Culture of the Land: A Series in the New Agrarianism

This series is devoted to the exploration and articulation of a new agrarianism that considers the health of habitats and human communities together. It demonstrates how agrarian insights and responsibilities can be worked out in diverse fields of learning and living: history, science, art, politics, economics, literature, philosophy, religion, urban planning, education, and public policy. Agrarianism is a comprehensive worldview that appreciates the intimate and practical connections that exist between humans and the earth. It stands as our most promising alternative to the unsustainable and destructive ways of current global, industrial, and consumer culture.

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The Dark Night of the Soil

An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life

> [God] is at a total remove from every condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, unity, limit, infinity, the totality of existence. And yet, since it is the underpinning of goodness, and by merely being there is the cause of everything, to praise this divinely beneficent Providence you must turn to all of creation. It is there at the center of everything and everything has it for a destiny.
> —Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*

> We are all praising, praying to
> The light we are, but cannot know.
> —Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths*

In "The Long-Legged House" (1969), Wendell Berry wrote that as a writer his struggle has not been to find a subject but rather to know what to do with the subject he has been entrusted with from the beginning. The subject he was referring to was Henry County, Kentucky, the region of his birth: "I was so intricately dependent on this place that I did not begin in any meaningful sense to be a writer until I began to see the place clearly and for what it was." Seeing a place clearly, Berry notes, is "an enormous labor," one that begins with the realization that we belong to a place rather than the other way around. To know that we are not the owners or possessors of the world amounts to a "startling reversal of our ordinary sense of things" and culminates, at least for Berry, in what became his governing ambition: "to be altogether at home here." The ambition to allow oneself to be entirely governed by a place, by one's belonging to thrushes and herons—this aspiration being the briefest and clearest characterization of "agrarianism"—is "a spiritual ambition, like goodness." While other creatures instinctually live in place, human beings must make the choice—informed by intelligence, propriety, and virtue—to *be* in place: "It is an ambition I cannot hope to succeed in wholly, but I have come to believe that it is the most worthy of all."[1]

It is unlikely that many would call Berry's ambition *mystical*, particularly if we go by popular characterizations of the term restricting it to obscure and esoteric teachings or exceptional, ecstatic experiences providing direct access to and awareness of the sacred. According to this common view, a mystic is someone who has extraordinary states of consciousness in which unity with the divine is achieved. As William James famously put it, a mystic has a special faculty, much like the musician has a special ear, that is open to particularly intense states of feeling reaching into depths of truth "unplumbed by the discursive intellect" and beyond the reach of institutional religious authority.[2] Mystics, in other words, are people possessed by special powers that take them out of the realm of the ordinary, out of the places of daily life and struggle, and into the holy realm of an ineffable God.

Defining Mysticism

For a number of reasons, this characterization of mysticism, though having historical precedent, needs to be challenged and corrected, particularly in a self-absorbed time like our own when creation itself is threatened by neglect, abuse, or outright destruction.[3] Rather than being a peculiar type of experience or paranormal state of consciousness, mysticism is better understood as a practical process and a way of life that is, in principle, available to everyone. Though his or her goal is an encounter with God, a mystic is someone who is particularly open and attentive to the presence of God in this life and world. What the *presence of God* means, or who the God is whom we surrender ourselves to, is, of course, not something that can be determined beforehand. Indeed, and as the witness of many mystics confirms, the God we meet on a mystical path is most often quite unlike what we expect, imagine, hope, or fear. This is why mystics speak so often of a "God beyond God."[4] In fact, given our propensity to worship the gods of our own devising or comprehension, the gods who will best sanction and further self-promoting agendas, Meister Eckhart advises the following prayer: "I pray God to rid me of God."[5]

Coming into the presence of God is always mediated by traditions, cul-

tures, sacred scriptures, institutions, practices, and (personal and social) experiences that may or may not adequately prepare us for the task. We always start our journeys from the perspective of some place as it has been shaped by time and memory, even if the course of our journey reveals the deficiency, even falsity—because either unjust, naive, sentimental, dishonest, or unloving—of the received understanding or naming of that place. In other words, a mystical path is something like a trial in which we submit our assumptions and desires, as well as the inflated egos and the false gods of our world, to rigorous testing and questioning to determine whether we have been faithful and true to the life we have been given. Few people have the patience or depth for this testing or the courage to face up to our various forms of idolatry. This is why named mystics are relatively few in number.

The narrowing of our mystical sensitivities is also attributable to the fact that, whether we care to admit it or not, we are still too much under the modern deistic assumption that God is far removed from our world and that gaining access to this God requires some supernatural, perhaps paranormal, effort that would make us unscientific or plainly kooky. We do not see God, as the Psalmist plainly does (of the many Psalms, see esp. 65 and 104), as intimately involved in the minute and mundane movements of our being as the one who gives us life and sustains us in it. And so we go in search of a god beyond this life and this world, all the while forgetting God as the Creator underpinning the goodness in all that is. What we need to learn is that the place of God is not "somewhere else," sequestered to some special place or realm of our experience. As we develop a contemplative and mystical way of living, we will discover that God is at the center of our being, at the heart of the whole of creation as its animating, pulsating life.

