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## **Faith and Field: Christianity, the Environment, and Five Contemporary American Poets**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Heather M. Hoover entitled "Faith and Field: Christianity, the Environment, and Five Contemporary American Poets." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Thomas F. Haddox, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Dawn Coleman, Benjamin Lee, Mark Hulsether

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**Faith and Field: Christianity, the Environment, and Five Contemporary American Poets**

A Dissertation Presented for  
The Doctor of Philosophy Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Heather M. Hoover  
May 2010

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Randy, for his provocative questions, his love, and his support, to Owen, our amazing son, and to my mom, who always believes in me.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Tom Haddox, who served as chair of my dissertation committee. His guidance throughout this project has been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr. Dawn Coleman and Dr. Ben Lee. Together, these three professors have given me insight and encouragement. Their wisdom has certainly shaped this project, but it has also shaped me as a scholar and teacher. I want to thank them for their many fruitful suggestions, their unending patience, and their support. Special thanks also to Dr. Mark Hulsether, who gave much time to my project as well. I would also like to thank my friend Ethan Magness for his ideas regarding Christians and the environment that made me believe this project might be possible.

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## ABSTRACT

Many poets write about the earth or even about God using the language of nature. And many poets and contemporary authors concern themselves with the state of the environment. However, the poetry of Wendell Berry, James Still, Li-Young Lee, Mary Oliver, and Charles Wright seems to engage different kinds of questions about how humans creatively respond to the earth. Collectively, their responses seem influenced by their connections with Christianity rather than any specific ecological agenda. In all of their poetry lies a sensibility about how humans should interact with the earth. All five of the poets seem to acknowledge humanity's place on the earth as important without elevating humanity as the most important organism on the earth. Their work presupposes the existence of God or creator and because of this, engages the questions of *being human* in light of that Creator rather than as creators of their own environment or as the architecture of imagination. Their work offers an important insight into how we might live in harmony with all environments—agricultural, rural, wild or urban. Their work also suggests a connection between the Christian concept of worship, and a way of living that takes responsibility for human actions within creation. Their poetry recognizes the earth's value as well as God's presence and results in praise of both the beauty of creation and Creator.



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## Introduction

As a little girl, I spent whole days inside the leafy canopy of my own special willow tree with my face buried in books. In that backyard place, my love of literature, and especially poetry, fused with a love for the outdoors. Inevitably I turned to writing poetry, and my very first poem (albeit not a good poem) was about the wonder of birds returning and grass greening in the springtime. Later, I began to connect my love of nature with my Christian upbringing and felt the echo of Christ's resurrection in the cycle of the seasons. In my late teens, however, I began to sense a distance between the Christian church's view on the environment and my love of poetry that celebrated both God and the earth. The debate over creation and evolution reached a fever pitch in the late 90s in my home church and in many area churches. The debate always emphasized the dichotomy between earth and heaven and favored the idea of heaven over the reality of the earth. The strong voices of the church community were not resonating with the awe I felt for a beautiful sunset, the bounty of the harvest, or even the mighty force of a winter ice storm, though I wasn't quite sure how to frame my unease. Ultimately, I found that the voices of the poets I admired expressed most clearly the nagging feeling I had that my faith called me to care for creation. Poets such as Denise Levertov, A.R. Ammons, Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, and later, Charles Wright, James Still, and Li-Young Lee, all articulated a vision of human interaction with creation that aligned with what I knew about the gospel.

Christians have traditionally been conflicted, perhaps wary even, of environmental movements. In Lyn White Jr.'s famous essay, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" (1967), he even ascribes blame to Christians for the ecological predicament. Many Christians have indeed favored a spiritualized heaven over the physicality of earth, convinced perhaps, of

Creation's fallen-ness.<sup>1</sup> In fact, White's essay recognizes that Christianity does contain a model for ecological responsibility; his complaint was that most Christians failed to embrace that model. Long before White, Henry David Thoreau recognizes a similar quality of Christianity in his "Wild Fruits." He notes that "the husk of Christianity is [...] bruited and widespread in this world; the kernel is still the very least and rarest of all things. There is not a single church founded on it" (179). In my own experience, many fellow Christians see my commitment to creation care as a political ideology rather than a practice connected to religious belief. But the foundational Christian belief in Christ's resurrection requires Christians to model Christ's love for the physical world in our own lives.

I found this love for physical creation clearly articulated by the poets I admired, poets whose interaction with creation seemed part praise and part call to action. Certainly poetry has a rich tradition as a response to nature and of its use of natural imagery to express transcendence. From the Psalms to the Romantics, nature poetry describes the intimate connection between humanity and creation. While some nature poetry represents nature as a "discrete place of retreat, idealization, or legitimation," the poets I connect with Christian responsibility toward the environment do not simply receive from nature, but rather depict the "possibilities for our relation to nature" (Costello, "Diminished Thing" 570, 572). That is, for these poets, nature is not a place for spiritual transcendence alone, but is instead a place for partnership in response to a mutual Creator. I believe that the "possibilities" for that partnership include a healthy relationship between humanity and earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my project, when I refer to "Christians," I will be specifically referencing Protestant Christians of the Christian church, Churches of Christ tradition unless otherwise noted. The poets themselves represent a variety of denominations, but their understanding of Christian scripture unites them and serves as a foundation for my own interpretations of their poetry.

And though many authors write passionately, even eloquently about the risks of exploiting creation, (for instance, Annie Dillard, Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, and even Wendell Berry in his essays) the linguistic richness and restraint of poetry, I think, offers a unique model of interaction and representation that enacts the subject rather than simply describing it. Even in their longest, most prose-like poems, the poetry of Berry, Still, Oliver, Wright, and Lee relies on an economy of words and on the precision of each metaphor. And yet, more than just mimesis takes place in their poetry. These poets do not simply *represent* the earth or seek only to describe it as some nature poems might, but rather, these poets examine and point to the role of human life on the earth. In their poetry, the life of the mind and the life of the land converge; the poetic line, the shape of the poem, the extravagance of an image or a metaphor all combine for a fullness of experience that perhaps only poetry can provide. Mary Oliver too wonders if a poem, a “literary construct within an imagined framework is a reasonable way to understand the world” (*Rules* 103). She draws on the long history of poetry and literary criticism itself and notes that poetry is indeed both a reasonable mode of understanding and response to the world (104). For Oliver, as for all five poets, poetry expresses the “passionate certainties” about living in this world (103).

I turned to poetry to make connections between my Christian tradition and my increasing awareness of my responsibility to the world itself. Before I was ever aware of great poets, I was familiar with the Psalms and the old hymns, which often expressed praise of God as awe of creation. The 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, professor, and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins turned to poetry to express a world he saw as full of the creative spirit of God. In his own innovative use of rhythm,

he also reflected the dynamic creative of the world itself.<sup>2</sup> In his famous poem “God’s Grandeur,” the speaker says that the “world is charged with the grandeur of God” and despite human disregard for creation, “nature is never spent” because of the Holy Spirit’s presence (Hopkins 15). Hopkins does not condone human disregard, but rather notes that the presence of God in the world suggests God’s great compassion for all creation. His poetry, both in form and content seems to connect theology and ecology. Similarly, I turned to these specific poets precisely for their ability to “interpret” for me, for their ability to point toward a way of living as part of creation that expressed my burgeoning beliefs about creation care. For my project, then, poetry bridges a similar distance between Christianity and ecology.

Nature poetry also has the potential to become a singularly spiritual or transcendent topic, often more affiliated with Eastern religions such as Buddhism than with Christianity. I chose to explore the poetry of Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, James Still, Charles Wright, and Li-Young Lee precisely because of their specifically Christian background, and because their responses to nature are grounded in Christian experience. Each poet professes some measure of Christian belief. But each poet also retains an objective distance from Christianity. Rather than being “Christian” poets, a description I find often limits any artistic genre (Christian books, Christian music, etc.), they are poets whose understanding of Christianity and of creation takes shape as a practical environmental ethic in their poetry. That is, these poets are firmly grounded in the physical world, a world in which they see the handiwork of God. However, unlike the Christians of White’s and Thoreau’s scorn, they seem to espouse the “kernel” rather than the “husk” of Christian thinking. These poets embrace the task of responsibility to all their intersecting

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<sup>2</sup> His creation of “sprung rhythm” as opposed to what he termed “running rhythm” is often seen as a forerunner to the free verse of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

communities, human and non-human alike. Their faith then becomes a part of their creative expression of life rather than a static belief confined to the walls of a church. These poets also represent a wide spectrum of experience with creation: as landscape, as agricultural, as urban, as rural, as community. Their voices, when taken together, provide a comprehensive response to God and creation.

A Christian response to creation is not only possible, but it also has implications for justice beyond field and stream, rock and woods. When Christians understand the importance of all physical creation to God, as evidenced first and foremost by the physical resurrection of Christ's body, then we must reevaluate the long-held dichotomies between physical and spiritual. Creation care is not creation worship or even pantheism. Even John Muir, the celebrated ecologist and conservationist, understood such a distinction. A deeply religious man, Muir identified creation as God's great gift to humanity not to be abused but appreciated. He also distinguished Nature's actions apart from God's (see *My First Summer in the Sierra*, chapters 4 and 5). He could worship God without seeing God's animating spirit in each tree, rock, or flower. Rather, like Terence Fretheim asserts in *God and the World in the Old Testament*, God actually gives a measure of creative ability to all creation. Creation is not finished, but is ongoing and dynamic. And here is where the poets fit so perfectly; as Mary Oliver says, poetry "lifts the latch and gives a glimpse into a greater paradise" (*A Poetry Handbook* 9). But paradise, for each of these poets is decidedly earthly. Indeed, the poetry of these five poets depicts life lived in the presence of God and all creation, life that requires careful attention to the smallest and greatest of God's creation. To care for the earth in one's immediate environment is the first step toward caring for all the communities in which one is entangled.

The first four chapters offer distinct poetic responses that build to chapter five's discussion on holistic worship. In chapter one, I evaluate the gift of land as agricultural. Drawing on the theological work of Terence Fretheim, Ellen Davis and Abraham Heschel, I suggest, in contrast to pervading environmental claims, that humans belong on the land and can benefit the land just as we benefit from it. In this chapter, I focus on Berry and Still's poetry in particular. Because of their lifelong commitments to farm life, their poetry offers valuable insight into what positive human contribution to the land might require.

In chapter two, I explore how the gift of Sabbath rest enhances and informs human work. I return to Berry and Still for their agricultural work, but I include Oliver in my discussion to address the many forms of work which benefit from Sabbath rest. Drawing again on Heschel and Fretheim, and also adding the work of Jürgen Moltmann, I explore how Sabbath rest can foster communion with creator and creation. The rest Sabbath offers, far from passive, affords an awareness of self and others that recalls the harmony God intended in creation and prefigures the final reconciliation of all things to God.

In chapters three and four, I acknowledge that the agricultural space often framed in terms of Garden imagery is not the only framework for envisioning ecological wholeness. In these two chapters, I explore the importance of wilderness and urban life. Wilderness frames farmland in many poems by Berry and Still. And all three poets' conscious awareness of wilderness in relation to everyday experience serves as a reminder that wilderness need not always be a remote area or federally-designated space. In addition to Oliver, Berry, and Still, I examine the poetry of Charles Wright and Li-Young Lee. Both Lee and Wright engage creation through urban and suburban living, which, more so than farming, is the experience of most

Americans. Drawing on the theological work of Norman Wirzba, Ronald Farmer, N.T. Wright, and Barbara Rossing, I consider the potential that these poets express for positive human interaction with creation in non-agricultural environments.

I consider chapter five the culmination of the previous four chapters and suggest that an environmental ethic is not compartmentalized but rather a comprehensive way of living. Far beyond single acts such as recycling or driving a low-emission vehicle, I suggest that ecological wholeness focuses us first toward God as Creator, and then toward God's creation in all of our decisions. For Christians, the call to worship is that holistic call to love God by loving the world. I return to the resurrection as the foundational core of Christian belief, suggesting that to worship the Triune God is to be implicated in God's reconciliatory plans for all creation. To that end, I also re-examine each poet's response to creation in light of worship. Like the Psalmist who found reason to praise God because of the glory of God's creation, these poets offer their own unique songs expressing their lives of worship.

Ultimately, I want this study to bring together the power of Word (*Logos*) and word. I see in this poetry the logical extension of Kingdom life. Kingdom life, for me, is life lived according to the call of the Gospel: to love God, to love the creation, to love others, and to serve all three. Kingdom life is humble and is ultimately incompatible with any attitude of injustice, including environmental injustice. I believe that the model of interaction provided by Oliver, Berry, Still, Wright, and Lee offers a purposeful vision of ecological wholeness that goes beyond political agenda or ideology to the work of reconciling and healing creation for the good of all.



## Chapter One

### Land as Gift in the Poetry of Wendell Berry and James Still

The land, as promise and gift, has a rich thematic tradition in much of Jewish thought, and for many Christians it is becoming an issue of importance.<sup>3</sup> Historically, Christians have spiritualized the land in an effort to redefine the promised inheritance which is now to come, not only to Jews, but to Gentiles as well. At the very least, for many Christians, the “Person” of Jesus transcends the religious claim to the land (Davies 298). However, many theologians are beginning to understand Christian connection to the land with a renewed perspective: that is, as part of God’s creation, which requires reverence, care, and human involvement.<sup>4</sup> Even many Christian intellectuals, that is, non-theologians who contribute to the practical understanding of the Christian church’s purpose, are beginning to espouse an environmental ethic that has its roots in Scripture, both Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup> All of these relatively recent responses are relected in the work of two poets, Wendell Berry and James Still, whose lives on the land illustrate a distinctly Christian environmental land ethic, one that centers on the idea of land as gift to humans from a Creator God. Much of Berry’s and Still’s attitude toward the land as gift

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<sup>3</sup> Many studies deal with the importance of the theme of land and Old Testament Theology, including Walter Brueggemann’s *The Land*, W.D. Davies’ *Gospel and the Land*, and Christopher J.H. Wright’s *God’s People in God’s Land*.

<sup>4</sup> Studies in this vein include Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God*; Cameron Wybrow, *The Bible, Baconsim, and Mastery Over Nature: The Old Testament and its modern misreading*; Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*; Norman Habel, *This Land is Mine*; and Claus Westermann in *Creation in the Old Testament* (Ed. Bernhard Anderson).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Rod Dreher in *Crunchy Cons* notes the important Christian motivations for Christians who take up (in earth-sustaining practices) what has long been considered “liberal” political concern rather than a conservative evangelical concern (67). Similarly, Brian McLaren in *A Generous Orthodoxy* suggests that an economy based on the understanding that “the earth, and all it contains, is the Lord’s,” would lead to an economy of stewardship and renewal rather than destruction and exploitation (239)

rises from their situation on the land, giving them a different or perhaps clearer vision of humanity's relationship with and to the land than some more studied, urban poets. Too often, what is perceived as rural or regional is discounted as non-academic or at least not worthy of academic discussion. But these poets bring to light both contemporary social and theological issues that not only provide implication for response to the environment but to other humans as well.

Wendell Berry notes the appropriateness of poetry as a response to these issues of land-gift and human involvement with the land in his collection of essays, *Standing by Words* (1983). He suggests that “*a place can be the form of a poem*” and that poetry “must be used for something greater and higher than itself. It is a way to learn, know, celebrate, and remember the truth—or as Yeats said, to ‘Bring the soul of man to God’ (108, italics mine, 112). For Berry, then, the form of poetry rises out of the poet’s unique experience on the land and, because of the poem’s “primacy of language” as related to the actual life on the land, brings the poet into communion with God, the land, and with other people (7). In Berry’s view, the form of the poem itself, its rhythm, “resonate[s] with the larger rhythm” of the world that surrounds it and leads to an “inescapable relation to the world, to the human community, and also to tradition” (17). His poetry about the land reflects this relationship of human communion with creation, God, and one another.

### ***Putting the Gift to Use in Farming: A Handbook***

Berry’s discussion of land as gift begins with farming. Berry’s *Farming: A Handbook* (1970), his third of fourteen volumes of poetry, centers around life on the land and on Christian responsibility for that land. Berry speaks freely about his Christianity in several works and

interviews. In an interview with Harold K. Bush, he notes his frustrations with Christians who don't take the gospel's call to "a great world that includes all the works of God" seriously (231). Berry notes in *Blessed are the Peacemakers*: "It is a fact that I have spent my life, for the most part willingly, under the influence of the Bible, particularly the Gospels and of the Christian tradition in literature and the other arts [...] As a result of [...] my experience, I am by principle and often spontaneously as if by nature, a man of faith" (50). Throughout Berry's poetry, the "principle" seems his decision to follow Christ's teachings and the "spontaneity" seems to encompass what he feels is an innate response to God through life on the land.

Because of Berry's open admiration of the gospels and the image of Christianity he believes the gospels portray, several important Christian connections come from the farmer's acceptance of the land as gift:

1. Humans belong on and to the land.
2. Humans cannot deny an ontological connection with the soil. This connection brooks the divide between the physical and the spiritual, present and past.
3. Connection to the soil brings connection to all of creation through the presence of a Creator.
4. Working the land has redemptive implications associated with the life of Christ.

The poetry, especially of *Farming*, speaks to each of these issues, sometimes individually and sometimes in conjunction with one another. But, as Berry himself noted, the poems arise from life on the land, which necessitates a primary focus on the poetry itself.

Throughout *Farming: A Handbook*, Berry explores the rightful place of humanity on the land. The connection to the land most obviously manifests through farming and in the person of the farmer. In “The Man Born to Farming”:

The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,  
whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,  
to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death  
yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down  
in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn.  
His thought passes along the row ends like a mole.  
What miraculous seed has he swallowed  
that the unending sentences of his love flows out of his mouth  
like a vine clinging in the sunlight, and like water  
descending in the dark? (*CP* 103)

First, it is important to note the apposition in the first line. “The man born to farming” is also or instead, a “grower of trees,” or “a gardener.” Berry seems to focus here on the physical interaction between human body and soil. Though the biblical creation account suggests that farming (difficult and labor intensive) is post-fall while tending the garden is pre-fall (fulfilling and burden-free), Berry implies that perhaps the edenic fulfillment of farming is not completely absent. He highlights the camaraderie of creation while also emphasizing the farmer’s role as caretaker. In this way, Berry may be responding more to the command to “keep” and “till” the land as part of humanity’s “divinely ordered vocation” as given in Genesis 2:15 (Wirzba 27). This first line seems to suggest, then, that being in connection with the land is not confined to the

working of a “farm” but instead stems from participation in the productive potential of the land itself. Any tending of the land then, becomes an *extension* of the farmer’s *own* hands which “reach into the ground and sprout” to become a “divine drug,” or an experience the farmer craves and desires. The thrill for the farmer of watching the “light lie down” into death and “rise again in the corn” allows the farmer to “enter into death” and return “rejoicing,” a cycle that presumably, because of the farmer’s own ability to sprout, will eventually become his own reality. Even the farmer’s “thought passes along the row ends like a mole,” whose diet literally consists of earthworms. The farmer-poet also takes in the soil as symbol of literal and symbolic sustenance. The final sentence of the poem poses the central question about the farmer’s place on the soil and suggests that the *farmer himself* is fertile soil if indeed a seed planted could become “unending sentences of love”. The seed germinates as action but *also as words*; the words take on the character of plant and water in their ability to root deep and nurture the life of the poet as well as the life of the ground. These final lines affirm both Berry’s understanding of the farmer’s role on the land as well as his role as poet who tells the truth about life on the land.<sup>6</sup>

The poem also gives evidence of the concept of human connection to the soil through the potential redemptive qualities of the soil itself. For Berry the cycle of life and death enacted on the farm comes to embody the life and resurrection of Jesus. He says in *Long-Legged House* (1969):

[Topsoil] is very Christ-like in its [...] beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it, and returning to it, not by ambition

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<sup>6</sup> Berry’s work seems to illustrate what theologians would call the doctrine of continuous creation—a doctrine intended to avert the very disjunction of God and world against which Berry protests ( Lang 263).

or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. (204)

Like Christian baptism, in which a believer symbolically dies into the body of Christ, enriching the body of Christ (the church) and being enriched by it, the soil offers for Berry, a similar model of enrichment and redemption through death. The gospels offer the promise of salvation in acceptance of death and resurrection (Burge 176). For Berry, death enriches life; it enables life to continue in the same way that Jesus' death and resurrection redeemed life for those who would follow him. Jason Peters' observation that we treasure most that which we understand concretely applies to the earth as well as the divine (326). As the farmer's hands work the earth, he flourishes in harmony with the land, and he understands the resurrection's implications for created life. In the cycles of the land the farmer experiences the metaphorical salvation of resurrection as the corn "rise[s] again" from the "dung heap." To suppose land as a gift is a "radically incarnational" concept, one that draws simultaneously from the God of creation and the Christ of salvation (Kroeker 123).<sup>7</sup> Because the farmer accepts the land, not merely as a gift to be negotiated in whatever way he chooses, but as a gift that requires certain actions in order to fulfill both its and his potential, he comes to know what Christ knew—that being *fully* human is about embracing the flesh, and consequently, the dust, the earth.<sup>8</sup> As Kroeker suggests, such a

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<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann explores the many connections between the Jewish (Old Testament) concern with the land and the Christian (New Testament) relationship to the land. See pp 168-171 of *The Land*.

<sup>8</sup> Most approaches to ecocriticism are uncomfortable with an anthropocentric approach to ecology. Ecologists such as Arne Naess and George Sessions resist the potential for domination and oppression that they see as inherent in anthropocentrism and distinguish anti-anthropocentrism from misanthropy. For many ecologists the distaste for anthropocentrism stems from the understanding that anthropocentrism assumes that God gave the created world to humanity to exercise dominion over. J. Baird Callicot, an environmental philosopher in the tradition of Aldo Leopold, suggests that a land ethic is "an addition to our familiar human-to-human ethics" and is "not intended to replace" them. However, he suggests that for Christians, a vision of such an ethic cannot sustain the plurality required in order to ascribe intrinsic value to nature and non-human creatures. That is, Christianity would have to ascribe a divine image to all creatures instead of simply humans in order to sustain a land ethic (13). Indeed, he criticizes those who might consider God an "axiological point of reference" (222). But I am suggesting that as an "axiological point of reference," God can actually inform a human relationship with all creatures that is both sustainable and responsible.

gift can only be received in humility and can only “be fulfilled by sharing it in and for the world” (121). The “fertility” of the land “is always building up out of death into promise” in which both flesh and soil participate (*LLH* 204).

Though Berry’s conviction that humans belong on the land and come from the land embraces the restoration embodied by Christ, it has roots in the Genesis story of creation. Much of the confusion about humanity’s place in and on the land stems from interpretation of the two accounts of creation found in Genesis known as the Priestly and Yahwist accounts. In the first account, often referred to as the Priestly account, God gives humanity “dominion” over creation, while in the second account, or Yahwist, the land needs someone to work it (Gen. 1:26-31, 2:5-15).<sup>9</sup> The word “dominion” troubles many ecologists, and according to many critics, has been integral to Christian apathy for or even active disregard for the environment.<sup>10</sup> But theologians and Christians are beginning to re-evaluate the commands of Genesis, as evidenced by the rise of “green” theological scholarship in the past ten years and in the Christian church’s more comprehensive turn toward creation care models.<sup>11</sup> Ellen Davis suggests that “dominion” is “a weighty honor and responsibility of representing God’s benevolent dominion in the world, of standing up for God’s interests in the face of every threat” (188). Instead of violence, then, *dominion* takes on a connotation of care and service, not unlike the second account that calls for *tilling* and *keeping* the land. Norman Wirzba notes that the Hebrew term for tilling the ground can also be translated as “serving” the earth. He claims “service does not connote oppression or

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<sup>9</sup> Though recent scholarship questions the timing of the P and J (Yahwist) sources, the fact remains that Genesis contains two different accounts that have been interpreted and appropriated for different and sometimes damaging views of humanity’s relationship to the land.

<sup>10</sup> Most notably, Lyn White, Jr. in his “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (1967)

<sup>11</sup> See the recent work of Jürgen Moltmann, Terence Fretheim, and Ellen Davis. Contemporary protestant ministers such as Brian McLaren and Rick Warren have also recently written about the church’s role in protecting creation. And in 2008, Harper Collins published a “Green Bible” to highlight the scriptural call to creation care.

humiliation, but rather the necessary and ennobling work that promotes growth and health” (31). He goes further to say that in tilling and serving the soil, “man sustains himself and the soil reaches its productive potential” (31). In “A Man Born to Farming,” the farmer, who is connected to the soil and to the cycle of the land, serves the soil through cultivation, and as a result, both farmer and soil reach a “productive potential.”

Often in Berry’s poetry, the productive potential of the land takes shape in the motif of seeds and sowing, further implying that the promise of land requires action from human beings in order to be fulfilled. In two poems, “Sowing” and “The Seeds,” the sower plays a crucial role in fulfilling the creative potential of the land. For instance, in “Sowing”:

In the stilled place that once was a road going down  
from the town to the river, [...] I walk heavy  
with seed, spreading on the cleared hill the beginnings  
of green, clover and grass to be pasture. Between  
history’s death upon the place and the trees that would  
have come

I claim, and act, and am mingled in the fate of the world. (CP 104-05)

The speaker inserts himself into the history of the land by choosing pasture instead of the forest that would inevitably claim a land opened by fire. His decision weighs on him both physically, in the heaviness of the seed required to plant an entire hill, but also in the spiritual and psychological responsibility of claiming the hill from the fullness of time and of wilderness. Specifically of interest as the poem concludes, however, are Berry’s choice of verbs: *claim*, *act*, and *mingle*. The speaker walks the land with heavy intentionality. He claims a role in the land’s



purpose, choosing farmland instead of forest. The final passive voice verb *am mingled* stands in contrast to the decisively active *claim* and *act*, as if to suggest that after asserting a role as claimant on the land, the speaker cannot avoid a connection with “the fate of the world.” The use of the word “world” instead of “earth” brings people and the earth *together*; the health of both humans and land depend on the character of their relationship.

To assert a claim on the land is to assume that humans belong on the land. For Berry, the land is a gift that God gives to humans, and yet he notes that most people “haven’t yet, in any meaningful sense, arrived in [the land] that we declare our own” (*LLH* 207). That is, for Berry the gift of land entails great responsibility toward the land. Berry consistently explores this theme of service to the land, but it is important to recognize the concept as tied to the idea of land as gift. Walter Brueggemann’s critical study of the land in reference to biblical faith offers a context for Berry’s poetry and for “Sowing” in particular. Brueggemann suggests that, for the Israelites, the land is a gift from God that offers the promise of “joy” and “freedom” if treated properly or “dehumanizing exploitation and oppression” if shown disrespect (11). Accepting God’s gift of fertile land comes with responsibility, not just to the land, but to those who lived on the land. The land itself, if “not presumed upon” can become “an arena for justice and freedom” (191). Taken together, these beliefs—that God placed humans in the land to serve it and that humans have a responsibility to be in the land and work it for the good of all creation—inform the sower’s response to the land that inevitably involves him in the future of that land that includes all creatures.

Similarly, in “Seeds,” the potential of the seed inextricably links the life of the sower to the seed itself, or in other words, the life of the farmer to the life of the soil:

The seeds begin abstract as their species,  
remote as the name on the sack  
they are carried home in: Fayette Seed Company  
Corner of Vine and Rose. But the sower  
going forth to sow sets foot  
into time to come, the seeds falling  
on his own place. He has prepared a way  
for his life to come to him, if it will.  
like a tree, he has given roots  
to the earth, and stands free. (*CP* 114)

Though the seeds begin as “abstract,” Berry’s play on words (in the names of the streets, “Vine” and “Rose”) indicates that the seeds come, not from a company but from other living plants and that the abstraction is deceptive. As the sower begins the process of planting the crop, he “sets foot / into time to come,” into the inherent promise of the plant to come, into intimations of eternity (Perkins 17). The seeds fall “on his own *place*” (italics mine). Berry avoids the word “land” here in favor of “place” which includes the sower in the life of the land without asserting his outright possession of it. By sowing, the speaker opens himself up to Wirzba’s “productive potential” and from that potential, “a way / for his life to come to him, if it will.” By committing to the land, by knowing the plants and soil intimately, he has opened himself to communion with the land which would necessarily place limits on his control of it. Harold K. Bush observes the importance of the provisional phrase *if it will*, noting that “there are no guarantees” about the future on the land (307). The provision reinforces the reading of “place” and again affirms that,

though the sower can facilitate growth, he cannot ensure it. Thus, the sower begins a relationship with the land in which responsibility links with humility. The speaker's acceptance of the land as a gift along with the mediation of outright ownership emphasizes Berry's moderated anthropocentrism that eschews a concept of exploitative dominion. Working the land is instead a "gracious risk," perhaps for the land as well as the farmer (Brueggemann 176).

***"Thresholds between Earth and Heaven": Land as Gift in Given***

In his most recent volume of poetry, *Given* (2005), Berry's approach to land as gift reflects his long life and what he acknowledges (due to his increasing age) as his coming death. The title of the volume reinforces the idea of gift while also suggesting the inevitability of death as an important part of earthly life. Much as in his early poetry the farmer entered into death "yearly" and returned rejoicing, so here Berry embraces death for all creation as necessary and good. Whereas in his early poetry he focuses on working the land as part of humanity's gracious acceptance of the land as gift, as an older poet he surveys the work on the land, a life well-lived and observes that the earth offers a glimpse of heaven. Berry consistently embraces an "earthy eschatology," an understanding of heaven only in terms of the earth. In Sabbath poem V, the speaker notes that his experience with the land is "one of the thresholds / between Earth and Heaven, / from which even [he] may step / forth from [himself] and be free" (*Given* 85). This earthy eschatology does not deny the necessity of redemption or restoration. He does believe an end is coming, but he emphasizes the evidence in all of God's creation, and even the crucifixion and resurrection, that death results in renewal from the same material, not complete remaking. Even though Christians often cite Revelation 21:1 as evidence that this earth is only temporary, Berry's full acceptance of land as gift gives primacy to this earth as God's creation and gives rise

to an eschatology in which humans are accountable for the stewardship of that gift.<sup>12</sup> N.T. Wright, in his *Surprised by Hope*, explains this kind of stewardship as modeled on God's own concern for creation: "we must envisage a world in which the present creation [...] is taken up into God's larger purposes, no doubt, but not abandoned" (259). In *Given*, Berry concentrates more fully on that end of time as the "coming dark" and the potential of light emanating from darkness, a sign of both coming and ongoing restoration of creation (*Given* 113). Two themes in particular give insight to the understanding of land as gift:

1. Earth is the "household of God" and the best indication of heaven's existence and possibility.
2. Death comes for all, even for the world itself, but renewal is an integral part of death.

Both issues assume the presence of heaven, not to the detriment of the earth but as further indication of human responsibility for this *present* land gift. Indeed, many of these poems offer meditations on the earth's goodness in conjunction with the life lived in the land.

For Berry, the earth's goodness is a manifestation of God's presence in creation. He learns from his contemplation "the long / lesson: how small a thing / can be pleasing..." (75). The lesson is "long" perhaps because of its seeming simplicity. Even the form of the poem, with its long column of words down the page, emphasizes the slow unfolding of its meaning over time. The lesson he learns comes from the land itself:

What more did I  
think I wanted? Here is

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<sup>12</sup> Rev. 21:1: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more"

what has always been.  
Here is what will always  
be. Even in me,  
the Maker of all this  
returns in rest, even  
to the slightest of His works,  
a yellow leaf slowly  
falling, and is pleased (75-76).

The repetition of “even” connects the speaker and the leaf, suggesting a common humility before the “Maker.” And notably, as in the “very good” of the Genesis creation account, here the Maker is “pleased” by his works. The Maker is present and delights in creation. Yet in the autumnal beauty of a “yellow leaf slowly / falling,” Berry evokes the coming of winter. Just as the Maker “returns in rest” to the speaker, so too will the Maker be present in the winter rest of the land. Coming death is as much a part of creation for this land as is the splendor.

Similarly, in another Sabbath poem (III), Berry explores the implications of God’s presence in creation in the tensions of life and death. God is present in the vitality of creation that includes life and death:

As timelessly as a river  
God’s timeless life passes  
Into this world. It passes  
through bodies, giving life,  
And past them, giving death.

The secret fish leaps up  
Into the light and is  
Again darkened. The sun  
Comes from the dark, it lights  
The always passing river,  
Shines on the great-branched tree,  
And goes. Longing and dark,  
We are completely filled  
With breath of love, in us  
Forever incomplete. (83)

The river, “always” passing and yet “timely,” gives evidence to God’s fluid presence, God’s “timeless life,” in the world, a presence that encompasses the goodness of light *and* dark. Just as God’s presence gives life, God’s withholding brings death. Still, the hope of redemption illuminates the dark, because even in the face of sin and death, God’s presence remains in the world. Berry himself notes that the “finite world is infinitely holy, [it is] a world of time that is filled with life that is eternal” (*Blessed* 66). Because of sin and death, even humans made in God’s image and “completely filled / with breath of love,” find that the breath is incomplete. Human response then, according to Berry, must be to work toward the time of complete redemption in response to creation and one another.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See “Original Sin,” where sin results in grace and forgiveness (*Given* 35) and *Long-Legged House*, 202: “Though as a man I inherit great evils and the possibility of great loss and suffering, I know that my life is blessed and graced by the yearly flowering of the bluebells.” In both instances, renewal displaces sinfulness.

Berry's eternal life, then, embraces both a spiritual and physical life, one that cannot be separated from the land. Throughout the final section of *Given*, Berry portrays heaven in terms of the earth and never apart from redemption. First a look at Berry's earthy heaven:

When we convene again  
to understand the world  
the first speaker will again  
point silently out the window  
at the hillside in its season,  
sunlit, under the snow,  
and we will nod silently,  
and silently stand and go. (*Given* 96)

Berry frames understanding in context of the land's physicality. Though he uses no overt Christian terminology here, perhaps intentionally to avoid what he feels is the Christian tendency to emphasize a spiritual heaven over the physically-present earth, the language does evoke an image of the return of Christ as perhaps "the first speaker," the first Word. Berry notes in an essay from *A Continuous Harmony* that such "division between the holy and the world, the excerpting of the Creator from the Creation" is the "great disaster of human history" (4). And later, in an interview with Harold K. Bush, he elaborates on the idea: "the dualism of body and soul, matter and spirit, creator and creation, Heaven and Earth, time and eternity, is destructive. Once you separate those things, the next step always is to depreciate what's perceived as the less valuable half of the dichotomy" (227).<sup>14</sup> In this poem, the "first speaker" refuses a destructive

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<sup>14</sup> Jesus often refers to the Kingdom of God (or Heaven, depending on the gospel) as being simultaneously here and coming. He also suggests that the way to realize the Kingdom of God on earth is by tending to the needs of this

dualism and becomes the first *to speak* as well as the first *who spoke*, offering a potential reference to God as the one who spoke creation into existence and whose thought issued forth the Incarnate Word. The first speaker uses no actual words; his presence embodies word in the same way that Christ gave flesh to divinity. Indeed, the first word seems so complete as to render all who gather silent. The reality of this “convening” is the “hillside in its season,” and the only response, as in the early poetry, is to take on the responsibility of the land once again.

For Berry, when Christ returns to raise the dead and to bring reconciliation to the land and to humanity, he will not gather the dead to the clouds or sky or some ethereal heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Instead:

Surely it will be for this: the redbud  
pink, the wild plum white, yellow  
trout lilies in the morning light,  
the trees, the pastures turning green.  
On the river, quiet at daybreak,  
the reflections of the trees, as in  
another world, lie across  
from shore to shore. Yes, here  
is where they will come, the dead,  
when they rise from the grave. (96)

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world and this life, a command that Berry takes seriously in his own response to the land and to those who work the land before and after him. Berry embraces this call of the gospels as essential to Christianity and sometimes quarrels with the Pauline literature that he feels creates “exclusive membership” of Christianity and a dualism incompatible with all of Christ’s teachings (qtd. Bush 230).

<sup>15</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:14: “because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.” New Revised Standard



Of note in the first line is the word “it” which has no antecedent. The rest of the poem, however, suggests that “it” is indeed the second coming of Christ, which Berry suggests here will take place because of and in terms of the rebirth of spring. Just as in the earlier poem, God’s presence pervades and encompasses death, so here the *raising* of the dead occurs in conjunction with the hope of “pastures turning green.” The splendor of the earth in its season of renewal, then, is at least the initial inheritance of the dead.

Berry goes even further to suggest that Christ’s resurrection belies true physical death. Many Christians believe in eternal life, but not as many embrace the fullness of the resurrection. Berry emphasizes the implications of physical resurrection, not just for bodies, but for the earth and all creation. In doing so, he also emphasizes the importance of responsible human interaction with creation. In one of his most recent poems he explores the implications of Christ’s crucifixion for the earth and for creation:

The little stream sings  
in the crease of the hill.  
It is the water of life. It knows  
Nothing of death, nothing.  
and this is the morning  
Of Christ’s resurrection.  
The tomb is empty. There is  
no death. Death is our illusion,  
our wish to belong only  
to ourselves, which is our freedom

to kill one another.

From this sleep may we too

Rise, as out of the dark grave. (125)

Death outside of the context of the land leads to selfishness. In much of the early poetry, Berry emphasizes the need to acknowledge and embrace fruitful death as much as fruitful life. To continue to deny a kinship with creation, “to belong only / to ourselves” denies the physicality of a land enriched by death. If death itself, that is, a finite end, is an “illusion” then humans are indeed accountable for the violence we do to creation and to one another. Belief in resurrection changes the way we perceive our relationship with creation. If resurrection is possible for all who believe in Christ and join in Christ’s mission, and a similar type of renewal is possible for creation, then we must act with greater care toward creation. In this way, then, even though the world may come to an end or a sort of death, we should not take part in effecting that death, but should instead act on the hope of creation renewal that always exists for Berry.

