifferentiated mass. It is the nothing over which the Spirit hovered in the beginning, out of which the world is created. Jayber's vow affords him no comfort or rest, but it gives him faith in love. "It seemed to me that, because of my vow, a possibility—of faith, of faithfulness—that I could no longer live without had begun leaking into the world" (259). What eluded him in institutional education has arrived through living out a love through membership in a community: Christ's "mortal love of life that his death made immortal" (253). Jayber's faith in that love is set in the same terms of the same world as Troy's unfaithful love, and yet is a glimpse, a leak, of eternity.

Though living out the possibility of faith through fidelity to an impossible love "is no easier than it sounds," it enables a marginal life. Jayber needs the possibility of faith in this world because he lives in a disintegrating community. Mattie's daughter, Liddie, dies as do several of the young men who go to war, including Mattie's second child, Jimmy. Shops close down never to be reopened. The last men of the old way of farming die. The school closes. The town becomes less and less economically sustainable. Jayber is forced to move to Burley's cabin on the river because his barbershop violates draconian health regulations. Port William is dying, but Jayber's faith allows him to hazard the possibility that "Maybe something of itself will always be there" (258) and "Now and forever here" (301). Jayber says that his book is "about Heaven," perceiving heaven in what one sees on earth (354). But it was almost a book about Hell, which the earth also speaks of in the leftovers of life: "things I might once have done that are now undoable, old wrongs, responsibilities unmet, ineradicable failures—things of time, which is always revealing

the remedies it has already carried us beyond” (355). Jayber’s faith makes his story about heaven, about the divine love for the world present in earthly love.

The story ends with an intimate moment shared between Mattie and Jayber. After Jayber moves to the river, he has random encounters with Mattie in the woods on Athey’s farm that he called the “Nest Egg.” These encounters are never planned or expected, but happen over a period of fourteen or fifteen years. Jayber enjoys these times immensely but recognizes a certain discretion on Mattie’s part. “She was with me, but not for me... I knew there was a smile of hers that I had never seen” (351). This was the unimaginable smile that brought his delusional desire of Mattie to an end. He knows that if she would really leave Troy for him as he wished, “Mattie would have had to give me a look, a smile perhaps, of consent” (196). Mattie falls sick and is taken to the hospital. Troy sells the big timber in the Nest Egg and thus destroys the last of Athey’s farm. Jayber visits Mattie, who knows about the deforestation. To Jayber she whispers, “I could die in peace, I think, if the world was beautiful. To know it’s being ruined is hard.” Jayber, crying, responds, “But what about this other thing?”

She looked at me then. “Yes,” she said. She held out her hand to me. She gave me the smile that I had never seen and will not see again in this world, and it covered me all over with light (363).

Mattie, according to Jayber, gives her consent. His love is not wasted, he is not lost, but redeemed by her love. It is his faith in her validation of his love that keeps his story from being a book about hell—a deluded man searching for the lost love of his mother in the unrequited love of a woman married to a fool. All the reader knows is Jayber’s account, what he experienced in his life. There is no proof that Mattie’s smile is the one he thinks

it is, no evidence that her “yes” is the validation of his life of faith. The reader must make of it what she will.

Readers who agree that this book is about heaven will have to reckon with Jayber’s correlation between his religious imagination and maternal desires. Prior to his declaration of the book’s essential concern, Jayber conveys a dream in which he is Mattie. The dream ties together his visualization of the death of Mattie’s five-year-old daughter, Liddie, and his first encounter with Mattie in the Nest Egg. It juxtaposes Jayber’s highest experience with his most dreadful thought. In short, it is a portrayal of the worst redeemed by the best. In October of 1951, Mattie and Liddie are picking flowers along the roadside, when a car kills Liddie. Jayber imagines it according to his dream: it is October and Jayber/Mattie is gathering flowers, “laying them in the crook of my left arm,” which is exactly how Jayber imagines Mattie collecting purple asters on that fateful day. In his image of Liddie’s death, Mattie walks “among the dry grass stems and the fallen dry leaves and the smaller white-petaled asters” (199). In his dream, s/he walks among “drying stems and grasses and the fallen leaves,” but instead of white asters there are also scattered “whitened bones.” Prior to Liddie’s death, Jayber pictures her putting asters in her hair—which she has inherited from her mother—excited at her own beauty and thus wanting her mother to see her. She steps into the road where she can be best seen and says “Momma! Look how beautiful I am!” A car strikes Liddie dead, and the image is burned in Jayber’s mind: “the mother on her knees at the roadside holding her dead child” (200). Jayber dreams that Mattie picks up the whitened bones as she cries. Her tears dampen and then vivify the bones, giving them life and flesh: “They became a little

girl in a pretty dress, lying asleep in my arms” (351). Jayber’s image of Liddie’s death is reversed. Or, put better, he imagines Liddie’s death as the converse of his dream. After the little girl awakens it is April—the same month he decides upon his new life in Burley’s cabin on the river, the same month he first meets Mattie in the woods—and the girl becomes Liddie. She picks flowers to put in her hair and, looking at Jayber/Mattie says, “Momma! Look how beautiful I am!” (351). Such is Jayber’s conception of death and redemption, hell and heaven. Jayber’s next line is: “This is a book about Heaven.” Or, this is a book about understanding God’s love for the world as a mother’s love for her child. That love is not easy or painless; it cannot be proven, for it makes no noticeable difference in the world, but it makes all the difference for a life.