It is important to be clear that mystical traditions as a whole would not be in agreement with this point. One can find in mystical writings (often influenced by Gnosticism or informed by Christian Platonism) strands of antimaterialism and otherworldliness, strands that see little or no value in being at home in our created place. In the name of detachment, for instance, we are told to be "receptive of nothing but God" (Eckhart) or to become forgetful of everything beneath us and concern ourselves with "no creature whether material or spiritual nor with their situation and doings whether good or ill."[6] But what *detachment* means and what it practically entails is a complex, not universally agreed on matter. It need not simply mean the denial or denigration of material creatures. It can be developed in terms of the denial of certain kinds of attachments that esteem self and creation falsely and do not give sufficient glory and honor to God. Think here of Thomas Merton's precise formulation: "We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached *from ourselves* in order to see and use all things in and for God. . . . There is no evil in anything created by God, nor can anything of His become an obstacle to our union with Him. The obstacle is in our 'self,' that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will."[7] On this view, a view that I will here develop in an agrarian way, the goal is not to become free of creation itself but instead to be freed of certain ways of being within creation, ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting that inhibit or prevent a deep encounter with creation and God.

Learning the art of detachment is not easy, especially in our time, when we have grown accustomed to the myths of self-creation and self-regulation. We find it difficult to fully appreciate that we live through our dependence on others—most directly and evidently through bodily acts of touching, eating, drinking, and breathing—and, ultimately, God. This is why we need to recover an understanding of Christian practice and discipleship as a "schooling in the ways of creatureliness," in which we learn "that courtesy to creatures in which reverence for the Creator finds expression."[8] To understand God as our Creator, as the maker of everything, is to see everything (ourselves included) in terms of their relationships to each other and *in* God. We become courteous because we fully acknowledge that who we are, even *that we are,* is a feature of our having received the gifts that others are to us. Pseudo-Dionysius, speaking of the beauty and goodness of God, put it this way: "Beauty is the cause of harmony, of sympathy, of community. Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. . . . From it derives the existence of everything as beings, what they have in common and what differentiates them, their identicalness and differences, their similarities and dissimilarities, their sharing of opposites. . . . Hence, the harmony and the love which are formed between them but which do not obliterate identity. Hence, the innate togetherness of everything. Hence, too, the intermingling of everything, the persistence of things, the unceasing emergence of things."[9] There is, in other words, a correspondence among creatures, a mutual and created harmony and sympathy, that finds its unity and wholeness in God. If we are to come into the presence

of God, we must learn to find our place in this created correspondence and live responsibly and charitably within it.

This point is of tremendous significance because it means that mystical practice requires of us that we learn to become appropriately and fully present in the places in which we move and live and that we take up our proper place as creatures within the orders of creation: "Contemplation, then, cannot properly be a prostration before a power outside us; it is a being present to ourselves *in* our world with acceptance and trust. Hence . . . the importance of attention to the praying *body;* the contemplative significance of taking time to *sense* ourselves in prayer, to perceive patiently what and where we materially are."[10] Indeed, because God, however mysteriously, is made manifest through the work of creation, we can make no claim to being present to God except insofar as we tune our living so as to be in harmony with God's life-giving presence among us. If to be alive is to be created, then to live well is to live in such a way that our own creative gestures—as witnessed in our eating, teaching, building, parenting, playing, and loving—increasingly bear witness to and honor the continuing creativity of God: "If the 'mystical' ultimately means the reception of a particular *pattern* of divine action (creative love, self-emptying incarnation), its test will be the presence or absence of something like that pattern in a human life seen as a whole, not the presence or absence of this or that phenomenon in the consciousness."[11]

This characterization of mysticism as a journey into the presence of God rather than the undergoing of exceptional states of consciousness opens new possibilities for a dialogue between Berry's ambition to be in place and the mystic's commitment to be present to creation. As I will argue, agrarian practices and sensitivities can, because of their focus on the health and vitality of embodied memberships, play a vital role in the reformulation of a contemporary mysticism that, while not in complete agreement with some traditional emphases, is firmly rooted in creation yet tuned to the life of God. As we proceed, however, we will need to be particularly mindful of the strategies that human beings have used for being in place, for what is clear is that we can be more or less successful in this effort.[12] That we can fail terribly is evident in our time as we now contemplate, for the first time in history, the near annihilation of creation's processes, memberships, and habitats. Not only are the divinely created harmony and sympathy the early church fathers talked about coming apart through our own hands, but their current dissolution also threatens to put an end to our memberships altogether.