In the poems of *Given* as well as *Farming*, Berry works to establish common ground for all creation before God. Berry says, in an interview with Paul Trachtman, that “not many people speak, or can think from the point of view of the land [...] People think of [the land] as something different from themselves and of course it isn’t” (54). For Berry, the land itself has no consciousness, but as part of creation and because of God’s presence among creation, it “keeps the past not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. [The land’s] fertility is always building up out of death into promise” (*LLH* 204). God is not in the land in some pantheistic embodiment, but is indeed active in creation. For Berry, the consciousness of the soil

is a human consciousness. Working the land, as noted by Ellen Davis, is service to the land. For Berry, the impact that humans have on the land, takes shape as *part of the land* itself:

How, having a consciousness, an intelligence, a human spirit—all vaunted equipment of my own race—can I humble myself before a mere piece of the earth and speak of myself as its fragment? Because my mind transcends the hill only to be filled with it, to comprehend it a little, to know that it lives on the hill in time as well as place, to recognize itself as the hill’s fragment. (*LLH* 203).

And always, humanity’s response to the land is a response to the Creator of that land. The implications of land as gift found in *Farming* intersect with the meditations on the land’s goodness in the nature of that “promise,” which can be understood as both covenant between humanity and God as well as the potential harmony for all creation.

#### ***“Dusty with Land”*: The Poetry of James Still**

While Berry explicitly aligns himself with Christianity in both his poetry and his other writings, James Still never overtly claims Christianity as a definition of his “design for living” (Stoneback 9). Jim Wayne Miller notes that Still’s poetry, as part of an Appalachian literary tradition, is “situated squarely in the secular realm,” that his characters are “dusty with the land” (Miller 15, 18). I would suggest, however, that his worldly focus is not only similar to Berry’s stance but also compatible with Christianity. Furthermore, because Still’s objective is not to endorse or debate Christianity but to live a meaningful life in concert with the land and with other creatures, his poetry offers an important bridge for those who might question the idea of land as gift—be it a doctrinal questioning or an ecological questioning. Still’s familiarity with Christianity is clear from the fact of his growing up in a region often bound together by the

community of the church, the early presence of the Bible in his reading, and in the connections he often draws to Christian scripture, especially in his fiction (“A Man Singing...” 8). Still’s poetry offers a perspective, as Miller notes, of being “situated squarely” in the earth. Still does not reject religion or the notion of heaven, or for that matter Christianity. Instead, he celebrates the presence of the land and the intimate connection between soil and body, all the while acknowledging the hope and burden of a land-gift.

James Still’s “land is *in* him,” and the question remains not *if* the land is a gift, but *how* to negotiate that equally burdensome and bountiful responsibility (Marion 52). In Still’s poetry the soil provides commonality between humans, plants, and animals. All creation must respond to the passing of time, to the very real presence of death, and to the potential for growth. Still’s attitude toward the land amounts to a reverence for the land and for creation rather than nature worship or pantheism. The earth is *not* Still’s God, but it does have value as creation, as do humans. Still’s poetry concerns human relationship with the soil, a relationship that Ellen Davis notes is “complex” and should be “deferential, observant, and protective,” a commitment to service rather than dominion (Davis 194). That Still’s poetry embraces this type of relationship with the land further suggests his compatibility with a Christian land ethic. To accept land as gift, in Still’s poetry, requires recognition of the interrelatedness of creation, the understanding that “there are not two worlds, the world of humans and a world of other modes of being [but instead] a single world” (Berry, T. 131). Still’s poetry offers a model for Christian interaction with the earth that takes into account the reciprocity between humans and the earth. Still often laments the exploitation of the land and notes the connection between land abuse and exploitation of people, as shown in his poetry dedicated to coal mining. When the land thrives, people also

thrive, but such health often requires restraint and forethought. Still's poetry, by far the earliest of the five poets I discuss, takes up contemporary ecological issues for Christians and non-Christians alike.

### *Early Poems and Implications for Land as Gift*

Still's poetry, specifically his early poetry, speaks to the continuity of creation inherent with life on the land, a consistent theme for the poet. As he notes in the introduction of his collected poems, *From the Mountain, From the Valley*, his "poems are all thematically interconnected—[because] they grew from his individualized experience living in his particular place and time" (4). His earliest volume, *Hounds on the Mountain*, however, is explicitly concerned with life in and on the land. Many of the poems published in same time period (1931-1936) as that first volume also deal explicitly with this topic and for that reason I will focus on these early poems for the initial discussion of land as gift. The poem "Farm" presents a typically human tableau in which humans are not the primary focus (though they are indeed an implied presence):

In the deep moist hollows, on the burnt acres  
Suspended upon the mountainside, the crisp, green corn  
Tapers blunt to fruiting tassel:  
Long straight shafts of yellow poplar  
Strike upward like prongs of lightning at the field's edge,  
Dwarfing the tender blades, the jointed growth;  
Crows haggle their dark feathers, glare beady eyes  
Surveying the slanted crop from the poplar boughs,

Opening purple beaks to cry the ripening feast,  
And flow from their perch in heavy pointless flight.  
A lizard, timid and tremulous, swallowing clots of air  
With pulsing throat, pauses at the smooth trunk  
And runs up the sky with liquid feet. (*Hounds* 19).

That the farm exists, “suspended on the mountainside” speaks to the fact of human intervention in the landscape. And yet, the three principal actors in the scene are not human but trees, crows, and a lizard. The poplars, with their strong, straight, mature growth, stand in contrast but not opposition to the “tender blades” of corn. Instead, they seem almost to watch over the corn, as do the greedy crows who “survey” from the tree branches. According to Jeff Daniel Marion, the crows benefit doubly, first from their role in thinning the emerging corn shoots, and again when the corn reaches maturity (50-51).

While the poplars and the crows assert themselves in the scene—“dwarfing,” “surveying,” “opening,” and “cry[ing] the ripening feast”—the lizard remains “timid and tremulous.” The poem’s structure further distinguishes the lizard by dividing the scene with two sentences. Despite the lizard’s otherness and timidity, the trees, the crows, *and* the lizard seek the sky. The poplars “strike upward,” the crows “flow from their perch” and the lizard “runs up the sky.” This upward desire is not so different from the farmer’s, who sets his seed in the earth with the hope that it will seek the sky in growth. The poem unites all these creatures, from the implied farmer to the plants and animals, in a community of creation; the upward movement of the poem suggests the equalizing need for the sun’s warmth. The farm, a symbol of human presence on the land, results not in the destruction of the land but in a new contact between

creatures. The presentation of the farm in this poem offers insight to a land ethic that supposes human beings, as created in the image of God, “are to mirror God to the world, to be as God would be to the nonhuman, to be an extension of God’s own creative activity in the world” (Fretheim 55). Here, the farmer has acted on the land, his presence is undeniable. But the active presence in the poem belongs to non-farm creatures and plants, suggesting a sort of fellowship. The farm becomes part of the natural landscape, its plants and creatures striving upward like the tall yellow poplars that define its borders.

In many of Still’s early poems, human beings derive identity from the earth. Particularly in “On Troublesome Creek,” identity springs from the hills and yields eventually to identification with the hills. In the first lines, “These people here were born for mottled hills, / the narrow trails, the creek-bed roads” (*HM* 19). And in the final lines, “men here wait as long as mountains have waited” (19). Those born on the banks of the Troublesome are not only “born for the mottled hills,” but they also accept that inheritance or purpose by making lives in those hills, by “rear[ing] their young before splendid fires” in homes provided by the work of their own hands and notably, by the resources of the hills themselves. The people of Still’s poetry accept the gift of the land and respond to that gift with moderation and endurance. The poem does not reveal what the men wait for, only that they, like the mountains, must wait. Early Christians assumed the imminence of Christ’s return, as do many contemporary Christians. Some might view this as a reason to exploit the land or at very least, to maintain a spiritual rather than earthly focus. But a holistic land ethic maintains that humans interact positively and responsibly with the land and with all creation, or as Walter Brueggemann notes, “the same land which is a gift freely given is

a task sharply put” (*Land* 59). Caring for the land is a spiritual and physical focus, a reverential response to the Creator and giver of the gift.

The final poem of Still’s first collection, “Heritage,” explores the complexities of belonging to the land. For Still, belonging to the land, and in particular, the hills of Kentucky, places him firmly in the context of that community as well as a larger community of creation which includes humanity, animals, plants, and the earth:

I shall not leave these prisoning hills  
Though they topple their barren heads to level earth  
And the forests slide uprooted out of the sky.  
Though the waters of Troublesome, of Trace Fork,  
Of Sand Lick rise in a single body to glean the valleys,  
To drown lush pennyroyal, to unravel rail fences;  
Though the sun-ball breaks the ridges into dust  
And burns its strength into blistered rock  
I cannot leave. I cannot go away.

Being of these hills, being one with the fox  
Stealing into the shadows, one with the newborn foal,  
The lumbering ox drawing green beech logs to mill,  
One with the destined feet of man climbing and descending,  
And one with death rising to bloom again, I cannot go.  
Being of these hills I cannot pass beyond. (*HM* 55)



A 1937 review of this poem praises the “quiet tone” but criticizes the “stock motif” of blithe happiness in the mountain valley (Green 33-34). The poem, however, is not about “blithe happiness,” but is instead about responsible interaction and intentional harmony. Though the poem ends with “cannot,” it begins with “shall not,” which indicates a decision to stay, not a punishment. Though life is hard here, the speaker is connected to this place and wants, as Berry’s speaker also decides, to let his life come to him here, if it will (Berry, *CP* 114). Being committed to his land is much more complicated than the “blithe happiness” noted by that early reviewer.

As if to underscore his commitment to the land, Still’s perspective notably shifts focus from the third person, “these people,” in “On Troublesome Creek” to, in this final poem of *Hounds on the Mountain*, the first person “I”. The speaker reiterates five times his inability to leave the hills. The poem opens with the declaration “I shall not leave,” indicating choice or at least a freely made decision, but then complicates that declaration by qualifying the hills as “prisoning” (*HM* 55). By the end of the stanza, the speaker “cannot leave,” “cannot go away”. Despite all the difficulty of identification with the land—the hills falling, the forces of water, the wear of time—the speaker, like those on the Troublesome, is born to the land. He cannot go away from the land because the land is “in” him (Marion 52). Indeed, the poem suggests that no matter where the speaker physically goes, the hills to which he is born claim him. Still’s inability to escape the land speaks to the reality that life on the land is not simple, though it is often rewarding. Whereas Berry’s “Man Born to Farming” emphasizes the productive potential of the interaction between soil and farmer, Still acknowledges that, while he could not be anything *other* than “of the hills,” the burden is not a light one.

The second stanza emphasizes the connections between the speaker and *all* of creation. For the speaker, “being of these hills” means “being one with the fox” as well as “the newborn foal”(HM 55). However, this link between humanity and creation is not restricted to the natural world. The speaker also notes his connection to the “lumbering ox” who, through physical labor, moves logs to the mill, likely logs that had once been in the forest now going to the mill to be processed for human use. He is part of the cycle of “climbing and descending” unique to humanity, that brings him into communion with the hills as well as the animals. As part of them, to leave would disrupt the cycle. His responsibility to the cycles of the land itself implicate his place on that land.

The last line offers the most interesting possibilities. In the previous lines, the speaker notes the connection with animals in terms of livelihood, work, and birth, with human beings in terms of aspiration, and with death as the catalyst of regeneration. He states finally, “I cannot go. / Being of these hills I cannot pass beyond” (55). Part of the poem’s tension rests in the word “beyond,” to which two potential readings apply. The line could indicate that the speaker cannot leave the physical boundary of the hills, so great is his connection and identification with the place. “Beyond” could also indicate a tie to the earth in that the body, once dead, passes not into a spiritual realm immediately but remains to serve the earth from which it came. Initially, this might discomfort Christians who privilege the soul over the body, but the effort here is not to separate the two or even deny the soul. Instead the line indicates the full import of the gift of land and echoes Berry’s beliefs about the importance creation.<sup>16</sup> Ellen Davis interprets the

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<sup>16</sup> In his “Wendell Berry’s Vindication of the Flesh,” Jason Peters notes the theological importance of physicality: “grace comes by means of the natural, not in spite of it” (320). Berry himself notes the importance of seeing the body as a whole unit rather than body vs. soul in *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*: Adam is not “a creature of two discreet parts temporarily glued together but...a single mystery “(106).

Hebrew nouns in the Genesis account of creation as a play on words: human, ‘*adam* and soil ‘*adamah*. She notes that “the two biblical symbols—humanity made in the image of God and human from humus—belong together, but in practice most contemporary Christians separate them. [...] For us in this generation, the call to discipleship may well be a call to remember our kinship with the fertile earth” (Davis 189-90). Still chooses this relationship with the land even when it is difficult and sees it as his inheritance for this life and the life to come.

The combination of readings (‘*adam* and ‘*adamah*) also articulates what Walter Brueggemann calls “rootage,” that is, the location within a community or place rather than the liberation from it (4).<sup>17</sup> Identity with the region prevents the speaker from leaving; identity with the land itself, with the hills, keeps him from passing “beyond.” Even the title, “Heritage,” bears out the potential of these two readings, indicating both an inheritance and a valuable gift to be preserved.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the early review, Still’s emphasis on the ongoing promise of “being one” with the community of creation encompasses “death rising to bloom again” rather than culminating in that transcendence. The speaker cannot leave the land because he recognizes it as the unifier of his community, a creaturely common ground.

Also within these early poems is a sense of the earth’s endurance in relation to humanity’s presence which further suggests the interrelatedness of creation. People in Still’s poems often participate in the creative potential of the land, but the emphasis in many of Still’s

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<sup>17</sup> For Brueggemann, “such rootage is a primary concern of Israel and a central promise of God to his people” (4). He sees the struggle for rootage as a contemporary issue not only as a concern for Israel (2).

<sup>18</sup> The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* offers both definitions of the word *heritage*, depending on the usage (473).

early poems is the ongoing process of creation afforded by the land itself.<sup>19</sup> His poem, “Foal,” (1936) speaks to this process, most notably in the second stanza:

[The foal] has come upon this place with limpid eyes

Moist in questioning. Never were the hills so green.

Never before this season more wondrous skies,

Or earth more yielding for his hoofs to pass.

His is the timid quest with spindling clumsy legs.

He is the flesh of Spring returning with the grass. (*FMFV* 54)

The newborn foal experiences spring in all of its fullness, a spring that has “never been so green” and skies “never *before* more wondrous” (italics mine). That the skies continue to renew and increase in beauty suggests the *dynamic* character of what might be considered by many Christians and even certain ecologists as a static creation, a creation fixed in its “created”ness with the ability only to maintain or be unraveled (most notably by humans). Many American Protestants resist this idea because it tends toward evolution.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as Brian McLaren notes, “in many [Christian] circles...the only time the word *creation* comes up...is before *versus evolution* (234). However, Still gives evidence to this ongoing process of creation in the “timid quest” of the foal, which as newly born, has no reference for verdant hills or beautiful skies. As the “flesh” of the season most associated with rebirth and regeneration, the foal implies the creative capacity of the already created: the earth generates new grass, the skies new wonder.

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<sup>19</sup> “Burned Tree,” first published in 1931, appears in *From the Mountain to the Valley*, pg. 28.

<sup>20</sup> For many Christians, the theory of evolution stands in complete opposition to the idea of God as Creator. For my purposes, I do not want to engage in a debate about evolution, but instead acknowledge the exciting possibility of a creation that was given the potential to work out *more creation* because God values creation so highly. Terence E. Fretheim discusses this (referencing specifically Gen. 1:27-28) at length in *God and the World in the Old Testament*: “God creates a dynamic world in which the future is open to a number of possibilities and in which creaturely activity is crucial for proper creational developments” (56).

Still understands life on the land as one of participatory creation, an understanding that aligns him with a land ethic. As Fretheim notes in reference to Genesis 1:26-28, “God’s relationship with the world is such that God, from the beginning, chooses not to be the only one who has creative power and the capacity, indeed the *obligation*, to exercise it” (49, emphasis mine). In Still’s poem, the foal’s presence (especially as the flesh that returns *with the grass*) bears witness to the dynamic potential of the land and all creation.

Still offers a similar perspective in the poem “Answer” (1935):

This is the answer to all centuries  
That spawn new life and grind it into dust.  
This is the solved equation of the heart  
Bound in arrogance between fettering rust  
And pure white rage of Spring’s late snow  
When sap is high, when tender buds first start.

There are no final lines to mark the end  
Of stern design in earth’s geometry.  
Firm angles crash, true circles wilt and fail  
Before the whirling mass of all infinity.  
Love that has paled and died in weary hope  
Will rise from dust to reenact the tale. (*FMFV* 31)

Creation and destruction exist in harmony and tension with one another throughout the poem. Even as, in the earlier poem, the foal gives flesh to the Spring and the mountains and hills erode

with those same spring rains, so too the centuries give rise to new life and simultaneously “grind it to dust.” For Still, there is no clear ending or beginning, just the ongoing process of creation that includes and requires death in order to bring about renewal. The final two lines indicate that creation itself is an act of love, not love that diminishes and therefore dies, but love that instead “pales and die[s]” in order to bring new life. Still’s earthy land ethic illustrates a Christian ideal of land gift as a response to creation. Where Berry sees God’s “timeless life,” Still sees love that rises again and again (*Given* 83). Still recognizes the reality of death and knows that it is only bearable because of that rising hope. For Christians, a land ethic recognizes that spring’s late snow sometimes merges with the coming of spring itself, that hope is not complete yet. It recognizes that potential *of creation* to continue creating, not as God or as even a spark of the divine, but simply because God “is a power-sharing God” (Fretheim 49). H.R. Stoneback calls Still’s understanding of humanity’s connection to the land an “ecological wholeness,” and notes that Still’s approach to the land does not “romanticize the harshness” of life in the hills or blur it with pantheism or nature worship (19). Instead, his work consistently affirms and values creation as part of the land while also affirming humanity’s place on that land. He criticizes human irresponsibility and implies even in destruction, however, “the hope of salvation” (15).<sup>21</sup> Consistently in these early poems, Still asserts the place of humans on the land as one of responsible interaction. Humans will and should impact the land, but that the impact should be within the bounds of service to creation, of acting on hope rather than death.

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<sup>21</sup> Stoneback sees this “hope of salvation” specifically in poems such as “I was born humble” which draws from Psalm 114, and “River of Earth”.

### *Three Later Poems and the Language of the Eternal*

James Still himself acknowledged the thematic consistency of his poetry reflected his “experience living in a particular time and place” (“Preface” 4). And yet, many of his later poems, specifically from the 1990s, explore a more overtly religious connection with the life on the land as gift, even though the earthy vocabulary and connotation remains. Specifically, he begins to negotiate the “place” of the eternal and what that might mean in terms of the land. His poem “Recollection” appears only in the collected poems of *From the Mountain From the Valley*, and offers insight into his evolving understanding of God and the land:

More than sixty years ago  
When I wrote River of Earth  
I had little awareness of  
The evil in the world.

God was not too far up  
in the sky, and He spent  
a lot of time looking out  
for me.

Everything  
I truly needed  
He would provide;

And when I wearied

of this earth, He  
would take my hand  
and say, "Come  
live in My house." (148).

Here, God's "house" is as much the earth as it is the "sky," which is presumably the speaker's initial understanding of heaven. That God's house is on the earth does not preclude God from heaven, but instead implies God's concern for creation. The poem's conclusion suggests the shift in the speaker's thought. If God's house is not far off or in some ethereal heaven, then the speaker must not "weary of the earth." Instead, he must take part in providing for himself and for the rest of creation. Like the "answer" Still finds in the earlier poem, his new insight into God's presence on earth suggests that darkness coexists with light on earth, that evil exists, but that God is in the world. The speaker implies the hubris of seeing himself as God's only concern. If God's house is not in the sky, but here (or to be here) on earth, then the eternal becomes quite present. Rather than "wearying" of it, the speaker must be involved in the life of the world.

To further explore the implications of "Recollection," it will be helpful to evaluate one of Still's most recent poems, "Mine is a Wide Estate" (1997):

I am wealthy with earth and sky  
Heir to far boundaries of field and stream,  
And scarce can keep track of so much property:  
Cloud-herd, dew-diamond, midge and bee,  
Wasp-way, wind's wisdom, and the foxfire's gleam—



I am rich despite a seeming poverty.

Mine is a wide estate. It is a legal jest.

These are a neighbor's hills, those a stranger's.

Who owns the water's speech, the hornet's nest,

The catbird's mew, the grassy breath in mangers,

And who in cricket song and mayfly nymphs invest?

I am possessor and possessed. (*FMFV* 145)

Still begins with the language of place and home in the title. Not only does the word "estate" imply home, it connotes a grand home with land. Several issues are of note in this brief title. First, Still's "mine" suggests a rightful place on the land. But the poem unfolds to reveal the deep reciprocity between the speaker and the land. Though the speaker indeed has claim to the land, it also has a claim on him. Perhaps in an echo of John 14 when Jesus states that his father's house has many rooms and that he goes to prepare a place for all who follow him, Still's "estate" has also been prepared for him, not as some far-off heaven, but in the "far boundaries of field and stream," a tangible and present inheritance whose seeming simplicity belies its wealth. Still phrases inheritance in terms of land and place rather than in terms of a spiritual heaven, which seems consistent with his discovery in "Recollection." Still's impulse here is no different from Berry's:

Though heaven is certainly more important than the earth if all they say about it is true, it is still morally incidental to [the earth] and dependent on [the earth], and I can only imagine it and desire it on terms of what I know of the earth. And so

my questions do not aspire beyond the earth. They aspire *toward* it and *into* it. Perhaps they aspire *through* it. They are religious because they are asked at the limit of what I know; they acknowledge mystery and honor its presences in the creation; they are spoken in reverence for the order and grace that I see, and that I trust beyond my power to see. (*Long-Legged House* 200)

This view of land as gift, as window to heaven, suggests the importance of responding to *this earth* rather than the oft-held contemporary Christian view that ultimately, no matter what humans do, a new earth will replace this “broken” one. Still and Berry suggest the bounty of this gift and the importance of caring for it. A Christian view of land as gift supposes that because God cherishes creation (humans, the lilies of the field, the birds of the air), we should as well. Still makes this clear in the final line of the first stanza: “I am rich despite a seeming poverty.” Even if he never sees a spiritual heaven, he has seen the earth, God’s first creation. While certain world-denying strains of Christianity might suggest that our life here is but a poor indication of heaven, a Christian view of land as gift, like Still’s final line, challenges this poverty.

Also at issue in this poem is the legal notion of ownership. Even though Still uses possessive pronouns and terms of property, he acknowledges that ownership is a “legal jest.” Still introduces the tensions inherent in land-gift and inheritance, indicated in this case by the initial “estate.” To belong on the estate without owning it presents interesting difficulties. For Still, true ownership of the land is a “legal jest,” in part because he understands that outright ownership often leads to human exploitation, as is seen in much of his poetry about farming mismanagement and the horror of the coal mines. In the same way, though, that Still could not

leave his “prisoning” hills in 1936, he is now “possessor and possessed”. The gift of these “far boundaries” requires much responsibility. Christians will recognize the tension between land gift and stewardship of that land. To belong in and on the land is to belong to that promise of “satiation” that Brueggemann describes, but Brueggemann also notes that “living in a land controlled by another is to live a problematic existence” (13). Still’s “legal jest” indicates the gift quality of the land that is not completely ours. Instead of mastering it, we *serve* the land. As Ellen Davis asserts, the Genesis 2:15 verbs, *avad* (to work for) and *shamar* (to keep), indicate “that the needs of the land take clear precedence over our own immediate preferences” (193). That is, the land may belong to humans, but because of the intimate connection between human and soil, the land has a claim on humans as well.

Perhaps the poem most indicative of Still’s mature view of the land and humanity’s place on the land and responsibility to creation is “Dove” (1993):

When a wild bird, a dove, a mourning dove  
Flew from a tree and plucked a seed from my fingers,  
I knew at last I had achieved something long sought:  
A oneness with earth, plant, animal, cloud, and water,  
Fowls of the air, denizens of the deep.  
The mist at morning, the sun at setting,  
Wind song, hail pelt, thunder clap—  
An invitation to the eternal,  
The great meadow of the hereafter.  
Peace.

Forever. (*FMV* 143)

The structure of the poem simplifies as it progresses, offering a structural indication of the peace the speaker indicates as the poem culminates in one-word sentences. The content also paces the poem from “a wild bird” to the “great meadow of the hereafter”. The beauty of the scene for the speaker lies in the wild bird’s acknowledgement of his [the speaker’s] achieved place in creation, which is not an accident but “something long sought”. The bird takes the seed from his hand as both nourishment and a continuation of the land’s promise, in that the seed provides sustenance for that single bird and for many birds when it emerges in new growth. The bird acknowledges the speaker’s pursuit of “oneness with the earth,” and all creation. In that moment, the speaker understands that this oneness is a glimpse of the eternal, that this is the way life on the land should look. Again, *Still* frames the eternal in terms of the earthly with the appositive, “the great meadow of the hereafter”. Presumably, if such oneness can be maintained, the reward is lasting peace, not only for the speaker but for creation.

As with many of *Still*’s other poems, the language here is not specifically Christian in scope; however, some theological connections are possible and, in some instances, hard to ignore. Christians can find two important connections in the image of the dove: peace and the earthly mission, what Christians call the Kingdom of God on earth. After Noah’s obedience during the flood in Genesis 8, the dove brings the olive branch as an indication that God’s wrath, as well as the water, has receded. After Jesus’ baptism, at the moment when he accepts all that is human and all that is divine about his mission on earth and as the Son of God, a dove descends on him to symbolize God’s pleasure. In both scriptural examples, the dove indicates God’s commitment to creation. Most notably, the Christian connotation of the dove and the poem’s

presentation of the dove merge in the impulse that oneness can be achieved on earth in the context of a land ethic that supposes the land as gift. Because of that gift, humans find common ground, and in this case, communion with all of creation.

James Still's poetry offers an important argument for a Christian land ethic, even though he does not explicitly embrace Christianity in the way Berry does. His poetry offers a model of ecological stewardship that recognizes land as gift by acknowledging the potential for good and destruction in human impact. Still also suggests that human identity cannot be untangled from its roots in the soil. Because Still's response to the land often evokes the language of land as gift and Christian thinking without overtly claiming it, he stands, like the poplars on the edge of his "Farm" in contradistinction, not opposition to Wendell Berry. In many ways, the idea of land as gift is not central to contemporary Christianity, and though the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament support the understanding of the land as God's creative gift to humans, Still's actual life on the land affords him clear perspective of what such a life requires. Turning to Still for evidence of land as gift, does not conflict with a Christian perspective, but rather brings depth to a Christian understanding.

Wendell Berry and James Still illustrate the importance of land as gift in establishing a Christian environmental land ethic. The gift of land bears out the promise of a creation story in which God places humans on the land to work it fruitfully as well as the promise of the incarnate and resurrected Christ. Still and Berry emphasize the inherent connection between humanity and the soil, a connection that provides a tangible understanding of the hope and fulfillment in the resurrection, a hope that rises physically from the dust ("Answer," *FMFV* 32). For both poets, the gift of land requires involvement with creation, not simply management of the land that

might maximize the benefit to humanity. As Brueggemann notes, the land is “not to be presumed on” but must be “managed as an arena of justice and freedom” (191). For Berry and Still, that arena includes a place for all of creation, not simply humanity.

## Chapter 2

### **“Now we may rest in hope”: Sabbath Rest in the Poetry of Wendell Berry, James Still, and Mary Oliver<sup>22</sup>**

The celebration of the Sabbath has deep roots in the history of both Judaism and Christianity. And though both faiths celebrate a divine rest from creative work, the earliest Jewish celebrations focus on rest as the completion of creation, while the earliest Christian celebrations look forward to the renewed creation of the earth foreshadowed by the resurrection. In contemporary theology, many scholars emphasize the need for a balance of the two concepts, an understanding that allows and even requires a focus on both completing and beginning (or renewal) within the same Sabbath rest. Such a balance between awe of this world and the anticipation of its renewal necessarily points toward ecological responsibility. For Christians, a conscious Sabbath awareness requires more, not less, participation in this world. That is, the often-held eschatology that views this world as fallen and to be replaced by a “new earth” frequently dismisses the concern for the environment and diminishes human responsibility for creation (Revelation 21:1). Norman Wirzba notes that “Christianity has promoted forms of otherworldliness” which reject a world so broken and filled with sin and to which the only response remains to look toward heaven and live for a distant future (“Placing the Soul” 84). Sabbath celebration, in contrast, elevates the importance of creation and of the human response to creation without rejecting the idea of renewal.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel’s critical study of the Sabbath, Jürgen Moltmann’s study of the Kingdom of God, and Terence Fretheim’s study of Genesis assert the potential of Sabbath

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<sup>22</sup> *Timbered Choir*, Sabbath poem V (1991): “The seed is in the ground / now we may rest in hope / while darkness does its work” (131).

celebration to bring healing to humanity and creation. Heschel argues that Sabbath celebration is not “a rejection of modernity or the secular world,” but a “complement to building civilization” (“Introduction” xiii). Moltmann suggests that a Sabbath consciousness “presupposes the ecological ‘day of rest’ of the original creation” (296). And Fretheim suggests that coming into “God’s ordering of life” in Sabbath time allows humans “to ‘feel’ the world and be touched by all God’s creatures” which “honors God’s larger creative purposes” (64). These creative purposes include the ongoing work of creation, both at the will of God, who is present in creation through the Holy Spirit, and the hands of humans made in the divine image. Celebrating Sabbath time is more than simple rest. Instead, as I will seek to show in this chapter, Sabbath time turns our attention toward creation, both in admiration and in respect. As a part of the ongoing process of creation in the world, Sabbath fosters an attitude of sustainable living and of humility. Sabbath, then, offers a way of understanding and participating with the world of creation that broadens human connection and responsibility within that world.

Wendell Berry, James Still, and Mary Oliver, the three poets I discuss in this chapter, are undoubtedly concerned with human response to creation, yet what these poets offer that theologians or environmental philosophers do not is their focus on the importance of communion between humans and physical creation. Sometimes poetic language that tends toward natural imagery strives for personal, individual transcendence. But in the case of these three poets, the nature imagery brings the poets into community. By that I simply mean that these poets, though they often have human speakers, self-consciously write from within the community of creation rather than as outside observers. Furthermore, their poetry (as Berry suggests poetry can) “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” (“Secular Pilgrimage” 3-4). Heschel argues for a similar quality of the Sabbath, that it is not a holy space, such as a tabernacle, but a “holiness in time” which allows those who celebrate its mystery to experience rest with all creation (10, 14). The poetry of Berry, Oliver and Still raises a concern for human and non-human alike that culminates in acknowledging the “reciprocal restoration” of responsible human interaction with creation (Gatta 227). Such a concern, as Gatta notes, is “inherently theistic,” and in the case of these poets, specifically Judeo-Christian (227). Their poetry offers insight into “human songs of praise as poetically distinct from, yet spiritually harmonious with, those articulated by nature’s other creatures” (233). The speakers in their poems demonstrate an awareness of this distinction and allow it to move them to imaginative praise.

Through the “formal integrity of [the poem],” these poets “remind us of the formal integrity of other works, creatures, and structures of the world” (*What Are People For* 89). What began, then, in Chapter One as a discussion of humanity’s relationship to the land, now extends that relationship with all to creation. For Berry, Still, and Oliver accepting the land as gift means celebrating that gift, not simply in praise or wonder, but with fruitful and productive work as well as thoughtful and participatory rest. For all three poets, rest “is not possible unless it has a durable and consequently living link with [...] divine worship” (Pieper xix). These poets’ treatment of the relationship between work and rest highlights this “living link” with a divine creator. Their response to creation embraces the materiality of the body and the earth, the very real ramifications of individual choices about where to live and how to engage their local

ecosystems, and situates the poets within a much larger community of creation which finds its best expression in the celebration of the Sabbath.

***Fruitful Labor as Work and Word—the poetry of Wendell Berry, James Still, and Mary Oliver***

Though the primary concern of this chapter is the potential for Sabbath rest, before rest, one must work, and for Berry and Still, fruitful labor most often takes the form of farming, in the “weariness that loves the ground” (“Stones,” *CP* 103). Because both of these poets embrace humanity’s place on the land, it stands to reason that fruitful labor on that land would follow. Berry’s references to work span all his collections of poetry; however, because of the close relationship between fruitful labor and land as gift, this chapter will focus on poems from *Farming: A Handbook* and *The Timbered Choir*, a book of Sabbath poems that involve the connection between work and rest. Still concentrates on farming and coal mining most directly in *Hounds on the Mountain*; however, because his approach to Sabbath is never overt, I will also include some of his later work to show the historical trajectory of his thought.

Berry’s definition of fulfilling work carries a tone of service. In “Enriching the Earth” his speaker tells us:

To enrich the earth I have sowed clover and grass  
to grow and die. I have plowed in the seeds  
of winter grains... (*CP* 110).

Here, work enriches both the soil and the worker. In fact, it “gives a wideness / and a delight to the air, and [the] days / do not wholly pass” (110). Because of the Genesis account of creation in which God curses man and ground after the Fall (“in toil you shall eat [...] by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread”), many in the Christian tradition view work itself as a curse, (Gen. 3:14-19). But it is important to note that God created man to till the earth in the garden of Eden. As God casts man out of Eden, his charge is still to “till the earth.”<sup>23</sup> In his essay “Going to Work,” Berry notes, “It is possible to find pleasure and beauty and even ‘recreation’ in work. It is possible to have forms [of work] that do not waste and poison the natural world” (*Agrarian Reader* 261). In the Genesis account and in Berry’s poetry, to work is to encounter death, though work *in itself* is not death; indeed, work can enrich life. Even the author of Isaiah envisions labor as part of the “new heaven and new earth”. The Isaiah author says of the new creation that “they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit” (65:21). But most importantly, the author says, “they shall not labor in vain” (65:23). In this view, work is not absent from the restoration of heaven and earth, but instead is free from all futility. Berry’s narrator has a glimpse of this type of fulfillment as he stirs “the offal and decay of past seasons” into the earth, seeing in decay and regeneration a more Christ-like vision of redemption, one that emphasizes regeneration from death (*CP* 110).

The speaker even begins to see his own body, not just the detritus of seasons, as important to the earth’s regeneration. As the poem comes to a close the narrator sees the importance of “falling into the fund of things”:

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<sup>23</sup> Verses 22-23: “Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.”

...It is the mind's service

for when the will fails so do the hands

and one lives at the expense of life.

After death, willing or not, the body serves,

entering the earth. And so what was heaviest

and most mute is at last raised up into song. (110)

Rewarding work requires awareness so as not to live "at the expense of life". Berry's narrator knows every physical body will eventually serve the earth in death, but he suggests a contentment to be had in that interaction with the earth, the conscious and responsible working to make "its yield increase" (*CP* 110). Biblical scholar N. T. Wright comments on the ramifications "in this present age" of a new creation that includes work (208). He suggests, that because of the resurrection, the work we do will "last all the way into God's new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there" (209). As Berry's narrator discovers, a more "willing" participation with the earth would offer a glimpse of fruitful labor, the kind of labor that celebrates life rather than discounting it (*CP* 110 lines 12-14).

For James Still, the geography of Appalachia, with its worn hills and mine-stripped mountains, suggests a lifetime of toil rather than rewarding labor. Because of the inherent difficulty of the terrain and the trial of life on the land, his poetry tends to embrace a movement toward fulfilling labor and rest, often in the context of a working community. Only in a type of Sabbath rest do Still's speakers begin to sense connection to community. In many of Still's

earliest poems (*Hounds on the Mountain*), he emphasizes the wearying toil on an unforgiving land. In his later poems, he emphasizes the importance of community as integral to establishing productive rhythms of labor and rest. A good example of this growing poetic understanding comes from an examination of “On Double Creek” (1935) and “A High Field” (1985, from *Wolfpen Poems*).

For instance, in “On Double Creek” the speaker, born “on a forty-acre hill,” grows up watching the “county poor farm with hungry fields” at the edge of his own family’s land (*HM* 22). The labor of these “county poor” is beset by trial, and their toil is often “plodding” and fruitless as evidenced by their “hungry fields” and their “furrows crooked as an adder’s track.” The speaker remains distinct from “their palsied hands,” “the worn flesh of their faces,” and “their tired cries.” The speaker observes, but does not intervene in the lives of these poor who touch the edge of his land. The labor the speaker witnesses is not only unfruitful, but it is also disconnected from any type of rest, let alone a Sabbath rest that acknowledges creation in its fullness. Here on “Buckalew Ridge,” land set aside for the poor is not enough to sustain them. This type of land surely would receive little rest, and in turn, it produces little. The cyclical process of low-yield and hard labor lends a sense of futility to their work, and consequently to their lives. Though the intention in designating land for the poor might have been good, they still remain isolated from the community and from the speaker himself. The final line references the “swift dark martins in their eyes,” which suggests their vulnerability. Martins are extremely susceptible to starvation due to their feeding practices and often depend on human-supplied housing (Purple Martin Conservation Association). Likewise, not only do these workers find no rest (“their tired cries”), but they find no community either in spite of the provision made for

them. The speaker sees and hears them, but he seems to have nothing to offer them, perhaps thinking that the land set aside for them is enough.

Nearly fifty years later, Still's poem, "A High Field" presents a new sense of community.

The speaker of this poem recalls:

And one morning here you came  
Climbing up to my high field  
And stood squarely among us  
And told us your name  
But not why you were there,  
And you grabbed up a hoe  
And matched us row for row  
As if I needed a hand, and I did  
And you not accepting pay. (*FMFV* 129)

The structure of the poem itself presents a movement toward community. In "On Double Creek," the speaker remains separate from the poor even in the distinct, end-stopped phrasing that marks his "forty-acre hill" from their "poor farm" (22). In "A High Field," the poem utilizes a more egalitarian structure as only one sentence, which puts the speaker syntactically in the same place as his neighbor. The repetition of "And" at the beginning of each line blurs the

syntax in the same way that the speaker's new sense of community blurs the once distinct barriers between those who need help and those who can give help.

This poem suggests a movement in the poet's own response to what might have seemed like futile toil in "On Double Creek". Here, the speaker offers the perspective of the worker in need, perhaps for the poet resembling the paupers from the earlier poem, while the "high field" itself seems to suggest the Ridge of the earlier poem. The pronouns throughout the poem reveal the new sense of community. The "you" of this poem seems to be an echo of the "I" of "On Double Creek". Rather than simply observing, the "you" takes action by standing "squarely among us" and taking up a hoe to help finish the work. It is possible to imagine that the "you" left a field of his own in order to help this neighbor, to take his place among them. Still presents here the importance of fruitful labor in the context of community, of recognizing and valuing one another through shared work, which prefigures the qualities of Sabbath rest.