The difficulty for the sympathetic reader is that she must take Jayber’s infantile desires into account. Jayber’s religious life begins in intense vulnerability and strong emotional needs for love and protection. His early ambivalent feelings toward father figures push him toward motherly love, which affects his early romantic experiences. His religious bewilderment reflects his confused love. Jayber is able to turn back to God, to pray after twenty years, only after his vow. Jayber finally imagines God as “Father, and all that that name would imply: the love, the compassion, the taking offense, the disappointment, the anger, the bearing of wounds, the weeping of tears, the forgiveness, the suffering unto death” (251). None of the fathers Jayber encounters—not even Burley or Athey—fits this description of fatherhood. The person Jayber describes is Mattie, or at least his image of her in his mind. His vocation is not to be a preacher, though he sometimes preaches, but Aunt Cordie vocalizes his calling: “God love his heart.” His vow

gives him “love in [his] heart;” it is God’s love for the world. This is the same love he has for Mattie, the same love that Mattie has for Liddie, Troy, Jayber, the farm, the Nest Egg, and the whole community. Jayber’s religious life, his psychic life of imagining God’s love in the world, is his love for Mattie. It is Mattie who enables the fulfillment of Jayber’s calling, which is at the heart of his social life. He says he is connected to Mattie through his love for Port William, but the opposite is also true. His life is redeemed and given meaning beyond its visible aspects all because he thinks the love he has received from Mattie, the final consenting smile he is given, is the divine love that contains the worst parts of the world by suffering and mercy. And so the reader must decide: is his life really redeemed by this love or is Jayber deluded by a religious fantasy of wish fulfillment? One must either accept that the only thing that gives his story hope is an infantile conception of God or else pity Jayber’s waste of love.

Wendell Berry does not give the reader any way out of this choice. Other than *A Place on Earth*, which precedes *Jayber Crow*, Berry rarely mentions Jayber. He gives no perspective on Jayber’s relationship with Troy, Mattie or her parents outside of Jayber’s own imagination. Jayber descends into the abyss and tarries there, just like his biblical namesake did in the belly of the beast, in order to be shown heaven. Whether or not Jayber is shown heaven must be rendered believable or not by the reader, but the force of the question assumes that there is no categorical distinction between loving Mattie and loving Christ. Nothing can be proven; it cannot be shown that it was “worth it” for Jayber to undergo his vow. He simply believes that those who appear lost and forsaken are not because there is a love in this world that is greater than its hatred and violence. He

believes this on the basis of his experience of love, which is morally ambiguous and psychologically complicated. But whether or not he is self-deceived, the differentiation Jayber makes between God's and Mattie's love is not basic. Those who are sympathetic with Jayber, who think his story is told in good faith, accept that Jayber's infantile desires are included in, rather than negate, his love of God. Put differently, the form of Jayber's love for Mattie may be infantile, but that too is encompassed in God's love.¹⁵³ He does not need to change the shape of his love to love God; he does not need a more "adult" or rationally mature model of relationships. This acceptance of love as it is in a particular life is what is learned only by going through despair—loneliness and sorrow—because that is the form God's love takes in the world. This love is not proven in Jayber's abstinence not only because it is not something that can be proven but also because divine love is not opposite to bodily love. Rather, this is the way Jayber's life has gone; these are the decisions he has made based on his life's course. The reader is left with a despair in her judgment of the book because the question forces her to confront the fact that our love of God may be nothing more than fantasies of wish fulfillments, and there is no way to prove it is not. Such despair is magnanimous because, only by undergoing it can a person's soul expand to the extent that the person who loves God with all her heart—who has God's love for the world in her heart—can even include infantile love. There is no form of love that must be left behind or developed in loving God, however deformed and

¹⁵³ "For a person who is genuinely, religiously troubled [by the question of how one could love God with one's heart, soul, and mind] the discovery that there is an infantile dimension to our love of God will come as a relief—not as a source of doubt. For it will reassure her that there are some prayerful forms of reaching out in which one can love with all one's heart and soul—even the infantile parts." Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (London: Routledge, 2005), 207. My language and thoughts about the placement of infantile love within love of God has been permeated by Lear's treatment here.

alienated it may seem. This is what it means to become like a child to enter the Kingdom:
having a child's love for his mother is the sense of being bonded to the community.

Conclusion

The Reverent and Inarticulate Thoughts of Affection

And so I will remember, and I ask you to remember, that I am not trying to say what is thinkable everywhere, but rather what it is possible to think on the westward bank of the lower Kentucky River in the summer of 1998.

—*Citizenship Papers*¹

What I have been talking about is the possibility of renewing human respect for this earth and all the good useful, and beautiful things that come from it.

—*Citizenship Papers*²

Regarding his novel *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky declares that, despite its fictitious genre, the book is illuminative of the cultural context in which it has been produced: “It has been my wish to show the public a character of the recent past more clearly than is usually shown.”³ Literature, for writers such as Dostoevsky and Berry, does not just reflect reality—it does not merely reiterate, display, or texture what is already known—but clarifies its subject matter by embodying the author’s understanding of it. That is, it gives flesh to a particular aspect of the author’s experience of being in the world. Novels give substance to the range of commitments, interests, and beliefs that characterize modern life by casting them in a different light from that of other perceptual mediums. For Berry, this amounts to describing precise human dramas—grief, regret, despair—in his local language rather than in the parlance of, say, electronic media. The purpose of clarifying ‘a character of the recent past’—which could be said of all Berry’s stories, especially his fictional biographies—through imagination is to reveal the

¹ Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 43.

² Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, 50.

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, in *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 95. Quoted in John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 138. Gibson’s book has been informative for my understanding of the relationship between literature and the world, which has influenced the analysis of the practicality of Berry’s fiction presented here.

significance, the meaning, of an experience such as despair in a way that changes its significance and function in the reader's life. Put more broadly, the purpose of clarification is not to render something more accurately than previous representations but to deepen and broaden speech about the experience of that cultural reality.

Furthermore, that which is more clearly revealed are not bits of information to memorize or moral lessons to follow; a character cannot be reduced to sound bites or slogans. Rather, as in Dostoevsky's example, literature helps the reader make sense of her world; it portrays an imagined world in a way that capacitates recognition of a deeper meaning of social circumstances than what political rhetoric offers. In short, imagination produces a vision of the world that changes a person. The experience of reading Berry's works of imagination is not entertainment—he is not interested in assembling art for art's sake—but an imaginative participation in his engagement with reality that struggles to both make sense of the world as well as to find adequate expressions of his understanding. The work of Berry's imagination is to incarnate his insight of cultural reality. Concomitant to thinking about aspects of mundane life differently is describing them differently, which changes the meaning and significance those concepts have in our lives.

“It All Turns on Affection”

In his Jefferson lecture, Berry defends the practicality of so-called “high culture;” he details the function of literature to make sense of one's experience and, by doing so, affect one's relationship with nature and other people. Here Berry argues that to imagine something is to know it with affection. Berry takes seriously the colloquial phrase “to know by heart,” which accepts in earnest the proximity and intimacy of knowledge this idiom suggests. It is unlike

statistical information; by virtue of its vast scale, impersonal meaning, and abstract context, knowledge of statistics remains at a distance and in isolation from motives and inclinations. In short, statistics do not affect the body—its senses, attractions, or impulses. Imagining the details of a neighbourhood—its peculiar inhabitants and their economic, spiritual, and physical circumstances—is thus more practical than knowing the statistics of soil erosion, rural depopulation, and Amazonian deforestation because it is moving, it “registers on our hearts.”⁴

Berry asks “an entirely practical question: Can we—and, if we can, *how* can we—make actual in our minds the sometimes urgent things we say we know?” His implied answer is that imagination makes urgent things real in the mind; however, he is quick to add, “Perhaps it cannot be accomplished at all.” Imagination is of paramount importance for environmental ethics—more so than scientific analysis and statistical data—but its practice is not adjudicated by efficiency, and its responses to problems are ambivalent. It is an activity that is less akin to “revolution” than it is to “the slower, kinder process of adaptation or evolution.”

Imagination is a faculty, but for Berry its activity depends on contact with reality outside the imagining person. Imagination is distinct from fantasy to the extent that it needs an object with which to relate in order to operate. In this lecture, Berry clarifies its capacity to absorb: “it does not depend upon one’s attitude or point of view, but grasps securely the qualities of things seen or envisioned.” The work of imagination is not purely mimetic; Berry does not produce either mirror images of nature or illusions. On the one hand, imagination is a movement of receptivity; it is a perception that leaves behind obvious and trite impressions in order to apprehend the unique character of something or someone. On the other hand, it acknowledges the particular details in a way that changes how it is understood. In other words, imagination is

⁴ Wendell Berry, “It All Turns on Affection,” Jefferson Lectures, National Endowment for the Humanities. John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Washington, D.C. April 23, 2012. n.p.

involved with that which it perceives; it is the attempt not only to gain access to the fundamental nature of places and entities, but also to “do justice” to them by appreciating their peculiarities.

This appreciation is affection.

Imagination makes knowledge real through affection, which is not given haphazardly but to “things that are true, just, and beautiful.” Affection, Berry insists, is not “subjective” but “personal” insofar as it involves the whole of one’s being—body, soul, and mind. A functioning culture directs affections toward the common good: the true, just, and beautiful things held in common that both orient local communities and enable individual flourishing. Culture is sustainable as a cycle of “unending conversation between old people and young people, assuring the survival of local memory,” and it “turns on affection.” In an economy without such a culture, “human life has become less creaturely and more engineered.” Life is ‘less creaturely’ to the extent that it has become “remote from local places, pleasures, and associations.” It is conditioned by its “remoteness from actual experience of the actual world.” Deprived of conversations that organize and orient affections toward the common good, market prices guide citizens’ mental faculties toward greed and the accumulation of power.

For Berry, literature, insofar as it instructs affections, can be a cultural guide and constructive alternative to the market. In these lectures, as he does elsewhere,⁵ Berry draws from Wallace Stegner to “make sense” of his memories and experiences. Specifically, Stegner’s terms “boomer” and “sticker” demarcate the different inclinations and desires of Americans with respect to their places; the former are motivated by power, the latter by affection. Though these terms seem to categorically divide and reduce people, and thereby contradict Berry’s view of imagination, the judgment against “boomers” is not primarily against vices and oppressive practices, despicable though they may be. Rather, “boomer” refers to a “mechanical

⁵ Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1995), 67ff.

indifference” to details in favor of a single purpose; it operates without intention to victimize. Thus, when Berry says, “now we are all boomers” he is not being rhetorical; Berry admits to being a “boomer.” He is so because to be motivated by affection or greed is not a choice; right intentions and allegiances are not the end but the beginning of thought, and must be continuously renewed and converted. All singular purposes that ignore or do not adequately attend the details will be oppressive—this includes efforts of conservation, preservation, and security.