Becoming Creatures

The sense that our destructive waywardness is attributable to a denial of our creatureliness is well understood by Berry. In "A Native Hill" (1968), he wrote: "There appears to be a law that when creatures have reached the level of consciousness, as men have, they must become conscious of the creation; they must learn how they fit into it and what its needs are and what it requires of them, or else pay a terrible penalty: the spirit of the creation will go out of them, and they will become destructive; the very earth will depart from them and go where they cannot follow."[13] It is when we make ourselves the goal of the world, as when we manipulate or redesign the earth and its creatures to satisfy self-chosen and self-enhancing aims, that the memberships of creation begin to unravel. We stifle creation by making personal pride and greed "the standard of our behavior toward the world." By failing to live patiently and with a measure of propriety, attentive and attuned to our fittedness within multiple webs of interdependence and responsibility, the beauty and goodness of creation is destroyed:

> The world is lost in loss
> Of patience; the old curse
> Returns, and is made worse
> As newly justified.
> In hopeless fret and fuss,
> In rage at worldly plight
> Creation is defied,
> All order is unpropped,
> All light and singing stopped.[14]

In short, we are impatient and unskilled at being creatures. Our impatience is most magnified in our desire to stand alone, unencumbered by the demands and responsibilities, the limits and the possibilities that come from living within and being constituted by the many memberships of creation. On an agrarian, but also mystical, view, there is no self-standing I. What we call *I* is always already communal and relational, a creature formed and sustained through the dynamisms of soil and soul.

Understanding, let alone practicing, a patient and attentive regard for creation is anything but easy, particularly in a time of mass urbanization and

readily available technology when our connections to the memberships of creation are so thin and superficial. Ours is a culture beset by biological and ecological amnesia, the mass forgetting that we are bound through our bodies to the microbial life in soils and the photosynthetic activity of plants. In the course of his writing career, Berry has spoken clearly about some of the strategies and practices we need to reconnect to our biological and cultural homes—ranging from staying in one region (saying no to upward mobility and social dislocation) and committing to a community to growing a garden and investing in a household and a local economy. What I want to do here, however, is develop the transformation of mind-set and habit that must occur if we are to fully be in the places that we are and, thus, be "altogether at home." As will become clear, what Berry has in mind is a spiritual transformation that links up in multiple ways with a mystical form of life.

Like the great spiritual masters who speak of a need for a perpetual *metanoia,* a continuous turning round of the mind and heart, in order for us to enter into communion with each other and with God, so too Berry observes that we have been infected with, and, thus, must continually treat, our developed "habit of contention—against the world, against each other, against ourselves." The breaking of this habit, this "intransigent destructiveness in us," will require a drastic change in the assumptions by which we live our lives: "It is not from ourselves that we will learn to be better than we are."[15] To correct our intransigence, we will need to become "apprentices" to creation, by learning to know the world as best we can and then cooperate in its processes.[16]

An apprenticeship is the long labor by which workers slowly and carefully learn to yield themselves to the excellences of a craft. They do not simply impose their ambitions on the work but rather let the materials (their availability and quantity), the needs of the community in which the work is performed, and the possibilities of good, safe, beautiful, and useful design determine the character and extent of the work. They must leave behind visions of profit and glory so that a genuine understanding of and appreciation for the work and the product can be achieved. The measure of the quality of our work, in other words, is not derived from what we might gain for ourselves but rather indicated in the durability and beauty of the thing made, in the health and happiness of the community in which the work is performed and the product is used, and in the long-term viability of the work itself (the work does not presuppose the degradation or destruction of the resources or workers that feed into the work). Good work—work that reflects a successful apprenticeship—will, therefore, result in healthy, flourishing habitats and dynamic, convivial communities. It does this because the workers have learned to detach from their ambition, replacing it with attachments that reflect a more sympathetic and harmonious (though not always easy) attunement to the grace at work in the world.

When we become apprentices *of creation,* we let the health of the land serve as the measure of the quality of our overall work. In a very real and practical sense, we submit ourselves to the creation and, thus, fully accept our divinely appointed vocation to "till and keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15). Berry describes the character of our submission in the following:

> Until we understand what the land is, we are at odds with everything we touch. And to come to that understanding it is necessary, even now, to leave the regions of our conquest—the cleared fields, the towns and cities, the highways—and re-enter the woods. For only there can man encounter the silence and the darkness of his own absence. Only in this silence and darkness can he recover the sense of the world's longevity, of its ability to thrive without him, of his inferiority to it and his dependence on it. Perhaps then, having heard that silence and seen that darkness, he will grow humble before the place and begin to take it in—to learn *from it* what it is. As its sounds come into his hearing, and its lights and colors come into his vision, and its odors come into his nostrils, then he may come into *its* presence as he never has before, and he will arrive in his place and will want to remain. His life will grow out of the ground like the other lives of the place, and take its place among them. He will be *with* them—neither ignorant of them, nor indifferent to them, nor against them—and so at last he will grow to be native-born. That is, he must re-enter the silence and the darkness, and be born again.[17]

There is in this language a profound sense that the mundane work of becoming a creature and making a home—what Berry also describes as our being "married" to a place[18]—is finally work of the highest spiritual order. This is why the collection of poems *The Country of Marriage* (1973) has as its epigraph a quotation from John 12:24: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone." We cannot grow "out of the ground" or arrive and remain in place without a certain kind of dying to self, even a dying "into the ground," that is the mark of spiritual transformation and renewal.