For Still, toil often stems from isolation, both from others and from creation itself. Notably, "On Double Creek" is the final poem of the Creek Country section in *Hounds on the Mountain*, and directly precedes the section entitled "Earth Bread" which focuses mainly on the lives and work of coal miners. In "Mountain Coal Town," the "upper world" of the miners consists of "stark houses hung upon the hills," and "ragged slopes and interstices of barren rock," which belie "man's firm laughter / and the long clear whistle of the cardinal singing" (25). The diction here provides insight into the life divided into upper and lower worlds. While a "gutted cave" may offer potential earnings, the fact that life outside the cave is no more than a mountain stripped bare suggests that such work is both empty and unnatural.

Still continues to highlight the miners' isolation from the community of creation in the poem "Earth Bread".<sup>24</sup> Here, the vision of the speaker moves from the sky to the depths of the earth and culminates in burial. The gradual descent evokes the connotation, not simply of death, but of the underworld, of lost lives and empty work:

Under stars cool as the copperhead's eyes

Under hill-horizons cut clean and deft with wind,

Beneath this surface night, below earth and rock,

The picks strike into veins of coal, oily and rich

And centuries-damp.

They dig with short heavy strokes, straining shoulders

Practiced and bulging with labor,

Crumbling the marrow between the shelving slate,

Breaking the hard, slow-yielding seams.

Bent into flesh-knots the miners dig this earth-bread,

This stone-meat, these fruited bones.

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<sup>24</sup> The second poem of the section with the same title in *Hounds on the Mountain*.



This is the eight-hour death, the daily burial

In a dark harvest lost as any dead. (HM 26)

As the scene shifts “below earth and rock,” the synecdoche “picks” suggests that the men who use them sublimate their identity into the work itself, losing both the value of self and the value of work. These “picks” continue, no strangers to hard work, with their “straining shoulders” and their “bulging” muscles. But the next few lines suggest the price of that labor: to become scavengers who seek the “marrow” of the earth, who pick the “fruited bones” of a harvest “lost as any dead.” The “earth-bread” and the “stone meat” of Still’s poem imply an unsustainable form of labor and harvest; coal brings wages that *buy* bread, but that cannot *make* bread. He uses the language of agriculture as contrast to the finite coal harvest and to indicate that the miners work without heed to the natural cycles of the land. The labor here, though ironically performed in the depths of the earth, distances the workers from the rhythms of creation.

Because God’s creative work in Genesis relies not only on the ground ( the dust of the ground becomes flesh) but on the spoken word (speaking the world into existence), it is both fitting and necessary to consider both aspects of work. Mary Oliver offers a different understanding of work as the process of wrangling words, which offers a unique counterpoint and complement to the vision of fruitful labor as represented by Berry and Still. For Oliver, the work of poetry celebrates Sabbath in its ability to inform her rest; that is, her interaction with creation becomes an integral part of her work and her rest. Sometimes compared to Dickinson for her introspection and sometimes to Whitman and Thoreau for her love of nature, Oliver’s inheritance from Romanticism is clear. Her connection to Christianity, though not overt, is seen

through her relationship with nature itself and with her positioning of humanity with the context of creation. Though she does not embrace the term “Sabbath” as Berry does in his poetry, she privileges those rhythms of work and rest in a Christian context. Thomas W. Mann argues that in Oliver’s poetry, Psalm 19 presents a helpful context for her role as poet.<sup>25</sup> According to Mann, “nature speaks and yet does not speak,” and Oliver, who observes closely, “hears the voice of nature that, in the biblical tradition, speaks of God” (5, 9). Oliver’s prolific career includes over 15 volumes of poetry, beginning with *Voyage and Other Poems* (1963), and most recently *Thirst* (2006) and *Red Bird* (2008). In *Winter Hours* (2000) she notes

Now I think there is only one subject worth my attention  
  
and that is the recognition of the spiritual  
  
side of the world and, within this recognition,  
  
the condition of my own spiritual state. I am not  
  
talking about having faith necessarily, although  
  
one hopes to. What I mean by spirituality is not  
  
theology, but attitude. (102)

For Oliver, then, the “heart of natural spirituality is not what one thinks about God [theology], but how one relates to the natural world *as the realm of God* [attitude]” (Mann 11, author’s emphasis).

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<sup>25</sup> Psalm 19:1-4: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; / and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. / Day to Day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge, / There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; / yet their voice goes out through all the earth, / and their words to the end of the world.”

Her most recent work in Volume Two of the *New and Selected Poems*, as well as in *Thirst*, demonstrates the poet's increasing awareness and recognition of God as creator involved in creation and of a nature offering praise to that God.<sup>26</sup> Oliver embraces what Jürgen Moltmann sees as "God's image" in creation, which necessitates a world-view that is

more fully in accord, not merely with the reality of natural environments of the world of human beings, but also with the natural character of this human world itself—the world of women and men...[This view] is bound up with new egalitarian forms of society, in which patriarchal rule is ended and co-operative communities are built up. (320)

Oliver, like Berry and Still, recognizes the presence of a Creator God, and because of this, recognizes herself as part of creation. The speaker in "Moss" says, "What a wild family! Fox and giraffe and wart hog, of / course. But these also: bodies like tiny strings, bodies like / moss!" (*NSII* 115). Her observation connects the world of mammals with the world of plants, but in the final stanza, notes the community of all creatures with humans as well: "When I see the black cricket in the woodpile [...] I touch her tenderly, / sweet cousin (115). Oliver echoes Berry's insight that "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'" ("The Art of Living Right" 23). Oliver's understanding of the community of creation aligns with that of Berry and Still. She shares Berry's "love of the ground" and his "weariness"; however, her

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<sup>26</sup> I say "increasing awareness" to acknowledge what seems to be a more overt recognition of God that comes in the recent work. Her earlier work, such as *American Primitive*, makes reference to God (see "John Chapman, p. 24 of AP), but her latest work often addresses God specifically, especially *Thirst*.

experience stems not from working the land but from immersing herself in it.<sup>27</sup> She still participates with the land, and sometimes writes of gardening and planting, but she is often more concerned with word-work.

Oliver's work, her labor with words, often explores the relationship between the poet's voice and the voice of creation, between attention that requires silence and a drive for expression that requires words. Just as Berry and Still must find a balance between farm work and rest, so must Oliver, whose primary work is celebrating creation with words, discern the time for pause and silence. Highlighting the rhythms of expression and silence in the relationship between labor and Sabbath, her 1994 poem, "Work," juxtaposes work and rest:

How beautiful  
this morning  
was Pasture Pond

It had lain in the dark, all night,  
catching the rain

on its broad back.

All day I work  
with the linen of words

and the pins of punctuation  
all day I hang out  
over a desk

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<sup>27</sup> The reference here is to Berry's poem "Stones" mentioned in the introduction to this section. (*CP* 104).

grinding my teeth

staring.

Then I sleep.

Then I come out of the house,

even before the sun is up,

and walk back through pinewoods

to Pasture Pond. (*NSII* 147).

The shift from the initial image of the “beautiful” pond to the word-work takes place in mid-stanza. The image of the pond disappears as the poet struggles to hold together the “linen of words” with the “pins of punctuation.” Notably, she presents the final image of the pond unadorned by any adjective. For all the poet’s attempts to represent the pond, her actual encounter *with* the pond becomes the most satisfying moment of the poem. Also important is the speaker’s need to sleep after work before coming to the pond, as if to suggest the importance of coming to the pond refreshed, not simply coming to the pond for replenishment. In this case, sleep itself is not the Sabbath rest, but instead prepares the poet for participation in that rest with the pond. This suggests that the rest itself is part of creation and specifically of Oliver’s ongoing creative process. Her action embraces a Sabbath rest, for the pond as well as for herself.

One of Oliver’s newer poems, “Work, Sometimes” takes up the same theme nearly ten years later, focusing on the process of work and its ongoing reward. The speaker begins with sadness, sitting at a table with “books piled up” and “words falling off [her] tongue” (*NSII* 6).

The poet's cascade of words seems no match for the robins, who "had been a long time singing" outside her window (6). Again, the image is of the inherent separation between words and experience, and yet given the breadth of Oliver's work and her lifelong pursuit of poetry, it seems safe to suggest that the poet still values the poetic work, or she would not still be sitting at that table. The title itself offers some insight—that the work comes easier at some times than others, or perhaps that the work is not always the same work, and that the expression of experience only sometimes lends itself to words. In the body of the poem she notes:

Happiness isn't a town on a map  
or an early arrival, or a job well done, but good work  
ongoing. Which is not likely to be the trifling around  
with a poem.

The "good work ongoing" seems for Oliver the ability to pay attention, to know the difference between a moment that can be rendered in words and one that cannot. Her poetic work listens to the voice of creation, and then through her own language, calls attention to that voice. Her poetic work is no more trivial than Berry's or Still's farming, though both types of work can become "trifling around" if emptied of the attitude, attention, or encounter with nature that Oliver values as spiritual. She continues in the final stanza:

You have had days like this no doubt. And wasn't it  
wonderful, finally, to leave the room? Ah, what a  
moment!

As for myself, I swung the door open. And there was  
the wordless, singing world. And I ran for my life. (6)

The sadness of the poem's beginning gives way to delight and the poet gives up her pen and chooses "the wordless, singing world" (6). Oliver's poetic encounters with words will always be metaphorical because nature has no human language. Instead, her words "perform admiration" and her poems invite others to "do the same" (*Winter Hours* 80). Like the images from Psalm 19, in which the voice of creation proclaims God's glory "to the ends of the world" despite the lack of speech or words, Oliver's concern is in joining that chorus. The language of metaphor offers an entry into that chorus. Fretheim argues that natural metaphors for God and God's creation are a form of theophany, and that if the "natural metaphors for God are in some ways descriptive of God, then they reflect in their very existence, in their being what they are, the reality which is God" ("Nature's Praise of God in the Psalms" 22). In this poem, the metaphors give way to the experience. Like the final stanza of "Work," this final stanza emphasizes the necessity of connection with physical creation. For those metaphors to come, for her life's work to be fruitful, she must immerse herself in the chorus of creation. As she runs "for [her] life" in the final line of the poem, she is not running away from work, but toward a greater fulfillment of that work. The only way for the words to carry the weight they deserve is for her to "[swing] the door open" and listen. Those initial words that fall from her tongue bear only the weight of work and not the bounty of delight.

Though Oliver's work focuses more on the intellectual than the physical, she shares with Still and Berry the desire for fruitful labor and offers an important counterpoint to the physicality that they both embrace. Oliver also keeps a close watch on when her work is valuable to herself and to others, and when it might diminish that which she is trying to portray. This concern situates her, along with Berry and Still, in a long tradition of work and rest. The value that all three poets place on rest, not as an interlude from work, but as the condition of a new perspective that invigorates and informs all life, places them in the biblical tradition of Sabbath rest and community.

### ***Renewal in and for the Community of Creation: Sabbath Rest***

Taken together, these three poets offer a vision of fruitful labor that echoes the work of a creator God, which combines intellectual, spiritual, and physical work. For Still, the importance of the Sabbath often manifests as a theme of justice for the earth, while for Oliver, the Sabbath becomes a mode of attention and participation in community. Berry's poetry, however, offers the most complex and complete understanding of the Sabbath and of its implications for humans and creation, largely because he dedicates so much of his poetry to pursuing the Sabbath. Just nine years after publishing *Farming: A Handbook*, Wendell Berry began a deliberate poetic recognition of the Sabbath in what would eventually become *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*. In this collection Berry considers the Sabbath seriously, though as he notes in one of the first poems, "contrarily" (TC 9). The Sabbath requires more than abstaining from work or even, as in the Christian tradition, going to church on Sunday. As the poem suggests, celebrating the Sabbath more often means "walk[ing] into the woods" rather than following the call of the church bells into town (9). In the woods, Berry waits and observes and participates in



the way of creation by deliberately changing his work-week trajectory. German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper's study of leisure, or stillness, as integral to healthy work and culture provides an important insight into Berry's choice:

Leisure [...] is not just non-activity, it is not the same as quiet and peace, not even inward quiet and peace [...] In the same way [as God celebrated creation] man celebrates and gratefully accepts the reality of creation in leisure, and the inner vision that accompanies it. And just as Holy Scripture tells us that God rested on the seventh day and beheld that 'the work which he had made' was 'very good'—so too it is leisure which leads man to accept the reality of the creation and thus to celebrate it, resting on the inner vision that accompanies it. (Pieper 29).

Pieper's words, published some 20 years before Berry began deliberately recording his Sabbath walks into the woods, illustrate the importance of rest in a culture where rest is often suspect (2). The Sabbath, for Berry, changes the direction of activity and offers him the chance to celebrate creation.

In the introduction to the volume, Berry notes that the collection is "a series...not a sequence (xviii). For this reason, I will work through a selection of his poems that offer a cross-section of his understanding of the biblical Sabbath, as well as of his environmental ethic.

Berry's Sabbath celebration seems to concern four major attributes of the Sabbath:

1. "What is begun is unfinished," or ongoing creation (*TC* 6-7).

2. “When field and woods agree,” or the relationship between work and rest (14-15).
3. “Time fit to be eternal,” or the eternal essence of the Sabbath (40).
4. “The blessed conviviality,” or celebrating the community of creation (8).

Berry explores most of these tenets in the initial poems, and though the poems are not sequential, Berry does spend more concentrated effort exploring the implications of Sabbath observance in the initial poems. Often, the later poems demonstrate these aspects of the Sabbath in action or in conjunction with one another.

### ***“What is begun is unfinished”: or Ongoing Creation***

For Berry and for many theologians, ongoing creation is part of God’s gift to creation and counters the belief that creation itself, as described in Genesis, is the end point of God’s creative activity in the world. Indeed, the theological writings of Heschel (*The Sabbath*, 1951), Moltmann (*God in Creation*, 1985) and Fretheim (*God and the World*, 2005) help us better understand Berry’s poetic representations of the Sabbath in theological terms. That Berry often anticipates or echoes many of their insights based on his own reading of the Bible suggests that his understanding of the Sabbath, with its implications for humanity and creation, has much to offer both Christians and environmentalists. Indeed, though Berry’s vision of Sabbath has theological roots, it is a vision of peace and wholeness for all of creation, one that he feels Christians especially should lead the way in embracing.

In Berry’s second poem of the *Timbered Choir* collection (II, 1979), he “resume[s] the standing Sabbath / of the woods” (6). In the woods Berry is able to “enter the holiness of the day

[...] lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, and of being yoked to toil” (Heschel 13). Here, the “leaves of fallen seasons” serve as a reminder that no created thing or being stands as goal of creation, but instead exists as part of the cycle of creation (*TC* 6). Even death itself is part of the creative churning of the earth, suggesting the incompleteness of creation. Berry consistently sees natural death as reflective of the restorative and redemptive process associated with Christ’s resurrection, as evidenced by the third stanza: “Past life / Lives in the living. Resurrection / Is in the way each maple leaf / Commemorates its kind, by connection / Outreaching understanding” (*TC* 6). Far from dismissing eschatology, Berry sees in the cycle of life and death the ongoing reconciliation of creation *through the example of Christ’s death and resurrection* that anticipates a continual movement toward Christ through respect for creation. Because “our only choice should be to die / into [Sabbath] rest or out of it” Berry suggests that experiencing Sabbath time facilitates this movement toward reconciliation (*TC* 7). Berry says of the soil itself, “its fertility is always building up out of death into promise“(*LLH* 204). Berry’s eschatology, then, simply diminishes the long-held traditional view that *this world* does not matter if Christ is coming again. Instead, his eschatology suggests that this world matters because God is working toward creation’s renewal. Christ’s resurrection indicates God’s commitment to bringing all creation into fellowship with God. To dismiss this world in favor of an ethereal, spiritualized heaven is to misunderstand God’s commitment to physical creation.

Berry denies the possibility of a static existence for those who share in Sabbath rest, suggesting instead that by participating thoughtfully in creation, we can move more intentionally toward Christ’s return. For the speaker:

[...] What rises

Rises into comprehension

And beyond. Even falling raises

In praise of light. What is begun

Is unfinished. And so the mind

That comes to rest among the bluebells

Comes to rest in motion, refined

By alteration [...] (6)

The speaker's stillness allows him to participate in the ongoing creativity of the world. Fretheim notes that "as the image of God, [humans] are to mirror God to the world, to be as God would be to the nonhuman, to be an extension of God's own creative activity in the continuing development of the world" (55). In order to do this, however, the speaker must choose to "die / into God's rest" (TC 7). Only within the context of sacred rest, a rest God created in the zenith of his own creative activity, is the mind "tended / in ways that it cannot intend: / [or] borne, preserved, and comprehended / By what it cannot comprehend" (7).<sup>28</sup> Though the speaker's observation of Sabbath clearly affords renewal, it also prepares the speaker to "be refined / by alteration," to participate in "Being becoming what it is" (6). The speaker, in participating in

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<sup>28</sup> Heschel observes: "The words 'on the *seventh* day God *finished* his work' (Gen 2:2), seem to be a puzzle. Is it not said: 'He rested on the *seventh* day?' 'In *six* days the Lord made heaven and earth' (Exodus 20:11)? We would surely expect the Bible to tell us that on the sixth day God finished His work. Obviously the ancient rabbis conclude, there was an act of creation on the seventh day. Just as heaven and earth were created in six days, *menuha* was created on the Sabbath. 'After the six days of creation—what did the universe still lack? *Menuha*. Came the Sabbath, came *menuha*, and the universe was complete (22).

Sabbath, embraces the fullness of humanity in all its potential. As Heschel reminds us, “The act of bringing the world into existence is a continuous process. God called the world into being, and that call goes on” (100). For Berry, Sabbath rest signifies the motion of *becoming*, not simply break from labor. For Christians, *becoming* is part of being a “new creation” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). N.T. Wright says that the new creation will have important connections with this present creation and that our present actions will be “completed [...] in God’s eventual future” (*Surprised* 162). Sabbath time focuses our actions toward God’s purposes in creation so that we might participate more completely in that work of renewal that includes ourselves and creation. In some sense, the work of the fields stops in order only to focus fully on the work of becoming.

Because Sabbath concerns the continuation and renewal of creation, created beings not only come into the presence of one another but into the presence of God. Moltmann argues, “the Sabbath is the prefiguration of the world to come,” perhaps a glimpse of the world as God envisions, as a place of harmony and fulfilled activity (*God in Creation* 6). In Berry’s Sabbath moment, the speaker allows the creative presence of the Creator to fill the stillness, to continue the creative work in him. The speaker’s choice to die into God’s rest, then, echoes the words of Paul who would become greater in Christ than in himself.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps just as significant, however, is the image of self-relinquishment to the Creator himself, which distinguishes Berry’s poetry from other eco-poets who bristle at the “environmental [and] cognitive dissonance that arise from human superfluity” (Costello 570). What Costello suggests in “‘What to Make of a Diminished Thing’: Modern Nature and Poetic Response” is simply that poetry like Berry’s

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<sup>29</sup> See 2 Corinthians 5: 17-19; 12:10.

calls “for an imaginative reckoning” of nature and humanity “other than grief and rage” (270). Rather than railing against human impact on the world, Berry’s poetry, and this poem specifically, calls for renewed and responsible interaction with creation. Berry’s response to creation is not a *construction* of value but *recognition* of inherent worth in light of a common creator. Indeed, through creation, the speaker actually “rises into comprehension,” with creation. The potential unity of creation, for Berry, stems from all creation’s relationship to God as creator.

In an entry that follows a few years later (I, 1981), Berry extends the theme of ongoing creation and further explores the necessity of relinquishing the perceived claim on creation in order to “submit to making” (35). In the first three stanzas Berry demonstrates how the view of land as gift counters a negative anthropocentric claim on the land. Sabbath rest helps situate humans who claim land as created gift within the same realm of creation:

Here where the world is being made,

No human hand required,

A man may come, somewhat afraid

Always, and somewhat tired,

For he comes ignorant and alone

From work and worry of

A human place, in soul and bone

The ache of human love.

He may come and be still, not go

Toward any chosen aim

Or stay for what he thinks is so. (35)

The verb “being made” in its progressive tense suggests the ongoing process of creation, while the passive nature of the verb suggests creativity outside of human origin. That the speaker comes both “tired” and “afraid” implies the wonder of this making, one that could be performed by creation or by Creator, and points immediately to the power of Sabbath rest as continuing creation. Indeed, the first stanza acknowledges the creative potential of creation itself, as well as God’s continued creative involvement in the world. Terence Fretheim sees creation as “a project of God, begun ‘in the beginning’ and developing through the millennia in and through the agency of creatures (especially human beings)” (52). Fretheim’s insight offers a model of creation care that begins with the Creator and suggests that one aspect of God’s gift to creation is creativity. It is important to note here that Berry describes God’s creative presence in the world; that is, God’s acts within creation rather than God *as* creation. Creation, for Berry, and later for Oliver, reflects God’s glory without being God. The speaker pauses to observe the potential beyond the work of the “human hand,” and makes room for the creative potential of other

creatures as well as for the presence of God. If all creation stands as testament to God's glory, then creative work is also a testament to that glory.

Berry certainly expresses the Sabbath experience in terms of imagination, and seems to act as both conduit and subject of the experience; that is, not only is he "being made" but he is also "making". The speaker's participation in creation celebrates rather than derides the speaker's "human constructions" (Costello 571). Even though the speaker observes work which requires "no human hand" the poem itself gives testimony to the potential of work that "does not flinch or evade but rechannels rather than restrains creative energy" (570). The poem itself maintains a ballad stanza with its consistent quatrain of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines, echoing the form of many classic hymns and even of Dickinson's poetry. Berry's commitment to form suggests the purposefulness and intentionality of the human mind that strives to represent creation faithfully. In the previous poem the speaker notes that "we can stand under no ray that is not dimmed by us," acknowledging that words may be inadequate (7). Here, the speaker seems to be measuring, through the mediating language and form of the poem itself, the "immeasurable" which "exceed[s] thought" (35). In the moment of Sabbath rest, even the creative process is enhanced, "borne, preserved, and comprehended / By what it cannot comprehend" (7).

Bonnie Costello sees in this creative process an "adjustment of the imagination," which is an important response to the "diminishment" of the environment (570-71). That is, she suggests that poetry actually offers a new way to imagine *positive* human interaction with creation. Costello traces the evolving American poetic response to nature. She notes the sensibility of embracing the common ground between human and "natural" construction and argues against the



poetry that would respond to “diminishment, ” that is, the despoliation of creation, only with “grief and rage” or with a call to “relinquish human constructions” (570-71). To respond with openness, to “submit to making,” as Berry notes, suggests that in Sabbath rest, he finds a “fluent actuality through which we know and alter our frames” (*TC* 35, Costello 570). Berry would call that “fluent actuality” the presence of God, in whose company the speaker sets aside his claim

On all things fallen in his plight,

His mind may move with leaves,

Wind-shaken, in and out of light,

And live as the light lives,

And lives as the Creation sings

In covert, two clear notes

And waits; then two clear answering

Come from more distant throats—

May live a while with light, shaking

In high leaves, or delayed

In halts of song, submit to making,

The shape of what is made. (*TC* 35)

First, the speaker must relinquish his “claim” not in order to restore nature, but to participate more fully. Indeed, he shares with creation a “fallen” status, and yet, “Creation sings / in covert”. Here, creation’s song is only complete in the “two clear answering” notes, that is, in conjunction with other creatures. For the speaker, the poem itself, in its form and rhyme exemplifies, as Robert Frost notes, an “other kind of music” (853). The final stanza seems to suggest that the poet can experience Sabbath as both praise and making. The poet may exercise creativity “in halts of song” or praise, or as poet who allows the experience to change the “shape of what is made.” Indeed, he may well “submit to making” himself as malleable medium. Here Berry seems to echo again the earlier Sabbath poem in which the speaker observes “Being becoming what it is,” that is, an ongoing fulfillment of creation.

Both poems suggest that to be convinced of creation’s potential for ongoing creative process is to be convinced of the value of created things. For Christians, valuing creation means joining God in working toward what N.T. Wright calls “the incorruptible physicality” that is firmly rooted in this world (*Surprised* 156). Practicing Sabbath values this world as gift, takes responsibility for its care, and contributes to its renewal. As Norman Wirzba notes, “the beginning is really more a prelude to the more practically significant task of determining the order of creation as a whole and seeing in that ordering the placement of humans within the creation before God” (*Paradise* 13). Berry’s Sabbath rest explores the promise of creation in the midst of renewal. With God as creator centrally situated in the Sabbath experience, the work of creation thrives as evidenced by the poem itself.

***“When field and woods agree”: the Relationship between Work and Rest***

Berry’s commitment to the land extends beyond his farm to the forested areas around his home. For Berry, the woods represent untended land and therefore become an appropriate setting for his Sabbath experience. The distinction he makes between field and woods has little to do with disparaging human influence on the land. Berry turns toward woods in the promise of fruitful work and Sabbath rest (*TC* 14). Indeed, the field and woods can agree, and in doing so, offer a promise of peace: “it is a hard return from Sabbath rest / To lifework of the fields, yet we rejoice, / Returning, less condemned in being blessed // By a vision of what human work can make: / A harmony between forest and field” (14). The return from Sabbath rest is “hard” precisely because, as previously mentioned, the Sabbath anticipates a restored creation and simultaneously recalls the first Sabbath in Paradise.<sup>30</sup> And yet, even though “the lifework of the fields” is toilsome, when coupled with the Sabbath, the work transcends mere labor and becomes “blessed”. Berry echoes Heschel’s claim that Sabbath rest is “not a depreciation, but an affirmation of labor, a divine exaltation of its dignity” (28). Work, in light of the Sabbath, becomes a vehicle of reconciliation, a move toward a time when all labor is fruitful and fulfilling.

The reconciling potential of good work renews both worker and creation, and God’s gift of Sabbath enhances and enables good work. Indeed, “[i]n that healed harmony, the world is used / but not destroyed, the Giver and the taker / joined, the taker blessed, in the unabused // Gift that nurtures and protects” (14-15). When work bears the imprint of Sabbath rest, “Then workday / And Sabbath live together in one place,” and “though mortal, incomplete, that

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<sup>30</sup> The reference is to Jürgen Moltmann’s claim that “the Sabbath prefigures the world to come” (6).

harmony / Is our one possibility of peace” (15). Berry underscores here the *humanness* of the peace, which suggests that, while creation is still in want of restoration, the work humans choose right now matters to the health of creation.<sup>31</sup> Sabbath’s rest affords a place of harmony for all creation. This ecological harmony begins with an ideological harmony, one that indicates the importance of all creation. Berry’s assertion here embraces the creative potential of work on this earth, work that joins “Giver” and “taker” in mutual delight of a world “given for love’s sake” (14). That the gift, creation itself, “nurtures and protects” highlights a distance between Berry’s ecological vision and that of radical environmentalists, such as *Earth First!*, who would save the earth from all human impact. However, humans can only implement harmony that bears the stamp of our own mortality. Even though creation is an “ongoing project of God,” eventually it will need “salvific work” (Fretheim 52-43). Thus, for Berry, while redemption and restoration are certain, they will not originate from humans. Instead, humans are part of the same creation that needs redemption, and for Berry, responding responsibly and respectfully to creation is an expression of gratitude to God. Sabbath, created by God for all creation—for land, animals, and humans—offers an opportunity for humility and restraint. The closest humans can come to the “First Sabbath’s song” are the echoes sounded “when field and woods agree,” which is not simply an echo of pre-fall existence but also a movement toward that kind of harmony (*TC* 15).

Berry further explores God’s own attitude toward Sabbath in one of his 1980 (V) Sabbath poems. This 26 line poem of AABB couplets, again in a trimeter rhythm, moves breathlessly to the climax of the poem and reiterates in form the overarching theme: that the attitude of the work week impacts the celebration of the Sabbath, inextricably linking the two:

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<sup>31</sup> I will leave the connections between Sabbath and redemption undeveloped for now, in order to take it up more completely in the next section.

Six days of work are spent

To make a Sunday quiet

That Sabbath may return

It comes in unconcern;

We cannot earn or buy it. (*TC 29*)

The “unconcern” here is not a lack of concern for Sabbath, but rather for the affairs of the day. Notably, Sabbath rest cannot be commodified as a thing to “earn or buy,” nor is it simply the abstaining from physical labor (*TC 29*). Indeed, the “six days of work” may very well be six days of preparation, not in terms of productivity, but of readiness and awareness. The next line posits, “Suppose rest is not sent or comes and goes unknown” (29). The passive voice here indicates that Sabbath rest originates outside of humans, that it is a gift given that must be purposefully acknowledged. The poet suggests the possibility of missing the Sabbath altogether. Heschel notes the same distinctive quality of the Sabbath:

The difference between the Sabbath and all the other days is not to be noticed in the physical structure of things, in their spatial dimension. Things do not change on that day. There is only a difference in the dimension of time, in the relation of the universe to God. The Sabbath preceded creation and the Sabbath completed creation; it is all of the spirit that the world can bear. (21)

Heschel suggests here that one must choose to come within the bounds of the Sabbath, which is to say, within God's own rest.<sup>32</sup> But without a conscious decision to let the Sabbath inspire the work of the week, Sabbath celebration suffers. Instead, the day focuses inward, "In wrath at circumstance, / Or anger at one's friends [...] Or anger at oneself" (29). Sabbath rest does offer renewal, but if, as Heschel notes, Sabbath completes creation, then it exists for all creation and should be other-focused rather than self-focused. Norman Wirzba, in *Living the Sabbath*, describes this quality of the Sabbath and its connection to work: "If human delight finds its model and goal in God's delighting in creation, so too human work finds its inspiration and fulfillment in God's own work of healing, restoring, strengthening, and maintaining the life of creation. Our work, if it is to be good, must line up sympathetically and harmoniously with God's" (95). Like God's own six days of work in the Creation account, the speaker finds his own "six days of work" a preparation to experience the harmony of the Sabbath.

In the final lines of Berry's poem, "hopeless fret and fuss" undermine the relationship between work and Sabbath as well as the relationship between humanity and creation. Without Sabbath, work becomes "hopeless" and "rage" rises "at worldly plight." When the "world is lost / in loss of patience" work loses its potential to fulfill worker and creation. Sabbath restores patience, and with it, the concern for beneficial work. Without Sabbath, "Creation is defied, / All order is unpropped, / All light and singing stopped," and dissonance replaces harmony (29). Because Sabbath adjusts the workday perspective by situating the speaker in God's presence, the speaker can honor creation and God through good work. The potential of the Sabbath is not simply to offer "an interlude within life, but rather [to be an] animating heart, suffusing every

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<sup>32</sup> Sabbath poem II (1979), already discussed in terms of ongoing creation offers the same view, that one can choose to "die / into that rest or out of it" (TC 7).

moment with the potential for joy and peace” (Wirzba, *Living* 33-34). Outside of Sabbath rest, creation is incomplete, as is the promise of peace. As in the previous poem, part of the work preceding Sabbath is indeed “the lifework of the fields,” but just as important is the work to bring harmony between labor and rest by integrating Sabbath attitudes of restoration into the actions of each day.

***“Time Fit to be Eternal”: The Essence of Eternity in the Sabbath***

Thus far, both a sense of ongoing creation and the harmonious relationship between work and rest allude to the presence of an eternal quality embodied by the Sabbath. Interestingly, for Berry this timeless quality of Sabbath rest often serves to “unstick” heaven in time, bringing heaven, as an entity of time rather than space, in contact with earth. The Sabbath, which is a hallowed time, is “detached from the world of space” and brings into focus what is “eternal in time” (Heschel 10). Thus, through Sabbath celebration, heaven—the symbol of eternal life—mingles with life on earth. The awareness of heaven always points toward redemption, sometimes full-scale redemption of all creation, and other times, redemption of the day or a single moment. For instance, in Sabbath poem II (1982), the poet climbs a deer path in the cold of early spring where

the blood root,

twinleaf, and rue anemone

Among bare shadows rise, keep faith

With what they have been and will be

Again: frail stem and leaf, mere breath

of white and starry bloom, each form

recalling itself to its place

and time (40).

These frail harbingers of spring persist each season and are no less “twinleaf” or “bloodroot” in the dead of winter than in the early awakening of their season. In their rising, they of course “keep faith with what they have been,” but more importantly, they enact “a saving loveliness” of “root and light” for the speaker (41). Just as the knowledge of the resurrection so often sustains Berry, so too do these flowers reappearance offer more than “ornament” to the speaker. They give evidence to the “eternal” that Berry sees in the present. For a “brief Sabbath now” the poet experiences what Jürgen Moltmann claims every Sabbath bears: “a sacred anticipation of the world’s redemption” (*TC* 40, Moltmann 6). For the moment of their blooming, the poet notes the presence of “the forfeit Garden that recalls / Itself here, where both we and it / Belong” (40). The present and past coexist in the mystery of spring’s return, and even more so in the flower’s single bloom, because the Sabbath is time and not space. The Sabbath is the gift of God to creation, a holiness in time. The presence of the eternal in each moment is possible because “time is the presence of God in the world of space” (Heschel 100). Indeed, in the “starred firmament here underfoot” the poet sees “time fit to be eternal” (*TC* 40-41). Berry, as he often



does, upends the mystery of heaven and eternity. In this moment of Sabbath, instead of looking up, the poet looks down to the tiny blossom of the rue anemone and sees the Garden of Eden. Heschel notes that “Sabbath and eternity are one—or of the same essence” (73). Berry later echoes Heschel in an interview with Anne Burleigh. He says that because of his experience on the land he “can see the way things of time relate to the things of eternity analogically” (139). In this way, Sabbath anticipates redemption, offering a glimpse of restored creation through the eternal presence of God in time.

Though the Sabbath, as Moltmann notes, *anticipates* salvation of the world, Berry often depicts these moments of redemption as present in each Sabbath celebration, much like the “saving loveliness” of the spring flowers. The redemption is often accessible, not as anticipation of a far-off future, but as part of each Sabbath experience. In Sabbath poem V (1996), the speaker encounters the same type of timelessness as in the previous poem, but in this case the moment is more specific, the redemption more personal:

Some Sunday afternoon, it may be,  
  
you are sitting under your porch roof,  
  
looking down through the trees  
  
to the river, watching the rain. The circles  
  
made by the raindrops’ striking  
  
expand, intersect, dissolve,

and suddenly (for you are getting on  
now, and much of your life is memory)  
the hands of the dead, who have been here  
with you, rest upon you tenderly  
as the rain rests shining  
upon the leaves. And you think then  
  
(for the thought will come) of the strangeness  
of the thought of Heaven, for now  
you have imagined yourself there,  
remembering with longing this  
happiness, this rain. Sometimes here  
we are there, and there is no death. (201)

Because of the second person pronouns, both the speaker and the reader participate in the observation. The pronouns also provide an objective distance for the speaker to observe himself, an echo, perhaps of the timeless nature of the Sabbath itself. As the “you” observes the rain, the speaker observes the “you” and emphasizes their simultaneous distinction and connection through the parenthetical knowledge. The second person not only serves as a bridge between

reader and speaker, between speaker and himself, but also between past and future, heaven and earth by shifting all perceptions into the present, into the “brief Sabbath now” that Berry observes in the previous poem.

The poem invokes Sabbath in both the naming of the day (Sunday) and in the play on the word “rest” in the first stanza.<sup>33</sup> Not only do the hands of the dead rest in a posture of blessing on “you,” but the rain also “rests.” In this moment of rest, time collapses; the past with its dead, the present with its memory, and the future with its promise—all come into view. From this moment of Sabbath rest comes the interaction with the long-dead. The speaker tempers mysticism by grounding this stanza in the earthy physicality of stanza one. In fact, the second stanza encounter with the dead seems to be the logical extension of raindrop circles that “expand, intersect, and dissolve” upon “striking” the earth (201). In the Sabbath moment, the present *expands* to *intersect* with past and future, while the boundaries of earthly time and space *dissolve*.

In the third stanza, Berry emphasizes this “eternal essence” of the Sabbath by illustrating the common foundation of both heaven and earth in God as creator. Berry consistently portrays the earthiness of heaven (as seen even in the previous poem), and of the commonalities between heaven and earth. In this final stanza the “thought of Heaven” seems almost foreign given the “happiness” of the speaker’s moment. And through the power of Sabbath observance, the speaker comes into fellowship with creation of all times. Because Sabbath is a gift of time and bears the essence of eternity, the speaker is “able to sense the unity of all beings,” and is able “to

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<sup>33</sup> Moltmann offers an entire section on the roots of Christian celebration of the Sabbath on Sunday. See *God in Creation* pp. 292-96.

relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world [... He] has been initiated into the appreciation of eternal life” (Heschel 74). This appreciation is part of the redemption of the Sabbath: to see the reflection of heaven on earth, to move toward full-scale redemption by taking seriously the redemptive potential of each Sabbath experience. The speaker’s world of space does not change, but his perception of time does. In this way, the qualities of the Sabbath merge, bringing together the sense of continuous creation, God’s eternal presence in time, and the consistent movement toward renewal, both on a daily and cosmic scale. For Berry, that all of these attributes of Sabbath are available to creation is a staggering gift.

***“In this Purple Hour”: James Still’s Yearning for Sabbath***

Though Still addresses the Sabbath in only a few poems, his insight is important, particularly in light of his poems regarding work. And just as Still often explores the impact of unfruitful work on the community, he also explores the theme of Sabbath through its rhythms of rest for both farmer and land. When those who people Still’s poetry grant rest to the world around them, they too find rest. What was once simply the natural world, as distinct and separate from humanity, becomes instead the world of creation as in Still’s “Let This Hill Rest.”<sup>34</sup> As the poem opens, the speaker intones a prayer-like refrain: “Let this hill rest... / Let the roots crawl into this failing earth, / Let the leaf fall, let day descend / on untilled slopes” (*FMFV* 33). The poem thus begins in downward motion, following the roots into the ground and even the sun past the horizon of “untilled slopes”. Rest begins in ending. This movement also draws the speaker, in this moment of rest, *toward* the earth and builds on this mounting camaraderie in stanza two, which echoes the refrain of the first stanza: “Let my heart rest this purple hour / [...] Let me lie

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<sup>34</sup> Included for the first time in *From the Mountain From the Valley*.

here unstirred, unwoke, and still, / Let my heart lean against this fallow hill” (33). Surely the speaker’s physical heart cannot *lean* or *rest* except in the context of the whole being. “Heart” as synecdoche certainly represents the body, but in doing so highlights both its corporeality and spirit. That the heart rests implies the very essence of the speaker at rest: all that he is *rests*; all that he is *leans*. Moltmann notes a similar potential of the Sabbath: “the peace of the Sabbath distinguishes the view of the world as creation from the world as nature; for nature is unremittingly fruitful and, though it has seasons and rhythms, knows no Sabbath. It is the Sabbath which blesses, sanctifies, and reveals the world as God’s creation” (6). Similarly, in the speaker’s rest, he makes nothing, but instead allows the “voiceless” breath fill the “unwoven” air (*FMFV* 33). His rest draws him to the hill, and he draws strength from it, as a brother rather than master.