Ecological disaster and scarcity of goods can also be educative, causing corrective measures to the destructive tendencies of industrialized economy either by default or stimulating moral conviction. Berry, however, suggests that affection can be a more adequate motive power for change, not least because it does not require the depletion of natural resources. In these lectures, as elsewhere,⁶ E.M. Forster’s novel, *Howards End*, guides his affections. Included in its narrative is a dramatic revelation of the ugliness that overwhelms places when affection is withdrawn from them, the social need for imagination and forgiveness over expediency, and the reality and practicality of the soul. The “great reassurance” of the novel, however, is the “wholeheartedness of [Forster’s] language” and its defense of “soul-sustaining habitations.” In Forster’s language that signifies both seen and unseen reality, the life of the community and its qualities, “we find our indispensable humanity.” Apropos are terms such as “truth, nature, imagination, affection, love, hope, beauty, joy.” Put simply, *Howards End* helps Berry define himself as human, as a creature, over-against the inhuman ambition to exploit the world for his own purposes. It is a novel that cultivates an openness of imagination, to see with affection the reality and worth of things to which the market is indifferent, through its language—i.e., by describing things differently from they are when seen with indifference and profitable self-interest.

⁶ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community* (San Francisco: Pantheon Press, 1992), 117ff.

It is imagination more so than statistical knowledge that enables an economy of household management. Such an authentic economy is one that “would define and make, on the terms of thrift and affection, our connections to nature and to one another.” Culture generally participates in building this kind of economy in part by cataloguing the limited range of mental capabilities; *Howard’s End* specifically contributes to this endeavor by presenting households as ‘soul-sustaining habitations.’ Facts and statistics exclude the affections and pull the mind beyond its human limits, engendering practices and ambitions unconcerned with the small, negligible details of a neighbourhood. An economy adapted to these local components is authentic because it is proximate with human experience and the complex-yet-limited reality of creaturely life. Local adaptation is economy as household management: “the making of the human household upon the earth: the *arts* of adapting kindly the many human households to the earth’s many ecosystems and human neighborhoods.” Literature is practical insofar as it facilitates local adaptation, educating the scale and variety of human reality and bringing people closer to experiencing the world. It gives life to the details; through imagination, which enables sympathy and affection, it makes actual the neglected, marginal, and obscure.

Truth, Incarnation, and Literature

As indicated in chapter one, the task of Berry’s literature is to tell the truth. Though the “whole truth... belongs to God” and therefore cannot be comprehended, “if we offend gravely enough against what we know to be true, as by failing badly enough to deal affectionately and responsibly with our land and our neighbors, truth will retaliate with ugliness, poverty, and disease.” Ultimately, Berry’s vocation of local adaptation is not first and foremost the development of an environmental ethic, or a program of sustainable agriculture, or a communal

social structure. It is instead to seek and know what is true, which, though he does it without any official affiliation with an institutional church, is a theological task. It is so because his literature and its practicality is based on the Incarnation—the active reality of God’s love and pleasure in the world. On Berry’s own terms, to the extent that it informs a practical and practiced affection, his literature appertains to theological ethics. His language and the practicality of knowing with affection emerges from his apprehension of the Incarnate Word.

Berry’s precedent for the relationship between language, truth, and action is “the Christian idea of the Incarnate Word, the Word entering the world as flesh, and inevitably therefore as action.”⁷ In the Word’s incarnation, the physical presence of its flesh precisely points to itself for its full meaning as the Word of God; there is no gap between sign and signified. On the one hand, Berry simply wants people to mean what they say; prevarication and obfuscation are rhetorical strategies for speaking expediently, pertinent to protecting private interests alone. On the other hand, Berry focuses on the experiential nature of encountering truth itself in a person. As flesh, the presence of the Word is active, tout court. This understanding of truth as active, as something encountered, changes the way it is known. Berry cites the well-known phrase from the Epistle of James that “faith without works is dead” as an indication of the manner in which knowledge is received in this case. To merely hear the words of truth is experientially equivalent to looking in the mirror; that which is evident does not necessarily communicate its qualities. To know a person is to know more than her physical attributes; it is to know what kind of person she is. Or, as James puts it, “what manner of man” he is. Having such knowledge, however, is equally not the same as having knowledge of an appearance; to know that someone is wise is different from knowing that someone has a big nose. Qualitative

⁷ Wendell Berry, *Standing By Words* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1983), 30. The term “precedent” is Berry’s own. It is helpful as a reminder that Berry is not using an abstract paradigm or theory to expound the relationship between language, truth, and action but rather a historical event.

knowledge cannot be reduced to themes or perspectives that can be extracted from the life in which they are found; instead it names a relation. Knowledge of this latter sort is significant because it makes a claim on the knower; not only does it take a relationship to discover that a person is wise, but that knowledge, once ascertained, it changes the relationship.

Qualities cannot be passively known but are experienced. “Understanding,” as John Gibson puts it, “establishes a type of dramatic relation.”⁸ Part of the condition of knowing is the physical response of knowing it. That it visibly affects the knower is not evidence that something is known, but is the state of knowing itself; the Incarnation is Berry’s precedent because there is no gap between “knowing” and “acting.” The claim the Incarnation makes on someone who knows that Jesus is the Word changes the person who knows it; knowledge of the truth is not a reception of the information that “Jesus is the Word” but the change it entails. Simply put, to say that truth is a person means that knowing the truth is determined by the failure or success to participate in its life.