Mystics have often characterized this dying as an entry into darkness be-

cause in it the self learns to shed the various forms of rationalization—the light of a natural reason—that would identify God with one element of creation or legitimate and justify the self in its ambitions.[19] The central problem with our seeking to identify or claiming to comprehend God is that, in doing so, we think that we have access to the supreme calculus that will enable us to secure and legitimate our place in the world. In other words, by claiming to identify God, we underwrite ourselves and our ambitions. In the mystical dark night, however, we gradually come to sense the hubris of our attempts to delimit or comprehend God. We give up the desire to firmly grasp, whether mentally or practically, the world for ourselves.

Entering into the Dark

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel,* Saint John of the Cross alludes to the dark night when he says that divine truth exceeds every natural light and all human understanding. He writes: "The excessive light of faith bestowed on man is darkness for him, because a brighter light will eclipse and suppress a dimmer one. The sun so obscures all other lights that they do not seem to be lights at all when it is shining, and instead of affording vision to the eyes it overwhelms, blinds, and deprives them of vision, since its light is excessive and unproportioned to the visual faculty. Similarly the light of faith in its abundance suppresses and overwhelms that of the intellect."[20] Saint John of the Cross is drawing a contrast between a "natural way" of knowing, which is dependent on the senses, and the "way of faith," which overwhelms sight and comes to us by hearing the Word (Rom. 10:17). Of course, hearing is one of the senses too. But his point is that the object of faith is not proportionate to any sense object and, thus, is not the end product of any natural (self-chosen) desire. God cannot be seen with our eyes or comprehended in terms of the light of natural reason. Indeed, insofar as we claim to have grasped God using the various categories of the understanding, we can be sure that we have laid hold of an idol rather than God. God forever eludes all reasoning, knowing, and naming.[21]

When Berry talks about our entrance into silence and darkness, he is not simply opposing sight and hearing or natural reason and faith. His is a complex darkness that suspends and calls into question a habitual disposition to secure the world for ourselves (often through force and violence, but also through native cunning and ingenuity). He is not finally opposed to reason.

Nor does he seek its elimination. It would be better to say that he seeks to set limits to it and contextualize it within a larger pattern of human and created life formed by love. In his poem "The Design of a House" he says:

> If reason was all, reason
> would not exist—the will
> to reason accounts for it;
> it's not reason that chooses
> to live; the seed doesn't swell
> in its husk by reason, but loves
> itself, obeys light which is
> its own thought and argues the leaf
> in secret; love articulates
> the choice of life in fact; life
> chooses life because it is
> alive; what lives didn't begin dead,
> nor sun's fire commence in ember. (*CP,* 31–32)

Reasoning needs to be darkened so that the illumination of love's mysterious light can appear and shine on our living. Much as in Saint Augustine, reason is subsumed within the larger movements of love, only then truly becoming itself.[22]

In the 1980 "Sabbath Poem VI," Berry offers a meditation on precisely this theme:

> The intellect so ravenous to know
> And in its knowing hold the very light,
> Disclosing what is so and what not so,
>
> Must finally know the dark, which is its right
> And liberty; it's blind in what it sees.
> Bend down, go in by this low door, despite
>
> The thorn and briar that bar the way. (*TC,* 30)

Our problem is not the intellect itself but rather our ravenous nature and our desire to reduce all creation to a utilitarian or market-driven end. What Berry

opposes is the sort of scientism epitomized by modernity's ambition to take control of the world by force and with the aid of technologies that mask our fragility and dependence on others.[23] Through scientific and economic reductionism, the intellect has become blind. Though it looks, it no longer sees truly since it has lost the imagination to see the sanctity of created things or the vast and indescribably complex memberships of which they and we are but one part.[24] Our naming of things is superficial and not detailed enough, which means that, in our engagement with them, we readily violate their integrity and wholeness.

And so we are instructed to "bend down." Our bending, as the thorns and briars make plain, is hardly a straightforward or smooth effort since it must fully come to terms with the harvest of human sinfulness. As Berry continues: "Greed and sloth / did bad work that this thicket now conceals" (*TC*, 30). Human sinfulness is not an abstraction. It is made manifest in soil washed into the sea, in watersheds poisoned by the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, in mountaintops blown up and then removed for their coal, and in rural communities destroyed and emptied out by the world of finance. When we bend down, what we are, in fact, doing is signifying a humble disposition that is prepared to learn from creation and is willing to be taught by it in the ways of interdependent living. To bend, like a servant, is to give up the hubristic assumption that we can live well alone and through the forceful imposition of our will on the world.[25]

It is extremely difficult to argue the case for humility in our time. We resist recommendations to service and fidelity because we see in them the potential for abuse or outright humiliation. The paradox, however, is that it is precisely the quest for self-assertion that has culminated in the degradation of creation. The evidence is clear that our desire to control the world and to engage it on our terms has led to its ruination. We are in need of a better way, a way that is more faithful and true to the biblical mandate to serve and keep creation. Since hubris has done so much harm, we need to rehabilitate the practice of humility.