Moltmann’s insight into the ability of Sabbath to reveal nature as creation provides important perspective into Still’s Sabbath experience. Whereas in Berry’s poetry, the speaker has already made the decision to encounter the world in terms of Sabbath, Still’s speakers must discover Sabbath, and through it the world as creation. And yet his speakers seem to move instinctively toward Sabbath, even if their discovery comes belatedly. As the sun sets on this speaker and on the hill, the speaker wanders slowly through “dull passages of breath [...] in sleep withdrawn from death” (33). He understands rest as he also begins to accept his own mortality. Indeed, the speaker’s discovery that “perfect rest is an art [...] the result of an accord between body, mind, and imagination,” comes as twilight falls, in the “purple hour” (Heschel 14, *FMFV* 33). But he *does* find the harmony of body and mind of which Heschel speaks. Still’s “heart” serves this discovery well, representing the creative, imaginative force of both body and

mind. By letting the hill rest, the speaker comes to rest along with it. Not only does he begin to see the hill as creation, but he takes his place beside it as well.

Similarly, in “Aftergrass,” the speaker finds rest intuitive after years of “toilsome ways” (*FMFV* 49). All the creatures required to make his work possible run free as he turns from his labor to rest. Like the speaker in “Let this Hill Rest,” the speaker seems to be preparing for death as he reflects:

A little time for calm, for looking back

On the long furrows spread across the years,

On the lost faces, the young hands,

The eyes caught up within the glance of tears. (49)

The speaker measures his whole life in the furrows tilled across his fertile past. His “young hands” are now old, and “lost faces” imply the pain of death. In his productivity, he has been unable to secure peace. Only in his “quiet gazing on the hills [does] he share with earth an unaccustomed peace-- / after abundant harvest, the aftergrass.” Peace suffuses the speaker’s rest as well as the earth’s. The aftergrass follows harvest as a sort of healing, in this case for both the land and the speaker. That the peace is “unaccustomed” suggests that he was perhaps more interested in harvest than aftergrass for most of his life, and that only in putting aside toil is he able to experience and enjoy the post-harvest peace. In both poems, the speakers must come to Sabbath. Because Sabbath exists in time, the speakers must choose the pause over the action.

For Still, then, the celebration of the Sabbath is hard-won. Though it may be an instinctive yearning, choosing Sabbath requires great strength of body and spirit. In “Reckoning” (1935), the speaker observes that only the “strong” have been able to claim “an earthly peace” (*FMFV* 42). The title suggests that perhaps rest comes only in a final accounting for one’s actions. Those who have had the strength to claim the peace afforded them on earth will be the ones “in this might breathlessness heard” (42). Even then, they are the “weary and the spent, / the broken at the wheel.” And though they claimed an earthly peace, another, greater peace waits for them as the hills testify: “each yearning here unspent / Shall have its reckoning when the hills confide. / They shall find strength where peace and time abide.” *Reckoning* suggests God’s final judgment, and Still’s language does underscore this possibility. What seems most important, however, are the speaker’s consistent references to peace. This reckoning seems to be more equalizing, one in which the hills bear witness to those who sought peace. For those who sought peace, perhaps a more complete peace will be awarded.

The speaker of the poem echoes Wendell Berry’s observations about the difficulty of life in light of the Sabbath:

the life of this world is by no means simple or comprehensible [...] It involves darkness and suffering; it confronts us daily with mystery and our ignorance. But the idea of the Sabbath passes through it as a vein of light reminding us of the inherent sanctity of the world, our life, and of the transformative sanity of admiration, gratitude, and care. (“Foreword” 12).

Still often emphasizes the darkness and suffering of those who toil, but for those who seek peace, the harmony of humanity and creation, the light of Sabbath dawns and illuminates. Still's Sabbath peace highlights the importance of *choosing* rest after a life of work. In these poems, rest seems to crown the life of work, to complete it as no other harvest could. When Still's speakers choose rest for the earth, they experience the fullness of Sabbath.

***“Standing Still and Learning to Be Astonished”: Mary Oliver’s poetry of Sabbath***

Sabbath celebration suffuses Mary Oliver’s work, especially her most recent work. Though Oliver has always been known for her nature poetry, her most recent work (*Red Bird, Thirst*) emphasizes the “communal conversation,” that Sabbath facilitates between creation and God (Mann 16). Oliver’s work, her poetry, extends from her Sabbath relationship with creation. In this way Oliver engages in what Moltmann describes as a perception that leads to participation in “mutual relationship” rather than analysis, reduction, or domination (3). Oliver’s poetry certainly approaches the world in this way, and yet, her theological connections are often difficult to establish, though many critics find the theological pulse in her poetry to be quite strong. Debra Rienstra notes:

For Oliver [the world’s] beauties exist not primarily for our pleasure and use but are animated, as in the Psalms, with the praise of their Creator. The theology infusing the poems remains subtle, however, perhaps partly because, as Oliver remarks in "Bone," “our part is not knowing, / but looking and touching, and / loving. (41)



Likewise, Thomas W. Mann, in his study of Oliver's poetry through a theological framework, notes her connection to the Psalms and to her "deep appreciation for Sabbath time, the crown of creation in Genesis 1" (13). He continues by suggesting that Oliver likes to "keep Sabbath," even if she does not use the term. Instead, he observes that for Oliver, "idleness—not work—produces blessing" (13). The idleness that Mann notices presents itself in nearly all of Oliver's poetry, and I suggest that Sabbath actually distinguishes her "idleness" as a different form of activity, an attitude of attention rather than inactivity. For Josef Pieper, such an attitude is a form of "leisure." For Pieper and for Oliver, "leisure [...] is a mental and spiritual attitude—it is not simply the result of external factors, it is not the inevitable result of spare time. [...] It is] a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality [...] a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude" (26-27). Pieper notes that God created leisure (or Sabbath), and this leisure helps humans "to accept the reality of the creation [of the world] and thus to celebrate it" (29). Oliver herself, in one of her rare interviews, suggests that "appreciation is a very valuable thing to give the world," and that appreciation is at the "center of what [she] feel[s] spiritually" (Ratiner 1). With these things in mind, it is quite possible to associate Oliver's rest, her contemplation of nature, with the Sabbath even though she never actually uses that word.

Oliver's exploration of creation is readily apparent in many of her poems, but her concern with Sabbath is most overt in her most recent volumes. For this reason, most of my analysis will center on three texts: the newest poems (2004-05) in *New and Selected Volume II, Thirst* (2006), and *Red Bird* (2008). As Diane Bonds notes, Oliver's explorations of God and nature are undeniably theological, though they also provide a "powerful and critical rereading of the logical

and ethical assertions associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition” (7). This is precisely the aim of my own project: to question the Christian traditions which exclude creation from the realm of human responsibility and to underscore the scriptural call to environmental responsibility as evidenced by the poetry. For Oliver, Sabbath rest situates humans and creation in the presence of the creator and elevates the importance of this present world. In one recent poem, “Both Worlds, ” included in *Red Bird* (2008) she explores the interconnection between the world of Sabbath, the “first [world], the holy one” and the world of perception:

where the trees say

nothing the toad says

nothing the dirt

says nothing, and yet

what has always happened

keeps happening:

the trees flourish, the toad leaps

and out of the silent dirt

the blood-red roses rise. (51-52)

The mute world of creation populates her poem, and yet the initial lines here hang on the word “say.” Though the trees and the toads have no human speech, they each contribute to the “holy” world the speaker experiences beyond her own imagination. The enjambment of these lines is striking and connects to Mann’s observation of the relationship between Oliver’s poetry and Psalm 19 (13). In the Psalm, all creation “pours forth speech” even though “there is no speech, nor are there words” (vs. 2-4). For Oliver, it seems as if each aspect of creation brings unique perception of creation: the tree says nothing / the toad says” and “the toad says / nothing the dirt / says”. By identifying the distinct “voices” of creation as both speaking and not speaking, Oliver suggests the value in listening to and participating with creation.

Throughout Oliver’s poetry, she observes that the best way to make room for a poem is to make room for creation through attention and stillness. Thus, she consistently juxtaposes her approach to Sabbath with the craft of poetry. Diane Bonds notes that Oliver’s poetry is “an attempt to restore [...] the broken connections between human and non-human” (7). Only Sabbath can focus the poet’s language toward this type of healing. In this way, Oliver not only echoes Berry, but also provides an excellent model for a theological and ecological approach to creation through Sabbath: she explores the eternal quality of Sabbath time, the redemptive power of Sabbath through creation, the ongoing creative capacity of all created things, and most overtly, the community created by Sabbath experience.

Unlike Berry’s traditional observance of Sabbath or Still’s lifelong journey to Sabbath, Oliver’s Sabbath is a nearly constant state of rapt attention. She is not “seeking a lost unity, but rather “presupposing a connectivity with nature” (Bonds 10). The “connectivity” still leaves room for distinction between work and rest; indeed, the connection illuminates her vision of the

rewards in Sabbath rest. Though Oliver shares many themes of Sabbath experience with Berry, she also brings new insights to Sabbath: the ongoing work of celebrating Sabbath Community, the craft of poetry within the Sabbath, and the healing that rises from sorrow in Sabbath rest. Oliver adds her voice to the celebration of Sabbath in the “context of love,” which Berry notes, “is the world” (*What are People For?* 90). Oliver’s work, then is as firmly rooted on earth as either Berry’s or Still’s. More than simply an ideal for Oliver, celebrating the world of creation is the inspiration for living fully and responsibly in that world.

***“Loving the World”: the ongoing work of celebrating Sabbath Community***

In “Messenger,” the first poem of the volume *Thirst* (2006), Oliver explores participation in Sabbath community as part stillness of attention and part action. As the title indicates, the speaker brings a message perhaps to creation, though the poem itself could be the vehicle of delivery. The language of the poem supports even a Christological reading of the title, especially the first line that states: “My work is loving the world” (1). In this way, Oliver aligns herself with Christ’s work within the poem and in her own life. Oliver’s poems nearly always evince that duality, that is, the speaker within the poem and the poem as entity. The message itself is simply expressed in the poem: “how it is we live forever” (1). To arrive at this eternal moment requires the effort of “loving the world” from sunflowers to yeast to “the clam deep in the speckled sand” (1). Perhaps the paradox is “standing still and learning to be astonished” (1). That *astonishment* requires *learning* at all implies the difficulty of participating in Sabbath celebration without stillness. The speaker herself must battle distraction. The second stanza moves immediately from the creation she loves to a presentation of self. Her clothes and body are “old,” “torn,” and “no longer young,” and she must remind herself that what “matters” is the

work “of loving the world” (1). The speaker experiences the decay of time, but the Sabbath moment, the moment of “learning to be astonished,” mediates that decay. It leads instead to “rejoicing” and “gratitude” (1). The moment of stillness leads to celebration and transcends the boundaries of time, not space. Oliver’s transcendence is firmly rooted in the earth and is for all creatures. Bonds suggests that for Oliver, “the Kingdom of God *is replaced by* the ‘small kingdoms’ of nature, kingdoms [which possess] their own kind of infinitude and eternity” (8, emphasis mine). I would suggest, however, that these small kingdoms comprise Oliver’s Kingdom of God rather than replace it; the world of creation *is* the Kingdom of God, and it requires present attention and action. In her most recent poetry, Oliver repeatedly connects loving God with loving the world. In fact, the only way that loving God makes sense to her in *Thirst* is through loving God’s creation.<sup>35</sup>

For Oliver, “loving the world” also means embracing life completely, an echo of Berry’s “being becoming what it is”. Oliver’s foundation in the community of creation requires more than “having visited this world” (“When Death Comes,” *NS* 10). The amazement that pours forth from Sabbath awareness elicits a spirit of community that leads to a “particular” and “real” life (10). Oliver’s earlier poetry, as evidenced by “When Death Comes” (1992), bear an urgency and even a ferocity of desire to live in Sabbath amazement and embrace all of life. But in *Thirst*, published over a decade after the first volume of selected poems, grief and age temper ferocity. Here the speaker not only delights in the community of creation, but also looks to that community for a model of how to embrace the one life she has, even in grief (in this case grief

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<sup>35</sup> Many of these poems I reference throughout this chapter. However, for reference, poems such as “The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist” (24), “Six Recognitions of the Lord” (26), and “On Thy Wondrous Works I will Meditate” (55) all give evidence to Oliver’s understanding of God’s Kingdom as earthly and present.

for the death of her lifelong partner, Molly Cook). In “When I am Among the Trees” the trees of all types, from willows to pines, “give off such hints of gladness” that the poet “would almost say that they save me, and daily” (4). The speaker falters in the second stanza, “so distant from the hope of [herself].” And yet, as the “almost” of the first stanza suggests, it is the Sabbath communion with the trees, the spirit of God that enters the moment, that actually save her. She does not “hurry through the world / but walk[s] slowly, and bow[s] often.” The slow attention of the Sabbath moment brings her to the community of trees and allows for a different kind of astonishment, perhaps—an astonishment that love persists even in grief. Indeed, “light flows *from* their branches,” in a type of demonstration for the speaker (emphasis mine). The language here resonates with traditional Christian imagery and the transformative power of Christ on the cross, also known as the “tree of Calvary.” Just as that “tree” resulted in salvation, so too these trees “save [her], and daily” (4). She receives “simple” instructions: “to go easy, to be filled / with light, and to shine.” Like the speaker in “Messenger,” her assignment is to love the world. Because of her Sabbath experience with creation, she again takes up Christ’s message to the world. The community of the Sabbath provides hope for living again, and not only for living *a* life, but living a life that shines.

***“Just the poem I wanted to write”: the craft of poetry within the Sabbath***

Oliver’s poetry, because of her assumption of creation’s connectivity, becomes an outpouring of Sabbath experience. As evidenced in “Both Worlds,” Sabbath attention infuses her poetic work; her “perception of the world is inextricable from her participation in it” (Mann 16). Often the poem comes to her most completely in the Sabbath moment of participation. In “White Heron Rises Over Blackwater,” the poet spends the first four stanzas contemplating only

the ontology of the poem itself: “I wonder / what it is / that I will accomplish / today // if anything / can be called / that marvelous word. / It won’t be // my kind of work, / which is only putting / words on a page, / the pencil // haltingly calling up / the light of the world, / yet nothing appearing on paper / half as bright” (*NS II 13*). Like Berry, her recognition that the words can never quite capture the brilliance of creation highlights the “ownerlessness’ of the word,” as well as, I would suggest, the world whose complexity often surpasses human comprehension and representation (*Bonds 13*). In the moment of Sabbath attention, the world of words and the world of creation rise out of observance. As receiver involved in the experience, the poet-speaker cannot “settle into polarized relation” with nature or with the poem (13). Instead, they exist in balance with one another, infusing one another. The final four stanzas suggest that the poet’s words could never capture the brightness of creation, and in lamenting their deficiency make a poem of

[...] the mockingbird’s

verbal hilarity

in the still unleafed shrub

in the churchyard—

or the white heron

rising

over the swamp

and the darkness

his yellow eyes

and broad wings wearing

the light of the world

in the light of the world. (NS 13-14)

The mockingbird echoes the poet's own struggle to bring to the page the mirth of the moment that has yet no ornament. The heron, too, as he rises over the swamp dressed with "the light of the world" echoes the poem's and poet's own existence "in the light of the world". When the poet "sees" the heron, he completes the poem, he "is exactly / the poem / [she] wanted to write" (14). The balance between the writing and the observation, of the reflection of creation in the poem itself *is* the poem. Thus, the poem moves back and forth between mediator and mediated, a position made possible by her desire to "find a way into community" through the Sabbath and again through the poem itself (Moltmann 4).

Oliver's poetic expression of the Sabbath depends on her connection to that community of creation, for though the poem comes *through* her, it also comes *to* her just as she comes to it. In "Of What Surrounds Me" (NS II), the speaker needs "a leaf or a flower, if not an / entire field" as both inspiration and subject for the poem (32). Indeed the continual "invention" of the sky gives the speaker new inventions as well. In love with the mutability of creation, the speaker

[...] simply can't



say whatever it is I'm saying without  
at least one skyful.

In order for the poem to come, the leaves, flowers, fields, sky, and water must “be there,” presumably in the poem itself and in the poet’s experience. That she needs a “skyful” of inspiration suggests the extent to which nature’s own inventiveness, with its constant improvisations of cloud and color, stimulates her own thinking. Once these things are in place, then “the heart [can] be there,” “the pen [can] be poised,” and the “idea [can] come” (32). Again, the poet’s creative capacity draws her into Sabbath moment and into the poem itself. For Oliver then, the Sabbath moment of rest, “the attention that comes first” is exactly the poem” she wants to write (15, 14).

***“Box full of Darkness”: the healing that rises from sorrow in Sabbath rest***<sup>36</sup>

Though much of Oliver’s poetry seeks out the moments of joy and light, she understands the sorrow of a “broken” or “hard” world (*Thirst* 49, 50). When Oliver experiences the grief death brings, she begins to nuance her exploration of joy. For Oliver, Sabbath provides not only a community of strength, but a source of healing. Like Berry, Oliver finds healing even in sorrow, largely through the model of creation and the model of Christ. The Sabbath facilitates this healing as it does in “Heavy” (*Thirst*). Here, the speaker suffocates under the weight of grief’s burdensome load, saved only by her friends and by the hand of God (stanza 2, 53). As she learns to balance the weight of grief and of her close contact with death in the world, she begins to “embrace” the grief. Laughter returns “now and again” as she “linger[s] / to admire,

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<sup>36</sup> “The Uses of Sorrow”: “Someone I loved once gave me / a box full of darkness. // It took me years to understand / that this, too, was a gift.” (*Thirst* 52).

admire, admire / the things of this world / that are kind, and maybe // also troubled— / roses in the wind, / the sea geese on the steep waves, / a love / to which there is no reply?” (54). By pausing even from the work of grief, the speaker begins to find wholeness and hope. Though the roses and geese might be “troubled,” they still exist and persist. Darkness impending, they still represent a gift.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Oliver’s Sabbath healing comes in her vision of redemption. In “Gethsemane” she represents the Gospel narrative of Christ praying in the garden to let the cup of death pass from him:

The grass never sleeps.

Or the roses.

Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.

Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.

The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet,

And it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body,

And heaven knows if it ever sleeps. (*Thirst* 45).

Creation has no real option to sleep. And the cricket, in its prayerful posture, sings with “its whole body,” perhaps crying out in the disciples’ stead. Creation waits with God, but the disciples do not. Sleep is not the kind of rest that Sabbath promises, and by sleeping the disciples take the most obvious individual form of rest rather than the kind that would involve them in the divine life.

Jesus himself desires companionship and connection with creation in the face of death,  
and yet:

The dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not

Keep that vigil, how they must have wept,

So utterly human, knowing this too

Must be a part of the story. (*Thirst* 45)

In this moment before the crucifixion and resurrection, the redemptive Sabbath is yet incomplete; the disciples cannot completely understand the fullness the Sabbath, which Wirzba argues comes from the “work of Christ as the continuation and completion of the Sabbath” (*Paradise* 40). Indeed, the disciples’ need for sleep, their “utterly human” response is part of their “corruptible physicality” (*Surprised* 156). Their “dear bodies” are a crucial “part of the story”. So dear are they that God himself become flesh in order to renew and restore them. But though the disciples cannot or do not understand, the speaker suggests that perhaps non-human creation, in its inability to choose sleep over attention waits with Jesus in the garden:

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe

the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn’t move,

maybe

the lake far away, where once he walked as on a blue pavement

lay still and waited, wild awake. (*Thirst* 45).

The last line replaces the expectation of “wide awake” with “wild awake” as if to suggest the actual awakening of creation to Jesus as “Lord of the Sabbath” (*Paradise* 40). In this moment before Christ fulfills his role in their redemption, perhaps the disciples cannot help but choose physical rest. The failure of the disciples to stay awake does not condemn them; it simply reinforces their need for redemption. In the same way, sorrow and death remind Oliver, as well as Berry and Still, that the world needs redemption. Sabbath peace moves always toward that redemption and balances the sorrow of crucifixion with the hope of resurrection.

For each of these poets the Sabbath offers much more than a physical rest from work. Instead, these poets find in Sabbath rest the possibility of increasing the world, of embracing and participating in the redemption of creation. Through their close contact with the land and with their own ecosystems, comes the recognition of God as creator. In Sabbath, these poets achieve “a profound *conscious* harmony of man [*sic*] and the world, a sympathy for all things, [...] a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above” (Heschel 31, emphasis mine). The awareness of Sabbath, then, begins in a *conscious* decision to put aside self and recognize the value of creation. What these poets bring in both craft and theme is the understanding that awareness of value is incomplete. Sabbath must not be an interlude from work but rather a new kind of work that allows for the ongoing reconciliation of creation to God.

## Chapter 3

### **“At the Edge of the Green Woods”: Lessons in the Wilderness and the Poetry of Wendell Berry, James Still, and Mary Oliver**

On a recent visit to Arizona, I stopped with my husband and son to visit a famous cavern. Throughout the visit, the tour guide emphasized preservation. The staff takes great measures to reduce human impact—from the sealed doors at the entrance to the team of cleaners who swoop in to scrub down any area where human skin might have come into contact with cave surfaces. Throughout the tour, the guide proudly reiterated the “unchanged,” wild character of the cave, and at one point suggested that it was “as if we were never here at all”. I could not help but disagree. Paved walkways, lighting, seating, rails, doors, and even the cleaning team suggest the impact of human contact. Though their preservation efforts are admirable, their boast is misguided. The cave is not the same as it was thirty years ago; its discovery and opening to the public assured that. However, the thousands of visitors who come every year may potentially recognize wildness in things closer to home, in things less fantastic than the cavern because of their experience. Therein lies the power of wilderness. William Cronon notes that “the myth of wilderness [...] is that we can somehow leave nature untouched by our passage. [...] If we cannot help leaving marks on a fallen world, then [...] we [must] decide what kinds of marks we wish to leave” (88). In this sense, an environmental ethic grounded in Christianity broadens the lessons of wilderness and requires that they be put into practice not simply in designated spaces but as a way of living.

Wilderness, as Roderick Nash has noted, is a deceptive term fraught with a long history of connotations (1). For John Muir, one of America’s earliest advocates of environmental

preservation and management, wilderness is a place of beauty and plenty. For many Christians, wilderness symbolizes a place connected with God's abandonment; and for many Deep Ecologists, it seems to suggest the land's potential without human intervention (Devall and Sessions 118). All of these connotations share one commonality: the lack of human control, whether good or bad. Perhaps in response to this lack of control, we *designate* wilderness and distinguish it from civilization. In developed areas, then, we often have the illusion of freedom, while in wilderness areas, we have the illusion of restraint, because one man's wilderness is often another man's home, as was the case for European settlers of North America. To "conquer" the west meant displacing native peoples; similarly, later efforts to define parts of Yellowstone, the first national park reserved as "wilderness," also resulted in displacing those who called it home. Marc Margolis cites the beginning of America's first national park as "a bit of Eden splashed with blood" in reference to the indigenous tribes who were forced out or killed by park guards or the U. S. Army (54). As in the example of Yellowstone, the term "wilderness" often assumes or privileges the absence of human beings. The United States Wilderness Act defines wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain," and as "an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence" and yet is "protected and managed" (Section 2b). Many environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club or Badlands Wilderness lobby to reclassify more land as wilderness in order to prevent development or despoliation. In this way, wilderness sometimes becomes a political and economic issue, as well as an ideological one.

Indeed, the term “wilderness” hardly means for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans what it did for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans, for whom “conquering” the wilderness was the primary goal. Today, America’s National Park Service emphasizes recreation (as a form of impermanent interaction) in the wilderness but recognizes that most people will never actually visit the “backcountry.” In fact, the Park Service suggests “just knowing that wilderness exists can produce a sense of curiosity, inspiration, renewal and hope” (Wilderness FAQ). This attitude seems far removed from the wilderness that strikes fear or disdain into the hearts of the early settlers, or the Israelites who wandered in the desert for forty years. Indeed, the Park Service’s implication that people are thankful simply for the mere *existence* of wilderness contests the negative connotations of wilderness as a moral or spiritual wasteland. And yet, the idea of a wilderness that most humans never actually encounter ignores the issues central to the environmental crisis, such as the waste of resources in non-wilderness areas.

For Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, and James Still, wilderness that exists in deliberate daily encounters and is not necessarily defined by Federal regulation, suggests that all people have access to wilderness of some sort. The work of these poets, which resists the setting aside of wilderness in favor of careful interaction everywhere, recognizes that many wilderness areas exist with humans in them. Environmental poet and professor Chris Powici notes that “wilderness cannot have the kind of ahistorical, transcendent meaning” that many ecologists (especially Deep Ecologists) would like (83). As long as humans exist to define wilderness, it cannot be “ahistorical”. Powici understands wilderness as “much an effect of history, of context, as of place” (83). Many ecologists would like for wilderness to suggest a pristine, virgin landscape; a designated space that returns to a pre-human status. But this view often, especially

in light of the creation of Yellowstone or other wilderness preserves, seems to reject, or at least ignore, any history of human interaction with the land. Jesse Stuart's short story, "Whose Land is This?" provides an excellent illustration of the problematic definition of wilderness. Old Uncle Uglybird stands with his nephew outlining all the human history of the land the nephew has recently purchased. The nephew is quite surprised and responds, "I thought I bought a wilderness when I bought this land [...] it was sold to me for land that had never been plowed; land where the timber had never been cut!" (53). At that moment in time, the land indeed seemed like a wilderness, but it had a history of human involvement that was important to the community of people and to the land itself. *Wilderness*, as seen in the nephew's reaction, generally excludes human activity, but I intend to suggest that wilderness is important to human activity and that humans are important to wilderness. This is why *wildness* is also important to my discussion. Recognizing wildness, that which is radically unlike human culture though often a part of it, brings new understanding to the concept of wilderness, which is often a creation of human culture. Wildness has always existed as part of humans and nature, and is not necessarily fraught with negative connotation. Wilderness is often arbitrarily designated by humans and has a complicated history of being feared and respected. Encounters with wilderness are not reducible to "wildness" but such encounters do include an element of wildness. And though wildness is not always part of human culture, it can also exist within humans without being an extension of human culture. Throughout the chapter, then, I will refer to *wilderness* as well as *wildness*.

Wilderness will, for me, suggest not a designated space, but the many environments in which wild organisms exist. Environmentalists often cite Thoreau, who claimed that "in



wildness is the preservation of the world” (*Walking* 26). His statement has become a motto for many preservationists (even the Sierra Club), and yet I think it is often misapplied to wilderness preservation. Environmental philosopher William Cronon notes that “wildness [...] can be found anywhere: in the seemingly tame field and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies” (89). Cronon’s examples suggest an autonomy of creatures outside of human control that can be found in wilderness and garden, city and country. Wilderness often has the potential to become entangled in cultural constructs and referents, but wildness is part even of our own bodies as Cronon notes of the cellular activity within us. Thus my usage of the term *wilderness* will always include the concept of wildness and sometimes refer to unconventional types of wilderness. Clearly wilderness has many facets and implications, not all of which can be addressed in one chapter. Instead, I will focus this chapter on how wilderness informs agricultural life on the land and on the value of careful interaction in any setting.

The Agrarian vision of the first two chapters stands as a sort of middle ground in the concept of wilderness, but not in opposition to it. In many of the poems discussed in the first two chapters, wilderness edges the farm land, framing it and standing ready to reclaim after a time. The theory of Sabbath, too, involves putting aside the work of the land to come into contact with creation. The very act of putting aside the plough in an attitude of Sabbath suggests relinquishment of control. The goal of this chapter, then, is to examine the role of wilderness and wild creatures in developing a relationship between Christianity and environmental responsibility. I will return to Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, and James Still, in order to suggest clearly the links between an agrarian land ethic and the ethic of wilderness.

Many scholars, including Nash, whose history of the American understanding of wilderness is quite helpful, summarily dismiss a Christian response to wilderness as hostile (Nash 3-5). Indeed, very few texts exist on the theological ramifications of wilderness. The ecological movement, in response to Nash (and others, such as Lynn White, Jr.) have also “been wary of Christian language” and have “looked beyond Christian constructions” for means of defining and approaching wilderness as a construct that stands *outside* of human culture (Williams120). The theologians and Christian scholars who do take up the subject, notably David Williams, Ulrich Mauser, Calvin B. DeWitt, and Francis A. Schaeffer, confront these claims of hostility to wilderness with scholarship that explores the complexity of wilderness in the Christian tradition, as well as the idea that wilderness is much more connected to and necessary for human culture than one might expect. Schaeffer, one the first theologians to clarify the connection between Christianity and environmental responsibility notes: “Christians who understand the creation principle have a reason for respecting nature [...] we treat it with respect because God made it” (76). He also recognizes, as do the poets, that “substantial healing can be a reality here and now” rather than in a far-off future (67). And this is where their work intersects with the work of the poets.

The work of Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, and James Still posits that humans need to be connected to and familiar with wildness and wilderness, not absent from it. Deep Ecologists Bill Devall and George Sessions take issue with Wendell Berry’s commitment to interaction between humans and the wilderness, noting that because Berry resists designating vast portions of wilderness land, he “falls short of a deep ecological awareness” (122). Berry resists their approach to wilderness preservation because it ignores the importance of human contact with

wildness. Norman Wirzba notes the hazard of the deep ecologists' approach: "Thinking too much in terms of wilderness preservation can lead [...] to the mistaken idea that we need to exercise caution and care only when we are in wilderness areas, the assumption being that what we do in our cities or on our farmlands is entirely up to us" (*Paradise* 191). Rather than a necessary part of fulfilled human existence, a view of wilderness that excludes human interaction becomes merely symbolic, like the Park Service's definition of a place that "inspires curiosity" even if people never actually experience it. Many ecologists would preserve wilderness as symbolic and something outside human culture, something pristine and untouched. Just as wilderness cannot be ahistorical, it cannot be wholly other or outside of human context. The poets, Berry, Oliver, and Still, through their lives and work, recognize the difference between wilderness and human culture, but find in it a kinship as part of creation. Their attitude acknowledges the value of human lives and their work suggests that the interaction with creation can be mutually beneficial. As the theologians point out, God (the true Other, in that as Creator, God stands over all creation) reveals himself often in the wilderness, providing guidance and grace.<sup>37</sup>

A Christian understanding of wilderness recognizes that God's grace extends to creation, diminishing its "otherness" due to God's presence over *all* creation. Biblical references to wilderness are vast, more so in the Old Testament than the New, though the lessons of wilderness are still vital to the Christian church. Ulrich Mauser's *Christ in the Wilderness* traces the history of wilderness through the Old Testament and examines the role of wilderness for Christian thinking in the New Testament. Though wilderness comes to represent many things to

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<sup>37</sup> As evidenced in the numerous Israelite experiences (Exodus 15:22-25; 13:17-14:31; 19:4), Jesus' 40 days in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11), and John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12).

Mauser—God’s grace, Israel’s rebellion, God’s wrath, Israel’s dependence on God, teaching, and sustenance—in every instance, including Christ’s forty days in the desert, wilderness time “is founded on, or at least accompanied by, the promise of salvation” (Mauser 48). Even if begun as punishment, wilderness time often leads to fulfillment, either of God’s promises or of His vision for creation. In the wilderness, humans must acknowledge limitations and rely on God. For the Israelites in the desert, God enforced this dependence by sending manna each day which spoiled overnight and thus prevented them from storing it for the future.<sup>38</sup>

If the examples of the Old Testament can be applied to a contemporary wilderness ethic, the spiritual experience of the wilderness is a teaching experience that leads to the understanding of God’s grace. In the wilderness, the Israelites experienced the barrenness of wilderness first as God’s wrath, but always God was working to bring them into his grace. Because wilderness often seems a place beyond human control, it often leads to an experience of God’s grace and hope for creation. For Christians, the New Testament supports such a reading of the Old Testament wilderness experience. Loren Wilkinson claims that the New Testament “teaches that Christ graciously enables us to share both in God’s immanence and transcendence. Through Christ, we represent God toward creation” (41-42). And if Mauser’s claims about the connection between the Jewish wilderness tradition and Christ’s mission are correct, then the responsibility for Christians becomes the extension of grace to the rest of creation (148-49). Understood in themes of grace and salvation, environmentalist Tom Watkins’ statement of wilderness potential finds renewed purpose:

Wilderness is not [...] a threat to be conquered [...] but a lesson to be embraced.

For in wilderness, as in the eyes of the wild creatures that inhabit it, we find

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<sup>38</sup> Exodus 16.

something that binds us firmly to the long history of life on earth, something that can teach us how to live in this place, how to accept our limitations, how to celebrate the love we feel when we let ourselves feel it for all other living creatures. (104)

The wilderness provides a venue for instruction and growth. For Christian thinkers, the “something” to which Watkins refers is a creator God who diminishes the otherness associated with wilderness by his own otherness. New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright offers helpful insight into God’s otherness: “if creation was a work of love, it must have involved the creation of something *other* than God. That same love then allows creation to be itself, sustaining it in providence and wisdom, but not overpowering it” (101). By very definition, creation is other than creator. The relationship of creation to creator binds the two in responsibility, and in Wright’s thinking, love. To take this thinking a step further, if humans are created in the image of God, then care for creation becomes an integral part of human existence.<sup>39</sup> In a sense, the Christian environmental ethic broadens the understanding of wilderness by reminding humanity of our place in creation. Just as the Israelites bend to God’s will in the desert and are reminded of their limitations in controlling creation, so too can a contemporary experience with wilderness suggest that we exercise restraint in bending creation to our will. Whether the space is culturally constructed, federally maintained, out the back window, or edging the farmland, the potential for instruction, for grace to humankind and non-humankind, exists, but only as humans begin to participate in creation and acknowledge the autonomy and intrinsic value of non-human creation.

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<sup>39</sup> See also the work of Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. pp. 61-64

For Berry and Oliver especially, wilderness stands in contrast to civilization but not in conflict to it. James Still, who spent his life living and working in the mountains, often conflates home and wilderness. However, his experience still provides valuable insight into wilderness experience. For all three poets, the lines between wilderness and garden are not always clear. Their experience with wilderness often comes in the context of relationship. Timothy Morton claims that “in order to mean anything at all [...] love for the environment must be more excessive, exuberant, and risky than a bland extension of humanitarianism to the environment” (188). For these poets, the relationship with wilderness comes through wildness, and their experiences often influence their relationship with human community. Their connections to Christianity provide an important and purposeful framework that motivates environmental responsibility that moves beyond humanitarianism alone. I will examine three specific aspects of this relationship with wilderness--restraint, restoration, and boundaries—and their impact on both the poets and the earth. These aspects often overlap, though they remain distinct enough to discuss separately.

### ***Restraint and Wilderness Interaction***

These three poets practice restraint in all their interaction with creation; even their poetry, a more restrained genre than prose or essay, suggests their commitment to careful participation with creation. Mary Oliver has devoted her life and career as a poet to the care of creation. Characteristic of her poetry is the speaker’s immersion in the wilderness, in the wild lives that surround her. Oliver’s immersion in the wildness of woods, field, animals, and insects recognizes a kinship with creation while still acknowledging that she inhabits a world of civilization. That is, creation is different from her but not lesser. She finds the similarities of all

created things too vast to distinguish too clearly. In one of her most famous and oft-quoted poems, “The Summer Day,” the speaker connects for a moment with a grasshopper who eats sugar out of her hand. As the poem closes the speaker addresses the reader, saying, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” (*NS I 94*). After a day spent in the company of an insect, a creature who “move[s] her jaws back and forth instead of up and down,” the speaker emphasizes the wild character of *human* life. And, in keeping with Oliver’s style, the speaker then wants to share that revelation with the reader. This poem, published in 1990 (*House of Light*) illustrates the trajectory of Oliver’s poetry that began even in her earliest volume, *No Voyage* (1963), and continues in her most recent, *Red Bird* (2008): to diminish the boundaries between human and nonhuman and consider what this means for living human life. For Oliver, wilderness is rarely, if ever, a National Park or a preserve intentionally set aside, though I doubt she would argue with these gestures if they were intended purely to preserve. Rather, her encounter with wilderness begins with her own “wild and precious life” and thus extends to the wildness within it—to field, woods, deer, grasshopper.

Oliver’s connection to a Christian environmental ethic comes from the nature of her interaction with wilderness. As in “The Summer Day,” her inclination is to connect with the creatures around her in their setting, and yet she often practices restraint, realizing that though she shares a kinship with these creatures, she has no hold over them. In “Climbing Pinnacle” (2005), climbing the physical mountain (in itself a wild space) is secondary to the speaker’s experience atop the mountain. Upon seeing a fawn stumble out of the scraggly trees, the speaker swings into a tree to avoid touching it and potentially alienating it from its mother. And yet, even without physical contact, the encounter moves her deeply:

higher even than the mountain,  
perched for hours  
while beauty held me tightly  
with the long lashes of its dark eyes  
and delicate, stamping hooves. (*NS II* 26-27)

In what might be considered a reinterpretation of the “mountaintop experience,” the speaker in her tree is actually physically “higher” than the mountain and here she achieves what she later calls “rapture”. She comes to this high place, both physically and spiritually, through restraint. She realizes that her touch would be toxic to the fawn; but her presence is not. Indeed, the fawn, whom the speaker equates with beauty, seems to support her in the tree and envelop her, holding her tightly. The fact that Oliver avoids any article or personal pronoun, such as “its” or “the,” indicates that “beauty” here transcends the individual fawn and precludes any claim that the poem anthropomorphizes the fawn. The doe returns, *not* with anthropomorphized thanks or relief, but “angry and snorting,” as would be typical of a doe instinctively protecting her young, and leads the fawn away. And still, the speaker describes the moment as “rapture.”