The reference point for the truth of speech is both historical and divine, and so it is accessible but not completely. As a specific form of life, Christ as truth does not name an explanation but a role in a narrative; our orientation toward him—his dramatic function—is more like “the ground we walk on” than “a hypothesis we may debate.”⁹ He is the standard that conditions the possibility of material relating to truth rather than an abstract argument about how words refer to the truth. It is this paradigm of embodying truth in experience that differentiates Berry from poetic or linguistic specialists; the success of expressions are determined by the way in which they participate in this form of life—this unity of body and soul, the human and divine aspects of our nature—rather than its ability to explain or capture the “truth of the matter.” The

⁸ Gibson, *Fiction*, 108.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

truth of literature is especially based on this incarnational model: it is adjudicated by its ability to say something true that facilitates a positive reorientation to reality; the measure of understanding it is captured in our experience as well as our response to that experience.

Truth is expressed in a concrete form with which we are invited to engage, illuminating “the consequence, the import, of those aspects of reality” expressed.¹⁰ Truth is experienced insofar as it names an actual person with whom I can engage through narrative; it is a life that cannot be reduced to summary form or a theme or an action. What is learned is not information, but rather knowledge that is “carried to the heart” and so affects us in a way that provokes a response—the best of which is some kind of conversion, a turning away from damaging practices toward servitude. Truth neither depends on nor is an experience of “getting it;” truth, as a person, is not something that can be possessed or entirely understood. According to the incarnation, Christ is not someone who has “got it” and wants his followers to possess what he’s got, but by engaging with him one can have an illuminative experience that changes everything without making any noticeable difference in the world. This experience is what reading literature that educates our affections is like.

Truth in literature is therefore both inextricably bound to what is said and yet is more than the definition of the words themselves. Communal experience—the shared experience of literature’s insights felt to be true by registering in the readers’ experience of being in the world—is the source for language in literature. Whatever aspect of this experience is incarnated in literature—the fear of death, for example, in *King Lear*—reveals a profound truth that leads to responsive action and yet is open to further statements and expressions of that experience. *King Lear* does not give the final word on experiencing mortal fear, even if it becomes the standard for

¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

what we mean by humanity's "crawl toward death."¹¹ Truth exceeds its expression in language; ideas and images are not the truth itself. The highest truths of reality cannot be explained but only experienced. "Yeats said that 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.'"¹² The moments when communal experience becomes conscious, we use experiential language to describe its effect: we are moved, disturbed, or touched. Berry's literature captures Yeats's sense of the truth; on the one hand, it incarnates something truthful about the world, but, by virtue of its fictional form, it foregrounds the instability—or provisional nature—of its claims. On the other hand, reading Berry's fiction has a bodily affect; its truths are not "known" in the sense that by reading it one acquires new knowledge but it changes how one sees reality.

Berry roots the communicability of fictional language in a truth that, though it cannot be represented, can be experienced. A language appropriate for expressing a feature of human experience is one that itself facilitates an experience; unlike the linguistic specialist who sees the experiential nature of literary art as an escape from "the world of reality" to the "world of fantasy," Berry does not divide the "imaginative statement of the message" from "the message."¹³ Within Berry's experiential framework of language's communicability, the cognitive value of literary art is in its ability to communicate its imaginative engagement with complex, diverse lives rather than merely the statements made about these lives—the two cannot be separated. Homer, Dante, and Milton, for example, "teach us to imagine the life that is divided from us by difference or enmity," just as nature poetry imagines "the lives of animals and plants and streams and stones."¹⁴ Again, what is significant about these poems is not, shall we say, mere knowledge but how their insights affect us; their truth is not adjudicated solely by

¹¹ *King Lear*, 1.1.41.

¹² Berry, *Standing by Words*, 74.

¹³ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 28.

¹⁴ Berry, *Standing By Words*, 51.

accuracy or valued only for their verisimilitude but for their illumination of the experiences of everyday life. Literature stands out from other forms of speech precisely in its unique ability to say something true without being constrained by the limits of knowledge. Imaginative activity makes it possible for fiction to be true.

Port William as an Icon of the Community of Creation

Berry's articulation of his experience as a farmer and writer is his attempt to understand the relationship among humanity, community, creation, and God. His own relationships with his place and its inhabitants inform his descriptions of the divine; though his language and imagery are sourced from scriptural texts, they are interpreted according to his knowledge of the divine revealed in earthly things. According to Berry, the community of creation is the harmony of humanity, community, creation, and God, which is the mysterious order of the good that illuminates everything. Loyalty and affection as well as alienation and non-conformity are all conditions and experiences that indicate ways in which people understand themselves and their condition in the world. Both biblical and poetic traditions inform Berry and are adduced to support the possibility for both religious and secular pilgrimages, i.e., experiences of the "absolute intimacy" between creatures and the divine that take place either inside or outside institutional religion.¹⁵

Berry's literature is an exploration of the idea of the healthy community, which includes the "reality beyond the world."¹⁶ It is a way to think about the connection between the Incarnation and community as the basis for Christian ethics—one that is not predominantly about the best ecclesial practices of discipleship but rather about affection as the register for

¹⁵ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 101.