> O bent by fear and sorrow, now bend down,
> Leave word and argument, be dark and still,
> And come into the joy of healing shade.
> Rest from your work. Be still and dark until
> You grow as unopposing, unafraid

> As the young trees, without thought or belief;
> Until the shadow Sabbath light has made
> Shudders, breaks open, shines in every leaf. (*TC*, 31)

Before we can enter into the "joy of healing shade," we will first need to become dark and still ourselves. What does this mean?

In various places Berry speaks of our "serving the dark." Often what he has in mind is the practice of tilling the soil. There is in this tilling much more than simply the preparation of a seedbed for a crop. If we remember that the word *culture* in Middle English usage referred not to the refinements of civilization but to a cultivated piece of land, then it becomes clear that our tilling is, ultimately, about the preparation and formation of people so that they can live worthily and sustainably in a particular place.[26] As Berry likes to say, there is no culture without *agri*culture. This is because the tending of plants and the husbanding of animals are the ideal training ground for the moral and spiritual virtues that would make for a good and beautiful home (*and* a faithful mystic). True farmers and gardeners have tamed the ego by making the care of another their first priority. They have submitted their plans and designed their economies in such a way as to contribute to processes of fertility and growth. They have brought personal desire into alignment with the needs, potential, and limits of another in its particular place.

To be in alignment with creation is a complex effort that requires us to let go of our own personal ambitions so that we can see clearly the creation before us and, thus, enter into the presence of God. The first thing we need to do is give up otherworldly aspirations. In "The Wild Geese," Berry said:

> And we pray, not
> for new earth or heaven, but to be
> quiet in heart, and in eye
> clear. What we need is here. (*CP*, 156)

Far from denying the idea of heaven, Berry is asking us to give up the dreams of wish fulfillment—how much of our imagery of heaven is precisely the end result of a personal dream?—and instead see the presence of God already in our midst.[27] In fact, the desire for heaven is, in many instances, a disguised, Gnostic form of disdain for creation, a desire to be rid of and to escape created, bodily life and its limits.[28]

The Mystery of God and Humanity

If what we need is here within creation, this does not mean that the presence of God will suddenly become obvious to us. As we have already seen, though God is in all things and underpins them as their animating source and destiny, at the same time we must admit that God is not to be reduced to or identified with anything in creation. God is everywhere *and* nowhere at the same time. God is transcendent, as Thomas Carlson helpfully puts it, "through his incomprehensible immanence."[29] The realization of the incomprehensibility of God, however, leads to the further realization that we too, as made in the image of God, are also finally incomprehensible to ourselves. Moreover, creation as a whole must finally also be incomprehensible since it is the concrete manifestation of God's groundless yet abiding love, a divine love that is, as Eckhart said, "without why."[30] From our point of view, we simply do not understand why creation is what it is and why it moves in ways that result in such beauty but also unspeakable suffering and pain. And so, as we immerse ourselves deeply into creation, as we "bend down," as Berry suggests, we are met on all sides by the darkness of incomprehension.

Divine incomprehensibility and human incomprehensibility yield a most important result, namely, the truth of human ignorance. This is no merely provisional or temporary ignorance (that will, thus, be overcome someday) but an essential part of who we are. In his most recent collection of essays, Berry has stressed the cultural necessity of acknowledged ignorance as an antidote to the arrogant and destructive "corporate mind" that thinks it can foresee and plan a better world according to its own devising.[31] What an industrial, merely economic mind forgets is that we cannot comprehend the orders of creation because ignorance of various forms—inherent, historical, moral, and scientific as well as that which follows from character weakness, false confidence, fear, laziness, and for-profit/for-power motivations—reflects a limited, even damaged mind. Even if we were to become fully human and realize every created capacity, we would still be faced with the incomprehensibility of divine, sustaining love:

> The mind that comes to rest is tended
> In ways that it cannot intend:
> Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
> By what it cannot comprehend.
>
> Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by
> Your will, not ours. And it is fit
> Our only choice should be to die
> Into that rest, or out of it. (*TC*, 7)

This point needs special emphasis because of what it can teach us about human "dominion" over creation (Gen. 1:26). For centuries, people have assumed that, even though we are creatures, we are, nonetheless, special because God has put us over all other living and nonliving things. Among some early church fathers like Gregory of Nyssa and John Scotus Erigena, there was the view that God creates creatures "in" humanity and that humanity contains within itself all creatures. The logic behind this view was that, if we are made in the image of God, then we transcend all creatures by means of our knowledge of them (as reflected in our freedom over them and our naming of them). For Erigena, it made little sense to say that we have dominion over creatures if we did not have the concept of them in our minds. Insofar as the human mind shares in the divine mind in its ability to see, hear, scrutinize, and possess a hold over creatures, it must contain within itself the substance of all created things. Human dominion, as Gregory argued, must, therefore, take shape in our control of creation through technological means. But this leads to a curious result: "The subject who cannot know its own nature at the same time relates to creation through an all-inclusive vision of comprehension and dominion."[32] We should wonder about claims to "all-inclusive" dominion, particularly if we take seriously the threefold incomprehensibility of God, creation, and humanity. If we are serious about living faithfully and attentively with our creatureliness, then we will need to chasten the desire for complete control.