The word “rapture” is an important usage here, as it bears the weight of several connotations, referring “joy” as well as to “carrying off to heaven” (OED 153). For many, the term *rapture* suggests the latter, mostly because of Paul’s reference to such carrying off in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. However, Revelation, the text most associated with rapture, offers “no vision of people snatched from the earth. Instead God is ‘raptured’ down to earth to take up residence” with humans (Rossing 214). Given the speaker’s initial description of her climb (at last there was nothing / but the blue sky) and her vantage point (looking down at the mountain



from the tree), all three connotations are important in determining her experience. Certainly she has not been literally carried off to heaven, but for a moment, she experiences a connection with a wild creature that transcends her daily life. As the fawn, the mountaintop, and the poet come together, perhaps the rapture she experiences is God's own wild, other presence.

The speaker, however, is not meant to dwell here. Indeed, as the doe leaves with the fawn, the speaker's first thought is of freedom. Her friends and family call for her at the base of the mountain; even "the great horse, Jack, / was sniffing among the grasses" in search of her (27). She has a life below, but her retreat to the mountain has enriched that life. Her only response to the beauty she witnesses is "to swing down / bough after bough-- / to hurry down field after field, / through pale twilight, / to be greeted by the people / who loved me, far below" (27). These last two lines suggest an important distinction between her experience with the fawn and her human relationships. The fawn, as beauty, *held* her, while the people who love her will *greet* her. The last two words imply simultaneously that these people are physically "far below" and perhaps that their love for her is "far below" the experience with the fawn, though indeed it is still love. In both cases, however, the speaker encounters love and beauty. In the same way that she allows the fawn's beauty to hold her, she allows those who love her to welcome her home. This passiveness seems to be a form of restraint, a realization that she has much to learn from her surroundings. She notes that "there is *never* anything to *do* / after rapture" but to return to those who love her (my emphasis). Having reached a moment of true beauty through connection with this wild creature in a wild setting, she has simply to return to her life at the bottom of the mountain and carry her experience with her. The two experiences provide complementary images of God's grace to her and to creation. In neither case did she "do"

anything to receive love, nor did she “do” anything after. Her restraint, her participation without the busy-ness of “doing” actually enriches her experience in both cases.

For James Still, restraint is less often a choice made than a lesson imposed by experience with wilderness. In the 1930s Still wrote prolifically of his adopted life in the mountains (he was born in the lowlands of the South). In 1939, he collected much of his poetry into *Hounds on the Mountain*. This volume illustrates most clearly what Chris Green observes as Still’s “tensions and hopes” for mountain farm life in Appalachia (27). The second section in *Hounds*, “Creek Country,” deals specifically with the tensions between cultivated and wild spaces where the bounds of farm sometimes clash with encroaching, perennially present wilderness. For Still, the restraint learned in wilderness or wilderness time chastens and reminds us of our physical limitations in light of natural cycles and geography, though it often brings promise and hope as well. Chris Green’s valuable reading of “On Redbird Creek” (*HM* 18), suggests that beyond “the edge of the human ordered world,” some things cannot be “given human meaning” and that some elements of wilderness “cannot be constrained via such purposeful cultivation as farming” (Green 30-31). The final lines of “On Redbird Creek” suggest that as “tares and thistles strewn upon the wind,” the land always retains an element of wildness that humans cannot fully tame (*HM* 18). The key to positive human interaction, then, becomes recognizing this wild element and respecting it.

Though wilderness reminds humans of limitations, as in “On Redbird Creek,” it can also bring delight and hope in its lessons of restraint. Following “Redbird” in the organization of the “Creek Country” section, “Spring on Troublesome Creek” (later retitled “Spring”) highlights the promise of the cultivated land after the imposed restraint of winter. This promise echoes the

biblical wilderness wandering that leads to promised land, though Still grounds any promise of salvation in the practical return of spring. The opening stanza reflects on the cold time, suggesting that winter is a season of wilderness, foreign and sometimes hostile to survival. This attitude would seem to place Still in the more traditional stance about wilderness as being antithetical to civilization. And yet, the poem suggests more than the simple dichotomy between the two. The first stanza characterizes the hardship of winter life in the mountains, noting that “not all of us were warm.” The language here suggests the unequal distribution of warmth, even though they “hugged the fire / through the long chilled nights” (20). This inequality reflects Still’s understanding of human limitation: not even a warm fire can guarantee warmth for all. The disparity felt here can only be remedied by the return of spring.

The second stanza provides a hopeful contrast as it moves into the present moment of spring. It begins with a severe indentation, aligning more to the right than the left. Because the other lines of the poem fall into an iambic pentameter, the final line of the first stanza and the first line of the second seem to be halves of one whole:

Through the long chilled nights.

We have come out (20)

Though the initial line is end-stopped, the interconnection is clear: without the winter, there is no spring. The intervening space between the first and second stanzas emphasizes those “long chilled nights” and the passage through “into the sun again”. Fred Chappell observes of this poem, “we can know nothing of nature until we have endured it in its calamitous aspects. Knowledge of nature must be earned” (223). When those who endure the winter wilderness have “untied [their] knot / of flesh,” they discover a kinship with those other creatures who have

wintered over, as even the first stanza indicates this relationship (“faces sharp with cold” and the “smell of wood smoke in our clothes”). Though these similarities are present in the wilderness of winter, only reflection, or coming out “into spring,” highlights this awareness. The people of the poem are “no thinner than a hound or mare, / or unleaved poplar.” (20). After this discovery, the poem culminates in the hope of coming “through / To the grass, to the cows calving in the lot.” The promise of new birth and growth can be more fully appreciated after their experience. The reminder of human limitations in wilderness can reframe human response in terms of interaction and reaction to the earth.

***Restoration: Finding peace in wilderness***

In Berry’s poetry, wilderness often offers respite and peace, even more so than his farming. In 1965, Berry moved to Lanes Landing Farm in Port Royal, Kentucky. Five years later he would publish *Farming: A Handbook*, but just three years after committing himself to his Kentucky farm, he published *Openings*. And though much of the book centers on farming, as would his later volume, it also lingers on the peace of untended land, perhaps in response to its newness, and perhaps in response to the escalation of the Vietnam conflict during that time.<sup>40</sup> Whatever the reason, peace occurs as a theme in many of the poems in this volume, most often with reference to the land beyond the farm, or the “woods.” Two successive poems illustrate the progression from disquiet to restoration: “The Want of Peace,” and “The Peace of Wild Things” (*Collected Poems* 68-69). Throughout the two poems, the speaker seems to be grappling with negative human presence and impact on the earth, in the forms of industry and war. He seems to be unsure even of farming in these poems, though he will eventually reconcile its purpose with

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<sup>40</sup> Several poems in *Openings* speak to this cultural concern. See for instance, “Against the Vietnam War” or “Dark with Power” (*Collected Poems* 66-67).

these themes in his later essays and poetry.<sup>41</sup> The speaker in “The Want of Peace” begins by acknowledging that because “All goes back to the earth,” he does not wish for “pride of excess or power” (68). Instead, he wants only the “contentments” of “the river’s grace” or of “the gardener’s musing on rows.” This would be a simple enough desire—to seek peace in the form of silence and restraint; however, the second stanza stands as a condemnation to the speaker and to humanity, which complicates the desires of the first stanza:

I lack the peace of simple things.  
I am never wholly in place.  
I find no peace or grace.  
We sell the world to buy fire,  
our way lighted by burning men,  
and that had bent my mind  
and made me think of darkness  
and wish for the dumb life of roots. (68)

The negation of the “I” in the first three lines (*lack, never, no*) belies the tranquility of the first stanza. The speaker then includes himself among those who would blaze a path through the night at the expense of the earth and those around them. He has not removed himself from human culture through his retreat to farming; in fact, his retreat may be the source of his conflict. He may, “wish for the dumb life of roots,” but that does nothing for the broader scope of peace. Not only is he in want of peace, the world is in want of peace. Of course, it would be easier to have responsibility only for growing and digging, but while this might be acceptable for plant roots, it is not enough for the farmer. As Berry will later suggest in essays and poetry, part of

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<sup>41</sup> See “Healing” in *What are People For*—pp. 9-13, *Farming: A Handbook, A Timbered Choir*, to name a few.

changing the behavior of the world is to be wholly committed to the earth and its community wherever one may be. Having only recently settled at the farm in Port Royal, it is no wonder that Berry's speaker may not feel "wholly in place" (68). Even though the weight of "the darkness" fosters a desire to bury his head in the sand, so to speak, the first stanza reveals the depth of his responsibility. Peace comes through experience with these wild places: the fisherman is "receiving the river's grace;" the gardener is "musing on the rows" (68). Berry's speaker, like Oliver's, demonstrates the potential of restraint and relinquishing control, here, though it leads to peace rather than rapture. For Berry, becoming more firmly rooted will help establish a relationship with wild places such as the river, which can offer peace and instruction.

Part of the peace offered by the wilderness is a relief from those feelings of grief and worry. In "The Peace of Wild Things" though the speaker begins to embrace place more completely he also experiences a "despair for the world." Here, the preposition is of note: he does not despair *of* the world, but rather worries about its future. When he becomes so consumed by the wrongs in the world that he "wake[s] at the least sound / in fear of what [his] life and [his] children's lives may be," he does not, as one might expect retreat further into human culture, "batten down the hatch" as one might expect, but instead he opens himself to "the peace of wild things" (69). The wood drake and the great heron with whom he seeks solace "do not tax their lives / with forethought of grief." Instead, they take food and rest when and where it comes. The speaker, too, can do this, but what comes instinctively to the wood drake requires intentional patience for him. Because he *does* anticipate grief, he must take time to anticipate and experience grace as well:

I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars

waiting with their light. For a time

I rest in the grace of the world, and am free. (69)

These last lines evoke the Psalm 23, in which the Lord, as shepherd, restores the psalmist's soul through the rest offered in "green pastures" and "beside still waters" (Psalm 23-1-3). The speaker's final freedom comes from a similar release in allowing lessons of wilderness and its wild creatures to provide solace. He learns from their existence in the present moment. Though the cares and worries of the day have blinded the speaker, as the sun blinds the stars, wilderness time reminds the speaker of the presence of light, no matter how small, in the face of despair. Ulrich Mauser, in reference to Jesus' encounter with wilderness in Mark's Gospel, notes that "lonely places" or "wilderness places" often afforded Jesus with a chance to renew his mission of salvation and receive instruction or help from God(109-10).<sup>42</sup> The speaker in Berry's poem receives similar renewal, perhaps even a promise of salvation (that is, seeing the grace of the world as a promise of what is to come), when in contact with this wild place outside the confines of his home. Importantly, this is a place he knows well, yet he does not inhabit it. The interaction is spontaneous, instinctive, and necessary to quell the speaker's disquiet. J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael Stevens observe a similar quality to Berry's approach to wilderness: "it is not because the wilderness is chaotic and disordered that it instructs and humbles us but rather because it is ordered and formed in ways beyond our complete understanding. Wilderness teaches us by chastening our attempts to control everything around us. It is above, not beneath our control" (91). In the "grace of the world" the speaker relinquishes the desire for control which keeps him awake at night. Like the Psalmist, he wants for nothing beside this still water.

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<sup>42</sup> Mauser cites Mark 6:45-46, 9:2, and chapters 1-6.

Peace also comes for Mary Oliver as restoration in the midst of her “sorrows of the heart” (*Red Bird* 63). Though Berry’s grief affects him deeply, it often seems more a global type of concern for the cares of the world, for war and injustice. Framed by songs of the cardinal, Oliver’s volume (the second after the death of her lifelong partner) wrestles with intensely personal grief. And like Berry, Oliver experiences healing through the experience of wilderness. The poem “In the Evening, in the Pinewoods” struggles with the ability to know another’s sorrow in full. While Berry intentionally lies down beside still waters, Oliver’s speaker finds comfort in the song of the thrush, who seems to know more of personal sorrow than anyone other than God, including “the dearest of friends” (63). Though she intentionally goes to the pinewoods, the song of the thrush is an unexpected gift. He sings

by himself, at the edge of the green woods,  
to each of us  
out of his mortal body, his own feathered limits,  
of every estrangement, exile, rejection—their  
death-dealing weight.

And then, so sweetly, of every goodness also to be remembered. (63)

In a departure from her usual reliance on the singular first person or the second person (to address the reader), Oliver uses first person plural to describe the thrush’s audience. Though the speaker is inside the pinewoods, the thrush sings at its edge; both the plural pronoun and the thrush’s position offer inclusion, perhaps in recognition that though all sorrow is intensely personal, it is still universal and that the thrush offers healing or restoration that all might find



beneficial. Restoration comes then in the form of restored vision; the thrush who sings of sorrow also sings of goodness. Just as healing can come to a broken or fallen world through the humility and responsibility that comes from interaction with wilderness, so too can healing come to a broken heart. Bonzo and Matthews' observation, though in response to Berry, certainly applies here: "the goodness of creation is never totally obscured, and it keeps recurring, in ways that are surprising, unexpected, but also organic, unforced" (45). Here, in the evening woods, the speaker finds not only goodness but wholeness, restoration in the face of sorrow. The structure of the poem emphasizes this lesson in the thrush's song. The final lines of the second stanza focus on separation (estrangement, exile, rejection) and the final word of that line, "their" plays on the homophone "there" to imply an association between his "feathered limits" and the separation of which the speaker hears him sing. The last line of the second stanza emphasizes the ultimate separation of "death-dealing weight". Again, the "weight" evokes also the homophone "wait" indicating the potential heaviness of separation as well as the impatience for reunion. The importance of the bird's song is that he sings of both sorrow and goodness, indeed "every goodness" (63). Like the connection between wilderness and garden, sorrow and peace seem unlikely partners, yet they enhance one another and frame the poet's experience.

***Redefining Relationships: Kinship and the boundaries of community***

From the peace and restoration of wilderness time often comes a renewed sense of community. Berry speaks to this potential of wilderness in his essay "The Body and the Earth." In the wilderness, "man [*sic*] [...] must measure himself against Creation, recognize finally his true place within it, and thus be saved both from pride and from despair. [...] he cannot possibly think of himself as a god [...] and he cannot descend into the final despair of destructiveness"

(*Art of the Commonplace* 95). In this way, wilderness provides a sense of limitation and humility. Indeed, the wilderness of forest bounds many of the poems in the first chapter on land and farming. The deep mystery and often even the fear associated with wilderness remind us of our place as created beings. Sabbath celebration achieved this reminder through a contrast of *time*, but wilderness achieves it through a contrast of *space*.<sup>43</sup> That is, while Sabbath offers the promise of eternity, wilderness offers the reality of human limitation in a tangle of woods or the ever-changing virus. While Sabbath offers celebration, wilderness chastens and reminds. Just as Sabbath does not require a designated space, but rather intentionality and awareness, so too does a wilderness experience occur in many places, its focus on a response to creation as a whole. Indeed, as Bonzo and Stevens note, “the relationship between [field and woods] is dynamic because the soil itself that we live upon and cultivate always retains a measure of wildness” (94). This wild element of even cultivated spaces is the element that deep ecologists miss. For this reason, their definitions of wilderness space as “untrammled” by humanity do not encompass the breadth and scope of wilderness in its fullness and in its potential (Devall and Sessions 118). The poetry of Berry, Oliver, and Still speaks to the instructive promise of wilderness to lead humans to greater community, though each poet experiences this promise in a unique way. For each poet, though, the lessons learned about beneficial interaction are borne of humble restraint.

In many instances, the wilderness experience redefines boundaries associated with human culture and wilderness, bringing community much closer to home for these poets than a park or cordoned-off space. For Oliver, wild creatures, not always in wild places, bring a greater awareness of the relationship between human and non-human. In many of her poems, this renewed awareness leads to living a better human life, though the immediate human

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<sup>43</sup> See again Abraham Heschel’s *The Sabbath*, particularly part one, “A Palace in Time” pp. 13-24.

consequences of that better life are often left unexplored. For instance, in “Mindful” (2004, *Why I Wake Early*), the simple, seemingly “ordinary, / the common, the very drab, / the daily presentations” of wild life help the speaker to “grow wise” (*NS II* 90-91). Even these seemingly insignificant encounters with “the untrimmable light // of the world, / the ocean’s shine” have the ability to “kill [her] / with delight” (90). The word “kill” seems an odd choice in a poem dedicated to “joy, / and acclamation” and yet the enjambment suggests that the speaker is losing not herself, but perhaps part of her ego, her hold on the world itself. To be killed with delight does not extinguish the speaker’s light but rather humbles her, leaving her instead “like a needle in a haystack of light” (90). Thus, she joins in the illumination as both participant and witness.

Oliver consistently blurs the boundaries between cultivated and uncultivated, though she recognizes often (as in “Climbing Pinnacle”) that she dwells in the cultivated. However, her poetry suggests that even though most humans are not wilderness dwellers, perhaps the distinctions between here and there are not quite as important. In one of her most recent poems, “Boundaries” (*Red Bird* 2008), the speaker observes “there is a place where the town ends, / and the fields begin” (10). These first two lines suggest that even without demarcation, wilderness exists in conjunction with civilization. Without signs or designations, “the feet know it, / also the heart that is longing for refreshment / and equally for repose”. The speaker trusts her own reaction to uncultivated space because “the house of our lives is this green world”. Though she resides in the town, the speaker acknowledges the greater reality of “the green world” as a shelter for her life, perhaps a reference to a more holistic life, one that needs “refreshment” and “repose” as much as food and water. Indeed, even though Oliver’s speakers consistently return from wilderness experience to life in human culture, the final lines of this poem complicate these

boundaries. After contemplating “the fields, the ponds, the birds. / The thick black oaks [...] / And the tiger lilies. / And the runaway honeysuckle that no one will ever trim again,” she returns to the question of boundary: “Where is it? I ask, and then / My feet know it. // One jump and I’m home” (10). The ambiguity of the final lines stems from her position. Is her “home” on the town side or the field side? Rather than a slipperiness or *homelessness*, this is a move toward increased awareness of her place, her belonging, in both. The wilderness, this community the speaker enters is a local one, a specific one, and this is why she can be “at home” in both. Redefining boundaries refutes the fragmentation between cultivated and wild put forth by an ecology movement that would have them wholly separate from one another. Even though she does not dwell in the wilderness, she can be *home* there. This sense of belonging indicates involvement, care, and most of all, presence.

While Oliver’s poetry often resolves the tension between human and wild through joy, James Still often lingers on that tension and its hardship for earth and human. Even in his poetry of farming where humans claim wilderness for their own, Still often explores the impermanence of these boundaries. In one of his early poems, “Eyes in the Grass” (*Hounds on the Mountain*, 1939), the speaker concentrates his vision (the eyes in the grass that he does not claim until the final stanza) on the surface of the earth. The poem progresses in three stanzas, beginning first with the movement of the grackle, who “wanders through a green cloth of leaves” (48). In the second stanza, the speaker focuses even more intently on the creatures who move beneath that cloth, the “doodles [who] / Drill their earthen cones, and ants [who] march in a forest / of living swords”. Only in the final stanza does the speaker make his appearance:

I think that neither the grackle’s black eyes

Nor the ant's myopic sight has found me here,  
Drowned in quivering stems, lost in wattled twigs  
Of grass-trees. O I am lost to any wandering view.  
I am a hill uncharted, my breathing is the wind.  
I am horizon. I am earth's far end. (48)

Immersed in the grass, the speaker becomes another unexplored aspect of the terrain for the creatures who surround him. In what might seem a complete identification with the wilderness as a "hill uncharted" or "the wind," the speaker claims to be horizon itself.<sup>44</sup> However, what might be more important here is the inversion of typical boundaries. Becoming "horizon" and "earth's far end," the speaker himself becomes the unfamiliar landscape, his body itself wild and unpredictable.

Still's focus in *Hounds on the Mountain* on the speaker's commitment to the "prisoning hills," and being *of* them rather than simply in them, culminates in the final poem, "Heritage" (55). The preceding poems, including "Eyes in the Grass," move toward this full-fledged acceptance of life in the mountains. Interestingly, the poem immediately preceding "Eyes" deals with "Uncle Ambrose," whom the speaker identifies so completely with his surroundings that his hair is long "like willow sprays" and his face is "a map of Knott county" (47). For the speaker of "Eyes in the Grass," the inversion is not one of roles but of perspective. As an attempt to know the inhabitants of this place, he lies down in the grass, his own body a foreign territory to the insects and animals. In this sense, the first stanzas take on new meaning, and the grackle,

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<sup>44</sup> See Jim Wayne Miller's Introduction to the *Wolfpen* Poems, Robert West's "'The Stillness After': Reflections on the Poetry" and even Jeff Daniel Marion's "The Poetry: 'The Journey of a Worldly Wonder'", collected in *James Still: Critical Essays on the Dean of Appalachian Literature*, edited by Ted and Kathy Olson. I suggest instead that the speaker remains distinctly human and that his shift of perspective is the more important aspect of the reading.

doodles, and ants embody typically human characteristics: proud, “impudent” searching; drilling of “earthen cones”; and a militaristic march through the grass. Changing perspective reverses the speaker’s sense of boundary between what is cultivated and wild. The speaker shortens the distance between himself and the earth by physically lying in the grass, suggesting that only interaction will bring understanding and new perception. Timothy Morton, in his *Ecology without Nature*, suggests that we are often too quick to resolve tensions between humans and wilderness or wildness (188). He notes that “we should be finding ways to stick around with the sticky mess that we’re in and that we are, making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness” (188). Personifying the grackle, ants, and doodles allows the speaker to reflect on the “ugliness” of human actions and to claim, at least in some regard, responsibility. If indeed his claim that he is “earth’s far end,” not simply to the creatures of the poem but in a broader sense, this final line is as much embrace as it is epiphany. In such a reading, which is in keeping with Still’s outrage at the exploitation the Appalachian region (to which he speaks throughout his poetry and especially in his section of *Hounds* on coal mining), the final words call for accountability: in this place, the speaker represents the future. Rather than becoming godlike in these final lines, the speaker simply acknowledges his great impact on even this tiny space occupied by his own body.

For Wendell Berry, wilderness experience reduces boundaries and mitigates distance. Because Berry often equates wilderness (or non-field) experience with Sabbath time, I will focus on how he interprets boundary and its effects on community, a very specific and local community, not a “totalizing system in which all differences are leveled” but rather explored and appreciated, through the poems of *A Timbered Choir* (Bonzo and Matthews 47). Two poems,

separated by only three years, serve to illustrate Berry's approach toward boundaries and community through wilderness experience specifically in the frame of the Sabbath. In Sabbath poem IX (1979), wilderness becomes a referent by which he defines cultivated space:

Enclosing the field within bound  
sets it apart from the boundless  
of which it was, and is, a part,  
and places it within care (*TC* 17).

These first four lines employ a sort of linguistic doubling (*bound/boundless, was/is, apart/within*) that undercuts the sense of dichotomy. The poet's intention seems to be the confusion of distinction, especially in the repetition of "bound" in its many forms. The structure of the poem itself, without breaks and with nine of eleven enjambed lines reflects integration and indistinction. Notably, creating a boundary "places *it* within care" (my emphasis). The linguistic ambiguity and overlap of the repeated pronoun allows the field (the "it") to have the character of *bound* and *boundless*. The land may be defined by boundaries, but it still retains a quality of boundlessness. And noticeably absent from this line is *who* might be responsible for this care, suggesting that "care" might be a state of being, perhaps for those who would employ boundaries, but also for any land culled from the "boundless." In this way, the poem suggests that the boundless itself has inherent value and that those who define it have a stake in the boundless as well as the bound.

Removing the *bound* from the *boundless* is an act of adoption, or as the poem goes on to suggest (as perhaps the ultimate vision of husbandry), a marriage. Choosing and marking the

land as field “bind[s] the mind” to that land inasmuch as it binds the body. The choice elevates the farmer’s responsibility to the land as that of groom to bride:

[...] A bride  
adorned, the field now wears  
the green veil of a season’s  
abounding. Open the gate!  
Open it wide, that time  
and hunger may come in. (*TC* 17).

That the field is “adorned” suggests the potential beauty of cultivating wild space. And yet, the poet recognizes the impermanence of the distinction between field and woods, as evidenced by line break and enjambment of the eighth line: “season’s / abounding.” The enjambed delay highlights the singular “season,” alluding perhaps simultaneously to a season of harvest and a season of human interaction, and emphasizes the relative brevity of each. The next line opens with “abounding,” a verbal echo of the earlier “bound” and “boundless” that implies the potential fruitfulness of the field with strong ties to the woods. Indeed, this potential is so great that the speaker calls not only to “open the gate,” but to “open it wide”. In this way, the field, in its abundance, makes room for “time” and “hunger”. The poem extends fellowship to wilderness *through the cultivated*, which is as Norman Wirzba notes, “crucial” to the “wholeness of creation” and stands in opposition to “the myopic or exclusive satisfaction of human need” (*Paradise* 147). For Berry, the woods and field belong to one another and help to define one another. The field retains its wild essence; recognizing this aspect of the field changes human relationship to field and woods. Berry notes in his essay “Preserving Wildness” the soil of the



filed itself is “a dark wilderness, ultimately unknowable, teeming with wildlife” (*Home Economics* 140). Because Berry recognizes “the centrality of the connectedness between wild and cultivated, [...] clearing and planting a garden within hedgerows and wooded boundaries can be done with humility, letting the wilderness be present” (Bonzo and Matthews 93). With this humility, then, healing can take place that restores and redefines community, beginning with the smaller systems of soil and plants. Bridging the distance between field and woods then brings into focus the entire habitat of a place with all its denizens, human and non-human alike.

As humans begin to change views about what defines community, the connection to and interaction with wilderness and wildness can reaffirm kinship with creation as a community to which we belong. Kinship with creation has not been a traditional forte of the Christian church. Indeed, many critics (including Berry), have leveled the charge of ecological irresponsibility at Christians. It is important to note, however, that while Berry levels his charge at Christian practice, he finds an important illustration of ecological responsibility in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Indeed, for many Christians, the community of faith (that is, a spiritual community) has long outweighed the community of creation (a physical community). But leading Christian thinkers are beginning to re-evaluate Christian responsibility for creation: Christians who believe in “God’s redemptive work” are realizing that work does “not occur in a vacuum,” and that “God’s work in redemption fulfills God’s work in creation” (Fretheim 112). That is, God plans to “restore and renew” *all* of creation, not just humans (DeWitt, *Earth-Wise* 60). Jesus’ bodily resurrection is the first indication of God’s physical commitment to humans that will eventually extend to all creation. For Christians, then, continuing God’s work on earth requires attention to people and creation. Bonzo and Matthews suggest that “as a listening

people, the church must be open not only to the cries of suffering people but also to the groans of creation around us” (176). The poets, with their sympathies to the Christian faith, are already doing this in a way that models belief in redemption for all creation. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright explains this concept of redemption for all creation:

The world is created good but *incomplete*. One day, when all the forces of rebellion have been defeated and the creation responds freely and gladly to the love of its creator, God will fill it with himself so that it will *both* remain an independent being, other than God, *and also* be flooded with God’s own life. (*Surprised*, original emphasis, 102).

Often, the work of these poets highlights the world’s goodness through humanity’s ongoing kinship with creation. This type of relationship is dynamic, suggesting forward movement for humans and the rest of creation. Opening themselves to contact with wildness, relinquishing control, and becoming familiar with the rhythms of a place, Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry both experience a holistic kinship of creation before a Creator God. Notably, for both poets, the experience of community through wilderness does not always resolve tensions. Though kinship exists, differences also exist. Negotiating the differences of any community again requires humility. Acknowledging God as creator in a community that includes wilderness (and wildness) promotes a healthier interaction with all of creation by emphasizing the limits of human understanding and control.

In her recent collections (*Thirst* and *Red Bird*), Mary Oliver acknowledges more overtly the reflection of God’s creative glory in creation. *Thirst* (2006) makes a more pronounced turn to religious and specifically Christian language to define her experience with creation. The

poem “Making the House Ready for the Lord” reads as a prayer. The title itself draws on the connotation of “House” as church or gathering place for worship, while the poem itself indicates that the house belongs to the speaker. The dual connotations, however, imply that worship may take place outside the traditional “House of God”. The first five lines suggest the speaker’s worry: though the speaker has “swept” and “washed,” “nothing is as shining as it should be” (13). She notes that “under the sink” lives an “uproar of mice,” followed by the question, “What shall I do?” While the first iteration of this question suggests helplessness, the repetition later in the poem (“they need shelter, so what shall I do?) suggests that she is “do”ing exactly what is necessary to make her house ready for the Lord. The speaker makes room for mice, squirrels, cats, dogs, foxes, and all manner of wild creatures in need though they have “gnawed ragged entrances” and generally made a mess out of her home. Yet even though the house is not “shining,” she is prepared: “And still I believe you will / come, Lord” (13). The enjambment of these lines emphasizes “come Lord,” which evokes both faith and readiness. Like the early Christian maranatha, the line structure indicates a desire for the speedy return of Christ, a potential connection to Fretheim’s claim that God’s redemptive work extends to all creation. Her belief that the Lord will come into her house relies on her actions:

[...] you will [come], when I speak to the fox,  
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know  
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,  
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in. (13)

As in many of the other poems, the wild touches the domestic and blurs boundaries. And certainly, these last lines call to mind the account in Matthew 25:34-40 of the judgment of

nations. The scripture passage describes a blessing to be poured out on those who minister to members of “the king’s family”. In such attention to “the least of these,” the righteous pay tribute to the King (God) himself. Oliver’s poem extends this kingdom and its membership to all those creatures who “stare boldly / up the path, to the door” (13). I do not believe Oliver excludes human beings here, as one might argue; indeed, many other poems in this volume speak to the importance of her connection with human community.<sup>45</sup> Instead, this poem supposes that humans are not the only “least of these”. By extending the realm of community and finding kinship with creation, the speaker is indeed hearing and acting on the “groans of creation” to which Bonzo and Matthews suggest the Christian church must be more attentive.<sup>46</sup>

Wendell Berry also calls attention to the community experienced by all created things through his encounter with wilderness. Berry finds hope in such contact that “field and woods at last agree / In an economy of widest worth” (*TC* 49). Indeed, an economy that extends to field *and* woods anticipates and exemplifies “High Heaven’s Kingdom come on earth” (49). Berry acknowledges in his essay “God and Country” that many things in creation are “outside the human economy” (*What are People For?* 100). Berry embraces “usufruct,” the idea that humans belong in creation and are free to use it while remembering that it belongs to someone else (for Berry, this is God), and that we are not free to damage it (99). Because of this attitude toward stewardship, Berry also notes that some places “we should not use at all” (100). Wilderness, then, is valuable because it is part of creation even if it has no economic or concrete usable properties for humans. Key to Berry’s understanding of human interaction with wild, seemingly unusable places and to developing a Christian environmental ethic that includes wilderness is the

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<sup>45</sup> See for instance, “Logan International” (48), “The Winter Wood Arrives” (14), or “The Poet Comments on Yet Another Approaching Spring” (50-51).

<sup>46</sup> Pg. 176 (referenced earlier on my page 130)

position of God as Lord *over* creation. Only then can humans develop an approach to the innate wildness of creation and encounter the grace reflected in creation. Wilderness experiences appear most often in Berry's work in *A Timbered Choir* in conjunction with Sabbath time, a time when Berry deliberately strives to recognize his place before the Creator and as part of creation.

For Berry, contact with wilderness and its creatures binds him to that community of creation, almost like renewing a vow. In Sabbath poem IV (1980), the three stanzas mark the realm of wilderness as both earth and sky. In the first stanza:

The frog with lichened back and golden thigh  
Sits still, almost invisible  
On leafed and lichened stem,  
Invisibility  
Its sign of being at home  
There in its given place, and well. (*TC* 28)

Repetition throughout the poem is important, but in this particular stanza, the frog's back seems almost an extension of the stem on which he sits. He is "at home," connected to his surroundings in such a way that he is protected and "well". The structure also works to bring insight to the speaker's experience. What begins in this stanza as a loosely constructed (or slant) ABC-ACB sestet, in the next two stanzas becomes a stronger, more masculine rhyme. The descending pentameter, tetrameter, trimeter of the first three lines swells back toward tetrameter in the final line, not only of this first stanza, but of all three stanzas. This structure seems physically to draw the speaker in toward the specific, toward the "leafed and lichened stem" and then expand in the largesse "of being at home [...] and well" (28). Thus far, the speaker makes no claim. Not until

the second stanza does the poet employ the personal pronoun “my” to indicate his presence in this place:

The warbler with its quivering striped throat  
Would live almost beyond my sight,  
Almost beyond belief,  
But for its double note—  
Among high leaves a leaf,  
At ease, at home in air and light. (28)

That the bird and the frog are “almost” out of sight suggests that the speaker seeks them out, intentionally notices them and that he has a presence in this place they call “home”. Though the warbler resides high among the trees, the speaker seems familiar with “its quivering striped throat.” The warbler’s song offers evidence to the speaker of a creature so magnificent that it might live “beyond [his] belief”. As the poem turns to the third stanza, the focus moves to the speaker, yet it retains all the language of the first two stanzas:

And I, through woods and fields, through fallen days  
Am passing to where I belong:  
At *home*, at *ease*, and *well*,  
In Sabbaths of this place  
*Almost invisible*  
Toward which I go from song to song. (28, my emphasis)

In this stanza, the speaker’s home is less clear than the frog’s or the warbler’s. He comes to the place he “belong[s]” only after coming “through field and woods” through the brokenness of

“fallen days”. Sabbath as a sacred time (as mentioned in the previous chapter) affords a vision of redemption. But key to this poem and to the idea of wilderness, is that this particular *place* has “Sabbaths.” The speaker’s experience is not one of a mysterious, singular moment, but of a series of moments that speak to the potential interaction between human and wild. Being “almost invisible” himself indicates that he belongs here as much as the other creatures cloaked by invisibility, so suited are they to their surroundings. That he does not intend to stay here, but only to keep moving to “where [he] belong[s]”, also indicates that through Sabbath time and contact with the wild he is being formed. The final line certainly evokes the warbler’s tune, but it could just as well be the song of Sabbath, the speaker’s own song, or the poem itself. All of these possibilities indicate the value of this wild place, the necessity of the speaker’s experience in order to grow, and the limited impact he must have. The speaker should be “at home” and “at ease” in creation. But in order for all three—frog, bird, and human—to be “well,” he must continue to respect their kinship as created things.

### ***Necessary Wilderness: Some Conclusions***

Oliver, Berry and Still, in their interaction with wilderness, suggest that it is much more than a designated area of preservation. Like Sabbath experience, interaction with wilderness overflows into daily life because it is *part* of daily life. Wilderness is certainly important, as is preservation, but these poets suggest that the encounter with the wild-ness of *all* that is not human in creation can help achieve a more responsible interaction with all of creation. The daily encounters with wilderness—the song of the thrush or warbler, a newly-born fawn, the stillness of pinewood, or the high grasses of uncultivated fields—become the bedrock of wilderness

experience and understanding for these poets. In places, moments, and creatures whose only connection to humanity is through a common creator, humans experience wilderness.

In Christian thinking, the extension of grace and of participation in God's ongoing creative work on the earth must include wilderness. The similar approaches both require humility, recognition of human impact on the earth, and restraint of that impact. In order to achieve this level of reflection and humility, human presence is necessary in wild places, not active presence but passive. Like Berry's speaker, an "*almost* invisible" presence indicates the awareness that humans can learn and even receive restoration without destroying, but that some amount of interaction must take place. Far from Edenic, but also far from diabolical, wilderness still has room for humanity. To recognize wilderness is to acknowledge human limitations. The problem with the wilderness of preservations and reserves, even of that well-intentioned cavern preservationists in Arizona, is that it "distances us too much from the very things it [might teach] us to value" (Cronon 87).

These poets bring wilderness closer to home, to the places where they live. Rather than a wilderness (as the National Park Service would have us believe) that exists should we want to *visit* it, the poets find hope and renewal in a daily contact with wilderness. The lesson these poets learn is that "home" makes room for garden and wilderness (Cronon 90). For Christians who are beginning to recognize all of creation as God's good work, this understanding of home embraces all creation and places humans firmly in the world, reminding us of the gift quality inherent in all land, wild or tamed. The earth itself is home, and belongs first to God. No human designation or boundary between cultivated and uncultivated should change the attitude with



which humans engage that gift. Connection with wilderness, more than spiritualizing the environment, allows for a firmer physical connection with all of creation and with the earth.

## Chapter Four

### **The Promise of New Jerusalem: Urban and Suburban Environmental Integration in the Poetry of Li-Young Lee and Charles Wright**

“in league with the stones of the earth[...] I enter [...] the city in which I love you”—Li-young Lee

The Midwestern city I grew up in was a study in contrasts. From my front porch I could see in one direction, beyond the houses of my own street, the flickering skyline of Indianapolis. And from the other direction, I could see acres and acres of farmland (corn, of course). The skyline keeps growing and changing, but those cornfields have long been developed into new housing tracts and neighborhoods. I felt the loss of those farms and the open land near my home, especially when the replacement seemed to lack foresight or planning, but my family did not farm nor did we have any desire to do so. We planted a garden and canned vegetables every year, but we also enjoyed city life, with its theater and sports events, its well-planned school districts, and all the easily accessible shopping. Downtown Indianapolis is a vibrant, attractive environment. In the mid 1990s, the city commission and Department of Natural Resources brought together green space and other attractions, such as the zoo and Eiteljorg museum (a museum of American Indians and Western Art), into the White River State Park, billed as “Indiana’s only urban state park” (White River). The unique quality of this “urban state park” hints at the perceived dichotomy between urban and agrarian mindsets; even the need to distinguish the park as “urban” suggests that the two settings might seem to have little common ground. The green space is beautiful and functional, offering both recreation and management of the important White River watershed. However, just a few blocks from downtown, houses are in disrepair, and people live in poverty. Miles away, subdivisions and strip malls gobble up the

once-farmed or empty acres. The lack of a more comprehensive commitment to responsible use of resources and city design mitigates the beauty and accomplishment of the White River State park. Certainly the park is an important step, as is Central Park in New York or The Fens once were in Boston. However, if the same planners who promoted White River Park were to apply that careful urban ecology to all aspects of city living, from the poorest of neighborhoods to the wealthiest, from the heart of downtown to the far reaches of the suburbs, Indianapolis could extend the vibrancy of its metropolitan areas to its surrounding regions and residents.