¹⁶ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 100.

experiencing divine intimacy. The healthy community is a vision of reality that orients a way of living in the world that refers to an experience of the creator comingling with creation. As images, Berry's dramatic portrayals of the life of Port William are iconic; an icon, as Rowan Williams observes, is not "a reproduction of the realities you see around you; it is not even meant to show what these realities will ever look like. It shows some part of this world... within a structure that puts them in a distinctive light. What is shown is their significance against the background of a source of illumination independent of them."¹⁷ An icon provides a means of participating in the transcendent sources that structure ways of imagining and conversing about existential truth. The common good—or, to use a term Berry uses more often, harmony—is the standard for virtues and happiness that is itself beyond measure; it is the end to which people are moving and what enables them to function. The idea of the healthy community symbolizes the experience of divine intimacy; it articulates the participation of all nature in the reality of divine being. As Burley says, membership does not delimit a spatial configuration; the difference "ain't in who is and who's not, but in who knows it and who don't.... It's all one piece of work."¹⁸ The Port William literature is a series of symbols—icons—that represent Berry's vision of the world as an interlocking, interdependent reality. Those willing to participate imaginatively and engage in self-reflection can have their dispositions, desires, practices, and judgments oriented toward the common good of their neighbourhoods. Berry's idea of a healthy community is engendered by experiences of harmony in nature—experiences of the good—that is beyond measure, comprehension, or straightforward description.

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to show how Berry's literature is important for how we think about and act within the natural world, which is part of how we experience and

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 2.

¹⁸ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 97.

describe human relations with one another and the divine. He is working with a functional idea of a healthy community, which is signified by Port William. Because his ideas are illuminated imaginatively—that is, by the faculty of mind that perceives both physical and spiritual reality—they are not arbitrary or non-historical propositions of truth. Berry uses imagery to indicate the range of creaturely experiences that informs his understanding of humanity. Port William as an ideal would be an object that can be measured and judged; as a symbol that refers to specific experiences, it must be participated in imaginatively if we are to retrieve the truth therein. As a symbol like an icon—rather than a value, which is understood as a privately held religious preference possessed by individuals without bearing on public discourse or social organization—it incarnates a mode of belonging whose bonds are determined by and apprehended through something beyond categories of choice, social construction, and intention (though these are also included). Also as an icon, its frame of reference is history; the stories and dramatic memories are both presentations of and negotiations with previous modes of understanding and representing similar experiences of God, community, and nature.

Berry's stories, because of their rich symbolic indication of reality as a powerful means by which readers can be reoriented, are at least as important as, if not more important than, his essays are for a religiously motivated environmental ethics. Berry's work should be read through Aristotle's approach to interpretation, "Words spoken are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul; written words are the signs of words spoken."¹⁹ Berry's essays, speeches, poetry, and fiction are attempts to delineate the experience of his soul's affections; he uses a variety of genres to try to describe what cannot, finally, be captured by words. Berry's entire corpus is a lifetime's attempt to give an account of affection as a motivation for being in the world, which has personal, social, political, economic, ethical, and religious ramifications.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 1.16a 3-4.

Or, to use Ezra Pound's translation of the definition of metamorphosis in the Confucian *Great Digest*, Berry's curriculum has been for more than mere protest or regime change:

The men of old wanting to clarify and diffuse throughout the empire that light which comes from looking straight into the heart and then acting, first set up good government in their own states; wanting good government in their states, they first established order in their own families; wanting order in the home, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their hearts, they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts [the tones given off by the heart]; wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost.²⁰

I have argued that one corollary of his account of affection is that imagination, perhaps more than will, is the internal experience that informs us about the character of reality. At times Berry is politically engaged in his essays, advocating for policy change and legislation that he perceives as necessary for a nation to preserve its people and resources.²¹ In other moments, Berry advocates a human condition that is not divided among body and soul and mind but instead one that is pushed and pulled by desires that are not capricious and do not always act in accord with each other. At his best, Berry's stories and memories engender experiences that turn people around, away from *hybris* and narcissistic ambition, toward a self-reflection that opens them to the depth of creation. He concentrates on virtues that habituate this self-opening and have the common good as their measure. Policy and legislation are unlikely to facilitate this kind of change in being; however, to turn around, away from the cultural symbols of motivation—the singular demand for production, innovation, and competition—will have practical results. As Berry says, “One wishes that the *persons* who own the mineral rights and run the mines had taken for themselves the prerogative of responsible and just behavior.”²² Change begins with the extension of knowledge to the utmost—with imagination—rather than by restricting or imposing

²⁰ Berry, *Way of Ignorance*, 63-64.

²¹ See *Long-Legged House*, 29.

²² Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 22.

one's will on others and places. Berry's literature guides his readers through images to think about relationships and interdependence; it does not provide instructions to establish and protect a social arrangement. His argument—that reality is a community of creation, which includes mystery and divinity, that current economic measures of production, industrialized health, and cultural depictions of relationships ignore to the detriment of human happiness and flourishing—is the verbal definition of the tones of his heart it is the words that symbolize his soul's affections.

All of which is to say, Berry does not have a program by which his argument can be institutionalized or legislated; he has had an experience of being a farmer and writer that opened him up to the genius of his place, the truth of which can only be accessed through engaging his imaginative world. It is not a subjective experience because he traces its origins through his agricultural and literary predecessors; it does not yield dogmatic or propositional truth statements because the experience of “divine reality can't be rendered exhaustively in material terms.”²³ His work is original, not in the sense of being unique, but because it imagines “the world and our life in it as gifts originating in sanctity,” which is a perception that takes him to his origins in time and place.²⁴

Berry's stories concerning the lives of Port William are a public reckoning of his own story. He knows—as does Aristotle and Pound—that “human experience or human meaning” cannot be “adequately represented in any human language.”²⁵ A predominant image that animates his mind, the meaning of which he finds different ways of expressing through his stories, essays, and poetry, is the “spectacle of a small boy tagging along behind his father across the fields.” This image is not an ideal—it is real—nor is it a nostalgic hope—it is present—yet it

²³ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 184.