How should we think incomprehensibility and dominion together, particularly when we know that ignorant arrogance matched with great power leads to ever greater destruction? We need to start by acknowledging that the admission of systemic ignorance is at the same time a call for restraint and humility. Those committed to taking up a divine pattern of life in this world must move beyond a ravenous and rapacious intellect and into the wider movements of love. Love is not a sloppy willfulness but a disciplined and attentive regard for another. Christians believe this because they have in mind the ministries of healing, feeding, forgiving, and reconciling as concretely and practically revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. The freedom that marks our

creatureliness and that makes possible our dominion reaches its most authentic pitch in the love shown by Christ. The Christian's freedom is always freedom "in Christ," which means that the dispositions that guided his life—what I earlier referred to as the pattern of God's continuing activity among us—must also guide our own. Whatever technological ambitions we might have must be restrained and contextualized by this pattern.

This conclusion is of the highest significance because it means that the transcendence that we enjoy over creation by virtue of our freedom and reasoning capacities is turned back to creation in the form of a loving *descent* (bending down) that commits to be with its members in their need and pain.[33] This is what Christ's ministry teaches: that to truly and fully be ourselves we must give ourselves away. Paul summed this up beautifully in his account of the kenotic, self-emptying mind of Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6–8). This giving away of self, this loving abandon, is the definitive expression of the divine life. Indeed, this is precisely what created life is: a perpetual, incomprehensible giving away: "God's utterance lovingly gives life; gives all life, all unfading freshness; gives only life, and peace, and love, and beauty, harmony and joy. And the life God gives is nothing other, nothing less, than God's own self. Life is God, given."[34]

If mystics are those who seek to take up the divine pattern of life within their own, then the giving away of one's life will become a defining feature of mystical practice. According to Berry, we have a concrete model to learn from: the soil's fertility. In the growing and the dying of things, and in their regeneration through processes of decomposition and recomposition, we see, even as we do not fully understand, the miracle of continuing life. As we contribute to the processes of fertility and growth—practically speaking, by consuming food and energy in just, sustainable manners and by committing to the strengthening of local communities—we enrich creation and so participate, however inadequately, in God's continuing creative work. Speaking of sowing clover and grass, Berry says in "Enriching the Earth":

> All this serves the dark. I am slowly falling
> into the fund of things. And yet to serve the earth,
> not knowing what I serve, gives a wideness
> and a delight to the air, and my days
> do not wholly pass. 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. (*CP*, 110)

Resurrection and Soil

To appreciate this view, we need to understand that soil is a marvel. It is not something we can make. All that we can do, besides destroy it, is cooperate with the dark processes at work within it—die into it—recognizing that, in the midst of this darkness, life is made out of death. Berry admits that, when talking about soil, it is hard to avoid the language of religion:

> The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and 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 or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or tunnel by which its past enters its future.[35]

Life continually dies into the soil and emerges as new life. And so it makes some sense to refer to soil as a site of resurrection. Here, we apprehend something of the hospitable character of the divine life that is forever creating room for others to be and to flourish, but then also to die and make room for yet more life.[36] Divine hospitality finds its analogue in the soil: "Hospitality is the fundamental virtue of the soil. It makes room. It shares. It neutralizes poisons. And so it heals. This is what the soil teaches: If you want to be remembered, give yourself away."[37] The remembrance that William Bryant Logan is talking about is not simply of the mental sort but the re-membering where we fully join into the life of posterity through our bodies, into the memberships of creation. Through our surrender to the land and to community we gain an entrance into the mysterious presence of God in creation. The supreme passivity and submission of the body to creation, seen first in our

need to eat and drink but then also in our dying into the earth at burial, is the constant, concrete reminder and tutor in the ways of spiritual submission. We enter into the dark ground with our bodies and our spirits and, thereby, anticipate the miracle of new life:[38]

> Let the world bring on me
> the sleep of darkness without stars, so I may know
> my little light taken from me into the seed
> of the beginning and the end, so I may bow
> to mystery, and take my stand on the earth,
> like a tree in a field, passing without haste
> or regret toward what will be, my life
> a patient willing descent into the grass. (*CP,* 114)