Indeed, deep ecology stresses wilderness preservation, and environmentalists bemoan the impact of the city's steady march toward the countryside. Christian thinking, too, has often demonized the city in favor of the Edenic, garden vision of paradise. Even the "ecocritical movement has been slow to survey the [literary] terrain of urban environment" (Bennett and Teague 3). However, some Christian environmental scholars are beginning to see the potential and promise of an urban ecology. An urban environmental ethic acknowledges that city living is the reality for most people and should be reconciled with ecological awareness and responsibility. Christian thinking goes a step further to envision the city as eventual dwelling place of God (so much so that God no longer needs a temple, a concept I take up fully later in this chapter) and as the site of potential justice and harmony for people and earth. Ecocriticism can also benefit from an expansion of response to include literature with urban themes. That is to say, ecocriticism does not need to be reserved for strictly "nature writing" or for the pastoral. By recognizing nature's place in the city, ecocriticism can highlight a practical potential for greater integration.

For Christians, the “disposable earth ” readings of Revelation 21:2-3 have been as damaging as the “dominion” readings of Genesis 1 and 2. Many cite the advent of a “new heaven and a new earth” as reason enough to use this one up. But as Norman Wirzba notes, “this created order is new not because the old has been discarded, but because the old is perceived and engaged in an entirely different matter” (*Paradise* 58). Wirzba refers of course to Rev. 21:1 which states: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.” New Testament and Revelation scholar Barbara Rossing reads this an economic impact, due to the disappearance of the sea and its associated commerce. Farmer reads this, because of all that also disappears (is “no more”) in verse four, as a social transformation. Robert H. Mounce, in his commentary on Revelation speaks to the debate among scholars: “Scholars often discuss whether the new order of things is to be a renovation of the old or a distinctly new creation” (380). He suggests that “neither the language employed nor rabbinic commentary on related passages such as Isaiah 65:17 will supply a definitive answer.” He concludes that because of the context, John’s concern is likely for a way of living that transcends the literal replacement of the old heaven and earth (380).

Thus, while the agrarian visions of Berry, Still, and Oliver are indeed important, they are not the only answer to the question of how to envision a better human response to the earth. Barbara Rossing claims, “New Jerusalem offers the promise of a totally renewed urban world, where God takes up residence on Earth in our midst [...which] can empower us to work to renew our cities and our world today” (“River of Life” 206). Both Wirzba and Rossing see the ecological renewal of cities as vital to connection with one another and with God. Two contemporary American poets, Li-young Lee and Charles Wright, both have rural backgrounds

and have traveled extensively, thus giving them a uniquely comprehensive experience of urban and agrarian. Both have settled in urban or suburban environments, and their poetry engages both the natural and urban qualities of their chosen homes. Both poets also have extensive Christian backgrounds, though each one engages that background differently. What they offer, however, is a vision of urban-natural integration, both in an ideological sense and in the poetic language itself.

***A Citizenship for All: Li-Young Lee's Beautiful City***

Lee's poetry centers on memories of his father, whose influence remains a strong constant in his life. Born in Indonesia, Lee immigrated to the United States when he was a child after his father suffered persecution for his political and religious beliefs in China and Indonesia. Lee eventually made his home in Chicago (by way of Seattle and Philadelphia). His poetry, especially his volume *The City in Which I Love You*, blends reverence for his father and for God with natural and urban language and metaphor. Lee's father, an evangelical preacher, instilled in him a love for the Bible and Christian teachings. Lee says that the Bible is not only literature to him but a sacred text (*Alabaster* 46). The Bible, for his father and now for him, offers more than an amazing story, but rather the hope of "something else" in the face of evil or suffering (46). Though he embraces many different teachings, Christian thinking figures most prominently in his approach to poetry and the world. He believes "God's presence is not only out there in the world in trees and oceans and birds and people, but [also ...] in me" and that "Christ [is] a form of poetry" (*Alabaster* 145, 81). For Lee, the process of writing a poem, perhaps even the goal of writing a poem, is an emptying of self in order to achieve "real contact with the godhead" (Lee J. 12). Christ, as the "extreme possibility of poetry" does exactly that in the New Testament; he

empties himself in order to be filled with the greater self and will of God (*Alabaster* 81). For Lee then, writing poetry becomes a process of imitating Christ.

Though ethnic Chinese and born in Indonesia, Lee considers himself an “American poet [...] first and foremost” (Ingersoll 10). And as an American poet, it is not surprising to find that Lee wrestles with identity, memory, and place. His earlier volume (*Rose*, 1986) centers on memories, especially of his father, while his latest work forays into questions of identity and place more completely. All of his work, however, bears Christian overtones (Moyers 33). Lee says in an interview with Anthony Piccione and Stan Rubin:

Whether or not there is a Godliness and a sacredness in the world—everything rides on that. The stakes are so high for me. It isn’t choosing between sacredness and the mundane: for me the mundane isn’t even the mundane without the sacredness [...] to locate that sacredness [...] I] began addressing the God I grew up with. (46)

The God that Lee “grew up with” is the God of his father, the God of the Old and New Testament. In addition to his father and Christianity, Lee also cites Whitman as a formative influence, especially Whitman’s sense of the democratic. In his interview with William Heyen, Lee refutes the idea that love for “woman, worm, and tree” is “liberal gushiness,” but instead suggests that Whitman’s democracy can lead to harmony between people and with the earth (29). To take Whitman’s democracy seriously, Lee says, is not simply an ideal but “a hard spiritual task” that manifests as emptying of self and in love for all creation and requires him to embrace the world in a practical way (29). These qualities, along with Lee’s immersion in city life and

his sense of displacement, provide an excellent foundation for an urban-Christian ecocritical approach to his poetry.

Li-young Lee's *The City in Which I Love You* (1990), his second volume of poetry, uses the Song of Songs (or Solomon as it is also called) as its guiding central image. The epigraph to the title poem, "the city in which i love you" comes from Song of Songs: "I will arise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek... whom my soul loveth" (3:2). The centrality of this scripture to the poem and to the volume of poetry suggests the importance of the city to Lee's search. Walter Hesford notes that Song of Solomon's "attractiveness to Lee may be that [...] the Song, rightly read, unifies the sacred and the profane" (38). In Lee's journey through the city, the unification of sacred and profane brings together the cities of his experience with the vision of a new kind of city. In Solomon's Song, the city is of course, Jerusalem. Given Lee's history in Jakarta, Hong Kong, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Chicago, I would suggest that Lee evokes several cities in his search for inclusion and connection. The poem establishes two types of cities in contrast: the "bombed out" urban setting (which may be a more social than physical reference) and the "city in which I love you" (Piccione and Rubin 50). The latter city offers both a present and future contrast to the city the speaker roams at night. That is, the city exists even as the speaker searches for it. Barbara Rossing notes a similar contrast of cities in Revelation: "The author of Revelation constructs New Jerusalem as an alternative to Babylon and calls for a choice between the two cities. New Jerusalem is a contrasting political economy, an alternative vision of the world and of God's liberating purpose" (*Two Cities* 161). Because of Lee's reliance on the "Song of Solomon" for inspiration and poetic structure, it is not difficult to suggest a similar contrast of cities in the poem. To

follow Hesford's thinking about the unification of sacred and profane, Lee's poem offers perhaps an understanding of what the two types of cities offer *right now*. The choice between them is still an integral part of the speaker's task in the poem; however, Lee's understanding that elements of both cities exist right now intersects with the line of thinking that ties urban ecology to Christian belief.

In his many interviews, Lee often mentions feeling disconnected or displaced. Notably, in the title poem he seeks connection by entering the city. And in much of Lee's poetry, the city acts as "a place / for those who own no place" ("With Ruins," *City*, 45). In these urban settings he frequently juxtaposes compassion with fear and constructed with natural. The rose especially becomes a symbolic image of compassion, and it often occurs at the heart of his urban explorations. In "Furious Versions" Lee explores the many ways of telling his life's story. The often brutal images of his city experience—soldiers, fires, barbed wire—coexist with the image of his father's love for roses, particularly the "Paul's Scarlet" (20).<sup>47</sup> Lee's father and his roses suggest compassion, both from humans and God, in the midst of fear. On "an American sidewalk" a man recognizes Lee's father as one who helped over twenty years before to bury his wife amidst the bomb explosions and fear (23). In this American city, his past compassion brings them together and invites the connection that bridges even the "the sadness of ten thousand miles, / of an abandoned house in Nan Jing" (23). Building on this idea of compassion, the speaker then sees Li Bai and Du Fu, poetic literary giants of China's Tang Dynasty known for their social concern, standing on a Chicago corner:

Folding paper boats,

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<sup>47</sup> Lee explains the connection to the name of the rose in the two lines following its mention: "Paul, who promised the coming / of the perfect and the departing of the imperfect" (*City* 20).



They sent them swirling  
Down little rivers of gutter water.  
Gold toothed, cigarettes rolled in their sleeves,  
They noted my dumb surprise:

*What else did you expect? Where else should we be? (24)*

Their boats, like their poetry, address the potential for beauty and compassion even in so unlikely a place as a muddy gutter stream. That they appear in Chicago, in America, also represents the potential Lee sees in the American city, which is why it provides the direction for the entire poem, as well as the volume. Like Solomon, who arises to go into the city in order to seek the one whom his soul loves, the speaker of “Furious Versions” begins by asking if he shall “rise and go / out into an American city/ or walk down to the wilderness sea” (Song of Solomon 3:2, *City* 13). He chooses the city and notes in a later poem, “Arise, Go Down,” that the inheritance from his father is “only this world, in which there is always / a family waiting in terror” (38). Certainly this is a bleak image of the city. But Lee’s vision of the city includes that element of compassion seen in his father’s gift to a dead woman and in the beauty of a brilliant blooming rose “that scaled the red brick / of [his] father’s house in Pennsylvania” (20). In this same world, in this same city, “a man / might arise, go down, and walk along a path // and pause and bow to roses” (38). The connectedness that eventually links people begins with a connectedness to the natural world.

An urban environmental ethic should start with a similar idea of connectedness. If Christians begin to embrace the city as the eventual dwelling place of God, as well the possible site for ecological wholeness, then the city becomes an important site of human and non-human

community. The kingdom of God on earth offers a “new community which seeks to order its life in terms of the gift and demands of the kingdom. It seeks to model the new order of God’s rule in its present existence” (Zerbe 89). This is an important lesson to be taken from Revelation’s New Jerusalem. As Ronald Farmer notes, in the New Jerusalem, God is “continually making all things new, not just at the End, but always” (Farmer 136, Rev. 21:5). Such a present-minded view (as opposed to a perhaps more traditional future-oriented view) suggests what Farmer calls a “prophetic eschatology,” one in which God works “in the present time to bring about a glorious future” rather than condemning this present age as evil or fractured (136). This view aligns with my thinking in the first three chapters, which highlight the importance of our attention to the world in this moment, and of the reality of God’s action in this time rather than a remote future.

If indeed people can work toward renewal in the present, then Lee’s search for connection within the city begins to make sense. Lee seems to move instinctively toward God in this city, and the city itself changes over the course of the poem. In this light, the city of Lee’s poem begins to take on qualities of the New Jerusalem. As the poem continues, the “you” of the poem shifts from female lover to divine other. Initially, the city is like any other damaged urban environment, with its “alley / weirdly lit by a couch on fire” and its “guarded schoolyards” and “newspapered windows of tenements” (*City* 51). From these disturbing images of disconnect between people, the speaker turns to the sensual description of a lover, seeking in her the connection he desires.

In moving toward that which is both like (human) and unlike himself (female), the speaker begins to pull from the images of decay an image of fulfillment, yet even this will not

fully complete the speaker; he must find the new city. In the “policed / city” that the speaker calls “home,” he is also “guest” (51). In this moment the city shifts to lover:

A bruise, blue  
in the muscle, you  
impinge upon me.  
As bone hugs the ache home, so  
I'm vexed to love you, your body (51)

Not until the last line of the stanza does the speaker clarify the shift. Until then, the “you” bears the weight of both city and lover. The sensual imagery suggests desire as well as the limits of desire. He can only know his lover to a certain extent; he is a guest even in her body. In a flash of doubt, the speaker wonders: “In the uproar, the confusion / of accents and inflections, / how will you hear me when I open my mouth?” (52). Even in the midst of the sensuous “ache” of his lover’s body, the city’s confusion displaces the speaker with its anonymity, and he remains one of its “drab population” (52).

In this moment of doubt, which also seems to be a turning point in the poem, lover shifts to something even more powerful. The speaker closes the ninth stanza with two end-stopped lines: “I will follow you. / Hew me to your beauty,” suggesting allegiance to someone even greater than a lover (52). The language here intensifies the adoration of a lover to that of a disciple. Indeed, Lee says of this poem, “I started out to write a love poem. I think there is a kind of love for a specific other, which becomes so intense that it transforms itself into a love for a greater other [...] trying to enter the other, to locate the other [...] felt like entering a city” (Piccione and Rubin 50). As the poem progresses from this point, the “you” begins to take on

the quality of the “greater other.” The speaker recognizes the great task of acknowledging this presence, but also realizes the great potential for connection:

Stack in me the unaccountable fire,  
bring on me the iron leaf, but tenderly.  
Folded one hundred times and  
creased, I'll not crack.  
Threshed to excellence, I'll achieve you. (*City* 53)

Though the stanza suggests a violent sort of change (*threshed, folded one hundred times*), the speaker remains distinct. The winnowing permits him, prepares him even, not only to “love you” but to “achieve you” (53). The courage required of the speaker to seek the other must be accompanied by the courage to become different, greater, himself.

Though the speaker seeks a type of New Jerusalem, he faces the reality of Babylon. The speaker waits, but “no one comes” (53). The night city heightens his sense of disconnectedness, as “no one wakens the honey in the cells, [or] finds the humming / in the ribs” (53). In this urban setting life seems far from paradisiacal: litter flies through the streets, a gun “goes off,” and the speaker even discovers a dead body (53). Lee devotes nearly six stanzas to the image of the gunshot victim and to the speaker’s distance from “the ones I do not see / in cities all over the world” (54). It seems, then, that part of his search, part of his own transformation, might be to reverse his sense of displacement by finding “your otherness” which “is perfect as [his] death” (55). This phrasing recalls Lee’s statement about Christ as the “extreme possibility of poetry” (Heyen 29).<sup>48</sup> In the previous stanza, the speaker sets up his emptiness: he is “famished for meaning” and waiting to be filled, not with food but with something greater. Immediately the night

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<sup>48</sup> As I reference on page 141.

“dissolves” and the speaker becomes aware of the “otherness” that fills him and “exhausts him” (55).<sup>49</sup> Embracing this otherness, which is reminiscent of Christ’s sacrifice or dying into that sacrifice, the speaker can finally relate to those who suffer in all cities.

The New Jerusalem type of city stands in contrast to “the cities in which / you are not, / the cities in which I looked for you” (55). Certainly the poet’s own experience includes life in many cities, and as Stan Rubin notes in his interview with Lee, the poem expands Lee’s “personal situation and history into the communal” (51). As Lee wandered the city of Chicago while writing the poem, he found renewal in his search for the “greater other” (51). Thus, the city where “you” are begins to take on qualities of renewal and completion and of belonging for those who live there. In the cities empty of “you,” the speaker is “famished / for meaning” (55). And in the presence of “you” the speaker realizes that “everything is punished by your absence” (55). The implications here for a Christian-urban ecocritical reading are important. If God’s own temple, as Rossing suggests, is to be with humans, and if God continually works in creation toward this end, as Farmer suggests, then Lee’s speaker could conceivably feel the presence of God and the lack of God’s complete presence in this moment. Thus, even when the urban setting seems to fall short of the vision of New Jerusalem, the potential for renewal still exists.

In the final seven stanzas, Lee highlights the sense of displacement that leads the speaker to seek this new city as well as the bond between city and earth. These stanzas employ more natural imagery than the rest of the poem, and yet the organizing image of the city remains. As the sun rises, the speaker concludes:

You are not in the wind

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<sup>49</sup> The exhaustion here is also reminiscent of Lee’s claim that emptying self and recognizing others is a “hard spiritual task” (29).

which someone notes in the margins of a book.

You are gone out of the small fires in abandoned lots

where human figures huddle,

each aspiring to its own ghost.

The first image seems to reference both 1 Kings 19:10-14 (in which Elijah discovers that God is not in the wind or the fire) as well as to the poet's own discovery of his father's annotated Bible after his father's death.<sup>50</sup> Because of these allusions, "you" begins to take shape more fully as God rather than lover or indistinct other. In the Elijah story, the prophet fears for his life in the wake of Jezebel's wrath and revenge.<sup>51</sup> Elijah hides in a cave, much like the speaker hid earlier in "the excavated places" and "in the derelict rooms" (*City* 53). To reassure Elijah, Yahweh sends him to Mount Horeb to experience the Lord's presence. Though a spectacular wind, an earthquake, and a fire ensue, Elijah finally experiences the Lord's presence only in "the sheer silence" (I Kings 19:12). Notably, the wind has been an important symbol throughout the poem: the "lewd body of wind" who jammed the speaker "in the passageways; the "plastic bag, fat with wind"; and even the "mind that longs to be freely blown" (*City* 53, 55). The speaker discovers that God is not in the wind, something his own father knew years before, but which he can only discover in his own seeking.

The second image suggests the importance of human action to invite God's presence into the city. In this second image, "you have *gone out*" of the fire, suggesting perhaps that God's presence was once here or was intended to be here even in these "small fires" (56). However, God's absence seems to be related to the fact that *human figures*, not humans, "huddle" in these

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<sup>50</sup> Lee discusses the discovery of his father's Bible with Bill Moyers. See *Alabaster Jar*, pg. 36.

<sup>51</sup> Elijah brought about the deaths of hundreds of Jezebel's prophet's of Baal. See I Kings 18: 20-46

“abandoned lots”. The people who gather near these fires seem somehow less than human, as if discarded by the city around them like the very refuse they burn to keep warm. The final phrase of this stanza suggests the spiritual and physical alienation. These figures, “each aspiring to its own ghost,” have no connection with one another—not in the sense of human camaraderie (the use of “its” rather than gendered pronouns) or in the sense of the divine. The word “ghost” suggests death, the supernatural, and even a sort of anti-Paraclete. That is, even though *Paraclete* is often translated as “Holy Ghost,” these huddled figures aspire not to a spirit poured out *for all* from God, but to an individual ghost of self. The speaker realizes in this moment that not only is God *not* present here, God *cannot* be present here. Similarly, Rossing claims that Revelation’s New Jerusalem “exhort[s] and encourage[s] people to proclaim the judgment and salvation of God, to provide a vision of hope and justice” (“River” 207). Without justice for those living in the city and for the city itself, as the previous stanzas imply, God’s presence is difficult to find. In order to invite God’s presence, the speaker must find the connection he seeks, and notably he begins with the earth.

As the poem concludes, the speaker finds solidarity with the earth and sea which allows him to enter the city with adoration. As Bruce Malina notes, the only true requirement of entrance to the New Jerusalem is adoration of God, which then extends to all of God’s creation in justice for people and earth (63). The city the speaker enters seems poised for renewal, perhaps because of the speaker’s experience:

Between brick walls, in a space no wider than my face,  
a leafless sapling stands in mud.  
In its branches, a nest of raw mouths

gaping and cheeping, scrawny fires that must eat.

My hunger for you is no less than theirs.

That the brick walls afford space for both a human face and a leafless sapling suggest that even pre-renewal, all three elements—human, constructed, and natural—can coexist. The sapling’s importance lies in the energy of its emergence. Its leaflessness, while perhaps initially suggesting decay, also importantly suggests the rebirth of spring. The birds who take up residence in its branches also imply growth, however hard won. They also seem to need the presence of God, “you,” as much as the speaker, once again indicating the relationship between God and all of creation. If the small tree and birds can survive even in the harsh environment of mud and bricks, how much more promising would be a city built upon an urban-ecology that stressed the renewal of the New Jerusalem.

These two stanzas, wind and tree, prepare the speaker for his final entrance into “the city in which I love you” (56). He stands at the gates as the “sea hauls the sun on its back,” an image central to the poem’s climax and to the reading of Revelation. For the poet, gaining entrance also means achieving place and stability. In New Jerusalem, the gates “are entrances, not exits, and they are never shut” (Rossing, *Cities*, 154). That the speaker stands at the gates as dawn breaks echoes Farmer’s interpretation of Rev. 21:25-27:

Earthly cities shut their gates at night for safety, but such is not the case for the new Jerusalem. Because of the presence of God, it is always day, never night, and there are no more enemies to fear. Because the gates are never shut, there is abundant entrance.

(138)



This is the final immigration for the speaker after “misguided journeys” and “expulsions” (*City* 57). In this city, distinctions disappear. Indeed, his “birthplace vanished” and his “citizenship [is] earned” (57). He is now “in league with the stones of the earth” (57). This city privileges that relationship with the earth and, importantly, privileges it in the present. The speaker observes that he has “experienced neither heaven nor hell,” suggesting that he has actually achieved the city on earth, not simply envisioned its future existence.

The final two stanzas bring together the speaker, God, the city, the earth, and the making of the poem itself. The speaker is both inhabitant of earth and inhabitant of the city. And finally, the speaker enters:

[...] without retreat or help from history,

the days of no day, my earth

of no earth, I re-enter

the city in which I love you.

And I never believed that the multitude

of dreams and many words were vain. (57)

In a departure from the practices of Berry, Oliver, and Still and the agrarian commitment to place, Lee’s speaker orphans himself from a specific place in order to belong to a more universal place. However, he grounds himself, so to speak, in time (in this case, a specific Wednesday morning, “late in the century”). By locating himself in the present, he certainly counters the weight of an ancestral past and also, perhaps, an overwhelming sense of the future.

Lee has often mentioned his attraction both to Ecclesiastes (a much darker Old Testament text) and Song of Solomon (a more hopeful book about human faith and love).<sup>52</sup> The last two lines of the poem allude to Ecclesiastes 5:7, which states, “with many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words, but fear God.” The verse follows an earlier injunction in verse 2: “Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.” Lee contrasts the darkness of Ecclesiastes with his own hope. By the very making of the poem, Lee chooses to “utter a word before God” and the result is a speaker who finds God not in heaven, but on earth. Hesford suggests that Lee’s turn toward the Song of Solomon affirms human love and faith over a relationship with the God of his growing up. However, because of his inversion of the Ecclesiastes text in the last line, I contend that he finds a balance between them, and that the city provides the venue for that discovery (53). Lee’s response suggests that God is *not only* in heaven, but that God is accessible *here* on earth. What Lee offers here in these concluding lines is precisely what an urban-Christian ecological vision requires: wholeness of time and place, of human and divine, natural and constructed.

### ***A Well-Manicured Landscape: The Suburbs of Charles Wright***

An urban ecology begins to acknowledge the reality of most Americans, but is not complete without an examination of life in the suburbs.<sup>53</sup> According to the Brookings Research Institute, suburban and exurban areas continue to grow faster than metropolitan areas (“Finding

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<sup>52</sup> See Bill Moyer’s conversation with Lee in *Alabaster Jar*, pg. 39.

<sup>53</sup> According to Katz, Berube, and Lang, medium-sized cities (like Tallahassee, FL and Hayward, CA) are growing faster than the 100 largest cities. Downtowns are also growing but are less likely to be populated by families with children. And “despite city and downtown gains, the suburbs remain at the cutting edge of population growth in metropolitan America” (3) Together with “growth counties,” or outlying regions characterized by strip malls, schools, single-family housing and no real “host” city, suburbs exhibit the greatest population increase. See *Redefining Urban and Suburban America: Evidence from Census 2000*, Vol. 3. Brookings Institution Press, 2006.

Exurbia”). In suburban and exurban communities, many people live in planned neighborhoods designed to simulate the rural quality of life with the access to urban commerce. My own family, a few years after I left for college, made the move to one of the many sleepy-but-growing suburbs on the south side of Indianapolis. When we visit there now, we pass neighborhoods with names such as “Heartland Crossing” or “Roberson Woods,” each with its own set of stores and restaurants to accommodate life there. The woods and fields to which these names allude now yield, not trees or crops, but row upon row of nearly identical houses. The socio-economic range for entry into one of these planned communities, or subdivisions, often ensures a flat demographic, and despite the convenience of the commerce located nearby, many, if not most, of the families face long commutes to work.

With so many single-family dwellings and such rapid development, it is not hard to imagine the impact of a developing suburb on an ecosystem. Andrew Ross notes that suburban development has “exacted a severe toll on ecosystems, both regional and global” (18). Ross advocates urban renewal, not only for environmental reasons, but for relational reasons as well. Indeed, after years of trying to find a community in their new suburb, my family returned to their old church and many of their old activities in the heart of Indianapolis. Of course, this means quite a commute for nearly every pursuit central to their chosen community, especially since many of their friends now live in suburbs on other sides of the city.

The suburbs offer a seemingly attractive social alternative to city life. Americans often “long to escape to the suburbs or the countryside [which would explain the exurban flight] to avoid the crisis of American cities” (Rossing, “River” 215). The “crisis” of cities is often interpreted as violence, poverty, and underfunding. And though many cities are working (or

have successfully worked) through these problems, many people still equate prosperity and stability with the single-family dwelling, the yard, and the neighborhood. Indeed, as Laura J. Miller notes in her study on suburban life, “the valuation of suburbia for a particular form of family life has [...] provided some of the primary ideological underpinnings” for its growth, even if that actual ideal may be “highly elusive” (395). In 2004, the finale of long-running city-based television sitcom *Friends* aired to millions of viewers. The two married friends, Chandler and Monica, prepared to move from the city, where they had good jobs and happy lives (no “crisis” whatsoever), to the suburbs so that they can raise their children and really “settle down.” The allure of the suburbs sometimes has little to do with any perceived problems of the city. Rather, the echo of the American dream still rings in the ears of many Americans who believe that a better life begins with a piece of land and a place to call one’s own. Despite many vibrant urban communities, the suburbs continue to swell (McMahon). American urbanist James Howard Kunstler calls the American attraction to the suburbs “the greatest misallocation of resources the world has ever known” (*Economist* 30). The suburban impact on the environment often surpasses the urban impact. An urban ecology recognizes that many people crowded into a central location *will* have an impact on the environment, and that people must take action to mitigate that impact. A suburban environmental ethic must do the same thing, but the task is complicated by the detached distribution of people in any given suburb.

The suburbs create a sort of liminality: not wholly city, not wholly rural. Nature becomes landscape, neatly framed and universal, a creation of the human mind. As evidenced by the proliferation of landscape companies in these areas, “the aestheticization of landscape permits the viewer to define and control the scene, yet fosters the illusion that the scene is part of

self-regulating nature” (Byerly 53-54). Poet Charles Wright, with his well-documented pursuit of landscape, provides a unique insight into how landscape might be, not a negative quality of the suburbs, but as he notes, “a lever of transcendence” (*Black Zodiac* 3). Acknowledging landscape as construction leads to a new understanding of ourselves and perhaps of the importance of human interaction with the environment.

Wright’s long career centers on his “trilogy of trilogies”. Over the past few decades, Wright has produced three collections of three books, each subsequently collected into three separate volumes (*Country Music*, *The World of Ten Thousand Things*, and *Negative Blue*). In each of these progressions, the poet wrestles with belief through the topic of landscape. In *Quarter Notes* he suggests that the topic of all his poetry is “language, landscape, and the idea of God” (123). These three (a trilogy in their own right) serve to unite not only his poetry, but his varied homes and his lifelong pursuit of God. Born in East Tennessee, Wright then lived in Italy and California before finally settling in Charlottesville, Virginia. Though raised in the Episcopalian tradition, his relationship with Christianity is complex. Bonnie Costello, in her valuable work on Wright’s pursuit of absolutes, notes “it is impossible to piece together any coherent theology from Wright’s combination of medieval Christianity, Southern Episcopalianism, Zen Buddhism, and modern phenomenology” (“Via Negativa” 329). Wright himself declares that his “main mojo is Christian” and that his poetry is “God-haunted” with a “tangential Christianity” (Casely 102, Turner 140-41). Whereas Lee turns toward the Christianity and God of his youth, Wright turns away from the “looney ‘spiritualism’ of the Sky Valley [NC] community” that defined his teenage years (141).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Wright describes this time of his life in his early poetry, especially in “Sky Valley Rider” (first published in *Hard Freight* (1973) and later collected into the 1982 *Country Music*.) In this poem he describes what he experienced at

What then, might such a syncretic poet who writes from such a conflicted space as suburban landscape have to offer in a discussion of a Christian environmental ethic? Wright says in “Thinking of Winter at the Beginning of Summer” (*Black Zodiac*), “what we refuse defines us” (54). Certainly, even as Wright refuses to embrace Christianity fully, he continues to pursue God and the “idea of God”. Lee Upton observes, “Wright’s is a faith against faith, a resistance to his early indoctrination in the Episcopal church, but not a renunciation of religious strategies for seeking transcendent meaning” (257). In this light, he seems similar to the other poets I have discussed, including Berry.<sup>55</sup> As Costello notes, Wright’s “via negativa” often creates a positive; the absence he perceives becomes presence, often through the experience of landscape (“Via Negativa” 330). He revels in abstractions and metaphor, and suggests that landscape itself is an abstraction of nature in which he can find himself more solidly (*QN* 85).<sup>56</sup> Rather than lose himself in nature, as might a romantic nature poet, Wright chooses the distance of landscape. By acknowledging landscape as construction, he certainly solidifies human place in the scene and confronts the tensions that stem from such a realization.

Wright claims that his serial volumes often mirror Dante’s *inferno*, *purgatorio*, and *paradiso*, or hell, earth, and heaven (Suarez 56). Since, as he has also claimed, he could not write the “heaven” or “paradise” volume of the final trilogy, he concentrates mainly on the earth in the middle volume, *Black Zodiac* (1997), and on the affirmation of life and acceptance of death in *Appalachia*, the final volume in the series (1998). Because Wright’s meditation on

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Sky Valley Academy under the tutelage of Ann and Jim Perry’s strict evangelical program that emphasized the lost soul and the broken world. In this setting, Wright claims to have first become enamored of landscape. (See *Quarter Notes*, 144-45).

<sup>55</sup> Wright, in an interview with Daniel Cross Turner, speaks of his admiration for Berry as well (*Charles Wright in Conversation* 144).

<sup>56</sup> “Landscape is a ‘distancing’ factor [...] as regards the ‘self,’ the ‘I’ in poetry. Nature, on the other hand, is quicksand” (*QN* 85).

landscape and belief culminates in this trilogy, I will begin with poems in *Black Zodiac* but will also include poems from *Appalachia*. Robert Denham says *Black Zodiac* “is a metaphysical and religious quest founded on the descriptions of landscape” (60). Wright’s landscape is “a lever of transcendence” because it allows him to pursue God, even if God at first seems absent to the poet (*BZ* 3). The “paradise” he seeks is one in which “God, landscape, and language” exist simultaneously (Hart 411). Like so many of the other poets I have discussed, Wright cannot envision a heaven beyond the context of this earth. For him, the blue of the sky and the twinkling of a starry night edge the heavens (and subsequently God) in his sight. If suburban living is the reality for so many people and continues to grow in its appeal, then landscape might be the one tangible entrance for engaging the environment.

Most suburban dwellers can relate more readily to “landscape” than to “wilderness.” The term mediates distinctions between urban and rural, and even provides potential connection with others and with the divine as would other environments such as farmland or wilderness. The term is also a great leveler. Landscape offers an access point to the divine for all people without being, as Wright claims of nature, “inherently sentimental” (*Quarter Notes* 85). That is, landscape distances the participant (speaker, reader, poet) while still acknowledging human impact on the scene. In this way, Wright breaks suburban ground for the “perennial themes of one’s relationship to place and the importance of spirituality in contemporary life” (Moffett 1). In terms of suburban living, Wright’s attention to landscape (which begins from a very private space) begins to indicate a greater need for environmental awareness that starts in the backyard, as well as a need for increased social awareness. Both needs, it should be noted, are key components of the previous chapters.

Wright's use and exploration of landscape in *Black Zodiac* illustrates this accessibility and leveling. His "Appalachian Book of the Dead" encompasses both aspects in a more "Christain orbit" than do many of his other poems (Denham 75). Wright models "The Appalachian Book of the Dead," after those other famous books of the dead, namely the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Wright describes these books as "pep talks spoken into the ear of the soon-to-be dearly departed who is a true believer and knows where he's going" (*Blackbird*). It is important to note here, that though Wright may not be the "true believer" (he is, instead, the giver of the "pep talk"), the poem itself must be taken as a message to those who do believe. The poem opens on a "September Sunday" as "sunlight lavishes brilliance on every surface, / doves settle, surreptitious angels, on the limb and box branch" (*BZ* 34). These opening images reflect the worshipful tradition of Sunday in the Christian faith, especially in southern Appalachia. And yet, immediately following the sunlit brilliance of the first four lines, "a crow calls, deep in its own darkness" (34). The crow's darkness, whether a deliberate contrast to the sunshine or simply a reference to his dark feathers, complicates the initial image. This "first glimpse of autumn," as the last stanza will suggest, is "stretched tight and snicked" by the contrast (35). Even though the day is rich with beauty, "just there, beyond the horizon" is the "steady clock" where "something like water ticks on" (34). Though the image suggests the relentless coming of death or winter, it does not seem sinister, especially since the water leads to the Eucharist in the next stanza.<sup>57</sup>

After establishing a concrete set of impressions and images, the speaker cites Pound, saying "Go in fear of abstractions," which could potentially mean to fear that which is not

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<sup>57</sup> "whatever enlightenment there might be / housels compassion and affection, those two tributaries / that river above our lives"



concrete or the mental state of preoccupation.<sup>58</sup> The speaker, however, seems to embrace rather than fear abstractions. Indeed, the speaker responds to the voice of Pound, “Well, possibly,” suggesting that perhaps abstraction (in both its meanings) offers something useful to the poet. Because landscape itself offers an abstraction of nature, it is not surprising that Wright is skeptical. And for Wright, the abstraction often enhances the concrete—in this case, what he sees leads him to what he does not see. Though the speaker begins with an autumn Sunday and eventually finds “God’s breath” in his “walking up and down,” a similar trajectory could be suggested for suburban living in general (*BZ* 35). Abstraction can lead to true encounter—be it with nature, with people, or with God. The speaker reinforces this by devoting the remainder of the stanza to abstraction, such as “enlightenment,” “compassion,” and “affection” (34). These abstractions provide access to enlightenment, “they *are* the strata our bodies rise through, the sere veins / our skins rub off on” (author’s emphasis, 34). The poet’s emphasis on the “being” verb here suggests the reality of abstractions, their tangibility even in their intangible form. That our bodies actually influence them, “rub off on” them indicates friction and change. From *strata*, these abstractions become “sere veins”—literally “withered” veins (Merriam-Webster). Our concrete bodies touch the dry veins of abstraction, invigorating both the concrete and the abstract and reinforcing our understanding of the “waters we sense the sense of” (*BZ* 34). In this way, the constructed landscape of the suburban setting offers potential for revitalizing interaction.

Our physical bodies have the potential, according to the speaker, to experience something as abstract as the administration of the Eucharist; indeed, this is the “enlightenment” achieved, that speaker senses “late at night” (34). However, it is also important to note that Wright’s

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<sup>58</sup> From Pound’s “A Retrospect.” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T.S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1935. 4-5

abstractions here always take root in natural imagery. Such a realization offers great potential for the suburban landscape, abstracted as it is from either a rural or urban one. The speaker confronts the abstraction of landscape itself in the third stanza:

Uneasy, suburbanized,

I drift from the lawn chair to the back porch to the dwarf orchard

Testing the grass and border garden.

A stillness, as in the passageways of Paradise,

Bell jars in the afternoon.

Leaves, like *ex votos*, hang hard and shine

Under endlessness of heaven.

Such skeletal altars, such vacant sanctuary. (34)

Initially, the speaker finds this to be no “genuine paradise” (Denham 75). The backyard garden offers only the “stillness” of “bell jars” with their vacuum-sealed atmosphere. The “border gardens” seem to do their job edging out sound, and perhaps a symbolic sort of wilderness. In this way, the jars also call to mind Wallace Stevens’ jar “placed in Tennessee,” that “took dominion everywhere” (554). But the energy of the previous stanza negates the seemingly “skeletal altars” and the “vacant sanctuary.” God can be accessed here, too. And as constructed as it might be, the landscape of the backyard garden is still a garden.

For Wright, “the heart of nature is nature [but] the heart of landscape is God” (*Quarter Notes* 85). Because Wright understands “landscape as revelation, a door into the light,” it also, as he notes, provides access to what we do not always “see” (Turner 146, *BZ* 35) Wright’s landscape serves a self-reflection and self-expression. In the opening lines of “Stray Paragraphs

in February, Year of the Rat,” he notes that landscape is “forever joined, forever apart ~ outside us, yet ourselves” (*NB* 145).<sup>59</sup> Because the self-reflective landscape so often leads to an awareness of God (as an absolute), it is possible to suggest that God is indeed the “heart of landscape”. Language and landscape come together with Wright’s continued God-seeking as expressions of his own creativity and limitation. What God created *ex nihilo*, Wright creates from his own vision, echoed by the very limits of his chosen landscape: his own back yard. Even as the poet reflects the image of God’s creativity, he also senses the limits of self in landscape. Studying his own limits through landscape, Wright becomes aware of what exists beyond landscape, beyond his own vision. In light of a Christian environmental ethic, these limits require great responsibility. Rather than acres of strip malls that mar the landscape and housing developments built only for economic gain, responsible development and sometimes restricted development would be in order. Wright’s landscape is nearly always immediate—his yard, his porch. He would likely find it difficult to seek God in the heart of suburban greyfield space.<sup>60</sup> Thus, even in the suburbs, people must begin to take responsibility for their particular environment for it to bear its full potential.