²⁴ Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, 147.

²⁵ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 151.

contains more meaning than can be expressed. It is an icon of the “long procession” of Berry’s family “issuing out of generations lost to memory, going back... across previous landscapes and the whole history of farming.” The “meaning, the cultural significance, even the practical value, of this sort of family procession across a landscape can be known but not told.”²⁶ His readers can imagine it and to that extent it has a “public value” but not a “public meaning” because it is “too specific to a particular small place and its history.” It is a “tragedy,” according to Berry, that part of the cost of a society so willing to displace people and cultures is the loss of the meaning, cultural significance, and practical value of the dispossessed. And yet it is a simple observation of the essential feature of history: “When the procession ends, so does the knowledge.”²⁷ The procession is not a symbol that is constant through time; though it says some things about the characters and virtues of a rural life that modern society regards as expendable—doing a disservice to its people that, if not tragic, is at least very sad—its evocative power is not primarily meant to enjoin a defensive posture to champion the “old life” against the forces of progress, industrialization, and economic trends. Berry’s stories are not meant to be read as obituaries, from which indispensable truths can be extracted and valued as permanently valid over-against new forms of social and individual life—no matter how deformed they may be or how much they are symptomatic of the relentless passing of reality into totally administered existence. Rather, the concern of Berry’s characters is the same as his own, not for permanency at all costs but to flourish amidst the instability of time. Berry’s own concern for despair and hope, for example, does not refer to purely alternative emotions but displays a range of experiences within the struggle to not only survive but enjoy moments of happiness.

²⁶ Berry means that he embodies it without knowing it as information that can be written down or even articulated; he says he only knows “to some extent.” That is, his statement has the same meaning as Yeats’s regarding the corporeal relationship between humanity and the truth, which can be embodied but not known. *Life is a Miracle*, 152.

²⁷ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 153.

What, then, might be the political significance of Berry's patient introspection—his descent—into the spectacle of one rural family's long procession across space and time? The insights it reveals—that love needs to maintain a sense of its finitude, that community constitutes the ground for mediating personal desires and social commitments, that perception organized by geometrical precision obstructs an interactive vision of nature, that racial divisions are indicative of the disordered desires attained by upward mobility—are equivalent to the spectacle itself. In other words, the lessons of Berry's literature have the same status as the images themselves, namely, an agonistic search for their meaning, cultural significance, and practical value. Put yet another way, Berry's wisdom cannot be explained entirely by words; it cannot be recorded and then learned, repeated, or imitated. When his time comes, his knowledge will fall like a leaf. The challenge for his readers is to resist transforming his search as a ritual movement to discover the particular manifestations of the beautiful, good, and true in his time and place into a manifesto or political movement. Berry does not alleviate struggle and tension by describing things as certain, inevitable, or self-sufficient.

I have tried to give an account of Berry that is faithful to this resistance, to his “distrust of movements.” In his essay of that title, he reminds his readers that he has been making the same argument, which he did not dream-up but inherited: “we humans can escape neither our dependence on nature nor our responsibility to nature.”²⁸ All of his insights emerge from his own experience of dependence and responsibility. That his writing has gained numerous followers, or “friends,” who are involved in both the preservation of land economies and the opposition against industries attempting to “own and control all of Creation,” he finds to be, perhaps surprisingly, worrisome. He is hesitant to allow his work to become subsumed under a general protest or agrarian movement that transforms a searching and agonistic argument into an

²⁸ Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, 43. Further citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

ideology, one that abandons its complex antecedents, continual revision of its organizing metaphors and practical aims, and demonizes those who do not conform to it. Shallow slogans and self-righteousness tend to seep into ideological movements, which blind members to the difficulties of the problems at hand, not least of which is the fact that everyone is implicated in the economy that cultivates a corporate mastery over creation. Berry's primary anxiety is not that "everybody ought to be a farmer or a forester. Heaven forbid!" but rather the "profound failure of imagination" that cannot see the actual hidden behind the artificial, "the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history (human or natural) beyond the farm" (48). Berry's work is to expand the imagination of those willing to take his argument seriously, trying to help them get beyond the slogans and protests and participate in the search for meaning and truth in human order by maintaining an affection for their particular places and communities, and transform those neighbourhoods by transforming themselves through using careful, articulate language, using plants and water well, and recognizing their complicity in the political and economic system they wish to revolutionize.

The task that I have suggested is foregrounded most dynamically in Berry's literature is spiritual. The inner life of human experience is central for agrarianism: "we need to enlarge the consciousness and the conscience of the economy" (49). His primary vocation is to participate in the "human economy" whose business is to "make one whole thing of ourselves and this world"; though it may be impossible, or take several lifetimes, to "make ourselves into a practical wholeness with the land under our feet," the attempt alone "carries us beyond *hubris*" (49). Thus, there is no basic distinction between the private and public aspects of the task of embodying a human economy; the consciousness and conscience Berry speaks of is the magnanimity of participating in the community of creation by experiencing dependency and responsibility as a

search for the divine life in the world. Neither this economy nor the amplified consciousness can be measured:

The outward harmony that we desire between our economy and the world depends finally upon an inward harmony between our own hearts and the creative spirit that is the life of all creatures, a spirit as near us as our flesh and yet forever beyond the measures of this obsessively measuring age (50).