When Berry characterizes human life as "a patient willing descent" and models personal growth after a young tree that is "unopposing and unafraid . . . without thought or belief" (*TC,* 31), he is describing a way of living that has detachment at its core. By *detachment,* we can now see, he means not a flight or an escape from the world but our full immersion into creation, our giving ourselves to others so that they can more fully be. Detachment is a form of engagement marked by conviviality and celebration rather than contention and needless destruction. Put more precisely, since we are always already (through the passivity of our bodies) within creation as one of its members, what Berry is recommending is a way of being present to one another in which we see and welcome things for what they are rather than what we want or wish them to be. This is a way of being marked by the letting be of things, what Meister Eckhart described as our "releasement" into things and into God "without restraint."[39] Detachment, in other words, makes it possible for us to fully be with others since we no longer receive or engage them in terms of the agendas or idols we carry through life. In this respect, Berry is in agreement with the definition of *wisdom* offered by Maximus Confessor: "Wisdom consists in seeing every object in accordance with its true nature, with perfect interior freedom."[40]

When we enter the mystical path, what we are really trying to do, more than have some special apparition of God, is come to see (however imperfectly) the world as God sees it. We resist this form of seeing because it means that we must give up points of view that establish and legitimate our standing

in the world. We resist detachment because it makes us vulnerable to the contingency, suffering, mystery, and unpredictability that creation itself is. We prefer not to serve the soil, or enter into the dark "ground" that is creation's life and death, because it entails our submission to the unknown and incomprehensible.[41] Berry's work, however, stands as a reminder to the damage done to the countless bodies and memberships of creation that ensues from our failure to "serve the dark." It also shines as a witness to another way, a way that might yet lead us into the "blessed conviviality" ("To Sit and Look at Light-Filled Leaves" [*TC,* 8]) of creation that marked the first Sabbath day.

Can we be at peace with one another and with God and so be "altogether at home" in creation? Can we finally become the courteous creatures God intends for us to be? Berry offers no simple or painless solutions. What he recommends is love's labor, a labor informed by virtues of modesty, attention, fidelity, humility, thrift, propriety, generosity, mercy, and gratitude. What we need to learn to do as much as possible—and for this we will need the help and guidance of spiritual traditions, the insights of ecology, the support of a community, and the memory of good work—is how to get ourselves and our ambition out of the way so that the incomprehensible, gracious givingness of God (what Berry sometimes calls *Sabbath light*) can shine throughout creation and in us.

If a mystical path is one in which the traveler learns to submit to God, then it is the virtue of agrarian life to show us that our submission is authentic only as we commit ourselves to the health and vitality of creation, for it is here that God's ways, however mysteriously, are being worked out. It is here, in the soil beneath our feet and among countless created neighborhoods rather than in some faraway celestial place, that God meets us in work and grace that exceeds our comprehension and our wrongdoing:

> For we are fallen like the trees, our peace
> Broken, and so we must
> Love where we cannot trust,
> Trust where we cannot know,
> And must await the way-ward coming grace
> That joins living and dead,
> Taking us where we would not go—Into the boundless dark.
> When what was made has been unmade
> The Maker comes to his work. (*TC,* 74)

Notes

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1. Wendell Berry, "The Long-Legged House," in *The Long-Legged House* (1969; reprint, Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), 141, 150.

2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 293 (see generally lectures 16–17, which were the 1901–2 Gifford Lectures).

3. An excellent place to begin, one that submits James's version to sustained analysis and critique, is Nicholas Lash's *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). In preparing these general remarks on mysticism, I have also benefited greatly from Bernard McGinn's magisterial, multivolume history of Western Christian mysticism, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, esp. vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

4. Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New York: New City, 1993), 26–35.

5. Meister Eckhart quoted in Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 2001), 209.

6. *Meister Eckhart: From Whom God Hid Nothing: Sermons, Writings, and Sayings*, ed. David O'Neal (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 108; *The Cloud of Unknowing V* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 53.

7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 21.

8. Nicholas Lash, "Creation, Courtesy and Contemplation," in *The Beginning and the End of "Religion"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 173.

9. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 77–78 (4.7). Basil the Great speaks similarly in *Homelia hexameron* (2.2): "God has united the entire world, which is composed of many different parts, by the law of indissoluble friendship, in communion and harmony, so that the most distant things seem to be joined together by one and the same sympathy" (available at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208.txt).

10. Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 76. I would add that we must be present not only to ourselves in the world but also *to others* since it is through them that we live.

11. Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), 145–46.

12. For an agrarian-inspired examination of the problems and prospects of living in place, see Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1994).

13. Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill," in *The Long-Legged House*, 193.

14. Wendell Berry, "Six Days of Work Are Spent," in *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979–1997* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998), 29. Page numbers for subsequent citations from *Timbered Choir* (hereafter *TC*) are given parenthetically in the text.

15. Berry, "A Native Hill," 210.

16. "It is the creation that has attracted me, its perfect interfusion of life and design. I have made myself its follower and apprentice" (ibid., 201).

17. Ibid., 207.

18. "The way I go is / marriage to this place, / grace beyond chance, / love's braided dance / covering the world" (Wendell Berry, "In Rain" [1982], in *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* [San Francisco: North Point, 1985], 268). Page numbers for subsequent citations from the *Collected Poems* (hereafter *CP*) are given parenthetically in the text.