The realization of this suburban landscape’s potential is not a new one for the speaker. In the final stanza, he rediscovers “How landscape recalibrates the stations of the dead” (34). These “stations of the dead” play on the typical “stations of the cross,” which honor the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, as well as the first-stanza reference to the Appalachian Book of the Dead. Landscape offers not a “via dolorosa” toward God, but a “via mystica” (Hart 409). In the

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<sup>59</sup> I use the tilde (~) here to indicate the dropped line as Calvin Bedient does in “Tracing Charles Wright,” *High Lonesome*, Ed. Adam Gianelli. P. 127

<sup>60</sup> *Greyfield* refers to defunct developments in the suburbs. Similarly, *greenfield* refers to rural areas just beyond the suburbs that are potential targets for development, and *infill* space refers to urban areas that are reclaimed for practical use (See George E. Clark, “Seeking Solutions for Suburbia.” *Environment*. Nov. 2007. pg. 3).

stillness of the backyard garden comes “God’s breath” which “reconstitutes our walking up and walking down” (*BZ* 35). Wright slides easily between the first person singular and the first person plural, placing all people into the same category under the “endlessness of heaven” (34). Denham also sees a different universalizing image here in the allusion to Adam and Eve, who heard God’s voice in the Garden of Eden (75). Landscape is a human vision that invites “the odd quotient of what we don’t see” (*BZ* 35). Even the mundane backyard becomes a place for God’s breath. No paradisiacal garden is necessary here. Wright’s vision of landscape levels the experience with nature, perhaps more so than any other, because the human consciousness frames the experience, because “all forms of landscape are autobiographical” (*NB* 158).

As the breath of God renews humanity’s experience in this backyard “garden,” humanity must begin that task of “long division” in which the “virtual reality,” or what we see, intersects with the reality, or what we do not see (35). Denham suggests that this “division” is reminiscent of “Blake’s ‘double vision,’ the jacking up of the infinite and eternal from the natural and human worlds” (75). If this is the case, then the suburban landscape has potential for encountering the presence of God. In a Christian environmental ethic, this potential is not surprising. Even in the face of great urban renewal or a return to working the land, the suburbs are not going to disappear, and will probably grow. As Wright says in “Apologia Pro Vita Sua”: “Who can distinguish darkness from the dark, light from light, / Subject matter from story line, / ~ the part from the whole / When whole is part of the part and part is all of it?” (*BZ* 5). Suburban life and landscape still represent the environment as “part of the part”. Rather than distinguishing so heavily between areas (as perhaps many ecologists are wont to do), the hope of New Jerusalem again becomes relevant: a vision of integration that includes land, people, creatures, and a way

of living, even in the manicured backyards of the suburbs, that chooses to seek God. And as a “lever of transcendence,” landscape “offers us entrance” and will “nimbus your going forth” if only someone “will step forward” (3).

Wright does not offer solutions to the environmental concerns of the suburbs. However, he does offer a mode of engaging the suburban setting that presents more than the typical “house with a yard and white picket fence”. Landscape acknowledges without guilt that humans are part of the scene (*Quarter Notes* 85). In “Meditation on Song and Structure,” Wright speaks to the balance offered in landscape:

Nature abhors originality, according to Ciornan.

Landscape desires it, I say,

The backyard unloading its cargo of solitudes

Into the backwash of last light---

Cardinal, exhale my sins,

help me to lie low and leave out,

Remind me that vision is singular, that excess

Is regress, that more than enough is too much, that

Compression is all. (*BZ* 60-61)

Restraint propels the originality of both the poem and the landscape. Here in the poet’s own backyard, the songs of the cardinal, the mourning dove, and the nightingale resound in the “last light”. And just as their “song contained many songs,” so too does the landscape contain many landscapes—from the Umbrian hills to North Carolina’s Lake Llewellyn to “the tide pool of [his] neighbor’s yard” (58, 60). All of these songs and landscapes, however, “lead back / ~ to silence,

[to the] sound of the first voice” (60). That first voice seems to be the natural world encapsulated by landscape. Indeed, the poet turns to the cardinal (a metaphorical allusion to a Roman Catholic Cardinal) to “exhale” his sins of excess, finding absolution and inspiration in both nature *and* landscape (Denham 87). Both the “compression” of his poetic line and the poet’s “singular vision” of the landscape are important here. As he creates and records landscape, he must also practice restraint. In the wider lens of the suburban landscape, the speaker’s dictum seems hauntingly true: “excess is regress” and “more than enough is too much” (*BZ* 61).

In *Appalachia*, the final volume of the trilogy, landscape “reaffirm[s] life’s value” (Byrne 3). For so many poets and ecologists, nature excludes humans, but because Wright’s landscape offers a meditation on the self as well as the absolute, it also reaffirms human position within the landscape itself. As part of the suburbs, city, and wilderness, landscape acknowledges human involvement in the scene; however, it also acknowledges human limitation. For instance, most of Wright’s landscapes in *Black Zodiac* and *Appalachia* begin with his own backyard, though they often evoke other “remembered landscapes,” such as the Umbrian hills or California (*Appalachia* 19). Many times, Wright’s landscape conflates several memories of landscape, though all of them begin with the concrete setting of the back yard. One constant in all these landscapes is, of course, the poet—the human speaker and interpreter of the landscape. Another constant, and perhaps the greatest reason for pursuing landscape as subject, is the ineffable God. Landscape, both abstract and concrete, offers a place for human and God to exist and pursue one another. As abstract as landscape can be for Wright, it also grounds him in his search for the

absolute and for salvation, which is why the view from his “plastic lawn chair” is so important (Byrne 14, *Appalachia* 58).

Wright’s “Back Yard Boogie Woogie” begins with its allusion to Piet Mondrian’s 1943 abstract painting titled “Broadway Boogie Woogie.” Though its city grid of red, yellow, gray, and blue lines evoke the urban setting of cabs and city streets, the painting includes no people figures at all. As Wright’s poem begins, he enters “*sur le motif*,” or into the subject: his own backyard landscape (*Appalachia* 39). He sees

Nondescript blond winter grass,  
Boxwood buzz-cut still dormant with shaved sides, black gum tree  
And weeping cherry veined and hived against the afternoon sky. (39)

The backyard geometry of trees, bushes, and grass, creates an abstract palette that echoes Mondrian’s own play with color in his “Boogie Woogie” painting. But while Mondrian includes no people, the poet cannot sustain that level of abstraction:

I try to look at landscape as though I weren’t there, but know wherever I am,  
I disturb that place by breathing, by my heart’s beating— (39)

His presence in this back yard landscape reminds him of the imperfections of his own life:

“Lives the color of dead leaves, for instance, days like dead insects” (39). Though he says that “most of [his] life is like that, ~ scattered, fallen, overlooked,” he contrasts the realization with a closer look at the scene in front of him:

Back here, magenta rosettes flock the limbs of the maple trees,  
Little thresholds of darkness,  
Late February sunlight indifferent as water to all the objects in it. (39)

Like his own moment of reflection, the winter light gathers in all the components of the scene, perfect and imperfect alike. He seems to realize that *all* of it, the perfect and the imperfect, the remembered and the forgotten, the scattered and the gathered, is necessary to the scene. In this moment, the speaker quotes Simone Weil, saying “only perfection is sufficient” (39). Wright often writes about his search for salvation and his doubts that it might exist for him; Weil certainly struggled with the same doubts (Byrne 10).<sup>61</sup> Weil’s desire for perfection seems to exhaust him, especially since “Not even mercy or consolation can qualify” (*Appalachia* 39). For Weil, the spiritual vocation for humans is to become perfect, so that Christ might become part of our bodies and dwell in us (Weil 36). Wright fully acknowledges the difficulty of this vocation, and landscape adjusts his perspective by gathering light along with “little thresholds of darkness” (*Appalachia* 39).

Wright finds comfort in the “early leaf bristle in [his] hand” and in the movement of the cloud shadows to the northeast (39). Landscape draws together the perfect with the imperfect. Even in the expanse of dead “winter grass,” exists the promise of spring. And the clouds which steadily advance suggest that “time may have the power to shape and re-form anything” (Byrne 13). The cyclical turn of the seasons gives him comfort, as he notes in an earlier poem: “what we see outside ourselves we’ll soon see inside ourselves” (“Watching the Equinox Arrive in Charlottesville, September 1992” *NB* 54). The landscape itself becomes a “metaphor for the spiritual understanding he seeks” (Byrne 10). While Weil seeks to perfect herself in order that Christ may enter, Wright acknowledges his fragmentation. Landscape provides wholeness, a

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<sup>61</sup> In her letter to Reverend Father Perrin (*Waiting for God*): “In theory you fully admit the possibility of implicit faith. In practice you also have a breadth of mind and an intellectual honesty that are very exceptional. Yet they still seem to me very insufficient. Only perfection is sufficient.” (48). Later in the same letter she notes: “That is why I lack nothing, although my imagination, mutilated as it is by overlong and uninterrupted suffering, cannot conceive of salvation as something possible for me” (45).



more sufficient access to God in its combination of concrete and abstract. Mercy and consolation do exist in his tangible hold on the leaf bristle. Just as in “Appalachian Book of the Dead,” God’s breath filled the back yard garden, so too does the promise of divine presence fill this winter moment.

In light of an environmental ethic, Wright’s commitment to landscape suggests the possibilities of engaging the landscape in any setting. Because of their liminality, however, the suburbs are perhaps the most difficult space to negotiate in terms of environmental response. If the constants are indeed human and divine, then the relationship with landscape can be just as fulfilling in a suburban setting as in a rural or urban setting. For suburbs to lessen an impact on the environment, people will need to begin engaging the terrain in a different manner. If landscape, as Wright suggests, is a reflection of self and a mode by which we can pursue God, then old and new suburbs could begin to implement a greener infrastructure that would advocate care for creation.

***“A place of convivial life together”: Conclusions about urban and suburban life***

The problems of city and suburbs are both environmental and social, and working toward integrating the “sustaining natural world” with life in these places can result in “convivial life together” for humans and creation (Wirzba, *Paradise* 58). Many scholars and environmentalists already recognize the need for urban renewal and redesign. “Greener” living is becoming more cost effective (think oil prices and long commutes) for many people and even trendy (think chic reusable shopping bags), which is certainly good for the environment. But a Christian environmental ethic would pursue that “convivial life” as a harmony *between* people as well as a harmony of environment *and* people. George E. Clark notes “the loss of social relationships” as

a “factor [in] fragmenting communities” (4). Even more so than a negotiation of agrarian life or wilderness preservation, urban and suburban ecology reminds us that fractured human communities lead to fractured human lives as well as fractures in the rest of creation. The Urban Land Institute projects that the United States’ population will grow by 60 million people in the next three decades. Some of that growth will be in cities, but (at the very least) 70 percent will occur on greenfield space (McMahon). Cities focused on integrating urban and green living as well as multi-social and racial identities will grow and thrive. Lee’s urban experience in “The City in Which I Love You” outlines the possibility of God’s divine presence on earth and of a broad human citizenship in a city that God calls home. In such a city, justice must extend from the smallest space between brick walls and “stones of the earth” to all those who “are not me” (*City* 56, 54). Recognizing and respecting otherness can bring harmony to environment and to human relationship.

Correspondingly, suburbs that thrive must also be committed to justice for residents and environment. Suburbs can exist with limited impact if they begin to imitate what is best about urban areas, “with walkable urban cores, access to transit and green space, and a mix of uses and housing types” (McMahon). Wright’s suburban experience recognizes the stamp of human design on “landscape” and of God’s presence framing that design. The “virtual reality” of the suburban backyard is its own reality (*BZ* 35). The “terminal” quality of a garden edged by border garden and orchard provides “hooks in eternity” (*BZ* 78). Wright’s landscape acknowledges the fragmentation of the world and of human life without disparaging it. What he sees, even in its ordinariness, affords access to the absolute. If he can access God in his backyard, then the potential for ecological responsibility can begin there as well. Rossing maintains

that the New Jerusalem “is itself a paradise, integrating nature and urban life, bringing healing to the landscape as well as to the nations” (218). In short, for urban and suburban areas to flourish, the New Jerusalem “vision of hope and justice” must extend to all creation (Rossing 207). The renewal of the city and its suburban surroundings, requires an earth-centered approach to the ongoing reconciliation of people to God, people to creation, and all of creation together to God.

## Chapter 5

### **Together with the Trees of the Field: A Life of Worship and the Poetry of Wendell Berry, James Still, Li-Young Lee, Mary Oliver, and Charles Wright**

*You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12)*

A few years ago, our church in East Tennessee added a new sanctuary to accommodate the growth of its congregation. The most striking aspect of the new space is the enormous bay of windows that looks out onto the mountains. In front of those windows, between the congregation and the view, hangs a wooden cross. As the congregation gathers for worship, it is hard to ignore the world outside the building. The view that encompasses the beauty of creation belongs with a view of the cross, which symbolizes God's incarnate love for all creation, as a "steady, quizzical pointer to the beauty of God" (*God's Worth* 12). The Christian faith has always centered on worship, though its relationship with creation has not always reflected that God's creation points to God. In some cases, Christians have turned away from creation in its "fallen-ness" in favor of a spiritualized vision of heaven to come. Many contemporary biblical scholars contend that worship cannot simply be an isolated, spiritual state. Instead, worship requires Christians (in the words of the prophet Micah), to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [...] God" (Micah 6:8; Labberton 33). Worship involves, even requires, practical action beyond the singing and the praying, action that extends to all neighbors, human and non-human alike. Too often we worship God and somehow manage to ignore the world around us. However, these poets—Berry, Still, Oliver, Lee, and Wright-- offer a model of attention toward God *and* creation. These poets see God's work in the world, and their poetry offers both a response and a call to action.

The message of the Gospel is not only a message of future hope, but also one of service. Reflecting a God who empties himself into creation (in the form of Christ, the Spirit, and in an ongoing involvement with creation), the Gospel depicts worship as a performance of faith through service to others and all creation.<sup>62</sup> Being involved in a life of worship requires awareness of God as creator, and of God’s love for all creation. The previous chapters explore distinct ways to enact this life of worship—be it through the land, through the time of Sabbath, through the limitations offered in wild spaces, or in the bustle of the city. Land, Sabbath, and community are all gifts from Creator *to* creation. But in worship, *creation offers* the use of these gifts, along with lives and actions, as praise to the Creator.

The act of worship, as an other-directed life of action and awareness, is the logical culmination of the previous chapters. Out of the Gospel come the distinctly Christian doctrines that tie worship as a whole-life activity to environmental responsibility: *anamnesis*, or the memory of God’s actions in history, and the cross of crucifixion, with its emphasis on Trinitarian thinking, resurrection and the present implication’s of Christ’s “new creation.” As former Anglican minister and professor William Nicholls suggests, “worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian church. It alone will endure [...] when all other activities of the church have passed away” (Nicholls 9). These doctrines speak to worship as an all-encompassing and “indispensable activity” of the present which prepare believers for a time when all creation is fulfilled according to God’s purposes.

Though worship depends on individual faith, it can only reach fruition in community; such a life cannot “neglect the life of the world” (*Continuous Harmony* 7). In worship,

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<sup>62</sup> See texts such as Matthew 10:42 and 25:40; Proverbs 19:17; Hebrews 6:10 which all indicate the connection between service and worship of God.

Christians must come together in community with all of God's creation before God. The act of worship "draws us into the very life of God" (Torrance 24). Worship celebrates not only the beauty of creation, but also God's actions within the history of creation or *anamnesis* (literally, "act of memory"). As a practice of worship, this historical emphasis celebrates God's past actions in creation, grounding worship in God's being, not in "nature or nature's annual cycles" (Witvliet, *Psalms*, 22). N.T. Wright notes that the celebration of this historical act brings past action (God's), present action (God's and ours) and future hope together (*Surprised* 151). As a main component of worship, *anamnesis* remembers God and becomes a platform of humility and gladness from which believers approach God. The celebration of God's actions in the history of the world should have a profound impact on Christian involvement with the world.

Above all, worship is about remembering God, and about proclaiming that "God is not detached from the evil of this world" but rather is interested in "creating community" here on earth (Wright, *Worth* 30, Torrance 40). When we worship God together, "we gather up the worship of all creation" (Torrance 13). Old and New Testament scriptures indicate creation's orientation toward God. For instance, Isaiah 55:12 mentions that "the trees of the field will clap their hands" in joy, indicating that creation's own response to God's presence. Similarly, in Luke 19:40, the "stones will shout out" if the disciples' praise were to be silenced. Both of these passages indicate creation's connection to God in human terms, as if human expression indeed "gathers up" the worship of all creatures. Worship, then, transforms the ways in which humans respond to creation for the sake of the Creator. For Jürgen Moltmann this transformation means that "the triune God will indwell the world in a divine way [and] the world will indwell God in a creaturely way" (*Experiences* 311). Creation is full of God's presence, and as God empties

himself into creation, creation becomes capable of worship. To be involved in the life of God seems necessarily to be involved in the life of creation.

I see these five poets as being distinctly involved in the life of God and their poetry as an outpouring of worship toward God. Worship that defines a way of life, specifically worship of God, brings about “justice, peace, and the restoration of creation” (Wright, *Worth*, 133). Each poet seeks God through involvement with creation. Care for the environment, then, is not an agenda, but is instead an act of worship (Best 51). As the Genesis passages indicate, God finds all of creation, from sea creatures to sky dwellers, to be “good” right alongside humans (Gen. 1: 3-31). The poetry celebrates this goodness, this created-ness, in the very act of poetic creation. Through God’s outpouring into the Trinity and into creation, God makes worship possible (Peterson 283). Worship of God, for these poets becomes a process of outpouring: of self into others and creation, into God, and into the poem itself.

For some Christians, a cross illuminated by the mountains seems a dangerous proposition, one that borders on pantheism or nature worship or political agenda. A few months ago, a respected minister from my own hometown dismissed the Christian responsibility for creation as incompatible with faith in Christ. He declared, “This is my Father’s world” and proceeded to privilege the spirit over the body. My experience with this minister seems to characterize the undercurrent of suspicion that pervades many Christian churches. But the doctrine of new creation precludes such claims. The doctrine Paul outlines in Romans and the letters to the Corinthians suggests that in Christ, believers become a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). To become a “new creation” in Christ is to participate in the reconciliation of creation to God and, in a sense, become co-creators with Christ. This new creation status does

not elevate humans to divine status, but rather implicates humans in the mission of creation reconciliation (Romans 5:20). The mission of Christ should illuminate all our interactions, including our interaction with creation. Christ's commitment to physical creation becomes our commitment when we worship at the cross. God's commitment to the restoration of creation began with Christ and is ongoing. As "ambassadors" of that restoration, both to others and to creation, Christians should see Christ's purpose extending to human and non-human creation *in this moment* (2 Corinthians 5: 18-20). Just as in our home congregation the cross hovers *between* humans and creation, the mission of Christ that we put on as "new creation" informs and gives meaning to Christian interaction with creation.

Furthermore, the cross itself reminds all Christians of the crucifixion and the resurrection. The resurrection of Christ as "the firstborn from the dead" suggests that all Christians will also experience a resurrection (Colossians 1:15-19). But as N.T. Wright notes in his *Surprised by Hope*, the early Christian writers rightly believed this resurrection would be a truly bodily resurrection, a body that would be even more "body-like" than that which we already know (152-54). Wright maintains that Paul's belief "involves him precisely in sharing the weakness and suffering of the present state of the world" (156). This involvement matters because it elevates the importance of present actions within creation. Wright concludes, "Belief in the bodily resurrection includes the belief that what is done in the present in the body, by the power of the Spirit, will be reaffirmed in the eventual future, in ways at which we can only presently guess" (156). Those who live in Christ have already become a new creation and in doing so, have taken on the mission of reconciliation that is being fulfilled and will come to eventual completion.



Caring for, restoring, and stewarding creation, then, is part of this indispensable activity of worship.

This understanding of worship as action, as a life of other-directed service in praise of God, brings a new perspective to the understanding of environmental responsibility. Rather than being suspect, creation care should naturally extend from and be part of the worship of God. Worship, along with a celebration of God's sovereignty, becomes an active choice to mirror the outpouring of God through service to others and to creation. That is, worship of God requires actions that honor God and celebrate God. For these five poets, that action begins with poetry, which "is not only a technique and a medium, but a power as well, a power to apprehend the unity, the sacred tie, that holds life together" (Berry, "Secular Pilgrimage" 12). For Li-Young Lee, the outpouring of worship is "an act of abundance" and Harold Best describes worship as an act of "poetry" (*Alabaster* 85, Best 215). To "live life as though one were making art" indicates an outpouring of self as worship and witness (*Alabaster* 85). From the abundance of God's gifts to them, these poets offer praise to God through their poetry. All five poets explore the implications of faith and interaction with creation for those who pursue and honor God. Though each poet approaches God differently, their poetry speaks to the all-encompassing pursuit and praise of the Creator which results in the participation with the creaturely life as well as the divine life of God. Their poetry gives evidence to lives of worship and blends the concerns of worship with the concerns of poetry, ecology, and theology.

***"Be ignited, or be gone": Environmental Responsibility and the Cross***

The cross stands as a unique Christian reminder of God's involvement in the world and symbolizes faith in Christ, the resurrection, and the kingdom of God on earth. The cross,

according to N.T. Wright, gives evidence to human worth and responsibility: “The lordship of Jesus: the fact that there is already a human being at the helm of the world; his present intercession for us—all this is over and above his presence with us” (*Surprised* 114). But the belief in crucifixion, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus as a human also “creates a program for change and offers to empower it. Those who believe in the gospel have no choice but to follow” (Wright, *Surprised* 221). Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, and Charles Wright specifically embrace this “program for change” in their poetry. The influence of the gospel (and specifically, of Christ) in their poetry connects worship with a response to creation.

Christ’s resurrection provides the bedrock of the Christian faith. If indeed Christ has been raised from the dead, says Paul in 1 Corinthians, then his resurrection testifies to the promise of our own *bodily* resurrection and the restoration of creation from mortal to immortal (15:20-29). The resurrection of Christ suggests the importance of physical creation as opposed to a solely spiritual salvation that leaves behind physical trappings. In light of the resurrection, which is a promise to all creation, the Christian response must be active praise. If Christ’s ministry of reconciliation begins with his own resurrection, then the “new creation” of those in Christ embraces and moves that mission toward the fulfillment of total reconciliation.<sup>63</sup> These poets who embrace Christian thinking choose to act, to embrace physical creation (of body, of earth) in response to God as a form of worship.

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<sup>63</sup> I refer here to 2 Corinthians 5:17-19: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

**“As Close as the Cross I Wear”: Action and the Cross**

Mary Oliver’s poetry has always focused on a sense of unity with creation, but in her recent volumes, she has begun to explore this unity in light of faith itself. In her earlier work, her attention to creation often took the form of natural meditation (as in *American Primitive*, 1983). However, in her second volume of *New and Selected Poems* (2005), she begins to connect her experience with nature to the devotion of a religious life, and as she continues to pursue the subject, her commitment to action becomes stronger. As her exploration deepens in her more recent volume *Thirst*, her faith seems more deeply connected to Christ. Oliver enacts her life of worship in “More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree are the Words of the Lord.” Here the more specific awareness of the gospel’s message (and later in the poem, the body of Christ) spurs her to action more fully than the worship services she attends:

In the household of God, I have stumbled in recitation,  
and in my mind I have wandered.

I have interrupted worship with discussion.

Once I extinguished the Gospel candle after all the others. (*Thirst* 31)

The poem, divided into seven sections, begins with this glimpse of the speaker’s clumsy but well-intentioned worship in a formal setting, (she “never held the cup to [her] mouth lagging in gratitude”) (31). In this setting, actions outside the accepted tradition, such as “discussion” and the order of lighting and snuffing out candles, disturb the process of worship. But worship is more than the sum of its tradition. In section two of the poem, the speaker says, “The Lord forgives many things / so I have heard” (31). The situation of this second stanza—between the formal worship and the natural encounter in section three—suggests multiple levels of

forgiveness. Perhaps the Lord simply forgives the speaker's bumbling, though the implication that the Lord forgives broader, congregational attempts to contain worship in ritual or in a single setting certainly exists as well. That Oliver begins with the traditional rituals of worship suggests that they are important, but that they should not be the only means by which a person engages worship.

The following sections of the poem concentrate on the experience of worship through recognition and awareness of God's creation. In the third section, the speaker encounters a deer, who was "bold to say / whose field she was crossing: spoke the tap of her foot: / 'It is God's, and it is mine'" (31). The deer reminds the poet of God's gift of creation that finds expression in this "poem God made and called the world" (31). Every created thing speaks to God's gift: the deer, the "goldfinch," the "black pond," the "muskrat", the "single pine needle," the "priest in her beautiful vestments," and even the "clouds moving" (32). Though the speaker would "think thanks for this world" every moment of the day, what she wants to say finds expression in the song of the red-bird or the paw of the white bear (32-33). More so perhaps than the most sacred human-built space, the speaker notes that "You cannot cross one hummock or furrow but it is / His holy ground" (32). As the deer claimed the field as both "God's and mine" so too the speaker begins to see all of creation as space holy enough for worship.

As the speaker recognizes creation's holiness, her prayers request strength for active service to God's creation:

I had such a longing for virtue, for company,  
I wanted Christ to be as close as the cross I wear.  
I wanted to read and serve, to touch the altar linen.

Instead I went back to the woods where not a single tree  
turns its face away.

Instead I prayed, oh Lord, let me be something  
useful and unpretentious.

Even the chimney swift sings.

Even the cobblestones have a task to do, and do it well. (33)

The speaker's first inclination is to worship in the style of the poem's first section. The stanza turns, however, on her desire to be reformed into "something / useful." Rather than a prayer to be filled up with companionship or spiritual experience, her prayer is to be *poured out*. She recognizes that even in small ways, her life can be a testament to God's greatness. The poem that "God made" becomes not only her poem, but her place of worship as well. Her worship extends beyond the traditions to an identity of believer. She identifies with the "cobblestones," or stones traditionally gathered from stream beds, having been smoothed by flowing water and made perfect for paving streets. And no one cobblestone can do its job alone. Rather, cobblestones must be linked together with mortar, with other cobblestones to form a smooth surface for others. Like the "cobblestones" who perform their task well, the speaker's new role is one of action and obedience to God's formation of her as well as one of community.

Oliver continues to explore a commitment to creation through faith in many of the poems of *Thirst*, where nearly every poem explores the ramifications of the poet's relationship with God and creation. New to Oliver's poetry in this volume, however, is her emphasis on the value of

the human body within God's created world. In "Six Recognitions of the Lord," the poet acknowledges the unity created by a relationship with God:

Of course I have always known you  
are present in the clouds, and the  
black oak I especially adore, and the  
wings of birds. But you are present  
too in the body, listening to the body,  
teaching it to live (*Thirst 27*, section 4)

The speaker, who has long revered the created world, is beginning to apprehend God's presence in the body, which references perhaps the collective body of Christ as well as the poet's individual body. Christ, then, is available to the speaker individually and to community of believers. Another possible reading of "body" is that of Christ's own body—that through the incarnation, God is indeed "present" and "listening," involved in this life and valuing the experience of the flesh, of the speaker's body, and of the collective body as well. This reading embraces not simply an incarnate Christ, but a resurrected Christ who cares about the *living* of this life.

Oliver shifts from her traditional response to nature—learning from nature itself—to learning from God who pours himself not only into creation but into her own body. Her response affirms human and non-human creation. Her recognition of God's presence leads to her recognition of responsibility, a way of living. Because of her shift in thinking, she begins to "apprehend the other world" (27). This, of course, could refer to heaven, or perhaps to the redeemed world of creation. With either interpretation, however, comes a sense of unity not

previously experienced. N. T. Wright, discussing this type of unity, suggests, “Living between the resurrection of Jesus and the final coming together of all things in heaven and earth means celebrating God’s healing of his world not his abandoning of it; God’s reclaiming of space as heaven and earth intersect once more” (*Surprised by Hope* 264). Oliver has never been guilty of abandoning the natural world, but her poems have not always centered on her participation in human community. Her deepening religious commitment now binds the two realms more completely and purposefully. Oliver often uses the first person singular, but she does not often use the plural. Her experience with creation is usually personal. Here, however, the singular pronoun “I” from the beginning of the section now shifts to “we,” indicating unity with other people and with creation:

[...] Slowly we  
make our appreciative response.  
Slowly appreciation swells to  
astonishment. And we enter the dialogue  
of our lives that is beyond all under-  
standing or conclusion. It is mystery.  
It is love of God. It is obedience. (27)

What begins as gratitude, a pervasive theme in Oliver’s poetry, “swells” into “obedience” and “love of God.” Obedience enlarges Oliver’s traditional response of gratitude, by offering an active mode of response. What was, in the first poem of the volume, “standing still and learning to be astonished” takes a step further in “love of God” (1, 27). The speaker now engages in more

than isolated meditation or even joyous gratitude, and instead she enacts her gratitude as a worshipful response to God.

Like Oliver, Wendell Berry also focuses on the implications of the resurrection for a life of worshipful action. Berry often returns to the importance of Christ and the resurrection, but he begins writing about it first in *Country of Marriage* (1973). Berry explores in this volume the impact of his relationships with the land as well as with others. But most importantly, he begins to connect this responsibility to a belief in Christ and with the actions that follow from such a belief. In “Wild Geese,” the speaker experiences fellowship with living and dead companions, with animals, and with the land itself. As winter draws closer, the companions ride out together on a Sunday morning, a day typically given to Christian worship.<sup>64</sup> What they discover in the “sharp, sweet” of the grape and persimmon reminds them of “time’s maze” and “summer’s end” (155-56). As they look out “over the fall fields,” they begin deliberately to remember:

[...] we name names  
that went west from here, names  
that rest on graves. We open  
a persimmon seed to find the tree  
that stands in promise,  
pale in the seed’s marrow. (156)

The juxtaposition of the death and promise is a reminder that death nourishes life, and perhaps indirectly of resurrection itself. Resurrection is consistently an important theme for Berry,

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<sup>64</sup> A tradition that brings together Jewish Sabbath traditions with the Christian celebration of Easter. (Wright, *Surprised*, 238, 266-67).



especially in this volume.<sup>65</sup> Bonzo and Stevens observe: Berry “understands that the sting of death has been ultimately defeated by the hope of redemption and resurrection, the hope of the new creation that cannot be invented or earned but can only be received as the gift of a good creator” (83). And so, when scholars such as Harold Best suggest that “authentic worship can only be *in Christ*,” Berry’s focus on the promise of the resurrection and its connection to worship begins to make sense (27). The recitation of names makes way for the promise of the persimmon seed, of the tree to come. For that reason, the speaker and his companions need nothing else. In this traditional time for worship, their prayer is “not for new earth or heaven” (CP 156). Instead, they need only to see clearly that “what we need is here” (156). For Berry, the world of creation testifies to the resurrected Christ and requires that he do so as well through his own life of worship.

The gospel certainly influences Wendell Berry’s poetic response to creation, and like Oliver, the influence of the resurrection becomes even more deliberate and explicit in his recent volume, *Given* (2005). In his poem “The Future,” the speaker focuses on the importance of recognizing the beauty of the creator in the beauty of the world:

For God’s sake, be done  
with this jabber of “a better world”.

What blasphemy! (*Given* 27)

Berry’s “for God’s sake,” though intended quite literally here, echoes the reference to “blasphemy” in the third line. Here, however, the speaker seems to equate apathy for God’s creation, not only God’s name, with blasphemy. Berry would surely agree with N. T. Wright,

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<sup>65</sup> His oft-cited words “Practice Resurrection” come at the end of “The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment” on page 152 CP.

who says, “The created order, which God has begun to redeem in the resurrection of Jesus, is a world in which heaven and earth are designed not to be separated, but to come together” (*Surprised by Hope* 259). Wright argues that this world, though corruptible, has value and will not disappear, but will instead be restored as incorruptible (156). Berry seems to affirm such a belief in the value of physicality. For Berry, the opposite of worship is the disregard for the physical world.

Instead, to embrace the gospel, to affirm the resurrection, and to join in the mission of Christ is to take creation seriously as part of God’s redemption plan. Like Oliver whose awareness leads to action, Berry speaks directly to the reader and demands participation through decisive action, however small:

*Do something! Go cut the weeds  
beside the oblivious road. Pick up  
the cans and bottles, old tires,  
and dead predictions. No future  
can be stuffed into this presence  
except by being dead. The day is  
clear and bright, and overhead  
the sun not yet half finished  
with his daily praise. (27)*

The sun, even in its dawning, evinces praise to the creator, and Berry takes his cues from creation. Like Oliver, who discovers more than isolated meditation and gratitude, Berry too embraces the action of worship, even in small ways like cleaning a roadside or ignoring the

“dead predictions” of the earth’s insignificance. Just as the sun in its shining offers “daily praise,” so too does Berry suggest that our very lives and actions should reflect such praise. For Berry, praise must exceed awe and wonder and must contribute something to the life of creation itself.

Charles Wright’s long commitment to reconciling the seen with the unseen testifies to his long pursuit of God. In an interview with J. D. McClatchy, Wright notes, “to love the visible things in the visible world is to love their apokatastatic outlines in the invisible next” (*QN* 120). For Wright, landscape provides an “outline” of the redeemed “next” world. N.T. Wright’s understanding of resurrection and of heaven strikes many parallels with Charles Wright’s landscape. For N.T. Wright, the New Testament indicates that resurrection will imbue the physical with even more physicality. Charles Wright’s landscape “jacks up the odd quotient of what we don’t see,” suggesting that the landscape itself is not merely a Platonic outline but that it hints at all we are simply incapable of seeing (*BZ* 34). While Wright devotes much of his poetry to the potential and limitations of landscape, he shares a similar interest in the potential and limitations of words themselves, our his chosen means of expressing connection to the landscape. In two such poems from *Appalachia*, Wright explores these aspects of language and landscape. Wright finds a connection to Incarnate Word, or Christ, in the finite language he uses to explore the infinite Divine. In “Drone and Ostinato” and the inversion, “Ostinato and Drone,” Wright draws from his reading of Christian mysticism, particularly the work of Meister Eckhart. The opening images blend the poet’s search for the Eternal with his reality in the finite:

Winter. Cold like a carved thing outside the window glass.

Silence of sunlight and ice dazzle.

Stillness of noon.

Dragon back of the Blue Ridge,

Landscape laid open like old newspaper, memory into memory. (35)

Winter brings no surprise in the cycle of seasons, and even in its “ice dazzle” provides a glimpse into many Blue Ridge winters past. Winter also doubly removes the poet from the landscape, as he sees it through the “window glass”. The setting, combined with the poet’s inability to access the landscape completely, seems to return to the “drone” that accompanies most of his poetry: “our paltry insignificance in the grand scheme of things, and the equally paltry worth of words from the perspective of the soul” (Denham 114). Though Denham’s observation has merit, this moment when landscape is “laid open” affords the speaker a chance to experience the “silence of sunlight” necessary in order to become “*one in one united*” (Wright’s emphasis, 35). Wright italicizes here as a form of reference to the epigraph of Martin Buber’s *Ecstatic Confessions*, a quotation from Meister Eckhart: “Wordless is the one thing I have in mind, one in one united, bare in bare doth shine.” As memory builds on memory, his own response in words overlays his pursuit of the Word (*Logos*, the Incarnate Word). Here, the “wordless” landscape begins the unification process between the poet’s words (the poem itself, the image of the newspaper) and the infinite Word. Wright’s poem is itself an act of worship.

The poet’s own career in landscape, in seeing and perceiving, provides the “drone,” the sustained sound or repetition on which the rest of his lyrical vision builds. Wright’s interest in Christ comes from Christ’s unification of flesh and Word, of eternal and finite, of human and divine. Like the landscape itself, the Incarnate Word is the “ostinato,” the modal center for the seemingly hopeless “paltry insignificance” of the poem’s third stanza:

Our lives are like birds' lives, flying around, blown away.

We're bandied and bucked on and carried across the sky,

Drowned in the blue of the infinite,

Blur-white and drift.

We disappear as stars do, soundless, without a trace. (35)

Like a jazz improvisation with God as the “ostinato,” the “blue of the infinite” (one of Wright’s oft-used expressions for God) subsumes the poet. But rather than lament the finite quality of what he sees, the speaker instead prefers to “settle and hedge the bet” (35). As winter ramps up its hold on the landscape, he remembers that “wordless is what the soul wants, the one thing that I keep in mind” (35). The line seems to echo other of Meister Eckhart’s meditations on the Word and the soul: “While the soul is still speaking her own word and her noble word, the Father cannot speak his Word in her” (Pfeiffer 336). The autobiographical pursuit of landscape helps the poet see into himself and to grasp the “spirit indwelling in the physical” (Spiegelman 346).<sup>66</sup> Wright’s “vamping” on landscape is more than a mere exploration in futility. Through the image of landscape, Wright instead discovers the potential indwelling of the eternal Word and the unity of seen and unseen precisely because he is not content with “what can be expressed” (Pfeiffer 329).<sup>67</sup> His discontent does not silence him, but instead redirects him to the visible for instruction.

Wright continues the conversation with the mystics in the following poem, “Ostinato and Drone”. In this poem, Wright reverses the order, and instead of entering “the one” through the

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<sup>66</sup> From Eckhart’s “Sister Katrei”: “When I saw into myself, I saw God in me and everything God made in earth and heaven” (Pfeiffer 328).

<sup>67</sup> Also from Sister Katrei: “For you must understand that anyone content with what can be expressed in words—God is a word, heaven is a word—whose soul powers, love and knowledge, insist on nothing further than what can be expressed, is aptly styled an unbeliever” (329).

landscape, he now begins with “the one” and moves toward the landscape in the form of a quince bush. Having emptied himself of words in the previous poem, he now picks up the “undoing of the self,” which is for the poet, “a hard road” (*Appalachia* 36). In the face of “Radiance” and “Unending brilliance of light,” the poet finds himself “speechless” and the experience “incommunicable” (36). When he is “at one with the one” he has no words to communicate his identity as he does when he moves through landscape.