Harmony and wholeness cannot be grasped or known in themselves, but they can be imagined, which is itself a spiritual experience of a person's sense of interdependence with all of creation.²⁹ This is an experience of reverence, of a deep respect for the earth as the creation out of which all truth derives. There are no ideas but in the things of this earth. Respect makes these ideas neither subjective nor arbitrary; "Reverence makes it possible to be whole, though ignorant. It is the wholeness of understanding."³⁰ Imagination is the way of seeing the earth and its human and natural history reverently. "The imagination is our way in to the divine Imagination, permitting us to see wholly—as whole and holy—what we perceive as scattered, as order what we perceive as random."³¹ There may not be a visibly successful triumph over the economic corporations and political powers of this world, but there is a possibility of remaining human and experiencing the fullness of the spirit in communing with others; there is conviviality and eating well with friends and neighbours; there is pleasure and satisfaction; there is faith, hope, and love; there is work.

So how is Berry's life and work, his particular participation in his family's long procession, not "anachronistic and self-indulgent?" How is his work to remain in and imagine the life of the westward bank of the lower Kentucky River not merely a "quaint affection?"³² All of Berry's work should be read as an imaginative adaptation of his experience of dependency

²⁹ "I would like to purge my own mind and language of such terms as 'spiritual,' 'physical,' 'metaphysical,' and 'transcendental'—all of which imply that the Creation is divided into 'levels' that can readily be peeled apart and judged by human beings. I believe that the Creation is one continuous fabric comprehending simultaneously what we mean by 'spirit' and what we mean by 'matter.'" Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank*, 90-91.

³⁰ Berry, *Standing By Words*, 90.

³¹ Berry, *Standing by Words*, 90.

³² Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 88.

and responsibility that gave him an insight into the divine drama of incarnation. Part of the significance of his insight relies on the following claims:

“It is not just from the canonical Scriptures that the news of eternity comes. It can come from anywhere, anytime.”³³

“It’s important to me to understand that there are heavenly things that are present here, in time, in flesh, wood, rock, water, and all the rest of it. These good things are sanctioned in a good bit of religious teaching as part of the revelation of eternity.... It seems to me that there is an interpenetration, a major communication, and that to know this world at its best is to know something heavenly.”³⁴

The result has not been a “fashionable sentimentalization of the good life of farming,”³⁵ but rather “a life directly opposite to that which our institutions and corporations envision for us.”³⁶

His imagination keeps his fiction from plagiarizing nature; he is not trying to attain a “realism” detailed or accurate enough to reproduce the experience of his family’s procession. But, by reaching out into reality with imagination, he can grasp the spiritual qualities and memories of his place. His words are his attempt to honor and respect this depth as the love present in creation that is the source of everything. As words, their meaning comes from things in this world, like anything else. But they can evoke emotional responses that can spark the inner light—the affection as motive—in the reader.³⁷

Berry’s stories function as a “poetics,” broadly defined as “a conceptual instrument for the reorganization of consciousness, as a repertoire of forms for assembling and reassembling modes of connection between desire and action.”³⁸ Berry’s stories are not merely entertaining,

³³ Berry, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, 145.

³⁴ Berry, *Conversations*, 140.

³⁵ Berry, *Unforeseen Wilderness*, 23.

³⁶ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 89.

³⁷ From *Howard’s End*: “It is the vice of a vulgar mind to be thrilled by bigness, to think that a thousand square miles are a thousand times more wonderful than one square mile ... That is not imagination. No, it kills it.... Your universities? Oh, yes, you have learned men who collect ... facts, and facts, and empires of facts. But which of them will rekindle the light within?” According to Berry, this is the book’s “manifesto against materialism.” To Berry, “The light within, I think, means affection, affection as motive and guide.” Berry, “It All Turns on Affection,” n.p.

³⁸ Kenneth Surin, “Theology and Marxism: The Tragic and Tragi-Comic,” *Literature and Theology*, 19, no. 2 (2005): 125.

but they are not didactic in a pedantic or condescending manner. At the end of “Misery,” a story of Andy Catlett’s grandparents, Andy imagines his grandma caring for his grandpa’s misery; as grandpa’s agricultural community undergoes seemingly irrevocable changes, he awakes in the middle of the night crying out in misery as he “dwelt upon wrongs done and forever undoable, of limits met and unsurpassed, of understanding come too late.”³⁹ Grandma, though a teetotaler and member of the “Women’s Christian Temperance Union,” is no fundamentalist; she buys whiskey for grandpa to soothe his anguish. Andy imagines this care that surpasses convention and institutional religious obedience, a woman loving her husband, but it is entirely of his own imagination: “I would like to think it might have happened so, and maybe it did. It is probable enough, credible enough. But what is the good of it? Perhaps none at all. But on my own now with my imagination and my sorrow for them, I offer them nevertheless, out of time, this wish.” Berry’s wish is offered to his readers, to see the importance of imagination for living in interdependent communities, for its work, and its continual negotiation of its failures, pleasures, knowledge, absences, and silences. Conclusively stated, his wish is for his readers “to see the practicality of the life of the soul.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Berry, “Misery,” *Shenandoah* 58, no. 3 (2008): 111-122.

⁴⁰ Berry, “It All Turns on Affection,” n.p.

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