19. Here we should note that a philosophical/theological definition of *idolatry* is one in which the idol is not simply a fabricated object but the fulfillment of a human gaze or desire. Idols are, thus, the full extension of the self and its aspiration. They are mirrors to (and, thus, a confirmation of) the self rather than an opening to the divine (as an icon is supposed to be). For a development of these themes, see the recent work of Jean-Luc Marion, including *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. chaps. 1–2.

20. Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS, 1979), 110 (2.3).

21. Pseudo-Dionysius reminds us that it is even improper to stay with the image of darkness: "There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial" (*The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 141 [bk. 5]). In this essay, however, I will continue to use the metaphor of darkness as a way of describing our "unknowing" in the service of a more faithful and true life.

22. Augustine writes in his *Homilies on the Psalms* that we become fully conscious of God only insofar as love grows in us because God is love: "Before you had the experience [of love], you used to think you could speak of God. You begin to have the experience, and there you experience that you cannot say what you experience" (quoted in McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 241). True intellect is humbled or, as Berry would say, is "bent down" (see the discussion of "Sabbath Poem VI" that follows in the text) because it has been overwhelmed by love and, thus, rendered speechless.

23. Here, Berry joins hands with other "traditionalist" critics of modernity like Ananda Coomaraswamy, Kathleen Raine, and Philip Sherrard. In a tribute to

Kathleen Raine, he describes the nihilism of modernity as the desecration of humanity, once thought to be made in the image of God, but now reduced to being little more than a "higher" animal. With this desecration came "the implied permission to be more bewildered, violent, self-deluded, destructive, and self-destructive than any of the animals" (Wendell Berry, "Against the Nihil of the Age," *Temenos Academy Review,* no. 7 [2004]: 82).

24. Think here of Augustine, who describes how, in turning our backs to the divine light that sustains all things and is the sense of their truth, we darken our minds and bring destruction to one another and the world (*Confessions,* 4.30).

25. Berry observes that even our best attempts to heal are not without damage and pain: "An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars" (Wendell Berry, "Damage," in *What Are People For?* [New York: North Point, 1990], 7). In the short text "Damage," Berry reflects on his effort to repair the destruction caused by his desire to have a pond midway up a slope in one of his fields.

26. For a helpful discussion of the original link between culture and land and the gradual eclipse of land in the name of civilization, see Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), chap. 1.

27. Berry notes that his primary aim in life is not to get into heaven: "Though heaven is certainly more important than the earth if all they say about it is true, it is still morally incidental to it and dependent on it, and I can only imagine it and desire it in 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" ("A Native Hill," 200).

28. I have developed this theme in "Placing the Soul: An Agrarian Philosophical Principle," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land,* ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

29. Thomas A. Carlson, "Locating the Mystical Subject," in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia,* ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 213. As Carlson points out, according to Erigena, an invisible, incomprehensible God realizes himself in creation, thus turning it into a dark theophany manifesting this divine, inaccessible incomprehensibility.

30. Meister Eckhart, Sermon 81, "I Have Chosen You," available at http://www.geocities.com/athens/acropolis/5164/EckSermlxxxi.htm.

31. Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005).

32. Carlson, "Locating the Mystical Subject," 221.

33. The desire to ascend "beyond places and times" (ibid., 219), so much in evidence in strands of Western spirituality and modern technology, must, therefore, be counteracted by a self-emptying descent into the heart of creation. Only then will we, as Berry suggests, "grow out of the ground like the other lives of the place" ("A Native Hill," 207).

34. Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in the One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 104.

35. Berry, "A Native Hill," 204.

36. John of Damascus referred to the divine act of creation as the "making room" within the divine life so that what is not divine can emerge. For a development of this theme, see my *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), introduction and chap. 1.

37. William Bryant Logan, *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 19.

38. Again, it is agrarian imagery, imagery that has become foreign to most people only in recent times, that conveys the sense of this submission best. By working with the soil, the farmer or gardener "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" ("The Man Born to Farming," in *CP,* 103). Compare: "The seed is in the ground. / Now may we rest in hope / While darkness does its work" ("The Seed Is in the Ground," in *TC,* 131).

39. See the treatment of this theme in Schürmann, *Wandering Joy,* 9–18, 182–209; and Eckhart's sermon "Blessed Are the Poor" (O'Neal, ed., *Meister Eckhart,* 210–15). Berry refers to "the last labor of the heart" as the ability "to learn to lie still, / one with the earth / again, and let the world go" ("Awake at Night," in *CP,* 128).

40. Maximus Confessor, *Centuries on Charity,* 2.64, quoted in Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism,* 223.

41. For an excellent discussion of the "mysticism of the ground," see Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500),* vol. 4 of *The Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 83–93. *Grund* (ground or foundation), as it was employed by mystics, was intimately associated with *Abgrund* (abyss).