For Wright, to encounter the landscape is to encounter the “one in one united,” or the promise of creation redeemed. Into his wordless vision comes the figure of the quince bush, also “quiescent and incommunicado in winter shutdown” (36). Its very being, its “long nails, / and skeletal underglow,” its “lush / day-dazzle, noon light and shower shine” *do* communicate. The word “bush” may not truly exist, but this bush does exist. The poet quotes Defoe who says, “It’s reasonable to represent anything that really exists ~ by that thing which doesn’t exist” (36). Defoe’s philosophical sleight of hand illustrates for Wright the difference between “voice and the word” (36). Even in light of the “incommunicable,” the voice persists, “continuing to come back in splendor” (36). The voice is of course the poet’s voice, but it is also the voice or expression of creation as evidenced in the quiescent quince. Like Berry, he takes his cues from creation itself. Wright returns to the visible as part of his continued pursuit of words and perhaps the Word, since the incarnation would be the ultimate form of seen and unseen united, and his firm roots in a “world of individuation,” which is landscape.<sup>68</sup> Though no single word can represent the bush, in the poet’s voice, the bush can be “on fire” at the same time that it is simply a “quince bush” in “its noonday brilliance of light.” (36). Wright needs the “finititude” of

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<sup>68</sup> From the epigraph: “The mystic’s vision is beyond the world of individuation, it is beyond speech, and thus incommunicable”—Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Ecstatic Confessions*.

creation to explore and even to have hope of accessing the infinite. And yet, even in its “finitude,” creation offers a hint of what N. T. Wright calls “incorruptibility,” or the potential of complete restoration, the “shine” of unification with God’s intentions for creation (*Surprised* 44)

For each of these three poets, the influence of the cross, or specifically of Christ, shapes the way they embrace creation, both human and non-human. To worship a risen Christ, the Word made flesh, implies acceptance of his ministry, of the appointment as “ambassadors for Christ” that Paul describes in Corinthians (2 Corinth 5:20-21). These poets enter into creation through the poems themselves, through their poetic response in words to the promise of unification that comes in Christ and to come through Christ, both directly, as in the poetry of Oliver and Berry, and indirectly, as in the poetry of Wright. The responsibility to bring a message of reconciliation goes beyond even the image of being “good stewards” of creation. As ambassadors, Christians must act in ways that bring about justice for all creation.

***“Moved by what moves all else”: Remembering and Celebrating God’s Actions***

Memory is, of course, an integral part of human identity. Memories define us and shape us, which is why the heartbreak of conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer’s is so pronounced. In the Christian context, memory also directs and shapes the life of the church because “a person who remembers God allows his or her entire being and activity to be directed by God. [...] Remembrance or recollection cannot be separated from action” (Jones 435). In worship, the celebration of memory ranges from the collective liturgical memory of the universal church (as in the celebration of communion or of Easter) to the memory of God’s acts within a specific church body. Notably, worship celebrates the being of God as realized through God’s actions. Remembrance brings the past into the present; remembering becomes re-*membering*, or

the bringing together of the body in Christ. Memory situates us in a larger context by bringing together past and present, not in fits of nostalgia, but rather as a readjusting perspective.

For all five poets in this study, memory serves as an entrance to worship because even non-liturgical memory often serves as an indicator of God's presence in the world. Through their poetry, they become aware of how memory collapses time and space into a present moment. As a component of worship, memory emphasizes interconnectedness of past and present, God's gift of creation, and God's actions in creation. This awareness of and respect for interconnectedness can lead to decisive action. For these poets, that decisive action becomes a pattern of living in both their relationships and their art. Wendell Berry associates memory with the land itself. In working the land that his forebears worked, he chooses to prioritize care for that land. Knowing that his actions impact those people who will come to the land after he is gone, as well as the land itself, the poet-farmer seeks to live in such a way as to honor both creation and Creator. It is not surprising to find that just three years after he published *Farming: A Handbook*, he published *The Country of Marriage* (1973). After a volume of poetry dealing with the intricacies of farm life, Berry turns his attention to the relationships that extend from that life: past and present, land and people, husband and wife. Such attention to relationships is fitting in the context of a worship discussion. As John D. Witvliet, Director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship notes, "worship reflects, embodies, and enacts a rich tapestry of relationships" not only between God and creation but with creation as well ("Opening" 23). Even the title, *Country of Marriage*, reveals how interconnectedness binds the poet more intimately to a place.



Berry's insistence on the importance of memory is not a "nostalgic call to a lost past" but instead a call to "begin where we are" with awareness and intention (Bonzo and Stevens 16, Berry, *Way of Ignorance* 78). Thus, rather than lose himself in "the good old days," Berry's remembering is a way of honoring creation and Creator in the present moment. For all of the poets, including Berry, memory centers on others and involves a relinquishing of self. The epigraph to *Country of Marriage* comes from John 12:24 and reads: "except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone." He echoes this sentiment in one of the volume's early poems titled simply "Poem":

Willing to die,  
you give up  
your will, keep still  
until, moved  
by what moves  
all else, you move. (*CP* 145)

Here, the death is not of body but of will. And as the speaker empties himself of his own will, he is filled with that which "moves / all else," which arguably for Berry refers to the Holy Spirit or to God (145). Though the poem begins in stillness and awareness, it culminates in action. Mindfulness of God's continued presence leads both to action and to fellowship, as might be indicated by the epigraph and the use of second person within the poem. The second person implicates the reader as part of the community, but it could also be addressing the seed itself. In this way, Berry finds inspiration in the seed that would give up its present form to be transformed into something greater. As an apostrophe to a seed or a call to action to his reader, Berry

suggests a kinship with all “willing to die” into a greater fellowship of creation. Similarly in worship, the stillness of prayer and praise should prepare the worshipper for action. For Berry, action even encompasses the making of the poem. As Li-Young Lee noted, even the process of creating the poem involves a similar outpouring of self, one that begins in silence and ends in praise, what he terms an “excess” of beauty and response to beauty (*Alabaster* 85). Harold Best argues that the “making of art, for all believers everywhere, is an act of worship” (213). For Berry, the memory that begins with the land (the material of creation) turns to the mover of creation and leads to both action and fellowship.

Sometimes the action associated with memory leads to fellowship with others, and sometimes, as in “Planting Trees” leads to fellowship with creation. In this poem, the memory of the “old forest / that stood here when we came” moves the speaker to action: to “return to the ground its original music” in the form of new trees that will outlast his own presence on the land (*CP* 155). The speaker, in turning his attention to the memory of what came before him on the land, sees beyond his own need in this place. His action is both the result of and a form of worship, a prayer of sorts. The music he returns to the ground becomes a “horizon / and orison, the voice of the winds” (155). Here again, human action gives voice to creation. The interconnectedness begins in memory and then extends to the future:

Let me desire and wish well the life  
these trees may live when I  
no longer rise in the mornings  
to be pleased by the green of them  
shining, and their shadows on the ground,

and the sound of the wind in them. (155)

The poem ends here with a prayer that he might see beyond his own pleasure in their beauty. Like Oliver who prays to be “something useful,” Berry suggests that his own action of planting trees must respond to more than simply his own love of them. Berry prays for the good life of these trees, that when he is gone, the trees might become both “horizon and orison” of this place, giving voice to the winds in a prayer of their own (155). The task is not simply to plant trees, but to enter into the memory of the old forest and the future of the forest to come.

For Mary Oliver, the memory of God’s continued presence in creation is never far from her own poetry. In *Thirst* (2006), her poetry dwells on God’s historical acts, specifically through communion (the celebration of Christ’s own death and resurrection) and of creation itself. In “Coming to God: First Days,” the cup and the bread of communion help the poet to “enter the language of transformation” which is not simply “stillness” but an invitation to active participation (23). In the same way that she would “run for you [the Lord]” or “climb the highest tree” she would “learn also to kneel down / into the world of the invisible, / the inscrutable and the everlasting” (23). For Oliver, the stillness often associated with communion cannot simply be to receive the sacraments with “hands folded” (23). Instead, it leads to active participation in nature, which is as sacred for her as any church building.<sup>69</sup> For Oliver, action often begins in meditation and prayer. In “The Real Prayers are not Words, but the Attention that Comes First,” she devotes ten of twelve lines to the details of a hawk’s flight and its physical being. Only in the final two lines, as the bird flies away, does her “mind [sing] out” (*NS II* 15). Her prayer becomes a question: “oh all that loose, blue rink / of sky, where does it go to, and why?” (15).

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<sup>69</sup> I do not intend to dismiss the worship that occurs within the church building. What Oliver contends, I believe, is that, too often, worship begins and ends in this designated place. To engage a life of worship requires one to acknowledge that worship may take place outside those walls as well.

The immediate action of her attention to the hawk is a prayer, and the prayer itself directs her to a question of being.

Oliver continues to emphasize involvement that must *begin* with meditation but cannot end there. In the subsequent “What I Have Learned So Far,” her attention to creation is important, and it does lead to the description of prayer that opens the poem:

Meditation is old and honorable, so why should I  
Not sit every morning of my life, on the hillside,  
Looking into the shining world? (*NSII* 57)

Though the poet’s respect for creation and her reflection on it is part of an old tradition (and perhaps a reference to her earlier work), only *action* can bring worship to fruition:

[...] Because, properly attended to, delight as well as havoc, is suggestion. Can one be passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit to no labor in its cause? I don’t think so. (57)

In “Real Prayers” the poet’s *mind* “sang out,” but in this poem the poet realizes that “thought buds toward radiance” (15, 57). It is not enough to think about the beauty of creation. Instead, “the gospel of / light is the crossroads of—indolence, or action” (57). Attention and mediation are only first steps. Without the “labor,” that follows, the poet might as well “be gone”. Thus, the poet’s resolution to the question of being posed in “Real Prayers” about the sky is to be a part of it, to be “ignited” for it (57). The speaker experiences a sort of personal Pentecost, ignited by the fire of “the holy,” the poem her vehicle of expression. Just as the disciples who experienced

the fiery blessing of the Holy Spirit spread the message of the gospel throughout Jerusalem, (in what could be described as *delight* and *havoc*), so too does the speaker embrace the message of the gospel—to be committed to labor in its cause.

In Oliver's more recent work, she begins to blend traditional and non-traditional worship actions. Oliver's poetry often focuses on her love of creation, but as she also embraces the traditional worship gestures of kneeling, she suggests that the love of God must be connected to her love of creation. As a traditional response, Oliver emphasizes the importance of kneeling as a form of active worship that extends from her recollection and awareness of God's work in the world.<sup>70</sup> The kneeling posture suggests both an act of praise and a posture of humble life. And notably, Oliver's obeisance always takes place within creation, giving evidence to "long conversation in [her] heart" between "love for the earth and love for [the Lord]" that she notes in the epilogue to *Thirst* (69). For David Peterson, kneeling as part of worship indicates "gratitude," "recognition of God's character and not merely his presence," and "total dependence" on God for provision of needs (63). Though kneeling can suggest many different aspects of worship, Peterson notes that most importantly, bowing and kneeling before God "came to represent devotion and submission to the Lord as a pattern of life" (63). Thus, Oliver's speaker begins to understand what it means to "come to God" in terms of kneeling, "like a wanderer who has come home at last / and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things; every motion, even words" (*Thirst* 23). For Oliver, kneeling is a measure of obedience, of stillness before God that is much harder to master than running or climbing (as she mentions should would do for the Lord in the previous stanza). Her "pattern of life" includes not only a

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<sup>70</sup> In this poem and in several other poems in *Thirst*, Oliver chooses kneeling as an indication of worship or praise. See p. 26 and p. 58.

love for creation, which she has always maintained, but also a love for and obedience to God that brings purpose to her love for creation.

For Li-Young Lee, memory, especially of personal relationships, leads to the mystery he finds essential for a life of worship (*Alabaster* 80). Lee suggests that poetry has the power to unite mystery and memory and bring the poet to action. He says poetry “is the practice of [...] living” that energizes religion (81, 80). His Chinese cultural background gives him a sense that the future, not the past, lies behind us, and thus memory becomes a way of cataloguing who we are in the present moment (79). More so than Berry or Oliver, Lee often begins with an intensely personal and specific memory and builds to an understanding of how his own action in the world will or must change because of that memory, which often reveals emotional and spiritual realities (*Alabaster* 41). According to Lee, remembering actually re-orders the mind and prepares him for “act[ing] better in the world” because of the way it links him in relationship to those around him (80).

Li-Young Lee is certainly concerned with the health of the world, though often he presents this concern in the context of relationships. Lee’s unity of relationships begins with his personal experience as an exile and immigrant, as well as his close connection to his family. In Lee’s *City in Which I Love You* he explores the unity of immigrant relationships in “The Cleaving”. In this poem, the Chinese butcher becomes a symbol of all people who have made a new life beyond the borders of their homeland. In the butcher Lee sees his brother, his grandfather, his sister, and even himself. The butcher, as this symbol of cultural heritage in transition becomes “keeper of Sabbaths, [and] diviner / of holy texts” (86-87). The rich amalgamation of relationships revealed in the butcher’s face provides cause for gratitude and

celebration, as in a communion-like ceremony, the speaker “eats my man” and “receive[s]” from him “the covenant of the opened and the opener” (80, 86). The relationships the butcher represents bring wholeness to the immigrant speaker. In the speaker’s experience, “the soul / is cleaved so that it might be restored” (86). As an immigrant and exile himself, he knows that leaving one’s homeland is part of that cleaving and restoring process. But he also learns that the restoration process brings the intimacy of familial relationships even between strangers. By the final lines of the poem, he sees not only a relative, but a reflection of himself: “this Chinese / I daily face, / this immigrant, / this man with my own face” (87). Through his experience in this butcher shop, he has figuratively opened himself to all people to experience a type of *koinonia*, or fellowship. Colin E. Gunton describes the ramifications of *koinonia* in his recent work on the Trinity: Communion with others allows a person to “transcend the merely individual state that is a denial of human fullness” (216). From such communion comes relationship to the world; that is, the fullness of humanity comes from communion with all creation that reflects the communion of the Trinity itself. Gunton continues saying, “the shape that the world takes is in large part determined by what we, the human creation, make of it” (216). Lee’s attention to relationships, then, offers an important first step in attention to creation itself. Without human community, a community that includes creation will be difficult to establish.

Lee presents this type of unity in all three of his volumes, but with a newfound vigor in his most recent volume, *Book of My Nights* (2001). In this volume, he focuses more on the implication of his familial relationships for his own life of worship. In “The Hammock” Lee juxtaposes two seemingly insignificant moments of rest: his head in his mother’s lap, and his son’s head in his own lap (BN 48). The title itself indicates the lazy rest of a summer afternoon,

but Lee's rest is neither insignificant nor lazy. In the first stanza, he has only memories of his mother's love for him and the certainty that "day hides the stars" (48). Even should night come, the starlight would light the way. In the second stanza, he has worries for the future and faith that "there are stars we haven't heard from yet" (48). Though he can "know" the heavens with a certain surety, he does not know his mother's or son's thoughts. He begins the final stanza with that uncertainty:

Between two unknowns, I live my life.  
Between my mother's hopes, older than I am  
by coming before me, and my child's wishes, older than I am  
by outliving me. And what's it like?  
Is it a door, and good-bye on either side?  
A window, and eternity on either side?  
Yes, and a little singing between two great rests. (48)

The generations always overlap one another in Lee's poetry. And in this poem, he is no longer the child looking up to his father. Now he maintains the middle, looking backward and forward like Berry's planter of trees (48). In the middle, Lee's speaker knows a taste of both "its" to which he refers, that is, birth and death. The poem, itself a vehicle of worship, is the expression of his entire life, the "singing between two great rests" (48). Memory situates Lee in a present full of past and future and prepares him for participation in community, for praise of life.

While Lee's poetry often centers on an intensely private memory, the work of Charles Wright often begins with a stray literary line or a long-ago visited place, his craft of poetry inextricably linked to the art of remembering. In this way, his entire vocation gives evidence to a



life of worship, or the pursuit of God. Though Wright is often preoccupied with absence, his “via negativa,” the praise he associates with landscape, the past, and the craft of writing, becomes for him a “*raison d’etre* [...] for doing it and doing it again” (Costello, “Via” 341; Denham 126). Memory offers redemption, both for the landscape and the poet (*NB* 83.)<sup>71</sup> Memory functions most redemptively in the final two volumes of *Negative Blue: Black Zodiac* and *Appalachia*. James Logenbach describes Wright’s attention to memory and to God through landscape as “a foretelling that our lives will be made meaningful by the end toward which they move” (94). Literary memory and personal memory come together to form the basis for Wright’s pursuit of God.

In “Remembering Spello, Sitting Outside in Prampolini’s Garden,” the poet-speaker contemplates his time in Italy from his “plastic lawn chair” perch in his own Virginian back yard (*NB* 184). The memory begins in the sky with the “limp leaves of the grape arbor” and the “song birds” who “slither and peel back” (184). The sky so often disappoints Wright, as he longs to see the certainty of God in heaven, but in this moment, the sky offers a glimpse of at least the faithful:

High in the Umbrian sky, the ghosts  
Of true saints pinwheel and congregate like pale, afternoon  
clouds  
Ready to jump-start the universe (184)

And though the poem ends firmly on the earth (“just under the surface of the earth” to be exact), this initial memory not only “jump-starts” the poem but it elevates the poet’s experience in his

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<sup>71</sup> “What I remember redeems me.”: From “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” (*BZ* 15, *NB* 83)

present place. As in the much-debated “Gates of Propertius” and “Monte Subasio,” the memory of landscape grounds his immersion in the landscape of his back yard.

During his remembrance, time continues to move forward. The setting sun breaks into the speaker’s reverie, and in the half-light, “the early apricots start to shine,~forty watt bulbs / against the sundowned and mottled plain” (184). The twilight seems to bridge the distance from back yard to Spello, Italy. The mottled plain could be here or there, as he explores in the next stanza:

No word for time, no word for God, landscape exists outside  
each,  
But stays, incurable ache, both things,

And bears me out as evening darkens and steps forth (184)

The opening lines illustrate the poet’s rumination on time and God. Landscape, in the memory of Spello or in his own garden, becomes the expression for both in the word play on “stays,” which can mean “to stop” or “to remain” (OED 1014). The word play extends to the “incurable ache,” suggesting the potential of landscape to bring the poet deeper into the wordless soul (as in “Drone and Ostinato”). Wright’s language is so condensed as to suggest that without words for time and God, the landscape may encompass, or even transcend the need to name them.

Wright’s landscape is powerful enough to bear him out into the darkness, presumably a real darkness and the darkness of wrestling with time and God.

Remembering, for Wright, leads to a life of seeking and acknowledging God that begins with landscape. Robert Denham notes this tendency in Wright’s poems to contain “hymn-like

expressions of wonder,” is a combination of “writing as praise” and “praise of for the past” (126). In praising things of the world, in which Wright finds an expression of God, Wright also gives over his creative life to recording God’s articulation of being through landscape. As Wright notes in one of his earlier poems, “what I remember is how / I remember it” (“Language Journal” 218).<sup>72</sup> If taken in the context of this poem, *what* he remembers--the landscape in Italy, time, and God—is *how* he remembers it, with its cloudlike saints and geographical immensity. The poet finds himself beneath and between the “what” and the “how”. The memory of the bright Italian landscape provides solace as night falls, carrying in it something of the poet and something of God, partly safe and partly disconcerting. Even though his body is “snug” in this life “as a gun in its carrying case,” or “as an old language,” he becomes “unearthly and dispossessed” (184). In direct contrast with the weight of the Monte Subasio or the Gates of Propertius, his plastic lawn chair seems to offer little protection or depth of memory.

Even from his lawn chair, however, he can direct his vision to “the turning stars” that echo the “pinwheeling” of the “true” Umbrian saints. Memory collapses the past and present. By taking in everything, the whole landscape of the past and present, the poet “watch[es] everything and see[s] nothing” (184). The void, or the “nothing” might first seem a reflection on God’s absence, but could also be interpreted as an emptying of self. That is, if landscape is partly a reflection of self, to “see nothing” becomes a conscious emptying. To be “Like a Roman statue” indicates his own sense of being classically formed, perhaps by a lifetime his pursuit of God. And though the stars turn and twinkle, their light may already be extinguished thousands of light years away, thus rendering what he sees into “nothing”. Most importantly, however, this

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<sup>72</sup> From *World of Ten Thousand Things* (1991)—a collection of his work from 1980-90.

move away from vision prepares the poet to experience the dark that “steps forth” to bear him out of his own body in the earlier stanza:

Just under the surface of the earth,

The traffic continues to glide by

All night with its lights off. (185)

The image unites Spello and Virginia: the ancient medieval and Renaissance churches, whose foundations dig deep into the past, with the echo of suburban traffic just beyond his lawn chair. Yet, this is no ordinary traffic, but perhaps the traffic of memory or the traffic of the dead. As he becomes “unearthly and dispossessed” of his normal senses, he is able to sense what is beyond landscape and memory. Like the traffic that “continues to glide by,” this “beyond” is always present. Memory and landscape help him to apprehend it.

Though not a typical form of worship, Wright’s lifelong pursuit of landscape, language, and the idea of God is an artistic worship (*QN* 123). Harold Best claims artistic pursuit as part of worship, noting that “it is not the artist’s task to imitate God’s creation” but “to peer into every detail of his handiwork, to be humbled by what is learned” (213). Wright’s perception of the earth as landscape pushes him more toward Best’s category of artist. Wright’s poetry begins in humility at the immensity of landscape—past and present—and becomes a part of his poetic process. Wright responds to God’s own creation through the constructing and reconstructing of landscapes. Wright’s own words, a response to the Incarnate Word, allow him to be formed much like Oliver’s kneeling posture. As he seeks God through landscape, Wright also seeks transformation into something greater. His poetry, his life of worship, consistently confronts the potential of creation and of self to be more, to come into contact with the eternal.

James Still's concern for the integrity of the Appalachian hills he called home begins with his first volume of poetry, *Hounds on the Mountain*. In this volume, he explores the sometimes destructive relationship between humans and the earth. And while Still does not use overtly Christian language in this volume, he does attend to religious themes, which, given his upbringing and his attention to Christian themes in his later poetry and his early fiction, suggests that those religious themes could be construed as Christian in this volume. Still's speakers often bear a collective memory of the earth, and as his speakers attend to these memories, they become aware of a creation that would offer up its own song of praise. This type of memory directs and focuses human attention and allows the speaker to participate with creation in that praise. In a reverse of James Torrance's claim that human praise "gathers up the worship of all creation," Still's careful observers are gathered up into nature's song (Torrance 13). In many of Still's poems, the song of creation has been interrupted by humans, and the attention to remembering it becomes suggests both a responsibility for the past and future.

Still's poem "Passenger Pigeons" appears in the "Death on the Mountain" section of *Hounds*. In the final poem in its section, "Passenger Pigeons," Still's distanced speaker observes the now-extinct but majestic birds: "a symphony of wings, / an aerial river of birds across the sky" (39).<sup>73</sup> The multitudes of these birds, with their "slate-blue feathers" and their "host of violet throats" could sometimes darken the skies for hours or even days (Sullivan 210-13). In the early nineteenth century, the birds numbered an estimated five billion, more than any other bird species on the continent (Smith 359).

The present-day speaker accesses the memory of the pigeon, which the poet likely never witnessed (since their numbers were decimated by the late 1800s and he was born in 1906),

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<sup>73</sup> The last known passenger pigeon died in captivity in the Cincinnati Zoo on Sept. 1, 1914.

through imagination, research, or perhaps through the memories of his elders. The parallel structure of the two stanzas begin with the retrospective “Here was” and “Here were” to describe this vision of flocking pigeons. While the first stanza concentrates on the awe inspired by the sheer magnitude of their flocks, the second stanza takes a darker turn:

Here were red feet of pigeons spilling  
Like blood through the trees, breaking the forest down  
In their dense roosting wild with guttural cooing.  
Here in this weight of wings were folded death and dust. (39)

As Mick Smith notes, the pigeons’ “flocks were so large that their roosts could cover more than fifty square miles, [and] their collective weight was so great that branches and even whole trees collapsed beneath them” (360). These final lines offer an interesting shift in perspective from the “symphony of wings” to the “wild, guttural cooing.” The speaker suggests that the birds’ magnificence wanes when they compete with humans. As long as they inhabit the sky, their sound is a “symphony,” but when they consume all the space among the trees, they become a threat. Though the last stanza can seem a denunciation of the pigeons, it can also read as the human reaction to the pigeons. By the mid-1800s, humans were claiming and culling the pigeons’ oak forest habitats. As humans hunted the birds into extinction for food and sport, their blood was “spilling through the trees” as humans went about “breaking the forest down” (39). The sheer abundance of birds did not guarantee survival, but in fact doomed them to “dust and death,” due to the impression that they were abundant, easy to hunt, and seemed to be competing with more desirable wildlife. In terms of an environmental ethic, the dual implications in the

final stanza suggest the great tie between humans and creation and bodes as a warning as well as an observation.

For Still, then, the question often remains: how to hear the “symphony” in the “guttural cooing”? This question, a question of worship and praise, nearly always presents itself in Still’s poetry in the form of music, so integral to Appalachian life. In a poem from the title section of *Hounds*, Still explores the interplay between human song and creation song. In his “When the Dulcimers are Gone” the speaker imagines life without the instrument: “When the dulcimers are mingled with the dust / of flowering chestnut” (12). Notably, dulcimers were often crafted from chestnut, maple, and walnut wood, but at the time of the poem, the chestnut was disappearing quickly from American forests. The speaker compares the dulcimer’s song not to anything human but to “flights of swallows” and the fragrance of “jasmine after freshening rain” (12). But without the human-plucked or hammered instrument to sing “gentle words in mild abandon,” the forest itself will take up the song. Like the stones who would cry out in the disciples’ stead:

The tulip tree the lyre one must heed  
When the dulcimers are gone, when afternoons attend  
The silver underleaf of poplars in the wind (12)

The speaker emphasizes a human presence with his reference to “one,” indicating that perhaps what is lost is the intimate knowledge of the music-making itself. For Still, the loss of the dulcimer indicates a loss of mountain culture tied to a life of song.<sup>74</sup> While worship, as I have argued already, is not limited to song and prayer, it is an important part of expressing worship, a decisive action meant solely for expression. As Harold Best notes, “we do not sing or pray or

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<sup>74</sup> See other poems where song and music figures intimately in the life of Still’s subjects, such as “Death on the Mountain” (*Hounds* 32), “Fiddlers’ Convention on Troublesome Creek” (FMV 62), “I Shall Go Singing” (FMV 91), and “Fiddle” (FMV 96).

preach in order to worship. Rather, we do these things because we are already at worship” (212). Though the dulcimer’s song is not here directly associated with human worship, the fact that the forest would take up its missing song, suggests the connections between memory, this mountain life of song and a life of worship.

In a later poem, Still focuses on human song and its place in the song of creation. James Still’s “I Shall Go Singing” appeared in *Arcadian Life* in 1938, just a year after the publication of *Hounds on the Mountain*, and takes a more hopeful, celebratory tone than most of the poems from the previous volume. While many of those poems seem elegiac or admonitory, “I Shall Go Singing” portrays a speaker who has no choice but to sing as the fulfillment of his long life:

Until the leaf of my face withers,  
Until my veins are blue as flying geese,  
And the mossed shingles of my voice clatter  
In winter wind, I shall be young and have my say. (*FMFV* 91)

The song of his old age is also a song of youth. Though he may be older and time may not slow for him, his song, arguably a song of praise, does not change. If indeed this is a song of praise (as the next lines suggest), then its unchanged quality makes sense as a reflection of the unchanging character of God. Through his own voice, he “shall give words to rain and tongues to stones / And the child in me shall speak his turn, / And the old , old man rattle his bones” (91). In his song, youth, age, and the mute world of creation come together.

As in Psalm 148, praise transcends age, gender, human, and non-human in worship. The psalmist exhorts all creatures (sun, moon, sea monsters, wild creatures, cattle, Kings of the earth, and even young men and women) to “praise the Lord” (Psalm 148: 1, 3, 7, 10-13). For the



psalmist, God provides unity in worship and makes worship possible (“He raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful” Psalm 148:14). As a central activity of the poet’s life, then, singing brings a similar type of unity. Even in death, the speaker will praise:

Until my blood purples like castor bean stalks,  
I shall go singing, my words like hawks. (91)

The poem itself is his song, as are all his poems. In this way, he combines the practice of poetry with his connection to the natural world. Every image in this poem connects his song and his life to the leaves or the birds or the plants he knows so well.

Berry also experiences this type of unity in terms of Sabbath and gift. Sabbath, a designated holy time of creation rest and celebration offers an opportunity for the poet to experience “the song of Heaven’s Sabbath fleshed / in throat and ear, in stream and stone” (*TC* 43). As the speaker climbs “higher / in the hill’s fold” on this Sabbath, he loses a sense of past and present enveloped instead by the more transcendent and eternal “song” of creation itself (43). Immersed in Sabbath time, the “man who seems to be / a gardener” is also immersed in the “thrush song, stream song, holy love / that flows through earthly forms and folds” (43). Unlike Still, who sings his own song, Berry begins with quiet, and allows praise to emanate from the earth itself. In this gift of time and place, the gardener takes root “like a tree” and becomes an accompaniment to creation’s song (43). For both poets, song and poem emanate from their lives of worship. Their decisions to live in harmony with creation extend from their awareness of the past and of God’s presence.

Li-young Lee hears God in the collective song of the earth. When Lee focuses on memory, he can also participate in the song. In “The Sleepless,” the speaker wakes in the middle

of the night, but without fear because “all of night [is] / the only safe place” (*BN* 32). Though the poet wakes thinking of death, he is “falling toward beginning” as if death were merely another starting point, or perhaps a place of remaking (32). The speaker is known here, he is “spoken for” and never far from a “near hand” (32). The hand close to him could refer to his wife, who probably lies close to him as he sleeps, to those who have already died, or to death itself. He is welcome in both realms, however, and in each, the touch associated with familiarity sustains him. In the “stillness” surrounding the sound of his own name:

[...] I found my inborn minutes  
decreed, my death appointed  
and appointing.

Like Berry (in “Planting Trees”), Lee finds the fact of his own death “appointing,” requires some action of him. He seems untroubled by the thought of his own death, and through song (or poetry) enacts his “appointing”:

[...] And singing  
collects the earth  
about my rest,  
making of my heart  
the way home. (32)

In memory are the connections and relationships that sustain him in life and in death. As the earth gathers about him in his singing, the way “home” is through such relationships. Like the other poets, Lee finds that a life of worship always carries the weight of these relationships. The fullness of these relationships in the present and the past culminates in the song that sustains him.

### *A Pattern of Unity: Some Conclusions about Worship*

Worship has long been associated with praying and singing and the liturgy of the church; and indeed, all of these things are part of worship. But worship is and should be a way of living life that honors the object of worship. For Christians, the choice to worship God means “we must ask ourselves about the *fittingness* of all our actions in light of our worship before God” (Stubbs 144, author’s emphasis). For Christians who deny a responsibility to creation and to the environment, this view requires a re-evaluation of what worship means. N.T. Wright suggests that worship requires us to be firmly planted in this world as we “affirm our faith in the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit” (*Worth* 31). Indeed, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity provides, as Richard Sibbes says, “a pattern for our unity” that is a model for human community, community with creation, and the church as a body (194). Both anamnesis and the cross lead to decisive action that preserves and sometimes creates such unity. Celebration of God’s actions within history and of Christ’s resurrection necessitates a life of *doing* justice to all creation in the name of God.

These five poets are already providing models of holistic worship. Their poetry is an outpouring of that worship, a celebration of God and creation. Their subject is not worship itself, but rather their poetry embraces a life of worship, a pursuit of God through God’s creation. Berry, Oliver, and Still choose to enact this celebration through their close connection to the earth itself, with attention to the past and to the history of God’s actions in the land they love and call home. Lee chooses the participation in human relationships that situates him in community. An important element of the Christian environmental ethic, human community is often dismissed as part of an environmental ethic because of its emphasis on humanity. However, as Douglas G.

Adams notes, a “first step in creation consciousness is recognizing ourselves and our activities as part of God’s creation and not alien to it” (433). Strong human community can lead to responsible interaction with the rest of creation. Wright’s worship centers on this recognition of human-centered creation consciousness with his attention to human-framed landscape. But his commitment to landscape also ensures his commitment to his search for God, both within and beyond the frame of human vision.

These poets choose this world, not over heaven, but as an expression of heaven. They do, as N.T. Wright suggests all believers must: “live and [...] speak in such a way [...] as to demonstrate and to announce that there is a different way of being human, the way of love, the way of God” (*Worth* 49-50). For these poets, the “way of love” becomes a life of poetic worship that celebrates the “way of God” through love of his creation. They enact the pattern of outpouring modeled in the Trinity with attention to the history of God’s presence in creation.

## Conclusion

Though many other genres make important contributions to ecocriticism and to environmental theory, I believe poetry offers an actual expression of life directed toward God in community. The poetry of Berry, Still, Oliver, Wright, and Lee in particular model practical and purposeful interaction with creation. I see in their poetry a fundamental response to creation that shares with Christian thinking an emphasis on action and on interaction, a way of living that acknowledges the importance of creation. Implicated as part of creation ourselves, Christians who take up the call of Christ necessarily take up the call to love the world. Each of these poets offers a unique perspective on such a life.

Berry and Still emphasize service to the land as required by understanding land as a gift from God. They also suggest that God's land gift purposefully involves humans in the ongoing process of creation. As my own three-year old son this summer discovered the wonder of a tiny seed that yielded a harvest of fat, glowingly orange pumpkins, so do those who work the land in Berry's poetry rejoice as the "light lie[s] down" only to "rise again" in harvest" (*CP* 103). Sowing and planting physically involve the sower in creation's cycle of renewal. Both poets see in these cycles a reflection of God's own involvement in the world, both through creation and through Christ's resurrection. Working the land, then, draws both men into the life of God through the soil.

Good work, both with plough and pen, culminates in the celebration of the Sabbath. But rather than offering passive rest or physical sleep, the Sabbath is a chance to participate in God's own work of creation; as Berry notes, "what is begun is unfinished" (*TC* 6-7). The Sabbath recalls God's intended unity for creation and prefigures God's eventual working out of

reconciliation when we “shall not labor in vain,” and when “the wolf and lamb shall feed together” (Isaiah 65: 23-25). Oliver’s vision of Sabbath places her squarely in the “wordless, singing world” (*NSII* 6). As part of an environmental ethic, the Sabbath allows for fallowness, which is not idleness but rather the active process of regeneration—a key understanding in Sabbath rest. Still joins in that process, letting both his heart and hill rest “in this purple hour” (*FMFV* 33). More than anything, Sabbath rest requires human creation to come into the presence of the Creator God alongside non-human creation. The camaraderie of created things necessarily leads to a more responsible pattern of living.

Even wilderness fosters community between humans and creation. The old adage I see on every backcountry trail guide says, “leave only footprints, take only pictures.” Interestingly, though, these guides never prohibit exploration; rather, they encourage restraint. Like Oliver’s experience with the fawn in “Climbing Pinnacle” or Still’s winter experience in “Spring on Troublesome Creek,” restraint is both a reaction to wilderness and a lesson of wilderness (*NSII* 26-27, *HM* 20). As the untamed aspect of nature, wilderness reminds us of the entire earth’s gift quality, not just farmed land. The recent Pixar film, *Up* (2009), highlights the distinction between restrained and malevolent interaction as the main characters (Carl Fredricksen and Russell) struggle to save a rare bird from a trophy-hunting collector who would kill the bird simply to claim bragging rights and fame. In the final scenes, with the bird safe and the selfish villain gone, the house Carl and Russell used to float to Paradise Falls rests beside the falls in an image of companionship rather than opposition. The house, a domestic, human symbol, sits easily beside the wild, untamed falls. Like the film, Still, Oliver, and Berry detail the potential

for good and harm when humans interact with wilderness. However, like the final scene, their own poetry suggests the potential for a positive relationship.

The restraint of wilderness can also be applied to the urban and suburban experience. Indeed, the vision of New Jerusalem is a vision of spiritual, physical, and ecological wholeness that relieves the fragmentation of categories (urban, agrarian, cultivated, wilderness, rural, suburban). In this vision of a restored and holy city, God does not even need a temple because the restoration is so complete that he simply dwells within the city itself. And through the city runs a river, clean and life-giving. To achieve such a balance and harmony would indeed require restraint. Lee, in particular, focuses on the potential of our present cities to practice restraint and reconciliation. In his “The City in Which I Love You” he wants to be “threshed to excellence” in order to achieve that vision (53). For Lee, the excellence that will bring unity—now and in the future—comes from God. Wright, also seeks God’s ineffable presence, but in the suburbs. For Wright, landscape offers insight into God’s own being. For both poets, these urban and suburban spaces, often dismissed as part of an environmental philosophy, are not only important, but they encompass the reality for most Americans.

I see these poets enacting a life of worship. This quality, I believe, sets them apart from other nature or ecological poets. If participation in ecological wholeness is a participation in the life of God, and human life and art is an expression of that worship, then ecological mindedness becomes an organic, purpose-filled activity. As a Christian, embracing the cross and the promise of resurrection provides reason enough to care for creation. But beyond providing a reason, the resurrection requires that Christians carry the good news of God’s salvation, God’s love for creation, not just to people, but to creation itself. That means seeing the human body as part of

the created order, understanding spiritual health as connected to physical health and to the physical health of the environment around us. That means tough choices sometimes about how we live our lives, choices these poets have made and that are evidenced in poetry. If Christians proclaim the resurrection, then we need to, as Wendell Berry says, “practice resurrection” (*CP* 152). That is, we need to act in ways that show commitment to Christ’s mission of reconciliation of all things to him. Because God chooses the world, so must we. These five poets enact a life of worship, providing a model of interaction with creation that aligns with the scriptural call to care for the world.



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## VITA

Heather M. Hoover was born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana. She attended the Wayne Township schools in Indianapolis, including Ben Davis High School. After high school, she chose a smaller, liberal arts environment in the south. At Milligan College, she developed a love for twentieth century American literature. In 1998, she graduated *cum laude* from Milligan with a Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in English and Humanities and a secondary teaching certificate. While teaching high school English, Heather pursued a master's degree at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and also enrolled in the summer writing program at the University of New Hampshire. This time in New England was formative, and the encouragement Heather received convinced her to pursue more graduate work. Though she began the Master's degree at Dartmouth, she finished the degree at East Tennessee State University in 2004, where her husband took a job as a physician. She matriculated into the doctoral program at the University of Tennessee in 2005 and plans to graduate in May 2010. In 2007, she accepted a tenure-track position at Milligan College as an assistant professor of English and Composition and the Director of Writing. She recently passed her three-year review at Milligan and continues to enjoy teaching and directing the writing program.